

# Levinas' Metaphysics of the Face: Ontological Injunction Not to Kill

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## ABSTRACT

The prevalence of the practice of one man killing the other in different parts of the world, on a daily basis is alarming. In fact, the “culture of murder” is rapidly consuming our world and this can be attributed to the failure of a genuine encounter between human beings, as subjects; as persons with an inviolable right to life. We are actually witnessing the demise of the Thou in favour of It and this makes killing facile because man in this instance is looked upon as an object and not as a subject. This paper is borne out of this concern, which sets out to examine the philosophical intuition of Emmanuel Levinas and how it establishes an ontological injunction not to kill the Other. The central arguments in this work are articulated within the framework of the face of the Other possessing an inherent command; “thou shall not kill” and a call for a committed responsibility towards the Other; a responsibility which is bottomless, infinite, and requires that one avails himself or herself to the needs of the Other, even to the point of dying for the Other. This study proposes that for man to regain his ontological structure as a subject with the unfringeable right to life, the clarion call of Levinas to listen and respond to the summon of the face in the words: ‘thou shall not kill’, must be imbibed as an injunction, valid for all people and in all circumstances.

**Keywords:** The face of the Other, Emmanuel Levinas, Ontology, Injunction, Right to Life, Responsibility, Killing,

## INTRODUCTION

Contemporary society attests to the solemn affirmation and proclamation of the value of life. Yet, it is seemingly paradoxical that the same age has experienced the systematic abuse of these same rights. The solution to this, as many have proposed, is to call the human being to return to himself and to affirm his personal dignity. In this way, it is hoped that he will also recognize the dignity of others. Far from being a novel idea, this has been the subject of many centuries of philosophical inquiry. In late antiquity, for instance, Plato highlighted the value of human life by stressing its divine origin. (Plato, 90a-b). To Immanuel Kant, every human person has an inherent worth, and thus we should always treat others as ends unto themselves and never merely as a means to an end. (Kant, 2005). This can only lead one to exclaim that human beings are ontologically protected from any harm. Ontology in this case, propounds the view that all humans are naturally or innately protected from any sort of injury. Actually, Emmanuel Levinas, in contemporary times, argues that “the whole man is ontology.” (Levinas, 1998, p. 2).

Albeit all the emphasis on the right to life of every human, we register here that this generation has given a deaf ear to this ontological appeal and has instead waged a war against human life. This is evidenced by the ongoing crisis in Cameroon which has claimed more than 10.000 lives since its inception, the Russo-Ukrainian war, which has led to the death of about 5237 civilians as of July 24, 2022, (Statista Research Department, 2022), the Israeli-Palestinian conflict which has claimed thousands of lives and many other wars, genocides, and every kind of torture, through which thousands of human beings are killed every day. All of these only come to prove the point that the destruction of human life is no longer seen as a barbaric act. In fact, we are witnessing the dictatorship of horror and a “culture of killing” and in this sense, the life of another has lost its ontological or natural immunity. Man no longer sees the other as a subject, but rather as an object that can be manipulated and even annihilated. This phenomenon leaves us wondering what the future holds for humanity, if this culture of killing one another continues. It is hence posing a threat to the future existence of the human species.

Philosophers have not lent a deaf ear, as evidenced in their attempt to salvage humankind from the verge of the abyss. Martin Heidegger, Gabriel Marcel, Martin Buber, etc., postulate a subject-subject relationship with the Other; an “I-Thou” relation, in the words of Buber. Heidegger proposes his concept of *Mitsein* to demonstrate that *Dasein* is a “Being-with-Others”. (Heidegger, 1962). This illustrates that being-with-Others is primordial to man and it is an “ontological structure.” (Heidegger, 1962, p. 152). Therefore, any effort to annihilate human life goes against this ontological build-up of *Dasein*. Gabriel Marcel in his play, *Le Coeur des Autres*, is of the opinion that the question of the Other is necessary because “there is only one suffering: to be alone.” (Reinhardt, 1952, p. 203). Martin Buber in his book *Ich und Du (I and Thou)* articulates a distinction between the “I-It” and “I-Thou” encounters. According to him, there is a radical difference between a man’s attitude toward other men and his attitude to things. This attitude towards other men is a relation between persons “I-Thou,” whereas to things it is a connection with objects “I-It”. In the personal relationship one subject ‘I’ confronts another subject ‘Thou’. (Buber, 2004).

In spite of these praiseworthy attempts, humankind has continued to experience the deepest anguish in the denigration of their values. Concretely, humanity is caught up in web of destruction wherein the status quo is a culture of exterminating one another via various dreadful behaviours such as genocides, wars, social unrests, and a lot more. In this direction, the redemption of humanity from the clutches of annihilating endeavours is of utmost importance and urgent. Accordingly, we are coerced by the prevailing situation bedevilling humanity to ask the following questions; is human life having any inherent worth? Why has killing another human being become so facile? Why is there a breach of the injunction ‘thou shall not kill’? In this regard, Levinas’ *Metaphysics of the Face* seems to offer a dint light, if followed, in redeeming humanity from an impending danger. He is best known as the philosopher of the face of the Other, where the face of the Other enjoins me into a relation void of violence. To him, the first word from the Other, inscribed on his or her face, prior to speech is ‘thou shall not kill’. (Levinas, 1985, pp. 87-89). Thus, Levinas elaborates a radical critique against violence that is based on a reading of the Fifth Commandment in terms of an injunction not to kill. This leads us to announce the objective of this paper, which is to re-examine Levinas’ concept of the “Face of the Other” and to establish the extent to which it can serve as an injunction not to kill a human being. That is, this work seeks to investigate Levinas’ metaphysics of the face and critically examine how it offers an injunction not to kill. In this regard, firstly, we will explore the notion of the face of the Other. This will give us an insight into Levinas’ thought. The second part will dwell on the idea of what it means to kill another and the third part will attempt to establish a relationship between the face of the Other and the injunction not to kill.

## THE FACE AND RESPONSIBILITY FOR THE OTHER

The dedication page of the work, *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*, published in 1974, immediately captures the context of Levinas’ notion of the face of the Other. It goes thus: “To the memory of those who were closest among the six million assassinated by the National Socialists, and of the millions on millions of all confessions and all nations, victims of the same hatred of the other man, the same anti-Semitism.” (Levinas, 1991, p. ii). Levinas was born in Lithuania on January 12, 1906. In 1930, he became a naturalized French citizen and with the outbreak of World War II in 1939, he was drafted into the French army. Unfortunately, France lost the war and so, the Germans captured him as a prisoner of war. Although a French monastic community kept his wife and daughter safe, Levinas’ wider family perished in the Holocaust. Thus, the experiences of hostility and brutality toward human beings clearly shaped Levinas’ own philosophical thought. Again, in another work, he brings out this context of the emergence of his thought by purporting that man is laden with a “millennia of fratricidal struggles, political or bloody, of imperialism, scorn, and exploitation of the human being, down to our century of world wars, the genocides, civil wars, and terrorism.” (Levinas, 1999, p. 132). Hence, the Face of the Other is the most dominating theme in his writings. He writes within the context of wars, brutality, and genocides and it is within a similar context of war and armed conflicts (the Socio-Political war in Cameroon, the Russo-Ukrainian war, the Libyan civil war, Political conflict in South Sudan, terrorist insurgency in Burkina Faso, civil war in Syria, civil war in Iraq, civil war in Afghanistan, ...and so many others over the whole world), that we develop this essay.

In *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas demonstrates that the relationship with the “Other” is made manifest through the concept of the “Face”. However, what is this Face for Levinas? He defines the “Face” (*le visage*) as “the

way in which the Other presents himself, exceeding the idea of the Other in me.” (Levinas, 1969, p. 50). That is to say, the face is the way in which the Other manifests himself/herself before me that goes beyond my ability to evaluate, comprehend, thematize, capture or destroy. It is not perceived or experienced as a physical or aesthetic object. Rather, it indicates the presence of another person. This shows that the epiphany of the face cannot be dissociated from an ethical life worthy of the name. In fact, in *Ethics and Infinity*, he postulates “access to the face is straightway ethical.” (Levinas, 1969, p. 85).

The term “Other,” which Levinas uses in most of his works, was first introduced by Hegel (2018), to mean a constituent of self-consciousness, a ‘being-in-itself’. Levinas, however, introduces this term in his ethics to mean the other person. This “Other” is introduced with a capital “O” as “Autrui” and “other” with a small “o” as “autre”. “The Other (Autrui), refers to the personal other, the other person while other (autre), refers to otherness in general.” (Levinas, 1985, p. 17).

Levinas’ project is to counter the anti-humanistic tendencies that have existed since his days. In contrast to the philosophies of “Totality”, (that is, the idea of an egocentric and reductive philosophy, which objectifies everything, even the other person), he articulates a philosophy of “Infinity”. Levinas describes infinity as the presence of a being not entering into, but overflowing, the sphere of the same. In other words, the infinity of the Other “presents itself as a face in the ethical resistance that paralyses my powers and from the depths of defenceless eyes rises firm and absolute in its nudity and destitution.” (Levinas, 1969, pp. 199-200). Therefore, this infinity is stronger than murder. (Levinas, 1969).

The idea of the Other, in Levinas’s thinking, is linked to God. He insinuates: “the Other is the very locus of metaphysical truth, and is indispensable for my relation with God.” (Levinas, 1969, p. 78). This does not mean that the Other plays the role of a mediator or replaces God. This “Other is not the incarnation of God, but precisely by his face, in which he is disincarnate, is the manifestation of the height in which God is revealed.” (Levinas, 1969, p. 79). Consequently, through the Other, I get to God better.

The Levinasian framework of responsibility is, the essential, primary and fundamental structure of subjectivity; “the tie with the Other is knotted only as responsibility.” (Levinas, 1969, p. 97). The term ‘responsibility’ from the Latin *spondeo* means to “act as guarantor” or “to make a solemn promise”; but more precisely from *respondeo* meaning, “to respond to an appeal or a notice.” (Egea-Kuehne, 2008, p. 157). From these roots, we can uplift three distinct ideas about responsibility: that of status, like a parent, is said to be responsible for his/her children; that of capabilities like a task; and lastly, that of obligation in the sense of responding to a demand. We note here that Levinas feeds on the third meaning to produce a Levinasian responsibility for the Other, which is not a matter of responding before the Other for actions one commits, but of responding before the Other for the Other’s suffering and destitution. Thus, for Levinas, (1985, p. 96), “responsibility is initially for the Other, that is, I am responsible for his very responsibility.” In line with this, his responsibility is incumbent on me necessitates what he calls “Here I am”. (Levinas, 1991). Insistently, he notes that my responsibility is non-transferable and no one could replace me and that is why for him, we are all responsible for all men and I more than all the others. (Levinas, 1985).

## **‘THOU SHALL NOT KILL!’**

According to Jeff McMahan, “there is no moral belief that is more universal, stable, and unquestioned, both across different societies and throughout history, than the belief that killing people is normally wrong.” (McMahan, 2002, p. 189). That is to say, the deliberate taking of human life is, more than any other action, ontologically forbidden. Nevertheless, what does it mean to kill the Other? To kill the Other will mean deliberately or intentionally taking away the Other’s life by the act of another human being. Therefore, if the Other who was once alive is now dead, but the death was not caused by the act of another human being, then the death is not killing. Therefore, in order to qualify the death of the Other as murder, the killing must be intentional. For example, suppose a person is struck in the head by a falling branch off a tree and dies. Such a death cannot be considered as killing because the cause of the death is not an act of another human being. Consequently, killing is an extreme crime that engenders a special horror because of the irrevocable consequences for the victim and this explains why it merits an ontological injunction. In his work, *Taking Life*, Torbjörn Tannsjo intimates that “there are certain actions that human beings are not permitted to perform

irrespective of the consequences of particular instances of them.” (Tannsjo, 2015, p. 21). Therefore, if at all there are any prohibitions of this kind, the most ontological one must be the one given in the commandment ‘that thou shalt not kill’. We use the word ‘ontological’ here to express the natural or beyond the physical dimension of this prohibition. In other words, this prohibition is not chained or bound by any human law. If killing is not forbidden, then anything can be permitted, one may think. However, this leads one to wonder about the source of this prohibition. From this, we can opine that it is ontologically forbidden to kill the Other because we are moral, ethical, and spiritual beings. This implies that, in each human being is implanted the fabric to do good and avoid evil as well as the fact that only God can give and take away life. These two dimensions of man point to what Richard Norman calls “the idea of a ‘right to life’ and the idea of the ‘sanctity of life’.” (Norman, 1995, p. 39).

Generally, when we hear the word ‘right’, immediately we think of social institutions, hence it may be considered as what pertains to an individual as a member of any social structure. As a citizen, for instance, I have a right to vote and that is a right with which I am endowed by the law of my country. However, in this context, the significance of the rights flows in the vein of Levinas who characterises it in the following words:

The formal characteristic of the Rights of Man, such as they are conceived of since the Renaissance, consists in their being attached to every human person independently from any prior granting by any authority or tradition, and also independently from any act of taking upon oneself or of meriting these rights. Also called natural, these rights would also belong to men equally, regardless of the physical or mental, personal or social differences that distinguish men from one another. Prior to all agreed-upon law, they are a priori. (Levinas, 1999, p. 145).

Accordingly, ‘the right to life’ is a universal human and moral right, not dependent on the laws of any particular social institution. As a point of fact, this right is conceived as an inherent and inalienable high value or worth in all human beings, which ought to be acknowledged, respected, and protected by all. Consequently, the right to life cannot be stripped off or lost through another’s or even the individual’s actions. Therefore, this highlights the ontological foundation of the injunction “thou shall not kill”.

Unfortunately, this injunction has been converted to the instruction ‘thou shall kill’ by our contemporary society. This barbaric attitude has led many philosophers, religions, and even movements to see it as a duty to remind man of this injunction not to of kill another. In this regard, Kantian ethics expounds that the taking of human life is always wrong. In fact, according to Kant (2005), all human life is to be revered and no one may ever be killed for any reason, even if another threatens one’s life. According to Islamic philosophy, one of the greatest sins is to kill a human being. In the Qur’an, it states, “If someone kills another person, it is as if he had murdered all mankind.” (Surat al-Ma’ida 5:32). In the same vein, in Christian morality, this injunction not to kill another is echoed very powerfully in the commandment “thou shall not kill” (Deuteronomy, 5:17). This implies the non-destruction of a structure God has created and given life to; the non-deprivation of the right to life to the victim. It is also a banishment of aggression against the entire human family.

Furthermore, in line with movements that purport this idea of the human right to life, we can immediately think of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR, 1948), which serves as a roadmap to the international human rights system. It promulgates in Article 3 that “everyone has the right to life.” (United Nations Organisation, 1948). In addition, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, adopted on 19 December 1966 purports in Article 6 that “Every human being has the inherent right to life. Law shall protect this right. No one shall be arbitrarily deprived of his life.” (General Assembly of the United Nations, 1966). In the writer’s context, the Cameroon is Constitution of 1972 with Amendments through 2008, states in its preamble “every person has a right to life, to physical and moral integrity and to humane treatment in all circumstances. Under no circumstances shall any person be subjected to torture, to cruel, inhumane or degrading treatment.” (The Cameroon's Constitution, 2008). This dynamic of the universality of human rights confirms the moral foundation of every man and thus, it further insinuates that it is an ontological edifice not to harm or kill another, for every life is sacred.

The statement ‘Sacredness or Sanctity of life’ instantly betrays some spiritual or religious outlook of man and it connotes the fact that life is sacred because God creates it; therefore, it is not ours to destroy. In religious

parlance, man is created in God's image and so induces more sanctity to human life than to other living creatures. Thus, this doctrine carries with it the belief that life is sacrosanct and has an intrinsic value, hence must not be jeopardized. In this connection, Roberto Andorno quoting Seneca's Letter XCV in the Moral Letters to Lucilius, maintains that *homo homini sacra res* (Andorno & Pele, 2015), (Man is a sacred thing for man). Accordingly, human life is to be revered and protected from any destruction. In other words, man is supposed to fall prostrate at the epiphany of the face of the Other.

## THE ONTOLOGY OF THE FACE IN THE FACE OF IMPENDING HUMANITARIAN CRISES

Levinas launches a radical attack against the killing of the Other based on an atypical reading of the Fifth Commandment or, better still, of the Word of God, in terms of an injunction. According to the philosopher, "You shall not kill" must be understood as an absolute prohibition that provides for no exceptions and never, whatever the circumstance, the killing of the Other. He captures this beautifully through the face of the Other in the "face-to-face" encounter between two unique, absolutely non-neutralizable beings. He explains that the encounter with the face of the Other is not that which can be "reabsorbed into my own identity". (Levinas, 1969, p. 33). Rather, the encounter with the Other is an ontological call directed towards an Other who cannot be absorbed, whose alterity remains absolute. Consequently, Levinas' face of the Other intimates an ontological injunction not to kill founded on the following attributes: The face of the Other as an imperative and vocative force, Infinite responsibility towards the Other, the face of the Other invites an attitude of care, and ultimately, Dialogue with the Other.

Stating "thou shall not kill," may seem obvious, but as an ontological injunction, it needs the genus of Levinas to explicate its philosophical significance. According to Levinas, the epiphany of the face of the Other in an encounter has an imperative and vocative undertone: vocative, for it deploys a message that calls out to the I; imperative for it obligates the I to respond to that call of the Other. In this regard, the philosopher says, "The first word of the face is the 'Thou shall not kill.'... It is an order." (Levinas, 1985, p. 89). He further adds: "There is a commandment in the appearance of the face as if a master spoke to me." (Levinas, 1985, p. 89). Thus, once the Other presents himself/herself in front of the I, there is a ban not to kill which accompanies the presentation. It is an order and a commandment that must and should be accomplished. In line with this, Alphonso Lingis makes us understand more clearly that in facing the Other, "the I is confronted with an imperative; a moral imperative." (Lingis, 2009, p. 82). Pointing to the vocative aspect, Levinas says: "the face of the Other is destitute; it is the poor for whom I can do all and to whom I owe all. And me, whoever I may be, I am he who finds the resources to respond to the call." (Levinas, 1985, p. 89).

Importantly, we argue that it is not the Other per se that commands the I not to kill him/her but what manifests in the face of the Other that obligates the I. The word of God inscribed in the face of the Other, in the encounter with the Other, is that which requires the I to be responsible for the Other. This means that the robber who steals your money, the terrorist, the fighter, the army, or the warmonger who stands before you bears an inscription that orders you, which calls you not to harm or kill him or her and so, rendering killing impossible. In another case, as a soldier, you are being sent to the war front to fight, and you have a gun, filled with bullets. Your opponent is as well armed. In the uncertainty of things, you are reminded of the injunction inscribed in the face of the Other: "Thou shall not kill" which summons you to responsibility.

Levinas' concept of responsibility should be seen against the backdrop of a period that he characterizes as a "millennia of fratricidal struggles, political or bloody, of imperialism, scorn, and exploitation of the human being, down to our century of world wars, the genocides, civil wars, and terrorism." (Levinas, 1999, p. 132). In another way, he lays the blame for the existence of murder and other barbaric acts of man on the absence of infinite responsibility for the Other. Therefore, through the lens of Levinas, we can aver that another reason not to kill the Other, which is an ontological injunction, is the demand for infinite responsibility towards the Other. This clarifies wherefore the Levinasian framework of responsibility for the Other: the essential; primary and fundamental structure of subjectivity and this responsibility for the other must be seen as something incumbent on me exclusively and of which humanly I cannot refuse. In short, I am a human being in the sole measure that I am responsible for another. (Mkhwanazi, 2013). Hence, we declare 'I am responsible; thus I exist'.

The fact that I am responsible for the Other means that their very presence warrants a response and perhaps it demands what Levinas calls a “here I am”; an expression of one’s readiness to help the Other. In this regard the face of the neighbour is a bearer of an order, imposing upon me, with respect to the Other, a gratuitous and non-transferable responsibility, as if the I were chosen and unique and in which the Other were absolutely Other, i.e., still incomparable, and thus unique. (Levinas, 1999). Consequently, it is mandatory to me and I cannot refuse. Worthy of note is the fact that the infinite nature of responsibility drives Levinas to purport the idea of the dead end of killing the Other, even if he or she seemingly “deserves” it like being involved in the crime of killing another. As such, I am in reality responsible for the Other even when he or she commits crimes, even when the Other commits crimes. (Levinas, 1998). This thought beautifully highlights the point of the injunction not to kill. That is, it is not because the Other is a “thief”, a “terrorist”, or an “activist” ... that the I should bestow on the Other, the punishment of death. In this sense, the burden, weaknesses, problems, cries, needs, and difficulties of the ‘Other’ become that of the ‘I’ and not an opportunity or opening for harming or killing the Other. With this in mind, one would have no choice but to agree with Levinas that there is responsibility for the Other right up to dying for the Other. This immediately alerts us to the fact that Levinas sees responsibility for the Other not as a rational choice but as something that happens to you, which you experience as being chosen or ‘elected’ and which makes you unique, irreplaceable vis-à-vis the unique Other. Hence, there is an ethical call to surrender to the Other and to suffer from his or her suffering, an imperative that precedes all other considerations.

In addition, being responsible for the Other is concrete. It suggests action in which case the peace of the Other, is the responsibility of the I for the Other, the impossibility of leaving him alone before the mystery of death. This, concretely, is the taking up of dying for the Other. (Levinas, 1999). Responsibility for the Other is the duty to give to the Other even the bread out of one’s own mouth and the coat from one’s shoulders. (Levinas, 1991). It is interesting to note here that Levinas is not referring to one’s surplus bread and spare coat. One has to give away the very ones that one has and depends upon to live; remember that responsibility is enacted not only in offering one’s properties or possessions to the Other, but in giving one’s own substance, one’s own life for the Other. Tangibly, it means that the soldier should hold the hand of the wounded “opponent or apparent enemy”, and take him or her to a medical centre. It generally implies that people bear in their hearts the love for all living things: love life naturally, protect life, care for life, give life through their actions rather than take it away.

Levinas proclaims that “the nakedness of the face is destituteness. To recognize the Other is to recognize hunger. To recognize the Other is to give.” (Levinas, 1969, pp. 75-76). This demonstrates that the face introduces us to a world that invites one to care. According to Heidegger “Dasein’s Being reveals itself as care (Sorge)” or better still “Being-in-the-world is essentially care.” (Heidegger, 1962, p. 237). With this, one can only exclaim that care is an intrinsic aspect of man. However, this begs the question: why is the crisis of care alarming in our society? Men have tended to develop an “I don’t care” attitude toward the Other and this is visible in the multiple events of violence: wars, political crises and killing, which has become each passing day. Levinas employs the aspect of destituteness of the face of the Other to expiate and trumpet the vulnerability or defencelessness of the Other before the I. The Other is at the mercy of the I and thus utters a cry for help, a cry for care, a cry not to be killed. In this respect, there is the first uprightness of the face, its upright exposure without defense. The skin of the face is that which stays most naked, most destitute. It is the most naked, though with a decent nudity. It is the most destitute too: there is an essential poverty in the face.... The face is exposed, menaced as if inviting us to an act of violence. At the same time, the face is what forbids us to kill. (Levinas, 1985). This idea stunningly creates an agenda for care that the face of the Other necessitates or commands, nonetheless in a subtle manner. With this in mind, the invitation to care for the Other is peremptory. In fact, the ideal of care is an activity of relationship, of seeing and responding to the need, taking care of the world by sustaining the web of connection so that no one is left alone. (Gilligan, 1982). Better still to care may mean to be charged with the protection, welfare, or maintenance of something or someone. (Noddings, 1986). Once this point of caring for the Other, be they a warmonger or a peacemaker is reached, the obvious result is a society conversant with subject-subject relationships, and peace, and where the Other’s rights are respected. In this same society, dialogue becomes facile; killing another human being becomes difficult and why not impossible. Besides, the small societies of family and friendship embedded in larger societies are formed by caring relations... Globalization of caring relations would help enable people of

different states and cultures to live in peace, to respect each other's' rights, to care together for their environments. (Held, 2006). Nonetheless, to live in peace and respect each other's rights, the aspect of dialogue must be added to the equation.

Etymologically, the word 'dialogue' comes from the Greek word 'dialogos' which means 'conversation or discourse'. Hence, a dialogue will simply mean a live conversation or discourse between two or more individuals. For Levinas, it will be a face-to-face encounter between the I and the Other. He declares that the face speaks and the first word of the face is 'thou shall not kill' (Levinas, 1985). Thus, I must be keen to listen to this appeal of the face of the Other without which no genuine act or gesture of love can follow. Note that, listening here requires not only open ears but also an open heart and mind. From this, we can venture to say that the lack of listening to the primordial discourse of the face of the Other is at the root of the violence performed on the Other. In many cases, people listen, not to understand but to give a response or to criticize.

Moreover, it is worthy to maintain that dialogue connects individuals and creates a conducive atmosphere for me and for another to live in. To speak is to make the world common, to create commonplaces. (Levinas, 1969). In other words, in a dialogic relation the barriers of individual beings are breached and the other becomes present not merely in the imagination or feeling but in the depths of one's substance. (Buber, 2002). In another form, through dialogue, I get to understand the pain and suffering of the Other and consequently, I elude any form of harm on him or her. In sum, approaching, speaking, listening, looking at, coming to know and understand one another, and to find common ground: all these things are summed up in the one word 'dialogue'. (Francis, 2020). In addition, through discourse, I find that I am not the exclusive possessor of the world. What had seemed uniquely mine is revealed as shared with the Other? (Davis, 1996). So, the awareness that I am not the unique possessor of the world, warrants me to understand that the Other equally has the right to live in the world and thus, the petition not to kill him or her shines forth before me; an appeal which must be considered as an injunction not to kill the Other.

## CHALLENGES AND PERSPECTIVES OF THE LEVINASIAN PROPOSAL

What are some of the challenges to the injunction not to kill the Other? Many questions arise from the insinuations of Levinas. How feasible is it today to apply Levinas' prescriptions in the midst of glaring and deep-seated evil around us, where people kill others with impunity? In order not to overlook the shortcomings of Levinas' thought, some challenges to the injunction not to kill shall be analysed. The ground should be cleared hither by maintaining that the word "challenge" does not imply an opening or exception whereby one can kill the Other. Rather, the focus is to bring out how difficult it is, on a human standard to apply the ideas of Levinas. In other words, the trajectory fashioned by Levinas seems humanly impossible and perhaps to take a distance from his thought is a worthwhile venture.

We have noted that Levinas advocates for an infinite responsibility towards the Other. Nonetheless, it appears he overlooks the fact that the I may seek self-interest in responding to the Other. In this context, Hegel accounts that "self-consciousness achieves its satisfaction only in another self-consciousness." (Hegel, 2018, p. 76). This means, I relate with the Other or respond to the destitution of the Other for egocentric reasons.

Secondly, let us look at this case. In the middle of the night, you get a hard knock on your door. While terrified to respond to the knock, you approach the door, open it, and there you find someone with a gun. He puts you at gunpoint and tells you he was sent to kill you. He pulls up the trigger to open fire at you and actually fires but by chance it misses you. Then you succeed to jump on him, and there you find a knife by your side, and you grab it. At this point, why can't you just stab him in order to protect yourself? Will you listen to the voice of the face of the Other pleading, thou shall not kill? Flowing from this, we see that Levinas is so obsessed with the Other to the point that the I seems to disappear before the Other. In fact, he completely forgets one of the basic inclinations of human nature, which is the inclination to preserve or protect one's own life. At this point, one can ask if the I is not equally an 'Other' to the Other. Moreover, the opinion that I should love others as I love better still, to love others one or myself must be able to love oneself sounds utterly alien to Levinas. Thus, the "asymmetry" (non-reciprocal relation) of the ethical relation need not be carried as far as Levinas carries it. While it is true that someone who would not give his life for anyone else has not reached the level of "the

human; the true life”, it is likewise binding that a person can use force, if necessary to protect life. However, the use of force need not have the intended object of death. In other words, the formal object intended must be self defence and not the death of the aggressor.

Here lies a call to responsible stewardship over the I and over the Other. This reaches its culmination when we are able to hold on to the belief that life is a gift from God, and that the human calling is to preserve life and make it fruitful. God alone has dominion over life. So, there is the perfect obligation to respect the dominion of God as the Lord of Life and Death and this perfect injunction prohibits the intentional killing of the Other, beautifully captured by Levinas via the face of the Other in the injunction ‘thou shall not kill’. Hence, we can dare to say that albeit the shortcomings, Levinas offers to us a must-trotted path and this can only make us remark with Jacques Derrida that: “The thought of Emmanuel Levinas makes us tremble.” (Derrida, 1978, p. 101). Now, let us go a bit further to see how trembling contemporary society lies at the thought of Levinas.

To do justice to the theme, the relevance of Levinas in today’s world that is prone to daily violence and killing, there is a sense in which one must identify some pernicious factors, which continue to fuel the fire of violence and killing. It is commonplace that the taking away of people’s lives has become so frequent in today’s society. In fact, statisticians under the coverage of World Population Review, inform us that there are about 32 countries experiencing wars, and violence, through which thousands of people are killed on a daily basis.

In such a context, most parents throw up their hands in despair, so frustrated with their kids as they see them committing violence. Philosophers and teachers are at their wits’ end with the “culture of killing” in our society. Governments lament due to wars and conflicts in their countries and so this begs an answer to the question, how can killing be stopped? In this regard, Levinas’ metaphysical outlook of the injunction ‘thou shall not kill,’ as uttered by the face of the Other proves itself relevant in an attempt to stop killing.

As we have pointed out above, Levinas makes us understand that the face of the Other speaks and its first word is “thou shall not kill”; to this demand lies an infinite responsibility to submit oneself by not harming the Other. However, one of the reasons this attitude of submission to the Other does not triumph is due to the role played by social media in promoting the acceptability of killing. Accordingly, the propaganda of violent images, war videos, videos demonstrating the brutal killing of human beings blurs the line between reality and fantasy, makes killing seem acceptable and increases the appetite for killing. To this, Dave Grossman holds the view that “It is well known that people who consume a lot of violent media come to view the world as a hostile place. People who consume a lot of violent media also think violence is a ‘normal’ behaviour because media characters often use violence to solve their problems.” (Grossman, 2014, p. 50). He further says that when one is so familiar with the propagation of violent images and images of dead bodies, “often callousness sets in and a “so what?” attitude begins to frame the context of horrific acts, even for real-life violence... and it makes people less empathetic, less likely to react in a prosocial way to help victims of violence.” (Grossman, 2014, p. 51). In other words, so much exposure to violence and killing weakens the ability to recognize the face of the Other, exorcises the spirit of responsibility towards the Other and most importantly, it deafens one’s ears and hardens one’s heart to the desperate appeal; thou shall not kill. From this perspective, we are submitting to the fact that today’s media houses should promote images, movies, and videos, which emphasize subject-subject relationships or which are prosocial. Likewise, parents need to make sure they monitor the type of video games played by their children, encourage only movies and channels, which uphold values and virtues, which translate love and responsibility to them. While teachers on their part must induce, lessons which carry values that instigate care and recognition of the dignity of the Other.

Furthermore, through the development of technological and more sophisticated weaponry, the resistance to killing has been weakened and the horizons of violence widened. The development of new weapon systems enables the soldier, even on the battlefield to fire weapons that are more lethal more accurately to longer ranges: his enemy is, increasingly an anonymous figure encircled by a gunsight, glowing on a thermal imager or shrouded in armour plate. In this direction, a physical and psychological distance is created between I and the Other whereby the victim is objectified and thus, the subject-subject relationship is torpedoed. In addition, research points out that soldiers who manoeuvre warships, artilleries, and other sophisticated weapons, could kill others because of the intervention of distance and machinery between them and the enemy (Grossman, 1995). These soldiers tend to pretend they are not killing human beings, rather they kill ships and airplanes.



Accordingly, there is no face-to-face encounter and the first word of the face; ‘thou shall not kill’ is deliberately eschewed. Bearing in mind that man is the author of technology and so has the capacity to subdue it, we subscribe to the proposals of Levinas who, drawing from Heidegger, reminds us that we live in a physical world entangled in human relationships and not possessions. Man abides in the world of subjects as a building belongs to a world of objects...and the relationship with the Other is not produced outside of the world. (Levinas, 1969). Should man possess anything; it is because it already and henceforth is hospitable for its proprietor. This is, therefore, a clarion call to our society to produce only that technological equipment which is protective of humankind. In another way, our focus should be on enhancing human welfare. For instance, in Cameroon’s budget for 2023, the global amount allocated to the sovereignty sector is 542.5 billion CFAF with security and defence amassing up to 70 percent. Meanwhile, the amount allocated to the social sector, including public health is 316.9 billion. (MINFI, 2023). To be more precise, Security and Defence amount to 377.5 billion while Public Health accounts for 228.2 billion. In this light, we suggest that government should invest more in healthcare facilities than in the purchase of arms. In point of fact, the agricultural, economic and health sectors should be the primary areas of government spending, for when men are well-fed, in good health and economically stable, the quest for war or violence will be dissolved. In another way, poverty, hunger and economic instability often transform the society into a jungle whereby men are pushed to pick up arms and definitely kill to survive and so, the agenda should be to silence the guns while putting food on the tables. In addition, government policies on the purchase of arms should be stiffened to reduce the chances of individuals owning weapons. Drawing down to the individual level, Levinas invites us to acquire and own only things, which are welcoming to the face of the Other. That is to say, before the Other, we should present fish and not a snake; bread and not stone. In short, it is time to drop the armored cars and warships and take up the tractors and combined harvesters; let us drop the arms and pick up the thermometers, stethoscopes, and all that can only enhance human life and development.

Finally, it is important to note that one of the proximate issues that accelerated the development of Levinas’ axiom of the face of the Other, was the cultural and social distance that was created by the Nazi regime against the Jews, which led to the massacre of more than six million of them. Social distance is the viewing of a particular class as less than human in a socially stratified environment and cultural distance includes racial and ethnic differences that permit the killer to dehumanize the victim. (Grossman, 1995). Unfortunately, these social and cultural boundaries continue to intensify today leading to more and more human beings being killed. In fact, when one makes a historical journey 29 years back (1994) in Rwanda, we encounter an artificial social and cultural boundary that was fashioned between brothers (Hutus and Tutsis), which led to the death of about one million people. Albeit not a recent happening, we think, stands out in support of the view that cultural distances do break the chain between face-to-face encounters and defiles the injunction not to kill. Another glaring example is the crisis in Cameroon, which is due to the artificial boundaries created by political powers, being described using terms such as “English Cameroon” and “French Cameroon”. Here, is the case originating from a cultural and social differentiation, which has led to the killing of more than 10,000 people. Hence, Levinas reminds us “the Other who dominates me in his transcendence is thus the stranger, the widow, and the orphan, to whom I am obligated.” (Levinas, 1969, p. 215). The inclusion of the word ‘stranger’ in relation to the Other demonstrates that the relationship with others is not ethnic or tribal bound. Levinas’s cry, which arises from his lived experiences, is that there is no Jew nor Greek; we are all children of the same God. Thus, the existence of tribes or ethnicities adds nothing to human relations, so should not take away something from it. In addition, we are all responsible before all men and I more than all the others. (Levinas, 1985). Here, the choice of the word “all” indicates that cultural differences do not, and should not determine the way we relate to the Other. To this plight, Levinas is calling on us to unite, to come together to live as one so that brother shall not lift up sword against brother. However, the use of ‘unity’ here does not mean, in a loose sense, that we give up our tribal affinities to form one tribe. Rather, we are submitting that we open and widen the artificial boundaries created in the form of tribes, ethnicities, or villages in order to welcome all and sundry. Remember, we all form the human race and thus, let us not look at another as coming from this or that tribe, but as one with whom, together we form the human race. To this effect, we shall always see the Other as a brother or a sister with a dignity and right to life, which I cannot simply deprive them of enjoying.

## CONCLUSION

Levinas' clarion call to a true encounter between another, borne by his outstanding creed of the face of the Other, and I stresses an ethical injunction or duty to care, to listen, and to be infinitely responsible for the Other. Essentially, the Levinasian sine qua non for entering into a relationship with the Other worthy of the name, involves recognizing that one is obliged to make oneself self-available to the neediness of the Other. Nevertheless, at the summit of whatever is discussed in this paper and its findings, the Levinas' key idea is crystal clear, that the relation to and the encounter with the Other demands a responsibility with no limits, because in the face of the Other lies the imperative and vocative address; 'thou shall not kill'. Therefore, this command, 'thou shall not kill', tapped by Levinas from the ontological axis of divine commandments to the horizontal plane of human encounter grounded on the face of the Other, is an injunction that is valid everywhere and always.

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