

Heel-Sneak, Niche-Thief, Future-Eater, and the Nature of Change

*(Or Zamen's Face)*¹

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Cursory Introduction

How do we reconcile seemingly opposed schools of thought in the face of calamity? Can we agree that there are important issues afoot? I ask this knowing - as one who is torn between – or among – various schools of thought, that simplistic and confrontational analyses do not move us toward avoiding catastrophes.³

This paper came about when at least four things collided in my mind one night: an enduring interest in the biblical story of Jacob, decades of contemplating the thought of Emmanuel Levinas, research into the evolutionary origins of ethics, and a pregnant comment made in a book on the origin of bipedalism in hominids. I should have known myself well enough to predict that a project planned to fill a thirty to forty-five minute paper would not stay within its bounds. And it certainly has mutated since the submitted abstract.

Please forgive my truncations, glosses, lapses, and leaps.

I. To the Face Itself

What if God was one of us
Just a slob like one of us
Just a stranger on the bus
Trying to make His way home?
One of Us, Eric Bazilian⁴

We are asked in this conference “how can we as psychotherapists, psychologists, researchers, and ongoing students of the application of Levinasian Ethics take up mantle of justice beginning first with infinite Other before us?”⁵ We are asked to address “concerns such as global warming, mass school shootings, terrorism, racism, and widespread social and political upheaval.”⁶ My focus (if it is in fact focused) today, while not minimizing or effacing school shootings, terrorism, racism, and widespread social and political upheaval, is more centered on the concern of global warming and its accompaniments, lack of care for the creatures that share the earth with us, the earth itself, and the unseen networks that bind the biosphere.

When the other human faces me, Levinas tells us, I am affected by the immediacy of the ethical commandment before me. Levinas starts with the immediate - the transcendent other

facing me. Levinas claims that the move out of that rapt attention to *one* other – the breach of the dyad - occurs because there is more than one other. He tells us that the language we inhabit brings with it a language of others, and he tells us that “illeity” - an always-already-passed-by third person, has breached the dyad. To quote myself, “Illeity refers to the unknowable *humanness* which precedes the *ego*, a humanness which speaks forth the human world.”⁷

Reciprocity comes into the ethical through illeity; obligation moves to those people who are not present. But while Levinas provides a basis for morality for the unseen human, he is not obliged to the nonhuman except as it supports the other human. Illeity bespeaks a human world.

This human-centeredness was Llewelyn’s quandary when he tried to find in Levinas a basis for an animal other.⁸ Levinas denied that a dog has a face in “its purest form;” a dog’s face is more “pure vitality,” he claims.⁹ So the force of nature that manifested in the living creature “Bobby” – a dog that gave more human comfort than humans in the *Stalag* that Levinas inhabited during World War II, this face was not primarily an ethical call.¹⁰ (Others, including Matthew Calarco¹¹ and Donna Haraway¹² have puzzled over Bobby’s ethical call and Levinas’s failure to recognize that Bobby had a face.) Derrida, in his (atypically readable) lecture on animals, mentions Levinas at least three times along with a string of philosophers who fail to acknowledge differences among animals, who pursue a bifurcation of human and nonhuman, lumping together all living creatures that are not human into one neutral term, animal.¹³ “Men . . . have given themselves the words in order to corral a large number of living beings within a single concept: “the Animal.”¹⁴ In contrast, Derrida frequently references the individual cat who keeps him company as he writes the lecture.¹⁵ Other, for Levinas, does not include the other that is buried within the term “animal.”

It is time, I suspect, for Levinasians to return to the things themselves, which for Levinas means the face. Together with proximity, substitution, subjectivity, saying, and other such terms, the fundamental problem with returning to face is that it is out of time, non-present. It is a quasi-phenomenon, hovering on the edge of articulation, reconstituted into language inadequately. But by putting it into language, as Levinas himself notes, it has accompaniments. Levinas desires to reconstitute face into Hebrew and then translate it into “Greek.” But the fact that it must be doubly deciphered suggests that maybe we should take some time to examine it again, by ourselves.

I have a photograph of my infant daughter pushing up with her arms as she looks at our Siamese cat – “Zamen” (individuated here *à la Derrida*). Is the surprise and delight on her face merely an acknowledgement of a novel experience? Or does she see a face? I should also note that Zamen was not shy about making his desires known. He would bite if he was not happy. Yet despite the hair-pulling and abuse he suffered at the hands of my children, he did not bite them until they were in grade school. Is this patience solely due to some inherited disposition? Could Zamen be a perceiver of face?

II. *Jacob*

“That is my place in the sun.” That is how the usurpation of the whole world began.

Pascal’s *Pensées*, 112.¹⁶

Everything in us resembles god except for one thing.

God-Like, Gogol Bordello¹⁷

Jacob, patriarch, later renamed Israel, is the son of Isaac, the grandson of Abraham. Jacob is born the second of twins, born grasping the heel of his brother Esau. While Esau’s youth is spent hunting, Jacob stays at home and is favored by their mother, Rebecca. One pivotal

evening, Esau, returning tired from the field, asks his brother for some lentil stew. Pressured by Jacob to trade his birthright for food, Esau recklessly does so, stating that if he were to die, presumably of starvation, the birthright would be of no use.

Isaac, believing that he is near death (prematurely we later find), asks Esau to go hunting and prepare meat for him. Isaac promises Esau that he will bless him before he dies, after he eats. Esau leaves to obtain fresh meat, and Rebecca, overhearing, persuades Jacob to impersonate Esau. Jacob obtains goats from their flock, and Rebecca prepares their meat for Isaac. Following Rebecca's tutelage, Jacob covers himself with a sheepskin to simulate his brother's hirsute body. Isaac, blind, feels his hairiness and, convinced that the younger brother is Esau, gives him his blessing. Esau returns, finds that his brother has obtained the blessing through fraud, and swears to kill him. Rebecca urges Jacob to flee, to go to the land of Haram, to her brother, Laban, and Jacob does so.

Jacob reaches his uncle's home and immediately becomes attracted to his cousin Rachel. Working for Laban for seven years in exchange for Rachel's hand in marriage, he is deceived, cheated. He awakens to find that his marriage night has been spent with Leah, Rachel's sister. Upon his protest, he seemingly accepts Laban's explanation that it is improper to marry off a younger daughter before the firstborn, and he agrees to work another seven years to gain Rachel as his wife. During the time in the land of his uncle/father-in-law, the wives vie to bear children, and when they cannot, they give their maidservants to him so that they can be proxy mothers to his increasing offspring. Rachel, Jacob's favored wife, after long barrenness gives birth to Joseph (and later, after they have departed Haram, to Benjamin).

Jacob asks Laban permission to later return to the land of his father and contracts to receive wages in the form of the speckled and dappled sheep and goats. Then, using magical

means involving wooden rods in the watering troughs, he conjures increased births of speckled and dappled animals as well as vigor and strength in his flock and weakness and feebleness in Laban's. Accused by Laban's sons of taking away the bulk of what was their father's, Jacob justifies it, saying that Laban had cheated him, changed his wages ten times over, and further that God arranged to give him the wealth he now possesses. He takes his family and flock and leaves Haram.

But the return after twenty years is accompanied by anxiety. Jacob will be traveling through Edom, where his brother Esau has settled. He starts to make defensive preparations, separating the group into two camps, so that one might survive an attack. He pleads with his God to be saved from the hand of his brother. He sends his servants and flocks ahead of him with a message to Esau that he is sending gifts. Sending his family ahead, he spends the night seemingly alone at the river, a sleepless and eventful night. During the night he wrestles with "a man."¹⁸ But at dawn he is renamed by his adversary. He is Israel, "God-Fighter, for you have fought with God and men and have prevailed."¹⁹

In the morning Jacob meets up with his family and sees Esau advancing on the group with four hundred men. Putting the maidservants and their children in front, then Leah and her children, with Rachel and Joseph last, he moves ahead of the family and bows to his brother. Esau runs to meet him, falls upon his neck and kisses him. Jacob presents his family to Esau, and it is clear that they are reconciled.

One final incident needs to be summarized for the purposes of this paper. Returning home to Canaan, Jacob's daughter Dinah becomes involved with the prince of the land. The nature of the relationship is unclear, because in one verse it indicates that he lay with Dinah, forcing her, and in the next that he loved her. In any event, the prince begs his father to arrange a

marriage for him and Dinah. His father then talks with Jacob, requests the merger of the family through marriage, the joining in a familial community. He agrees to have all of the men in the town circumcised as a part of the union. But on the third day after the circumcisions, two of Jacob's sons, Levi and Simeon, kill all of the men in the town. They plunder the city - and capture and "plunder" the children and wives as well.²⁰

III. Return to Face

You who build these altars now
To sacrifice these children,
You must not do it anymore.

The Story of Isaac, Leonard Cohen²¹

It is common for Levinasian commentators to refer to the binding and near-sacrifice of Isaac – the *Akedah* - as the biblical basis of the face as ethical command.²² Katz, for example, referencing Levinas's essay on Kierkegaard, believes that Abraham put down his knife because he heard the voice of the angel commanding him to stop the sacrifice. But, she claims, in order for him to hear, he had to first see Isaac's face, his commanding visage ordering him not to kill: "I claim that Abraham was changed when he looked into Isaac's face Abraham had already begun to abort the sacrifice."²³

Levinas, when asked about the origin of the face in Jewish theology, states that the concept *does* have biblical origins. But he indicates that the notion is present on a thematic level, not at a specific or terminological level. He refers to "saintliness," to the commandment not to kill, and to the command to love one's neighbor.²⁴ But when he is asked specifically, "[D]oes the image of the face have Judaic or Biblical roots?" he denies it:

No. The word '*panim*', which means 'face' in Hebrew, is not a philosophical term in the Bible. I would say that the conception of the face is a certain way of expressing philosophically what I mean when I speak of the *conatus essendi*, the effort to exist which is the ontological principle²⁵

Yet this explanation, as transcribed in the interview, is confusing. Rather than the face representing the *conatus*, the face – as Levinas states in other venues - is what challenges it. The *conatus* is mine. The face is other.²⁶

Back to Levinas's response:

I didn't find this in a Biblical verse. But, in my opinion, that is the spirit of the Bible, with all its concern for weakness, all the obligation towards the weak. But I didn't find that in a verse. You see, my terminology does not come from the Bible. Otherwise it would be the Bible to the very end.²⁷

This came from the man who stated that one of his primary goals was to translate Hebrew into Greek, a man who quotes scriptures in his philosophical works to illustrate points, if not to provide grounding. Indeed, the *me voici*, the *Hineni*, the *here-I-am*, the response to the face, is straight out of Genesis 22:1, 22:7, and 22:11, Abraham's response to God and Isaac's response to Abraham, something acknowledged in footnotes in Levinas's interview with Phillippe Nemo.²⁸

So why this response from Levinas, this statement putting distance between Bible and philosophy? It is clear that this Talmudic scholar knew well the story of Jacob, and that he read fluently the Hebrew that described the Patriarch from his birth to his death, from his encounter with conscience and guilt through the unexpected bounty that his brother Esau gave him by forgiving him. What is doubly mystifying is that Levinas must have known why in this interview he was asked about the biblical origin of face, and rather than address the issue head-on, he reverted to previous explanations.

Let me explain why I am convinced of both the influence of this story and the probable reason he was asked about the biblical origin of face. Let me return to the story of Jacob and quote from the Everett Fox translation of Genesis, a translation that attempts to bring the poetry and meanings of Hebrew into English. After twenty years away from his brother, the brother

whom he stole from, Jacob returns, accompanied by substantial fear. He is obsessed with what may befall him, the violence of his brother. He splits his group and then stays by himself at the river:

For he said to himself:
I will wipe (the anger from) his *face*
with the gift that goes ahead of my *face*;
afterward, when I see his *face*,
perhaps he will lift up my *face*!
The gift crossed over ahead of his *face*
And Yaakov was left alone—
Now a man wrestled with him until the coming up of dawn.
At dawn, the man asked him his name.
And he said: Yaakov.
Then he said:
Not as Yaakov/Heel Sneak shall your name be henceforth
uttered,
But rather as Yisrael/God/Fighter,
For you have fought with God and men
And have prevailed
Yaakov called the name of the place: Peniel/*Face* of God,
for: I have seen God,
face to face,
and my life has been saved.²⁹

So Jacob struggles with guilt and conscience, wrestles all night with a man who turns out to be God, is renamed from Heel-Holder/Heel-Sneak, to God-Fighter, Israel, and not only uses the word “face” numerous times before the encounter, but as Marks points out, “the story culminates in a double etymological gloss; for the etiology of ‘Israel’ – the obvious ideological focus of the story – is closely shadowed by the etiology of the place-name Peniel or Penuel,”³⁰ the Face of God.

At first glance, the river event seems to be archetypally Levinasian. The other who distresses me, calls me into insomnia, causes me to leave my comfortable home, commands me to stay awake and obsessed, that other comes from on high, as one divine, holy. Levinas denies that this is source material for the concept of face. But in an answer to a question about the

human face, Levinas states: “It is as if God spoke through the face,”³¹ which comes awfully close to what Jacob says when he meets Esau: “For I have, after all, seen your face, as one sees the face of God”³² In another ambiguous reference, Levinas briefly addresses Jacob in an article on politics. Referring to Jacob awaiting his brother, Levinas states that Jacob “was frightened of his own death but was anxious he might have to kill.”³³ For Levinas, the face cannot be separated from death:

The face is not in front of me (*en face de moi*) but above me; it is the other before death, looking thorough and exposing death. Secondly, the face is the other who asks me not to let him die alone, as if to do so were to become an accomplice in his death. Thus the face says to me: you shall not kill. In the relation to the face I am exposed as a usurper of the place of the other.³⁴

So not only is his analysis of Jacob’s emotional state similar to his analysis of the relationship of face and death, but he uses the word, “usurper, which is yet another meaning of the name Jacob, along with Heel-Holder and Heel-Sneak.

Levinas, rabbi-philosopher, is not at all shy about his intention to translate Hebrew into Greek in order to teach us about ethics. He states that Judaism is a fundamental mode of all humans.³⁵ He refers to all humans as virtually chosen ones.³⁶ He uses the term “face” to refer to the hovering obligation for the other, the root of conscience, “committing me to human fraternity.”³⁷ He says, “It is as if God spoke through the face.”³⁸ Yet Levinas disavowed this story as being source material. Why?

I want to suggest a couple of reasons.

The first is simply that Levinas does not want to be accused of theologizing philosophy. He seems to be in a position similar to scholastic philosophers who walked a tightrope between orthodoxy and inquiry. Philosophy during the scholastic period was characterized by harmonizing the natural and observable world with accepted Christian dogma. While Levinas’s

interests are clearly varied, from Talmudic commentary to contemporary Judaism to ethical philosophy, he frequently uses similar terminology in all his works; while he sees them as one fabric, he tries to keep their methods separate:

I always make a clear distinction, in what I write, between philosophical and confessional texts. I do not deny that they may ultimately have a common source of inspiration. I simply state that it is necessary to draw a line of demarcation between them as distinct methods of exegesis, as separate languages. I would never, for example, introduce a Talmudic or biblical verse into one of my philosophical texts to try to prove or justify a phenomenological argument.³⁹

Levinas does not wish his philosophical writings to be rejected because they are faith-based.⁴⁰

The second possible reason is that Levinas wants a relatively “pure” foundation for the face. The *Akedah*, written sparsely, describes the near-sacrifice of Isaac without emotion, fear, or disagreement. The angel orders Abraham to kill Isaac and then orders him not to. Katz claims that it is Isaac’s face that allowed Abraham to hear the commandment not to kill. For Levinas, the power of the face is in its commandment not to kill.⁴¹ Again, while Levinas denies that any biblical passage is the origin of face, it is clear that this one is at least provides a strong example of what he believed face to be, as evidenced - as I said before -through the footnotes accompanying his interview with Nemo. The *Akedah* is, through its sparse verbiage and its direct language regarding the divine, a more “pure” foundation for a philosopher who wants the origin of ethics to be holy.

We must remember that Levinas’s prime project was the inversion of ontology and ethics:

I am trying to show that man’s relation to the other is ultimately prior to his ontological relation to himself (egology) or to the totality of things which we call the world (cosmology).⁴²

Levinas demonstrates that the impact that the other has on me precedes me and pushes me out of atemporality. My cognition - my system-making, making sense of things, self-concept – all

come after the impact of the other. In Otherwise Than Being, Levinas argues that perception and language all emerge from the proximity of the other. The ethical precedes, and is necessary for, ontology. Ethics is first philosophy. Knowing that the experience that he attempts to document is pre-linguistic and unrecoverable, he uses affective language to indicate that the ethical élan is not some derived rational process. It is the upsurge of each moment, a recurrent birthing, and the language he uses to describe it is passionate. Describing this passion is Levinas's prime project.

Jacob's encounter at the river is also passionate. But it is not "pure." It is easily argued that Jacob is not being prompted by the ethical. For twenty years he lived away from home, and it was only upon his return that Esau becomes an issue for him. And the issue is primarily one of fear. So while I suggest that Jacob feels guilt, the reality that is being narrated is that he is fearful for his life, his possessions, and his family, especially those he loves the most. (Indeed, I suspect that the biblical redactors structured the narrative deliberately to demonstrate that Jacob had not been transformed into an other-directed man.⁴³) The use of "face" in the Jacob story is not a clear prohibition against killing. Face, for Jacob, implies reciprocity, which for Levinas is a later, derivative, experience. For Levinas, I – as subjectivity – do not have a face. Only the other has a face. Jacob refers to wiping the anger from Esau's face by using a gift that will be presented before Esau sees Jacob's face. Maybe, Jacob hopes, Esau will lift up his (Jacob's) face. The importance of the term *face* is undeniable in the story, but it goes beyond the ethical inspiration that comes from on high. It acknowledges a lived commonality that Levinas denies as fundamental.

It is also important to point out that the imminence of the face in the Jacob story, face in the place and a perceivable face (and body) of God flies in the face of Levinas's concept.

Levinas is relentlessly monotheistic and anti-pagan, and the Jacob story does not readily support his stance.

Despite the fact that Levinas is well aware of the complexity of human emotion and the selfishness and violence that accompanies human systematizing, moral or otherwise (for Levinas all systematizing – all being – is a function of morality), he chooses to use a simpler biblical basis for face. Levinas uses a binary system in much of his work, juxtaposing opposites: self and other, totality and infinity, need and desire, said and saying; he emphasizes the second term in these oppositions, the terms that point to the holy: other, infinity, desire, and saying, the primordial ethical *élan*. This *élan* is the basis for praxis. It is not Levinas's primary project to say how we move from face to a specific form of praxis. It is his project to say that all praxis derives from face. However, Levinas's experience is his own and his desire to encapsulate the source of ethics is contextualized by his life, his cultures.

- Is it time to revisit the source of Levinas's ethics, the *élan*?
- Is it time to question Levinas's (philosophical) monotheism?
- Is the other person the only other to whom unmodified subjectivity acknowledges a debt?
- And what if it is? Is it possible that we must also bracket phenomenology to explore whether the emotional and numinous epiphany of the face is species-specific, a genetic algorithm that serves successful reproduction?⁴⁴

IV. Homo Jacobean: The Human Species as Jacob

[S]ome of our deepest moral intuitions are gut feelings that are with us for no more lofty a reason than that they helped our ancestors protect themselves and spread their genes.

Why We Fight – and Can We Stop? Robert Wright⁴⁵

Oxford evolutionary zoologist Jonathan Kingdon, at the close of a book focused on the development of bipedalism, authored a chapter entitled “Confessions of a Repentant Vandal.” While contemplating his words, I decided to bring him into my obsession with Jacob. “Even the most Darwinian of scientists likes to use metaphors from Genesis,” he states, “the favorites being Eden, Adam, Eve, and Exodus.”⁴⁶ But Kingdon, whose demonstrations of “bum-shuffling” – the presumed predecessor to bipedalism – with evolutionist and atheist Richard Dawkins can be seen on the internet,⁴⁷ does not just see metaphorical possibilities in Genesis. He sees wisdom.

It is . . . about rewriting, again and again, and in the light of an ever-expanding science, the old tribal stories of Genesis – all of them earnest and often wise efforts to understand our origins.⁴⁸

The fossil record supports a prehistory in which a mobile group of apes left Africa and, after millions of years, returned from Asia. Of its descendent species only humans, gorillas, and chimps remain.⁴⁹ And, significantly, of as many as eighteen hominin – human or near-human - species that evolved from that returnee, we are the only survivors. To Kingdon, it is of utmost importance to explore why that is true, to understand “*why* we occupy such a lonely position after such a diverse history.”⁵⁰ Kingdon’s “single-character one-liner” (akin to “Naked Ape,” “Moral Animal,” etc.), by which he describes what we are, is “Niche-Thief.”⁵¹ Our bipedalism is one of the traits that allow us to be the ultimate usurper. Our technology is the other.

Self-Made Man: From Eden to Extinction? - Kingdon’s earlier work – explains how over millennia we have changed our body structure and nearly everything else – through our technology. Mobility and tool have conjoined.

I take the view that the evolution of bipedalism and the emancipation of hands to become the servants of a greedy but ever-enlarging intelligence has led on to the elaboration of an ever more comprehensive set of tools and techniques. Human ingenuity has had the long-term effect of depriving other species of their livelihoods by consuming the same

resources or taking up more and more of the living spaces of other organisms. This expansion in scope may not have begun as a deliberate assault on another species, but for more and more species the end result has been to be elbowed out of prime habitats and eventually out of existence.⁵²

Kingdon frequently makes reference to a term used by the Australian naturalist Tim Flannery, “Future Eaters,”⁵³ a reference to the humans of 40,000 years ago and after, when mobility and tools created an efficiency not previously seen, efficiency that allows our ancestors to unthinkingly conspire against their offspring and their offspring’s world. As humans migrate, they create waves of extinctions. The first humans in Australia annihilate – among a number of other species – nearly all land creatures larger than themselves,⁵⁴ eighty-six percent of all animals weighing in excess of forty-four kg.⁵⁵ South America loses over eighty percent, and North America seventy-three percent. Similarly, many thousands of years later, the Maori, colonizing New Zealand, wipe out the giant Moa,⁵⁶ and cause widespread extinctions of other birds, marine mammals, and fish. As their population grows and resources disappear, the Maori become warlike fort-builders who eat their enemies.⁵⁷

The detriments of future-eating are most apparent when humans are confined to islands. Resources become depleted. If migration is thwarted, a behavioral sink ensues.⁵⁸ However, if enough time and struggle ensue, even Future-Eaters have been known to change, to achieve sustainable symbiosis with their environment. In the thousands of years after the forced extinction of numerous species in Australia, the aboriginal people moved into synchrony with creatures and land. Fire became a tool that not only was used for offensive and defensive purposes, but as a form of farming, “firestick farming.”⁵⁹ This approach to ridding the land of massive amounts of vegetation so that small animals can flourish and be hunted appears to be a replacement for the extinct herbivorous megafauna that previously ate this detritus.⁶⁰ Over the millennia, Future-Eaters can learn to compensate for the errors of their forbearers.

Now we all are as-if island-bound, in the midst of global changes without measure, countless species-extinctions, trillions of tons of carbon filling the atmosphere, futures gnawed on and tossed away. The temporary equilibriums that we established during our migrations and takeovers are wobbling.

As individuals, we Future-Eaters can be quite nice folks. We can recycle, monitor our carbon footprints, and coexist with our neighbors. It might even be that some of our Neanderthal genes, the five percent of our genome in those of us descended from the human out-of-Africa odyssey, came through peaceful mergers of families, but looking at history, we see that domination tends to be the route by which the genes of the indigenous enter into the majority population. None of us has Hobbit genes, though *homo floresiensis* was certainly eliminated (and while their genes are not within us, we may have inherited their parasites).⁶¹ In terms of extra-tribal relations, the actions of altruistic individuals tend to be exceptions, not the rule, though we are quite adept at regrets after conquest and “plunder” are over. Individuals rarely impede the inexorable cooptation and elimination of our cousins and our siblings.

Claiming one’s place in the sun results in the usurpation of the world, says Pascal. But the claim does not have to be mine; it can be ours, insofar as “ours” means tribe, neighbors, family, and culture. The usurper is not me, but us.

IV. What to do?

The Telefol people inhabit the very centre of the island of New Guinea One of the most intriguing [Telefol taboos] involves the long-beaked echidna. A relative of the platypus, this large egg-laying mammal is covered in spines and snuffles about the mossy forest feeding on worms Once found in Australia and New Guinea, it became extinct everywhere except New Guinea’s mountains over forty thousand years ago. Weighing up to sixteen kilograms and almost a metre long, it is a slow breeding, defenseless creature that can live up to fifty years. And because its flesh is the fattiest and tastiest in all of New Guinea, even moderate human populations are sufficient to completely exterminate it

Afek had four children: an opossum-like marsupial known as the ground cuscus, a rat, a human and a long-beaked echidna. The long-beaked echidna was his mother's golden boy. She loved him best of all, but the smoke from the fire irritated his weak eyes, so she told him sorrowfully that he must leave the family home to live in the mossy forest, where the air was cleaner. As the long-beaked echidna departed Afek warned her remaining children that they must never, under any circumstances, injure their brother, for if they did disaster would befall all Telefol. Until the 1950's, Telefol hunters found it unthinkable to harm a long-beaked echidna. But then a Baptist missionary arrived in the region, and the Telefol were taught that their ancestors' beliefs were the work of the devil. Within a short space of time long-beaked echidnas simply ceased to exist in the region.

Tim Flannery, Here on Earth, p. 101-102.

I make audacious leaps and claims in this paper, especially audacious for this venue. I accuse Levinas of denying that the story of Jacob was a source for his pivotal notion of face. I claim that we need to go back to the source of Levinas's ethics. I suggest that the holiness in Levinas's ethical source might be assisted by an evolutionary imperative and that we are not unique in this. I suggest that Levinas's rejection of paganism and (philosophical) polytheism may have molded his quasi-phenomenology.

I do not believe we will not find in Levinas alone a way of stepping from the face of the other to justice that will address the ecological disasters that we Future-Eaters bring upon our children and the other creatures that inhabit the earth. The original goal of this paper was to explore the story of Jacob as a possible basis for a mythology in accord with the nature of our humanity, our species-identity. Instead of hero or patriarch to be admired, Jacob would be the archetypal Future-Eater, the appropriator of the niches of siblings and cousins. The Heel-Sneak becomes Niche-Thief who becomes Future-Eater. As we tremble at the river, I thought, we can make meaning out of the story by realizing that we are him. We are the future-eaters who colonize, take the easy prey, and then fall into disarray and war when the resources become

scarce. We not only deceive and steal the place of others, but we then create ideologies that - *ex post facto* - justifies our deceit and theft.⁶²

I thought that we could learn from Levinas's failure to grab hold of the Jacobean story and run with it. Levinas's glorious description of the ethical imperative ignores the messiness of the actual ethical dilemma, a quandary in which the face of the other is looked at in order to bring me relief as well. Jacob – like me, like the species we are – quivers with desire, quests for power, loves unequally and selfishly, and manages to not learn from Esau, he who gave mercy and offered bounty. Jacob's moral conflicts are as infused with himself as they are with the other. Maybe by creating a mythology based in this flawed tribalist, I thought, we could learn from his errors and from his brother's transformation, a premodern mythology to assist as we cope with overtaxing the atmosphere with carbon. I thought maybe we could change culture.

But we are no longer in the pre-modern world, where mythologies persist for millennia. In George Stewart's Earth Abides, a disease eliminates most people on earth, and – at the end of the book – a mythology arises that is carried on to future generations through the oral tradition of a family tribe that lives in Berkeley, California.⁶³ However, failing the absence of an electronics-destroying electromagnetic pulse or world-wide pandemic, the likelihood is low that a common mythology will arise in the connected world we inhabit. There will be no Platonic “big lie” to guide us in responsible ways through global crises. And talking and writing about ethics seems ineffective in a world where preferred opinions are considered to justify themselves, where taste needs no accounting.

How do we change culture?

I started this project with the lofty ideal of changing culture through changing the meaning of a mythological story. But when cultures clash, a breach opens that allows previously

disallowed behaviors, as in the Baptist influence on the Telefol. *The Telefol managed to keep a species in existence for 40,000 years - through their mythology.* Indeed, for these millennia, Telefol hunters did not know how tasty the long-beaked echidna could be, because they did not break the taboo on hunting them. But we live in a time where cultural bounds – except for those of pernicious corporate capitalism – are dissolving rapidly. So it is doubtful that changing the meaning of a biblical story will have any effect.

Earlier in history, controlling the religious canon was a priority, because by controlling the parameters of the governing ideology, one can maintain power – and desired conduct.⁶⁴ But now religious canons are not sufficient to control and guide. We are in that feared and welcomed postmodern period, when grand narratives have lost their appeal. The endless variety of experiences, stories, and consumer goods provide a context by which we can expect no agreement on anything. But only by changing culture can we expect to avoid further ecological calamity.

How do we change culture?

Serendipitously, we have seen remarkable cultural shifts in recent years. The attitudes toward and legality of same-sex relationships, even marriage, have shifted substantially and quickly. I live in Colorado, which, with Washington State, has legalized recreational marijuana; a majority of the American public believes it should be legalized – a rapid transition in opinion. I mention these two significant changes to argue that there are things that are changing culture. I have my own theories about what now changes culture (and I have my own research practices which involve attuning myself to popular culture through Netflix), but I believe that the first move that needs to be made to change the world is to understand how culture changes in the Twenty-First Century.

We can find our inspiration, we can bemoan the tragedies of the world, but we will not make a lot of headway by staying in our old paradigms. My simple-minded hope to use Jacob as an exemplar of what we are and what we need to move away from also needs to be approached differently, but not from the context of a storybook or sermon. How can this insight be translated into something that really might make a difference?

Perhaps one answer is to realize that we need to move away from the passionate call of the individual other, not to avoid the call necessarily, but to investigate why the call is passionate in the first place. We need to question the limitations of Levinasian illeity, to truly look at ourselves and the limits of our subjective response to the other, to face what we are as a species, what we are as a culture. We should look to what Levinas points to – his messianic call for justice and mercy – and re-examine whether its limitations.

At the end of Otherwise Than being, Levinas states that the “modern world is above all an order, or a disorder in which the elites can no longer leave peoples to their customs, their wretchedness and their illusions, nor even to their redemptive systems”⁶⁵ He follows this by urging the “intellectuals” reading the book to acknowledge the individual humanity of each person and to hold back from taking actions that will result in violence. But action is needed, action to save people, their offspring, our cousins, our fellow creatures, and the web that connects us – action to save my kids and, yes, the selfish Future-Eater who is me. Violence is underway.

How do we stop it?

Endnotes

¹ Presented at the *Eleventh Psychology For the Other Seminar*, Seattle University, November 16, 2013.

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³ For example, Marissa S. Beyers & Jeffrey S. Reber, “The illusion of intimacy: A Levinasian critique of evolutionary psychology,” *Journal of Theoretical and Philosophical Psychology*, Vol. 18, 1998, p. 176-192.

⁴ 1995, Mercury/Polygram.

⁵ Kunz.

⁶ Kunz.

⁷ David R. Harrington, *Person, System, and Subjectivity: Psychology and the Philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas*, Ph.D. diss., The Pennsylvania State University, 1993, p. 132.

⁸ John Llewelyn, “Am I Obsessed by Bobby? (Humanism of the Other Animal),” In Re-Reading Levinas, Robert Bernasconi and Simon Critchley, Eds. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991, p. 234-245. (I was honored to be present in 1987 at Vanderbilt University when Llewelyn presented the draft of this article to a small conference on Levinas, with Jacques Derrida present as commentator.)

⁹ Wright, Hughes, and Ainley, p. 169.

¹⁰ “The Name of a Dog, or Natural Rights,” In Difficult Freedom: Essays on Judaism (trans. Seán Hand), London: The Athlone Press, 1990, p. 151–3.

¹¹ “Faced by Animals,” p. 113 - 135.

¹² When Species Meet, University of Minnesota Press, 2008, p. 311n28.

¹³ Jacques Derrida, “The Animal that Therefore I Am (More to Follow)” (trans. David Wills), *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 28, Winter 2002, pp. 369-418.

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 400.

¹⁶ Emmanuel Levinas, Otherwise Than Being Or Beyond Essence, (trans. Alphonso Lingis), The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, p. vii.

¹⁷ *Voi-La Intruder*, 1999, Rubric Records.

¹⁸ Fox, p. 155.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Fox, p. 164.

²¹ 1969, Sony/ATV Music Publishing LLC.

²² For example, Michael R. Michau, "The Ethical and Religious Revelation of the *Akedah*," *Minerva – An Internet Journal of Philosophy*, Vol. 9, 2005, <http://www.minerva.mic.ul.ie//vol9/akedah.html>.

²³ Claire E. Katz, "The Voice of God and the Face of the Other: Levinas, Kierkegaard, and Abraham," *The Journal of Textual Reasoning*, Vol. 10, 2001, <http://jtr.lib.virginia.edu/archive/volume10/Katz.html>.

²⁴ Tamra Wright, Peter Hughes, Alison Ainley, "The Paradox of Morality: an Interview with Emmanuel Levinas," in Robert Bernasconi & David Wood (Eds.), The Provocation of Levinas: Rethinking the Other, Routledge, 1988, p. 173.

²⁵ Ibid. It should be noted that Matthew Calarco also notes that Levinas's answers appeared to be somewhat confused. "Faced by Animals," in Peter Atterton & Matthew Calarco (Eds.), Radicalizing Levinas, p. 123-124.

²⁶ Cf. Levinas' response in an earlier interview: "The celebrated 'right to existence' which Spinoza called the *conatus essendi* and defined as the basic principle of all intelligibility, is challenged by the relation to the face." "Emmanuel Levinas," in Richard Kearney, Dialogues with Contemporary Continental Thinkers: The Phenomenological Heritage, Manchester University Press, 1984, p. 60.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Emmanuel Levinas, Ethics and Infinity: Conversations with Philippe Nemo (trans. Richard A. Cohen), Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1985, p. 95.

²⁹ Fox, p. 155-157. (Italics mine.)

³⁰ Herbert Marks, "Biblical Naming and Poetic Etymology," *Journal of Biblical Literature*, Vol. 114, 1995, p. 35.

³¹ “The Paradox of Morality,” p. 169.

³² Fox, p. 159.

³³ Emmanuel Levinas, “Peace and Proximity,” Adriaan T. Peperzak, Simon Critchley, & Robert Bernasconi (Eds.), Basic Philosophical Writings, Indiana University Press, 1996, p. 164.

³⁴ Kearney, p. 60.

³⁵ Salomon Malka, “*Entretien de Emmanuel Lévinas*,” Lire Lévinas, Paris: Les Editions du Cerf, 1984, p. 108.

³⁶ Otherwise Than Being, p. 185.

³⁷ Emmanuel Levinas, Totality and Infinity (trans. Alphonso Lingis), Duquesne University Press, 1969, p. 215.

³⁸ “The Paradox of Morality,” p. 169.

³⁹ Kearney, p. 54.

⁴⁰ I observed such a rejection by the noted French philosopher Claude LeFort. At the 12th Annual Merleau-Ponty Circle (September 17 – 19, 1987 - University of Rhode Island), a member of the audience commented that some of what LeFort had said in his Distinguished Lecture (“Flesh and Otherness” – “*Chair et alterité*”) seemed Levinasian. LeFort indicated that he rejected Levinas’s work because it included God language.

⁴¹ “Thus the face says to me: you shall not kill.” Kearney, p. 60.

⁴² Kearney, p. 57.

⁴³ Marks points out that

[D]oublings, the narrative equivalent of biblical parallelism, constitute the two tablets of all biblical narrative, but they are most densely clustered precisely here in the Jabbok episode (p. 35)

Can it be a coincidence that Jacob’s two names figure in a story that features two camps, two crossings, two embassies, two wives, two nights’ lodgings; two kinds of “blessing,” “deliverance,” and “sending/release [שלח]; two kinds of threatening אשׁ? (p. 34-35)

Is it too much of a stretch to speculate that Esau’s forgiveness of his brother is intentionally placed immediately before the slaughter and plunder of Shekhem in such a way to make clear that Jacob, who is now Israel, has not learned an important lesson? While the dualities in the story of Jacob are examined in a great deal of biblical literary research (e.g., Bruce Geller, “The Struggle at the Jabbok: The Uses of Enigma in a Biblical Narrative”, *Journal of the Ancient Near Eastern Society of Columbia University*, Vol. 14, 1982, p. 37-60), I have found no scholarly discussion of this juxtaposition and its ethical lesson.

⁴⁴ Studies of our cousins, chimpanzees and bonobos, have found interactions that must be labeled ethical, but are also species-specific. See Frans de Waal, The Bonobo and the Atheist: In Search of Humanism Among the Primates, W.W. Norton & Company, 2013.

⁴⁵ *The Atlantic*, Vol. 312, November, 2012, p. 115.

⁴⁶ Lowly Origin: Where, When, and Why Our Ancestors First Stood Up. Princeton University Press, 2003, p. 334.

⁴⁷ http://www.dailymotion.com/video/xdqqkq_jonathan-kingdon_tech

⁴⁸ Lowly Origin, p. 369.

⁴⁹ Ibid., p. 336.

⁵⁰ Ibid., p. 346.

⁵¹ Ibid., p. 348.

⁵² Ibid., p. 351.

⁵³ See Tim Flannery, The Future Eaters: An Ecological History of the Australian Lands and People, New York: Grove Press, 1994.

⁵⁴ Ibid., p. 115.

⁵⁵ Self-Made Man, p. 92.

⁵⁶ Future Eaters, p. 196.

⁵⁷ Ibid., p. 244-243.

⁵⁸ John B. Calhoun, "Population density and social pathology," *Scientific American*, Vol. 206, 1962, pp. 139–148.

⁵⁹ Future Eaters, p. 223.

⁶⁰ Future Eaters, p. 229.

⁶¹ Tim Flannery, Here on Earth: A Natural History of the Planet, New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 2010, p. 92-95.

⁶² Daniel Quinn attempted to also use Genesis to promote a change in the way that humans inhabit the earth. See Ishmael: An Adventure of the Mind and Spirit, Bantam, 1995.

⁶³ George R. Stewart, Earth Abides, Random House, 1949.

⁶⁴ There are many examples of examinations into canons and their formation, but the following are readily available on my shelf: Frank Welsh, The Battle for Christendom: The Council of Constance, the East-West Conflict, and the Dawn of Modern Europe, New York: The Overlook Press, 2008; Charles Freeman, A.D. 381: Heretics, Pagans, and the Dawn of the Monotheistic State, New York: The Overlook Press, 2009; Robert H. Eisenman, James the Brother of Jesus: The Key to Unlocking the Secrets of Early Christianity and the Dead Sea Scrolls, Penguin, 1998; Elaine Pagels, The Gnostic Gospels, Vintage, 1989.

In the same vein, it is intriguing to read about the canon-like influence of Sir Walter Scott and his fiction on the manufactured culture of the antebellum American South. See Robert Fulford, The Triumph of Narrative, New York: Broadway Books, 2000, pp. 121 – 152.

⁶⁵ Otherwise Than Being, p. 184.