

## Need is Not a Lack: Levinas on the Role of Eating in the Ethical Adventure

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Cases of intentional and persistent self-starvation in the contemporary era are typically subsumed under the diagnostic category *anorexia nervosa*. This study brackets that diagnostic explanation in order to examine the experience of nourishment and self-starvation by means of comparative analysis centered on conceptions of “need,” particularly “hunger.”

Each of Levinas's major works of philosophy, beginning with *On Escape* and culminating with *Otherwise than Being*, contains a particular version of Levinas's general "genetic" phenomenological account of subjectivity (Cohen, 1987, p. 1). The account begins with "the distinct existent...[and] then moves to the progressively more complex constitutive layers of subjectivity...to conclude with the subject's encounter with the other person" (p. 1). Always "sincere" (Levinas, 1947a/1978, p. 38), the existent's "ethical adventure" toward an encounter with another person nevertheless has a deep, metaphysical meaning that is not immediately apparent to the existent herself (Levinas, 1979, p. 33). The existent engages in everyday activities in the world because she yearns to be free from the inner prison of "solitude" (Levinas, 1947b/1987, pp. 42, 58-64; 1961/1969, p. 55) and because she refuses "to be transformed into a pure loss figuring in an alien accounting system" known as historical time (Levinas, 1961/1969, p. 56). The existent as portrayed across Levinas's philosophical career seeks *transcendence*. Levinas's accounts of ethical subjectivity in all of his major works may thus be understood as “answers” to the two-part question, “What is transcendence, and how can I accomplish it?”

The first-person experiences of people who self-starve likewise disclose a concern with achieving transcendence. Indeed, phenomenologically-oriented studies of *anorexia nervosa* suggest that this form of psychopathology is its own kind of ethical adventure. “[A]norexic women actively construct a ‘heroic moral subjectivity’...in which everyday (mundane) practices acquire out-of-the-ordinary meanings” (Gooldin, 2008, p. 275). What is the character of this “heroic moral subjectivity”? What meanings do people living with *anorexia nervosa* attribute to everyday acts? Most importantly for the purpose of this paper, how does this subjectivity and the deep significance it bestows on everyday acts compare with Levinas's own account of these themes? To pursue this inquiry, the aforementioned two-part question must also be posed to people who self-starve: “What is transcendence, and how can I accomplish it?”

For readers and scholars of Levinas, my study clarifies this philosopher's radically new conception of need and its relationship to ethical living. For psychotherapists working with patients who may be labeled as anorexic, this comparative analysis elucidates the ethical significance of hunger and starvation that many of these patients attribute to their behaviors.