I. Metaphysics and Infinity (Selections from Preface and Section I)

A. Preface (first 5 paragraphs, pp. 21-22)
   1. What does Levinas mean by asserting that “it is of the highest importance to know whether we are not duped by morality?” (21)
   2. Why does “lucidity” demand a recognition of “the permanent possibility of war”? (21)
   3. What might Levinas be referring to when he speaks of the “certitude of peace” that moral consciousness presupposes and which he opposes to the “evidence of war”? (22)

B. Metaphysics and Desire (Section 1, A, 1-2; pp. 33-40)
   1. What does Levinas understand by the term “metaphysics”?
   2. In what way does metaphysics involve “a desire that can not be satisfied”? (34)
   3. Note Levinas’ linkage of the metaphysical desire he is evoking with a desire for “the Most-High”? (34)
   4. In what way does the metaphysical desire for what is other presuppose a self that is egoistic (38)?

C. The Idea of Infinity (Section 1, A, 5; pp. 48-52)
   1. What does Levinas find peculiar in Descartes’ idea of infinity?
   2. How is the idea of infinity instantiated in what Levinas describes as the face of the other?

II. Ethics and the Face: Discourse (Section III, Part B, #s 1-3 [194-204], Section I, Part B, #3 [64-70])

(For all of the sections treating the theme “Ethics and the Face” I would like for you to have read from Totality and Infinity, Section III, Part B & Section I, Part B, #s 3 & 5 and Part C, #s 1, 2 & 3 [but only part d of #3] in that order. That is, read Part B of Section III first and then go back and read the bits from Section I. I think it will make better sense that way. In class I will be focusing on specific themes from this set of readings, asking you to read (or re-read) specific aspects of this reading that pertain to these themes more carefully than others. The reading/study guide will follow the order of the readings as we focus on them in class.)

A. Discourse and Obligation (from Section III)
   1. What is the significance of the distinction Levinas draws on p. 195 between 1) the Other “as a theme”, something that can be said about the Other and 2) the Other “as interlocutor”, the one to whom I speak? How does the Other as interlocutor transcend the Other as theme, transcending, in effect, anything that can be said about her/him?
   2. What does Levinas mean when he writes, “The face opens the primordial discourse whose first word is obligation”? (201) In what way does discourse presuppose a sense of obligation to the Other, my interlocutor?
3. In what way does my discursive relation with the Other, my interlocutor, call me into question or, as Levinas puts it on p. 203, “puts into question the brutal spontaneity of one’s immanent destiny”? In what way does being involved in speech with another person involve finding oneself called into question?

B. Speech, Conversation and Apology (from Section I)

1. In what way is speech “magisterial” (69) for Levinas? How does it differ from the written word?

2. How does Levinas’ conception of speech relate to his account of conversation on p. 40 where he writes, “the very fact of being in a conversation consists in recognizing in the Other a right over this egoism”? In what way does this “right” over me involve me in a relation of self-justification with the other, an attitude of “apology”?

III. Ethics and the Face: Reason (Section I, Part C #s1-2 [82-90], #3, part d [93-98] & Section III, #5 [209-212])

A. Why does Levinas write, “Knowing becomes knowing of a fact only if it is at the same time critical, if it puts itself into question”? (82) How does knowledge involve putting oneself into question?

B. What could motivate the kind of self-criticism that makes knowledge possible? Is a consciousness of our failures sufficient to account for it?

C. What does Levinas mean when he insists that “The freedom that can be ashamed of itself founds truth”? (83)

D. In what way does our ability to think objectively presuppose language, for Levinas (93-98 & 209-212)

IV. Ethics and the Face: Language and Gift

A. Language (Section I, Part C, #3, [part d of #3, pp. 93-98] and Section III, Part B, #5 [204-209])

1. In what way is a proposition only “maintained in the outstretched field of questions and answers”? (96) Why is the possibility of questioning a proposition essential to a proposition?

2. How does speech establish a sense, what Levinas also describes as an “orientation” to phenomena? (See p. 98 paying special attention to the double meaning of the French “sens” which the translator’s note points out.)

3. In what way does language presuppose the relationship to the other person that Levinas has been describing as my relation to the face of the other? (See p. 206 where he claims,
“Meaning is the face of the Other, and all recourse to words takes place already within the primordial face to face of language.”

B. Gift (Section I, Part B, #5 [72-77], Section III, Part B, #2 [197-201]

1. In what way does my recognition of the Other oblige me to give to the Other, to be generous? (See esp., p. 75 where he writes “To recognize the Other is to give.”)

2. In what way is the “ethical resistance” of the Other to my projects and concerns with life a “resistance of what has no resistance”? (199)

3. In what way is what Levinas describes as the “height” of the Other (her/his moral authority to command my consideration) announced in the “vulnerability” of the Other? (See p. 200 where he writes, “Infinity presents itself as a face in the ethical resistance that paralyzes my powers and from the depths of defenseless eyes rises firm and absolute in its nudity and destitution.”)

V. Ethics and the Face: Heidegger and the Other (NEW READINGS: Section I, Part A, #4, "Metaphysics Precedes Ontology," [42-48] and Levinas's "Heidegger, Gagarin and Us," to be distributed)

A. In the section, “Metaphysics Precedes Ontology”, Levinas indicts traditional western ontology as “a philosophy of injustice” (46)? In what way do you think Heidegger’s philosophy is, for Levinas, “a philosophy of injustice”?

B. In “Heidegger, Gagarin and Us”, Levinas argues that the later Heidegger’s emphasis on cultivating a sense of belonging to “place” (the “open region”) is the renewal of a form of paganism that is, as he puts it in his own rather extreme sort of way, “the source of all cruelty towards men.” (232) Why does Levinas think that? Note: Pay special attention to the passage which follows in which he writes, “One’s implementation in a landscape, one’s attachment to Place ... is the very splitting of humanity into natives and strangers.”

VI. Ethics and the Face: The Other and the Others (Section III, Part B, #6-7 [212-216] NEW READING Section III, Part C, #5, "The Truth of the Will," pp. 240-247)

A. What is the significance of considering in our analysis what Levinas calls the “third party”, the other others beside the particular other to whom we find ourselves obliged? (#6)

B. In what way does the presence of the “third party” make possible a sense of “fraternal community” (214) with all of humanity?

C. What does Levinas mean in speaking of the “asymmetry” of my relation to the Other? (#7)

D. What is Levinas getting at when he speaks of “a tyranny of the universal and of the impersonal” on p. 242?
E. What does Levinas mean in speaking of the “election” of the self? (245)

VII. Beyond the Face: Levinas and Family Values (Section IV, Parts A-G [254-285])

A. What is the relation between the Other as my beloved and the Other as the one to whom I find myself morally obligated? (See especially Part B for Levinas’ analysis of how love takes me “beyond the face” as he has analyzed it in terms of moral responsibility while also presupposing it.)

B. What does Levinas mean by “filiality” (Part F) and what does this add to his discussion of “fecundity” in Time and the Other (of which parts C-E are largely a reprisal)?

C. In what way does the child’s filial relation to her/his parent constitute a sense of election for the child? (Part F)

D. How does this sense of election which the child gains in her/his filial relation with her/his parents lead to a sense of “fraternity” in which we catch sight of our fundamental equality as humans? (Part F)

E. In what way does our fecundity open us up to an infinite sense of time? (Part G)

VIII. A-dieu/To-God: Time, Ethics, and Religion (from Totality and Infinity, "The Metaphysical and the Human," pp. 77-79 and from Time and the Other, "Diachrony and Representation," pp. 97-120. Also briefly look back over Levinas's comments on Descartes in Totality, pp. 210-212.)

A. On p. 77 of Totality, Levinas speaks of relating “to the absolute as an atheist”. What does Levinas mean by this? In what way can an atheist relate to the absolute/God?

B. Also on p. 77 of Totality, Levinas speaks of purifying the absolute of “the violence of the sacred”. What does he mean by this? Why does Levinas oppose what he calls “the sacred” as a dimension of a genuine religious sensibility?

C. What does Levinas mean when he writes on p. 78 that “Ethics is the spiritual optics”? In what way does “the dimension of the divine” open forth “from the human face”? (78)

D. What is Levinas getting at when he writes “The Other is not the incarnation of God, but precisely by his face ... is the manifestation of the height in which God is revealed.”? (79)

E. In what way is my subjection to the moral authority of the Other an openness to “the word of God”? (“Diachrony and Representation” from Time and the Other, p. 117)? In what way is my moral relation to the Other “the fall of God into meaning”? (115)