

# EMMANUEL LEVINAS

Critical Assessments of  
Leading Philosophers

*Edited by*  
*Claire Katz with Lara Trout*

Volume II  
Levinas and the History of Philosophy

 **Routledge**  
Taylor & Francis Group  
LONDON AND NEW YORK

First published 2005  
by Routledge  
2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon, OX14 4RN  
Simultaneously published in the USA and Canada  
by Routledge  
29 West 35th Street, New York, NY 10001

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Typeset in Times Ten by G&P Ltd, London



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*British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data*  
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

*Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data*

ISBN 0-415-31049-0 (Set)  
ISBN 0-415-31052-0 (Volume II)

#### **Publisher's Note**

References within each chapter are as they appear in the original complete work



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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The publishers would like to thank the following for permission to reprint their material:

Jackson Publishing for permission to reprint Silvia Benso, 'Levinas – Another Ascetic Priest?', *Journal of the British Society for Phenomenology*, 27, 2, 1996, pp. 137–56.

*Archivio di Filosofia* for permission to reprint Robert Bernasconi, 'Hegel and Levinas: The Possibility of Forgiveness and Reconciliation', *Archivio di Filosofia*, 54, 1986, pp. 325–46.

Verso Ltd for permission to reprint Simon Critchley, 'The Original Traumatism: Levinas and Psychoanalysis', in *Ethics-Politics-Subjectivity: Essays on Derrida, Levinas and Contemporary French Thought* (London: Verso, 1999), pp. 183–97.

Brill Academic Publishers for permission to reprint Paul Davies, 'Difficult Friendship', *Research in Phenomenology*, 18, 1988, pp. 149–72.

DePaul University for permission to reprint John E. Drabinski, 'Sense and Icon: The Problem of *Sinngebung* in Levinas and Marion', *Philosophy Today*, 42, supplement, 1998, pp. 47–58.

Jackson Publishing for permission to reprint Steven Hendley, 'Autonomy and Alterity: Moral Obligation in Sartre and Levinas', *Journal of the British Society for Phenomenology*, 27, 3, 1996, pp. 246–66.

Kluwer Academic Publishers for permission to reprint Cheryl L. Hughes, 'The Primacy of Ethics: Hobbes and Levinas', *Continental Philosophy Review*, 31, 1998, pp. 79–94. With kind permission of Kluwer Academic Publishers.

Jackson Publishing for permission to reprint Dennis King Keenan, 'Reading Levinas Reading Descartes' *Meditations*', *Journal of the British Society for Phenomenology*, 29, 1, 1998, pp. 63–74.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Taylor & Francis for permission to reprint David Michael Levin, 'Tracework: Myself and Others in the Moral Phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty and Levinas', *International Journal of Philosophical Studies*, 6, 3, 1998, pp. 345–92. <http://www.tandf.co.uk>

Ze'ev Levy for permission to reprint Ze'ev Levy, 'Hermann Cohen and Emmanuel Lévinas', in S. Moses and H. Wiedebach (eds), *Hermann Cohen's Philosophy of Religion* (Hildesheim: Georg Olms, 1997), pp. 133–43.

Prometheus Books for permission to reprint John Llewelyn, 'Levinas, Derrida, and Others Vis-à-Vis', in *Beyond Metaphysics?: The Hermeneutic Circle in Contemporary Continental Philosophy* (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Amherst, NY: Humanity Books, 1985), pp. 185–206. Copyright © 1985 by John Llewelyn. Reprinted with permission.

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*Dialogue and Universalism* for permission to reprint Brian Schroeder, 'Breaking the Closed Circle: Levinas and Platonic *Paideia*', *Dialogue and Universalism*, 8, 10, 1998, pp. 97–106.

DePaul University for permission to reprint Jere Paul Surber, 'Kant, Levinas, and the Thought of the "Other"', *Philosophy Today*, 38, 3, Fall 1994, pp. 294–316.

Blackwell Publishing Ltd for permission to reprint Merold Westphal, 'Levinas, Kierkegaard, and the Theological Task', *Modern Theology*, 8, 3, 1992, pp. 241–61.

Bar-Ilan University for permission to reprint Edith Wyschogrod, 'The Moral Self: Emmanuel Levinas and Hermann Cohen', *Daat: A Journal of Jewish Philosophy*, 4, 1980, pp. 35–58. Copyright Bar-Ilan University, Ramat-Gan, Israel.

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# INTRODUCTION

## Levinas, history and subjectivity

Although he is better known for his critique of Western philosophy, Levinas's thought takes the risk of translating Hebrew in 'Greek'. In each of his philosophical works, and even in those writings considered his 'Jewish writings', Levinas engages figures in the history of philosophy from Plato through to the contemporary period. His engagement with these figures extends from a positive use of their ideas to elucidate and support his own project, to a critique of central key concepts from dialectic to being, which, he argues, motivates the history of philosophy in the twentieth century.

The Preface to *Totality and Infinity* opens with Levinas urging that it is of the highest importance to know if we have not been 'duped' by morality. History has shown itself to be a history of war, 'a permanent possibility of war'. According to Levinas, to predict and win wars is the essence of politics, and politics is thereby opposed to morality. On the one hand, whatever morality has promised us cannot be realized in historical societies and, at the very least, we must understand morality's opposed logic to politics. On the other hand, to the degree that morality is based on politics, the best we can hope for is a morality based on reason with the immanent possibility of war. By morality Levinas means 'the pursuit of happiness', 'the calculation of pleasure' or 'the immanent moral law'. Not one of these can persevere in the midst of politics as competition, duplicity and violence. Defined in this way, morality will never advance us much beyond the calculation that defines politics. For all that, Levinas's conception of ethics cuts through this relationship between ethics and politics. Ethics, he shows us, need not be founded on politics; rather ethics will prove to be its interruption. Levinas's project, then, with *Totality and Infinity* offering his most sustained treatment of the ethical relation, seeks the meaning of ethics and the possibility of an ethics that is presupposed even by our traditional theories of morality.

*Totality and Infinity* introduces us to several new terms, and to terms that are familiar but now reconceived. It is in *Totality and Infinity* that Levinas launches his critique of the idea of totality, which, he shows, characterizes most of the history of Western rationalism, culminating in Hegel's *Philosophy of Spirit*. And his critique of totality was drawn from another figure in the history of philosophy, Franz Rosenzweig, whose university thesis

explored politics in light of Hegel's logic of totalization. It was Rosenzweig's *The Star of Redemption* – his positive philosophy of man, world and god – that provided Levinas his insight into a logic of passage and proximity without totalization. Finally, Levinas draws his idea of the 'Good beyond being' from Platonic philosophy and from the idea of the infinite in me developed in Descartes's *Mediations*.

Levinas's project shows that Spinoza's *conatus essendi* – the drive to persevere, the concern with one's own being – is not the sole driving force of the subject. Contrary to what Spinoza *et al.* argued, the *conatus* can be interrupted and the self may even sacrifice its own life for another. Levinas concedes that Heidegger is correct: one cannot take away the death of the other, even through the sacrifice of one's own life in the place of the other. But Levinas's concern is not that we make the other immortal (keeping the other from dying); instead, death is how we are bound together. The sacrifice the self makes for the other is not firstly an ontological one – the self does not take away the other's death. Rather, sacrifice is an ethical event. In answering the other, in our original responsibility to the other, we break through the limit of ontological desire and find ourselves for that other, if momentarily, sometimes even into death. It demonstrates the approach toward the other, the move outside my own ego.

We can thus interpret Levinas's question regarding our being 'duped by morality' as asking if morality – or rather ethics – is even possible. Is it really possible to act for another, as Kant also wondered? If so, what should an ethics look like? Is it not just another form of duty? Is it not just another form of asceticism? Although Levinas rarely mentions Nietzsche directly, unfolding the conversation between Nietzsche and Levinas promises a rich terrain. The most obvious figure whom Levinas does engage regarding the question of morality and the other that is, with regard to the conception of and relationship to politics, is Kant. Kant was the quintessential philosopher of the rationalist enlightenment who gave us morality based on imperatives. For this reason, Levinas has Kant in mind when he shows how ethics must precede reason. Although the case could be made that Kant and Levinas are not as far apart as Levinas occasionally argued, Levinas's phenomenology of ethics as responsibility and his criticism of the role of reason in ethics draws new attention to the flaws – metaphysical and otherwise – in Kant's ethical project.

As noted, most famous of Levinas's 'borrowings' is Plato's reference to the 'Good beyond being', found in his *Republic*, *Phaedo* and so on. Interestingly, this reference from the beginning of philosophy – which Levinas concedes is always Greek, and literally from Greek philosophy – occurs in Levinas's last book, *Otherwise than Being, or Beyond Essence*. So it is ironic that this final work shows Levinas moving closest toward the religious language and scriptural references found in the Hebrew Bible. Levinas argues that Plato glimpsed a unique way of conceiving the relationship

## INTRODUCTION

between ethics and ontology, one that puts the ethical outside of the realm of ontology and reason. This thematic crosses through the history of philosophy, occasionally inflecting it in Neoplatonic and religious directions; but rationalism and empiricism found little use for it other than as a mere postulate. Levinas returns to Plato's conception of the Good in order to illustrate what he means by ethics before ontology.

It is not simply these select themes of the history of philosophy – that which precedes the twentieth century – that influenced Levinas's work. He also credits Bergson with his view of time and Husserlian phenomenology dominates the method in *Totality and Infinity* and the search for an interpretative phenomenology of sensibility in *Otherwise than Being*. Additionally, Levinas was writing in France at a time when existentialism, including Kojève's Hegel, and phenomenology overshadowed the earlier French concerns with neo-Kantianism. Thus, it is not surprising that his work engaged and influenced such figures as Sartre, Merleau-Ponty, Blanchot, Marion and Derrida.





# LEVINAS – ANOTHER ASCETIC PRIEST?<sup>1</sup>

*Silvia Benso*

Source: *Journal of the British Society for Phenomenology* 27(2) (1996): 137–56.

## 1. Nietzsche's critique of morality

*On the Genealogy of Morals* offers Nietzsche's most systematical, pervasive and devastating criticism of all moralities based on the notion of a transcendent good inhibiting life, enjoyment of life and the will to power.<sup>2</sup> Nietzsche does not simply question a certain morality, but rather "the *value* of morality" (GM Preface, 5), and especially of the "morality of pity" (GM Preface, 5) – which Christianity represents at its best – in which "'moral,' 'unegoistic,' 'désintéressé' [are taken] as concepts of equivalent value" (GM I, 2). That good must mean non-egoistic actions is the result of an inversion of values connected with a decline of the aristocratic evaluation of good as strength, power, nobility, in favor of an understanding of it in terms of selflessness (GM I, 2) or utility to society as a whole (GM I, 3). According to this inversion, through which a noble morality based on the independence of the I, its spontaneity, its egoism (GM I, 10) has been replaced by a servile morality, "the wretched alone are the good; the poor, impotent, lowly alone are the good; the suffering, deprived, sick, ugly alone are the pious, alone are blessed by God, blessedness is for them alone" (GM I, 7).

The inversion of aristocratic values occurs neither spontaneously nor accidentally. Its artificer is the ascetic priest, whose activity consists in giving form to *ressentiment*, naturally felt by the slave-type of individual, by providing her/him with the idea of the reactive syllogism, according to which "you are evil, therefore I am good." In this statement of values the negative, the non-ego becomes "the original idea, the beginning, the act *par excellence*" (GM I, 11). Altruistic morality begins in negation: to define the goodness of its moral agent it takes its measure not from itself, but from a negation of what its other is. From the outset "it says No to what is 'outside,' what is 'different,' what is 'not itself'; and this No is its creative deed"

(GM I, 10). This movement of affirmation through negation is inherent in *ressentiment*, whose essence consists in the fact that "its action is fundamentally reaction" (GM I, 10). It is this reactive heteronomy that disqualifies the value of morality for Nietzsche. The priest is the intellectual that gives a philosophical theorization to *ressentiment*. He formulates the negative premise implied in *ressentiment* and provides it with an object (the noble). At first the power of *ressentiment* is completely organized toward the others, against the others (the noble). But this entails self-destruction for the individual who feels *ressentiment*, since the noble are also the strongest who may annihilate her/him. Therefore the priest's creative activity of formulating *ressentiment* imparts to this feeling a perverse twist: he invents the notion of sin, which re-directs *ressentiment* toward the interior of the subject who feels it (GM III, 15). The result of this re-orientation is the development of the notion of guilt (GM III, 15) and the desire for humiliation and repentance, for a repression of one's own (sinful) instinct to life. *Ressentiment* gives way to asceticism, which the priest administers. Although not himself a slave (AC 24),<sup>3</sup> the priest is an accomplice in the repression of life, a parasite whose will to power and affirmation serve nihilism. The complete victory of the morality of *ressentiment* comes through one more product of the priest's fertile imagination: the creation of an afterlife in which the value of this sinful existence is (dis)placed, so that the "center of gravity of that entire existence [is] beyond this existence" (AC 42). It is the idea of a good beyond being, rather than in being itself. The disinterested detachment of the individual from the world that is implied in the move is equivalent to a cessation of life. With the invention of the ascetic ideal (GM III) the priest has successfully completed his work. Morality has come to coincide with meekness, selflessness, usefulness to the most, altruism, need for repentance through charitable acts, in the forgetfulness of the other origin of good: that which associates it with nobility, egoism, life-assertion. This is the achievement of "the slave revolt in morality: that revolt that has a history of two thousand years behind it and which we no longer see because it – has been victorious" (GM I, 7).

According to the description contained in *On the Genealogy of Morals*, Nietzsche's criticism of morality can be reformulated as focusing on three issues: altruistic morality stems from *ressentiment*, it fosters asceticism, and it displaces the value of life into an ascetic ideal. All three notions, *ressentiment*, asceticism, ascetic ideal, are characterized by the same structural movement: that of negation – of the other, of oneself, of life. The morality of *ressentiment* is a morality of negation. In criticizing morality Nietzsche could be understood as condemning this notion of *negation* that functions as its foundation. Two types of negation can be retraced in Nietzsche: we will call them affirmative negation and negative negation. Affirmative negation is the movement of denial enacted by the noble, whose evaluation "acts and grows spontaneously, it seeks its opposite only so as to affirm itself

more gratefully and triumphantly – its negative concept ‘low,’ ‘common,’ ‘bad’ is only a subsequently-invented pale, contrasting image in relation to its positive basic concept – filled with life and passion through and through – ‘we noble ones, we good, beautiful, happy ones!’” (GM I, 10). Affirmative negation is a negation that stems from a first affirmation within the self; therefore it is autonomous.<sup>4</sup> Negative negation belongs to the rabble, who can assert themselves only by means of what Deleuze calls a “paralogism.”<sup>5</sup> It proceeds to affirmation only through a previous negation of what is other than itself. Negative negation starts in heteronomy, outside the self, from the other. Whereas affirmative negation is favored by Nietzsche who pursues it in many of his works (from the early *The Birth of Tragedy* to the later *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*) as a form of activity and affirmation of differences,<sup>6</sup> negative negation is sharply rejected by him because of its reactive character.

Nietzsche’s hermeneutic strategy for evaluating the dangerousness of a certain morality is that of reading moral values as symptoms of the health conditions of the will that stands behind their proposal. If the proposed values reveal an affirmative structure, the will behind them is salubrious, non-reactive and concerned with an affirmation and enhancement of life. Such values can be embraced with confidence, since good is “all that heightens the feeling of power, the will to power, power itself in man” (AC 2). But if the proposed values prove themselves to come out of a dialectical structure of negation and *ressentiment*, the morality founded on them should be rejected, since it fosters self-infliction of pain, debasement, *décadence*, nihilism, and the will that proposes them is itself reactive, sick and degenerated. Altruistic morality is the danger of dangers when it comes to the assertion of the value of life because, by operating through negation, morality denies life.

Nietzsche’s symptomatology is more concerned with a prognosis for the future than with a diagnosis of the past. Since the ascetic priest as a type “appears in almost every age; he belongs to no one race; he prospers everywhere; he emerges from every class of society” (GM III, 11) Nietzsche’s age, as well as ours, is not immune from him. Moreover, not only is the priest’s activity endemic to different epochs, but it is also contagious. Since the ascetic priest thrives on the existence of some herd whose weakness he can parasitically exploit, his own well-being is conditional upon the diffusion of a nihilistic (that is, altruistic) morality. It is essential for him to spread the infection, the disease, the hatred for one’s own self and life. The priest must encourage negation. As long as there exist priest-type individuals, morality represents the danger of a deadly contagion, which the physician of culture (the Nietzschean philosopher) needs to combat.

## 2. On the necessity of the confrontation Nietzsche–Levinas

The latest appeal to ethics in continental philosophy comes from Levinas. Two main claims give his philosophy its ethical connotation. The first is the

radical assertion that ethics is first philosophy, *philosophia prima* (TI 304).<sup>7</sup> The second is that ethics is essentially heteronomy, a response to an appeal that comes from the other and never returns to the structures of identification of the same. Ethics cannot be egoism. To be directed by, to be responsive (respond and be responsible) to the other is what being ethical means. Ethics, for Levinas an inescapable dimension, the primary condition to philosophize, preceding all *a priori* of theoretical knowledge, possesses exactly that quality Nietzsche condemns – heteronomy.

Levinas's position with respect to Nietzsche is made clear in an essay contained in *Noms propres*. By replacing exegesis with genesis, and symbology with symptomatology – this is the fundamental consequence of Nietzsche's saying "God is dead" – Nietzsche has favored the flattening of exteriority upon interiority, in a totality that is merely a different name for the non-clandestinity and intelligibility of being.<sup>8</sup> To maintain the difference between interiority and exteriority, to reopen the distance in a direction opposite to oppression (the Nietzschean master) is Levinas's intention. The project is neither naive nor innocent. Levinas is aware that "such a reconsideration is hardly conceivable in a world where infidelity to Nietzsche . . . is (despite the death of God) taken as blasphemy" (OBBE 177).<sup>9</sup> In other words, Levinas acknowledges his blasphemy and intentionally moves against Nietzsche.

Yet, any ethics that wishes to claim some credibility after Nietzsche cannot exempt itself from a confrontation with Nietzsche. In the confrontation, it must prove not to be walking on paths that have already been walked, and radically criticized by Nietzsche. To move against Nietzsche is not yet to disprove Nietzsche. Despite the awareness of its anti-Nietzschean motive Levinas's philosophy must prove that its blasphemy does not result in an ironical, or even dialectical, confirmation of the powerfulness of Nietzsche's critique. More specifically, Levinas's ethics must be capable of withstanding two conditions. First, it must not display the reactive structure characterizing *ressentiment*, thus proving not to be another case of slave morality. Second, and consequently, Levinas must prove himself not to be the latest incarnation of the ascetic priest; that is, he must prove himself not to be forwarding another example of asceticism and ascetic ideal. Were the answer to these two demands positive, Levinas's ethical project would be neutralized, since Nietzsche has already offered a genealogy, symptomatology and critique of the dangers intrinsic to such a way of proceeding. Levinas's philosophy would reveal its unimportance. Conversely, were the answer negative, Levinas's philosophy would not only prove itself capable of saying something again meaningful about ethics after Nietzsche's criticism, but would also undermine such a criticism and therefore the devastation provoked by Nietzsche when it comes to the possibility of an ethical thought. In either case, the confrontation between Nietzsche and Levinas is crucial.

### 3. Levinas's appeal to ethics: a Nietzschean reading

Let us start our analysis with a characterization of Levinas's ethics from the perspective of a Nietzschean reader, concerned with emphasizing the reactive aspects that might assimilate Levinas's project to the morality of *ressentiment* and would turn Levinas into an ascetic priest.<sup>10</sup> On such a reading, in Levinas's philosophy the place of the Nietzschean noble would be taken by the I. In *On the Genealogy of Morals* the noble "designate themselves simply by their superiority in power" (GM I, 5), they "'felt themselves' to be 'happy'; . . . they . . . knew . . . that happiness should not be sundered from action" (GM I, 10). The noble are spontaneous, active and self-sufficient. Similarly in *Existence and Existents*<sup>11</sup> Levinas describes the I as the virility that imposes itself on the night of the *il y a*, the mastery of existence by which the I becomes an existent, the upsurging of a hypostasis by which pure being receives a contour, a delimitation, a subject able to sustain the anonymity of being (EE 65–69). In its activity of affirmation, the I is a solitude. Atheist, it needs no god to establish its existence; it suffices to itself. It is separate and absolute. The separation and self-sufficiency of the I is re-affirmed in the section of *Totality and Infinity* devoted to "Interiority and Economy." The egoism of the I, its being satisfied by and within itself, is contraction upon itself, enjoyment, happiness (TI 107–185).

It is true that the body – sensibility, affectivity – recalls the I to its exposure to an outside independent from the I – the elemental.<sup>12</sup> But enjoyment overcomes this exteriority, eventually yielding to the interiority of the I, since in enjoyment the I is completely for itself, egoist and alone, absorbed in its enjoyment, satisfied by its nourishment, immanent to its world, which appears as its home, its dwelling, the space where to feel at ease, even in fear (TI 152–174). Enjoyment reveals itself as the first stage of the separation of the I, whose feeling of happiness and egoism receives a substantial contribution through possession and work (TI 158–168). The world becomes an economy the law of which is established by the I through representational knowledge, which is spontaneity, creation, legislation. Representation constitutes the epistemological way to give meaning to the world, a donation of sense by which the I constitutes itself as unchangeable. At the origin for Levinas there is a citizen of Paradise (TI 144), autonomous, independent, defined only by itself, since the I is not dialectically constituted as an antithesis to the other or to the Infinite. Analogously to Nietzsche's noble, Levinas's I is lord and master of its own existence.

Yet, Levinas claims, the mastery of the I gets interrupted by the appearance of the face (TI 187–219), which signifies otherness and whose first expression immediately presents the I with a prohibition: "You shall not commit murder" (TI 199). No is the other's first word (CPP 55),<sup>13</sup> which means that her/his signification is such to question the power and mastery of the I, to force it to justify its activity and spontaneity, to compel it to end

its conditions of blessed egoism and solipsism. The other asks the I for a suspension of its will to power, a negation of its enjoyment of life, an *epoché* of its domination and mastery. The Nietzschean would have no difficulty to recognize a familiar type disguised behind these requests: the other as a figure of *ressentiment*, whose activity is marked by the negative attempt to stop the expansive forces of life and egoism, as if it were possible “to demand of strength that it should *not* express itself in strength” (GM I, 13). *Otherwise Than Being*, the book where Levinas describes the figures of passivity by which the ethical self responds to the presencing of the face of the other, would be for the Nietzschean the clearest elaboration of such an ethics of *ressentiment*: the other commands the I to become powerless, to take care of the other, to open the doors of its warehouse and sate and slake the other, although the other leaves undetermined the content of her/his command – hence (and here the Nietzschean would forward her criticism) the I’s infinite guilt, its never being good enough in answering to the other’s demands, its becoming the other’s hostage. Unable to impose her/himself as a sovereign, the other asks for proximity, although the trick (the idealistic deception, the Nietzschean would contest) s/he plays upon the I is in the constant displacement of the possibility of achieving the proximity of community. The more the I approaches the other, the further it is from her/him (OBBE 93) because, Levinas maintains, the other is always a step beyond, always further than the I can reach (the ascetic ideal! – the Nietzschean would retort), always a trace, a distance, a past.<sup>14</sup> Despite the other’s unreachability, the I should be directed by her/him, rather than by itself, to the extent of becoming passive, more passive than passivity (asceticism! – the Nietzschean would admonish), substituting itself to and for the other, and rejoicing and suffering not for itself, but for the other, in place of the other (OBBE 90). The I should renounce being the creator of meaning, even of the meaning of *its* life, to receive such a meaning from the encounter with the other. On a Nietzschean reading, this would correspond to an inhibition of the I’s creative activity of interpretation, which is replaced by the unidirectionality of the relation oriented by the other and her/his appeal. The other becomes the giver of all meaning, the donation of which happens through that first “No.”

That this is an inversion of the noble morality, and not a substitution of a previous mastery (that of the I) with a new one (that of the other) is proven to the Nietzschean by that first negation that characterizes the appearing of the other. The “mastery” the other imposes on the I bears the features of what the Nietzschean would consider a reduction to the rabble: the other is the poor, the weak, the destitute, Levinas argues, therefore it is to a proximity in this condition that she/he calls the I. Whereas the other is described as a master, nevertheless s/he is the master of her/his own destitution, since hers/his is a mastery without possessions, Levinas claims.

That is, s/he is a master of nothingness, the Nietzschean would retort. Therefore, the Nietzschean reader would continue, the other inverts her/his lack of strength by transforming it into what Levinas calls ethical authority, according to which powerlessness, rather than power and force, becomes the victorious key of affirmation. The aim is to convince the I to be ashamed of its own power, to feel guilty, to renounce its egoism, to become subjected to the other, to become an *Autrui-sm*, that is, good. In its negativity, the first imperative would be considered by the Nietzschean as an expression of the other's *ressentiment*, of her/his inability to cope with her/his lack of physical power of affirmation. Rather than fighting, the other surrenders by placing an infinite demand: Levinas calls ethical resistance (CPP 55) what for the Nietzschean is a mere product of *ressentiment*.

Viewed from such a Nietzschean perspective, the move that represses the I's instinct for domination amounts to the affirmation of an ascetic ideal. For Levinas the other is always beyond, *a-Dieu*, s/he comes from an immemorial past of which there is neither grasp nor control, and her/his appeal to becoming good still concerns the beyond. The reward for the I's renunciation to the egoism of life and being, what Levinas calls the ontological I, is the transmutation of the I into an ethical self. But, the Nietzschean would object, the good toward which the I should strive is always beyond being, it is the Desire for the Infinite that never gets fulfilled, because the Infinite does not expose itself to possession (TI 33–35). That all this amounts to an ascetic ideal is further confirmed to the Nietzschean by the marginalized role history plays within Levinas's philosophy, which displaces synchronic events into the realm of diachronic transcendence. The forces of life do not serve the immanence of action, but the transcendence of eschatology.

When interpreted from this Nietzschean perspective focused on power, affirmation, activity, Levinas's ethics would maintain all the features of that morality Nietzsche so sharply condemns. Thus interpreted, the definition of ethics as heteronomy would amount to the theoretical acknowledgment of what the ascetic priest has been preaching for centuries. When the ascetic priest begins to philosophize, Nietzsche warns, the result is metaphysics. It is therefore very appropriate that Levinas reserves the term "metaphysics," as opposed to ontology (which he condemns as an instantiation of egology/egoism), to his thought. For him metaphysics indicates the philosophy of the beyond, of the Infinite, of the transcendent — the ascetic ideal. He would then admit to Nietzsche's claim, and would prove himself to be a successful ascetic priest, insofar as he is able to convince the I to renounce its power and autonomy and to become ethical. The Nietzschean would conclude that Levinas offers powerful theoretical tools for a successful infection and spreading of that debasing disease that is ethics, and that his success — and the consequent contagion — increases every time a new reader joins his public and lets her/himself be convinced by his philosophy.

#### 4. Levinas's appeal to ethics: a retrieval

The assimilation of Levinas to slave morality is what may immediately occur to the shrewd Nietzsche scholar (but an excessively naive Levinas reader). It is easy (but also simplistic) to catalogue Levinas among the ascetic priests on the basis of the surface of the moves he makes, especially since his language is overloaded with conceptual determinations coming from that Jewish tradition from which the ascetic priest also originates. Yet, a more attentive reading of Levinas, faithful not to the surface but to the inner structure of his thought, will reject the assimilation and absolve Levinas from the charges of being an ascetic priest, hence liberating his project from Nietzsche's condemnation while regaining for philosophy the possibility of ethics.

The task of rehabilitating Levinas is not unproblematic. Levinas seems to take a special pleasure in employing concepts like goodness, peace, responsibility, guilt, and love. Especially in *Otherwise Than Being* he seems to invite the same criticism and condemnation that Nietzsche advocates. Nevertheless, the retrieval of his philosophy from the grips of Nietzsche's criticism remains ineludible. Philosophically, it is not enough to claim that Levinas's notions of shame, responsibility, and conscience are located on a different level than those criticized by Nietzsche. The invocation to a difference of levels is the displacement that the ascetic ideal performs and Nietzsche deconstructs. Nor is it enough to claim that Levinas does not recur to traditional ethical concepts such as virtue and duty, as if this lack were enough to construe a different ethics and hence could constitute a sufficient exemption from Nietzschean criticism. A more structural analysis is required.

What characterizes the ascetic morality, the ascetic ideal informing such a morality, as well as the ascetic priest is the structure of negation – of the other, of oneself, of life. The very engine of such a morality, *ressentiment*, is negation; it gives birth to phenomena of repression and denial, as Nietzsche portrays in his description of the origin of (bad) conscience, responsibility, and guilt. Our strategy with respect to Levinas will be to show not that *ressentiment* (a psychological feeling) but that negation (a structural movement) is alien to his philosophy. If found to be true, this absence would neutralize the accusations against Levinas of being one more case of the ascetic priest – Levinas's ethics would not be an ascetic morality. In terms of the methodology of our retrieval, it would be vain to scrutinize specific notions (response, responsibility, substitution, hostage, . . . ) to differentiate them from the role they are said to play in slave-morality, and eventually establish their strangeness to Nietzsche's criticism. The task would be never-ending and repetitive. Never-ending, because it would mean to deconstruct the whole of Levinas's philosophy. Repetitive, because the retrieval of one notion would mimic the retrieval of any other, since they stem from similar structural presuppositions. A more fruitful path of retrieval seems to be that



of a global approach, which aims at retrieving not particular concepts, but rather the formal structure granting the possibility of Levinas's philosophy. The categories indicated above would then be understood as a differential display, in phenomenological terms, of the way in which the unitary formal structure operates.

### a. *The lack of external negation*

Despite the scarcity of his references to Nietzsche, it is legitimate to infer that Levinas shares with Nietzsche a deep philosophical aversion to negation. More radically than Nietzsche, however, he extends his contempt to include not only negative negation, but also affirmative negation. The reason for the double rejection lies in the formal character of negation, rather than in its genealogy. From a formal point of view, negation is the main feature characterizing dialectics, since negation is inherently bound to the object of its denial. Every dialectical project is aimed at keeping together precisely through negation, in a connection that can be more or less stringent, the I and the non-I (the other). When dialectics is enacted, there arises a link or dependency between the two that no revolt can dissolve.<sup>15</sup> It is immediately evident how negative negation depends on the existence of the non-I the self needs to deny for its own assertion. Nietzsche identifies the reactive character of negative negation in this dependency, which binds together the I and the non-I as a *condition* for the affirmation of the I. That also affirmative negation be, despite Nietzsche's effort to say the opposite, somehow dependent on the existence of the non-I is more difficult to assert, since the non-I enters the scene at a later stage, when the I has already affirmed itself, independently from the non-I. Levinas, however, although indirectly (on behalf not of the I, but of the other that gets denied), challenges the independence of the I that enacts affirmative negation. Such an I, according to Nietzsche, is autonomous. What Levinas questions is the nature of this autonomy.

Although the comparison is not explicit, for Levinas Western subjectivity since Parmenides (with very few exception) has been shaped by an autonomy and egoism (CPP 48) analogous to those Nietzsche favors. However, the identity of the subject is never a status, rather a process of identification (TI 36). To establish the autonomy of its identity the I needs to reduce to itself "all that is opposed to it as *other*" (CPP 48); the need for integration (i.e., totality) contemplates the other not as absolutely other, but already as another *from* myself, as relative otherness (and hence Levinas's complaint about the artificial alterity of this other). Thus, exactly as Nietzsche's noble, the I engages in a reduction to itself of its own non-I (representational object, nature, bodies) to be able to enjoy its power and strength more satisfactorily. If the dependence of the autonomous I on the non-I is not *a priori* (i.e., a condition for self-affirmation, as is the case for the slave),

nevertheless it comes *a posteriori*, as a consequence of the process of self-identification. In the case of Nietzsche's affirmative negation, this movement means that the masters could not appreciate the extent of their mastery, unless there *is* a slave to be mastered. Even the beast of prey depends on its victim to be the ferocious predator that it is. Otherwise it is only a hungry animal. The negation of the non-I, at whose expenses the process is carried out, becomes essential. The master self moves from itself. But then, for the sake of its own autonomy, it cannot afford granting autonomy to any existence outside itself. The existence of the lamb is a continuous challenge to the power of the beast of prey, which becomes a slave of its own nature. Therefore, having understood the other (*its* other) as an obstacle, the I needs to recomprehend it "to assert itself more gratefully and triumphantly" (GM I, 10). The philosophy of the autonomous Nietzschean master is a philosophy of *ressentiment* in which this feeling gets deflected into desire for power and delayed to a subsequent stage. The master does not move from *ressentiment* at the outset, but he surreptitiously re-introduces it under the features of domination. The deceiving alterity of the other (on whose behalf Levinas moves his critique to Western thought) in any dialectical system mirrors the deceptiveness of the autonomy of any I (even the I of positive affirmation) within such a movement of thought. Stated more clearly, in negation (either negative or affirmative) the negator and the negated always stand in a relation that commits the one to the other. The I of negative negation posits *itself* as a negation of *its other*. The I of affirmative negation considers *its other* as a negation of *itself*. No matter where the negation generates, the I and the non-I (*its* non-I) remain within the horizon of a same system, since, as Hegel would claim, negation is always determined, that is, *reciprocally* determined. Therefore, when Nietzsche claims that the noble are autonomous, he is mistaken. There cannot be real autonomy – or real heteronomy, and this is Levinas's point – when some form of negation is present. The noble are not much different from the slave. The fact that their negation stems from a pristine affirmation, rather than from an equally originary negation, does not discharge them from participation in dialectical dependency. Certainly there is a dialectics of the noble and a dialectics of the slave, and the differences between them are not irrelevant. But negation assimilates both. Levinas's criticism of Western philosophy turns Nietzsche's criticism against itself to include Nietzsche as part of Nietzsche's own targets: Nietzsche's criticism is self-referential. Conversely, the complete absence of negation eliminates the structural motive from which *ressentiment* arises. It is to this absence in Levinas that we now turn.

Levinas's project aims at withstanding dialectics by withstanding the negation that lies at its core. For him, the relation between the ego and the other cannot be dialectically, that is oppositionally, constituted. Between the I and the other there is distance, which allows for the separatedness and absolvedness of each of them. That is, in Levinas both the I and the

other stand as autonomous and independent from each other when it comes to their existence. Neither is constituted in relation to the other, because between them there is no reciprocity. Exteriority rules their existence, as the subtitle of *Totality and Infinity* (an essay on exteriority) suggests. The relation between the I and the other is a “relation without relation,” Levinas says (TI 259). It is “a relation between terms such as are united neither by a synthesis of the understanding nor by a relationship between a subject or object, and yet where the one weighs or concerns or is meaningful to the other, where they are bound by a plot which knowing can never exhaust nor unravel” (CPP 116, note 6). This relation is ethics.

First, let us characterize the “autonomy” — which Levinas identifies as separatedness, to distinguish it from ontological autonomy — of the I. Levinas describes it, among other places, in the section of *Totality and Infinity* devoted to the interiority of the same. As already mentioned, the I is the entity that concentrates being into an existent, that takes existence upon itself and gives it a name — its name. It enjoys the world (a Nietzschean theme?), possesses the world, shapes it through its activity of labor. It is solitude, distance from its creator, atheism, joy and plenitude of life. The I is master because it does not lack anything. It is the master of its own existence, the artistic creator of its own world and representations. It is a “here I am” that imposes itself upon the world, in its desire to ontologize, totalize, systematize. The fact that the “here I am” can translate itself into the availability of infinite responsibility is subsequent to the encounter with the other, who does not found the I, but finds it already there, already in the ethical dimension (although before the ethical encounter) and opens it up to infinite goodness — to ethics.

But equally first is the separatedness/“autonomy” of the other. The other is “not a character within a context” (EI 86),<sup>16</sup> s/he does not possess a name relating (and thus nailing) her/him to something/one else. S/he is the master of her/his own name. Between the I and the other there is no common theoretical ground. The other is the stranger, who does not depend on the identity of the I, as an *alter ego*. Retrieving the ontological argument, Levinas gives his own version of it in terms of the other: “the exteriority of a being is inscribed in its essence” (TI 196), which means that her/his otherness is absolute from the identity of the same, “is not formal, is not the simple reverse of identity, and it is not formed out of resistance to the same, for in limiting the same the other would not be rigorously other” (TI 38–39). The other is *Autrui*, irreducible to any content of the consciousness of the I. Because of her/his radical alterity, the autonomy of the other turns into her/his being the teacher, the one who can impart the I a knowledge that the I can never find within her/himself, contrary to any maieutics or recollection. The other is her/his face, her/his eyes, which are there before the I can honor them with any *Sinngebung*, which can never be properly killed, because they always return in their independence.

The relation which the I and the other are called to establish (ethics), but in which they are already, is this "relation without relation" in which each is maintained in her/his separatedness. The relation is a face-to-face – on both sides. There is no foundationalism of the I through the other, or viceversa.<sup>17</sup> The temporality of the I and the other, and of their relationship, is not synchronicity, in which the before and the after of foundationalism find their place, but rather diachronicity, that is, two different temporalities in a time that is that of inspiration and prophecy – height, irreversibility, anachronicity, preservation of the independence of the two involved dimensions – the I *and* the other at once. Only because the other is independent from the I can Levinas say that "the face is a hand in search of recompense, an open hand. That is, it needs something. It is going to ask you something."<sup>18</sup> Only because the I is independent from the other can the I disappoint, reject, annihilate the other.

What appeared as a first negation, "You shall not kill," must be reinterpreted not as a denial of the I and its power of affirmation, but as an affirmation of the other's existence. It is a claim, an averral, a statement marking the other's separatedness from the I. It becomes an appeal, an injunction, an order only because in their separatedness the I and the other are already in the ethical relationship, in a face-to-face anterior to any representation. That is, the ethical relationship precedes the separatedness of the I and the Other, but it does not sublimate it, or them. In this sense we can say that in Levinas's ethics the I and the other are independent in a more fundamental way than the Nietzschean master. It is not negation that acts in ethics. If anything, it is a philosophy of separation, in which there is no reduction of the one to the other.

Because of the lack of negation (whether affirmative or negative), certainly Levinas (in conformity with his own aspiration) cannot be qualified as a Nietzschean master. But neither can his thought be qualified in terms of *ressentiment*, because negative negation is absolutely missing from his philosophy. Levinas bears with Nietzsche in performing a strenuous critique of negation, but moves further than Nietzsche in assimilating both kinds of negation in a single mode of denial. While liberating him from the charge of being moved by *ressentiment*, this opens up to him a new meaning for heteronomy and ethics.

### *b. The lack of internal negation*

Yet, the Nietzschean could argue that, if there is no negation of the other to affirm the I or viceversa, Levinas's ethics still operates a negation in terms of a self-denial of the I which, despite its separatedness, is directed heteronomously, by the demands placed upon her/him by the other. Asceticism implies self-abnegation; Levinas's notion of heteronomy is precisely this movement. It is necessary therefore to show that Levinas's ethics, despite/

because of its heteronomy, does not re-introduce negation at a different stage, the stage of the individual, causing its exhaustion rather than its empowering. It must be shown that, beside not being structured by external negation, Levinas's ethics does not produce asceticism either.

Two remarks must be made at this juncture. The first concerns the relation between theory and praxis. According to Levinas, the I is involved in an ethical relation with the other *before* any theoretical acknowledgement. That is, "the theoretical opposition between theory and practice . . . disappear[s] in light of the metaphysical transcendence by which a relation with the absolutely other, or truth, is established" (TI 25).<sup>19</sup> The I is always ethical, even when it acts immorally. The distinction between epistemology and morality is subsequent to ethics. To invert the sequence, to make epistemology (or ontology) primary is the error in which the Western tradition has fallen, and which has provoked the aberrations of its violence and injustice. The primacy of ethics means that because of their separatedness the I and the other are always in a face-to-face relationship since the beginning, before the beginning. Heteronomy, orientation by the other is inscribed in the I's separatedness. Ethical responsibility is neither "the recall of some prior generous disposition toward the other," nor "a decision resulting from a deliberation" (DR 113).<sup>20</sup> In other words, ethics is not the product of volition, of an intentional act of the will (to power or to *décadence*). On the contrary, ethics is an-archic.

The second remark, which needs some further development, concerns the meaning and the implications contained in the notions of power/empowering (and hence debasement) for Nietzsche and Levinas. The clarification of these implications will help us to understand what it means for the I to be heteronomous (that is, ethical) in its separatedness. Since there is no negation, no master-slave dialectics that presupposes the fight for life of the two consciousnesses involved, mastery, as well as power, cannot be understood in Levinas as violent, tyrannical, dominating physical force.<sup>21</sup> The master is not "a beast of prey" (GM I, 11), but rather a separated existent. On the other hand, the other does not oppose the power of the I. S/he rather subtracts her/himself from it. The halting of the killing is by subtraction, not by repression. "The expression the face introduces into the world does not defy the feebleness of my powers, but my ability for power" (TI 198).<sup>22</sup> This institutes a distance between the I and the other that places the other in a dimension of height. The other is my master and my lord, not because s/he dominates me by repressing me, but because s/he issues orders to me from her/his distance.<sup>23</sup> Asymmetry rules the ethical relationship. Not community or association (GM III, 18), but proximity becomes the way by which the I encounters the other. Levinas's perspective is not immediately egalitarian. Justice is the preservation (and proximity) of differences (although not in the aristocratic sense Nietzsche advocates), and only thus an appeal to democracy.<sup>24</sup>

In Nietzsche the notions of mastery and power subtend the notion of the will to power. As Heidegger notes, the will to power implies a metaphysics of the will, or at least a voluntarism,<sup>25</sup> that explicates itself as one more instance of bad infinite (in the Hegelian sense). Human will "needs a goal," Nietzsche says (GM III, 1) and "it will rather will *nothingness* than *not* will" (GM III, 1). In needing a goal, it proves itself dependent upon that goal, which, however, it can never possess completely, or it would annihilate its own existence as will. The will needs continuously new goals to exist. The fact that its goal may vary does not diminish its dependence, which becomes infinite insofar as there are infinite objects to be willed. Levinas's notion of power, however, avoids voluntarism because it does not originate from the subject. To be powerful, for him, is not equivalent to killing the other, although the I has this wish.<sup>26</sup> Being powerful should rather be equated, in Levinas, to that condition of being opened up by the other that presupposes being full, complete, having fulfilled one's needs, hunger and thirst. Freedom is not the spontaneous self-realization of an autarchic ego, imposing its will to power on the other, but rather an investiture (CPP 58), the assignment to protect the other who is naked and vulnerable. To be powerful is to put one's freedom ever more in question. "The very depth of inwardness is hollowed out" (CPP 58).

In its primordial being exposed to the other, who empties and exhausts the ontological ego, the I is not defined by lack, which the ontological power tries to fulfill, but by Desire, which is therefore an opening up of the I after the closure to which the fulfillment of its needs (its enjoyment) has brought the I. The I is a happy subject, it possesses wealth. It is only because it is wealthy that it can make of its wealthiness a gift to the other, that it can become subject to the other. "The passivity of being-for-another . . . is possible only in the form of giving the very bread I eat. But for this one has to first enjoy one's bread, not in order to have the merit of giving it, but in order to give it with one's heart, to give oneself in giving it" (OBBE 72). In *Totality and Infinity* Levinas claims that Desire, that is, the opening up to the Infinite, is a luxury. Responding to the appeal of the other, submitting to the other, becoming her/his hostage is not for the I a debasement, or an enslavement (DR 114). It stems from and defines the I's separatedness, its richness, its plenitude. If it appears as a *minus*, nevertheless it originates from a *plus*. Power means undergoing this opening up. The I is so full that it can afford emptying her/himself, exposing her/himself to the other. To renounce one's own ontological power as an ego means to receive back the ethical power of the Me. But to renounce the ontological ego also means to abandon the structure of activity characterizing the tyranny of such an ego. It is not toward a negation of any subjectivity that the appeal from the other is directed, but toward its declination: the I becomes an accusative, a Me. And the Me is always appealed to as a first person. No conformation to the herd, or universalization of the I is possible. That the Me be defined in terms

of passivity, absolute passivity, passivity more passive than any passivity (rather than being defined by activity) is not relevant at this point, because the structure of (self)negation, even in passivity, has been relinquished. The movement is from a closed subjectivity to an open one. The open subjectivity, the ethical Me is what Levinas considers as (ethical) power. The other does not deny the I, does not alienate it; s/he keeps it awake as a one-for-the-other, as an exposure, as a Me.<sup>27</sup>

The “here I am” that the fulfilled I pronounces as a possible menace to the existence of the other becomes a “here I am” to serve, feed (OBBE 56, 69–72, 77), be responsible for/of the other. The “you shall not kill” becomes an appeal. To be responsible does not mean to have to be responsible (Levinas never mentions the word duty as part of his ethics), but rather to be able to afford responsibility. It is because the I is so rich as a separate subjectivity that it can submit to suffering and pain: it is not a submission to what is other-than-the-I, to a non-ego; it is the mobility, fluidity, displacement that the I, as a Me, reaches through the other. To retrieve this dimension is for the I to place itself at the origin of its genealogy, since ethical responsibility – the Me – is “prior to the will’s initiative (prior to the origin)” (OBBE 118). Not only voluntarism, but instincts for mere pietism, compassion, self-flagellation are dismissed. Levinas states very clearly that “responsibility for the others could never mean altruistic will, instinct of ‘natural benevolence,’ or love” (OBBE 112). In the passivity to which the other summons the I, in the assignation of the I to the other, the I becomes one and irreplaceable, insubstitutable. The Me is the elected one. In other words, in suffering, substitution, being a hostage, in the ethical categories by which Levinas describes the relation with the other, in being a Me, the subject gets reinforced, although through a different modality of subjectivity (the declination of the Me), a modality by which the I never returns to her/himself through negation, but is rather exposed, expanded, displaced – unbalanced. This different modality of the I – the Me – is also what insulates Levinas from the contemporary charges that originate from Nietzsche and move against subjectivism and Cartesian subjectivity. Not only does Levinas reinstate the possibility of ethics, but he also describes a different subjectivity for it. In being heteronomous the I does not renounce her/his separatedness, that is, it is never denied. What it gives up is what makes of it a resentful subject: the structure of (self)negation.

A major accusation Nietzsche moves against asceticism is that it represses sensuality, corporeality, the body. Levinas’s notion of passivity is based precisely on sensibility, which is however understood as the possibility of being affected, affectivity. The declination of the I as Me, as an accusative passive to the demands of the other, is for Levinas a celebration of sensibility, of the body. Nietzsche would agree that it is not the presence of suffering, but the modality of suffering that makes a life ascetic. Therefore, it is not the presence of suffering that may constitute a charge against Levinas. If Levinas finds an ethical justification to suffering in the form of responsibility for the

other, nevertheless, contrary to ascetic morality, which also provides a justification to the suffering endemic to human existence (GM III, 28), Levinas's justification does not posit self-denial as the supreme goal of life. Negation does not appear in Levinas, not even as self-negation. Therefore, the analogy between the categories of suffering, subjection, substitution Levinas employs, and the same categories Nietzsche criticizes is only superficial. Any such critique neglects the structural novelty of Levinas's project. It is not heterodirectedness that should be criticized, but rather the ab-negation – of life and self – that is usually associated with such a heteronomy. In subtracting himself from negation, Levinas escapes also its criticism, since, having dissociated heteronomy from negation, he is able to retain the former while relinquishing the latter. In other words, Nietzsche and Levinas have a common enemy: negation. Nietzsche fights it by condemning what he sees as the most powerful instance of negation – morality, asceticism, Christianity. Levinas, on the contrary, having severed ethics from negation can still fight the latter without being condemned to consider the former as part of his targets. In still different words, Levinas fights not against the symptoms of that morality Nietzsche rejects – this is the peculiarity of the anaesthetizing, rather than therapeutic method of the ascetic priest (GM III, 17) – but against the causes at work in such a morality – negation, whose consequence is the ontological ego. The result is an enhancement of life and sensibility. But since sensibility is defined in terms of affectivity, the re-evaluation of life becomes a re-evaluation of passivity.

### *c. The lack of an ascetic ideal*

One more issue remains to be proven to discharge Levinas completely from the accusation of being an ascetic priest: whether his notions of the other and the goodness toward which the other directs work as ascetic ideals for the ethical self. For Nietzsche the ascetic ideal places the value of life in another world, antithetical and exclusive with respect to the mundane life, which assumes the value of a bridge toward that other existence. In other words, the ascetic ideal displaces the value of life, connoting the mundane existence of negative attributes of lack and imperfection. This dislocation does not apply to Levinas, for whom the Desire for the infinite goodness is certainly unsatiable, and goodness itself is transcendent, beyond being; analogously, the other always speaks from the unapproachability of the beyond, from a temporality that is never that of synchronicity, but of diachrony, ungraspable and unreachable. But Levinas's phenomenology of Desire clearly shows how Desire does not originate from lack, but from plenitude. That is, there is nothing in mundane existence that is in need of fulfillment or replacement by redemption. Again, goodness does not repress the I into its limitations. It enhances it by opening it up to its possibilities, not for power, but for becoming good.



Need originates from a lack in the soul, it stems from and is oriented toward the subject. It is nostalgia in need of a fulfillment that, while fulfilling, also erases the subject by restoring it to a primordial unity. Desire is animated by what is desired, it moves from the other. Rather than fulfilling the desirer, Desire "hollows it out, at the same time in a strange manner nourishing me ever again with new hungers" (DEHH 193).<sup>28</sup> In its being beyond saturation, Desire escapes the economy of closure that need attempts to establish. The I is opened up by this emptiness that nourishes without satiating it. Heteronomy, but not negation of the desirer is at the core of the Desire for goodness. Levinas writes that "truth is sought in the other, but by [her/]him who lacks nothing. . . . The separated being is satisfied, autonomous, and nonetheless searches after the other with a search that is not incited by the lack proper to need nor by the memory of a lost good" (TI 62). That is, the Desired is not meant to complement (Plato), supplement (Hobbes or Hegel) or even substitute and replace the desirer (Christianity). In Levinas the desirer, because of its separatedness, is not "a being indigent and incomplete or fallen from its past grandeur" (TI 33), which the ascetic ideal should sublimate by an annihilation amounting to redemption. The Infinite, the good, what for Nietzsche is the ascetic ideal, for Levinas certainly calls into question the spontaneous freedom of the I (TI 51). But transcendence for Levinas is not negativity in as much as the other is not negation of the I.

Levinas makes this point explicit in a passage worth quoting and which, in certain respects, reminds the reader of Nietzsche's criticism of the ascetic ideal. "The movement of transcendence is to be distinguished from the negativity by which discontent [human being] refuses the condition in which [s/]he is established. . . . The doctor who missed an engineering career, the poor man who longs for wealth, the patient who suffers, the melancholic who is bored for nothing oppose their condition while remaining attached to its horizons. The 'otherwise' and the 'elsewhere' they wish still belong to the here they refuse" (TI 41). But from its total alterity the infinite to which Levinas wishes to subscribe does not deny imperfection. It rather designates a distance, "a passage to the other absolutely other" (TI 41), which does not remain on "the common plane of the *yes* or *no* at which negativity operates" (TI 41). In its designating a height, a nobility, the transcendent cannot be a mere negation of the imperfect, of the mundane. In "God and Philosophy" Levinas acknowledges that the "in-" of "infinite" must not only be read as a separation of the infinite, but also as meaning that the infinite is found within the finite, "as though — without wanting to play on words, the *in* of Infinity were to signify both the *non* and the *within*."<sup>29</sup> And already in *Totality and Infinity* Levinas had said: "This 'beyond' the totality and objective experience is, however, not to be described in a purely negative fashion. It is reflected *within* the totality and history, *within* experience" (TI 23).

Levinas's affinity with Nietzsche in rejecting any explanation of our world and existence in the light of another world is explicitly acknowledged in the opening pages of *Otherwise Than Being*. The God that dwelled above the earth is dead. Any recourse to a *Hinterwelt* is now forbidden (OBBE 8). Levinas's rejection is restated in the last paragraph of the book, where he locates his work on a wave of continuity with Nietzsche's project of demythologization: "in this work which does not seek the restoration of any ruined concept . . . after the death of a certain god inhabiting the world behind the scenes" (OBBE 185). The transcendence Levinas advocates is not a being otherwise, but an otherwise than being (OBBE 3). Not a negation, transcendence is rather a positivity that does not annihilate. As Levinas puts it, "transcendence designates a relation with a reality infinitely distant from my own reality, yet without this distance destroying this relation and without this relation destroying this distance, as would happen with relations within the same; this relation does not become an implantation in the other and a confusion with [her/]him, does not affect the very identity of the same, its ipseity, does not silence the *apology*, does not become apostasy and ecstasy" (TI 41–42). This relation is what Levinas calls metaphysical. The infinite does not direct the ethical self beyond the world, but to *this* world, toward an enjoyment of the fruits of the world, which acquires its meaning by making of them *gifts* for the other. But even in this gift-giving there is no negation of the other, or of the I. The gifts are met by the other with ingratitude. This move of non-return prevents a negation of the other by a return of the I to itself. The gifts are pure generosity without remuneration. Their being pure gifts means also that the I does not need the recognition of the other. The I is sacrifice; but sacrifice, when it stems from plenitude, is expenditure and excess, heteronomy that does not deny autonomy, it only redefines it.

Levinas accepts old Jewish categories, but he twists them in a direction that is immune to Nietzsche's charges of asceticism. Bearing with Nietzsche in criticizing negation, Levinas goes further than Nietzsche in retrieving an ethics and a subjectivity that, at one time, condemn Nietzsche's ontological imperialism and absolve themselves from Nietzschean criticism. Levinas is not an ascetic priest, nor is his metaphysical project a re-proposal in new terms of the old ascetic ideal. In him, metaphysics must be understood as a rupture of participation in the totality the dialectics of negation constitutes.<sup>30</sup> He does not infect the reader with a dangerous disease. Conversely, he signifies the death of the ascetic priest, since after Levinas there can be ethics without *ressentiment*, asceticism, ascetic ideal. It is an ethics of exposure, expenditure, non-return. It is an excessive ethics.

## References

- 1 I wish to thank John Llewelyn, Robert Bernasconi, and Brian Domino for their generous suggestions and comments.

- 2 Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, W. Kaufmann trans. (New York: Vintage, 1969), hereafter referred to as GM.
- 3 By AC I refer to Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Anti-christ*, R. J. Hollingdale trans. (New York: Penguin, 1990). There Nietzsche writes that the priest "took the side of all *décadence* instincts — not as being dominated by them but because it divined in them a power by means of which one can prevail *against* the 'world'" (AC 24).
- 4 On the impossibility of this autonomy turning into a morality, i.e., on the oxymoron contained in the expression "an autonomous morality", see Daniel Conway, "Autonomy and Authenticity: How One Becomes What One Is", in *Essays in Honor of David Lachterman*, *The St. John's Review*, 42, 2 (1994), 27–40.
- 5 See Gilles Deleuze, *Nietzsche and Philosophy*, H. Tomlinson trans. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983), 122.
- 6 Again, see Gilles Deleuze, *Nietzsche and Philosophy*.
- 7 By TI I refer to Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, A. Lingis trans. (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969). The thesis that ethics is first philosophy is evident in the title of the article "Éthique comme philosophie première", in *Justifications de l'éthique*, G. Hottois ed. (Ed. de l'Université de Bruxelles, 1984), 41–51.
- 8 Emmanuel Levinas, *Noms propres* (Montpellier: Fata Morgana, 1975), 106ff.
- 9 Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise Than Being or Beyond Essence*, A. Lingis trans. (The Hague-Boston: Nijhoff, 1981), hereafter referred to as OBBE.
- 10 I would like to thank Daniel Conway for pointing out to me the dangers of asceticism inherent in Levinas's ethical project.
- 11 Emmanuel Levinas, *Existence and Existents*, A. Lingis trans. (The Hague-Boston: Nijhoff, 1978), hereafter referred to as EE.
- 12 On the notion of the elemental, see Alphonso Lingis, "The Elemental Imperative", *Research in Phenomenology* 18 (1988), 3–21.
- 13 By CPP I refer to Emmanuel Levinas, *Collected Philosophical Papers*, A. Lingis trans. (The Hague-Boston: Nijhoff, 1987).
- 14 On the notion of the trace, see Edward Casey, "Levinas on Memory and the Trace", in *The Collegium Phenomenologicum: The First Ten Years*, J. Sallis, G. Moneta and J. Taminiaux eds. (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 1988), 241–255.
- 15 Therefore, the inanity of Kierkegaard's protest against Hegel's system.
- 16 By EI I refer to Emmanuel Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity*, R. Cohen trans. (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1985).
- 17 On this issue, see Theodor De Boer, "An Ethical Transcendental Philosophy", in *Face to Face With Levinas*, R. Cohen ed. (Albany: SUNY, 1986), 83–115, and Robert Bernasconi, "Rereading *Totality and Infinity*", in *The Question of the Other*, A. Dallery and C. Scott eds. (Albany: SUNY, 1989), 23–34. According to Bernasconi neither empiricism, nor transcendentalism (De Boer) are adequate to describe the face-to-face relationship, which is rather a rupture of ordinary experiences as well as conceptualization.
- 18 T. Wright, P. Hughes and A. Ainley, "The Paradox of Morality: An Interview with Emmanuel Levinas", in *The Provocation of Levinas*, R. Bernasconi and D. Wood eds. (New York: Routledge, 1988), 169.
- 19 See also TI 113.

- 20 By DR I refer to the essay "Diachrony and Representation", contained in Emmanuel Levinas, *Time and the Other*, R. Cohen trans. (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1987).
- 21 See Jan De Greef, "Le concept du pouvoir éthique chez Levinas", *Revue philosophique du Louvain* 68 (1970), 507–520.
- 22 Elsewhere Levinas writes that in face of the other "not that conquest is beyond my too weak powers, but *I am no longer able to have power*" (CPP 55).
- 23 In "Philosophy and the Idea of the Infinite" Levinas writes that "the infinite does not stop me like a force blocking my force; it puts into question the naive right of my powers, my glorious spontaneity as a living being, a 'force on the move'" (CPP 58). The other measures me from her/his distance.
- 24 See Simon Critchley, *The Ethics of Deconstruction: Derrida and Levinas* (Oxford and Cambridge: Blackwell, 1992), especially the last chapter, "A Question of Politics: The Future of Deconstruction".
- 25 Martin Heidegger, "The Word of Nietzsche: God is Dead", in *The Question Concerning Technology*, W. Lovitt trans. (New York: Harper and Row, 1977), 95ff.
- 26 This is the wish of the totalitarian ego dominating ontology; but such an activity is based on negation, and therefore rejected by Levinas. Since the negation can never be absolute, the I translates itself into an unhappy consciousness, extending the *ressentiment* toward alterity that has first brought the I to its voracious activity.
- 27 In *Otherwise Than Being* Levinas writes that "psychism is the other in the same without alienating the same" (OBBE 112); the relation of responsibility for the other is a "service without slavery" (OBBE 54), "nor a slavish alienation in spite of the gestation of the other in the same which this responsibility for others signifies" (OBBE 112).
- 28 By DEHH I refer to Emmanuel Levinas, *En découvrent l'existence avec Husserl et Heidegger* (Paris: Vrin, 1949).
- 29 Emmanuel Levinas, "God and Philosophy", R. Cohen trans., *Philosophy Today* 22 (1978), 133.
- 30 See Emmanuel Levinas, "Martin Buber and the Theory of Knowledge", in *The Philosophy of Martin Buber*, P. A. Schilpp and M. Friedman eds. (La Salle, Illinois: Open Court, 1967), 149.

# LEVINAS'S 'ONTOLOGY'

## 1935-1974

*Bettina Bergo*

### I. The early history of Levinas's 'Ontology'

The 'modern' insight, that every object supposes a subject, is certainly true of Levinas. But it also suggests that, broadly speaking, a rational psychology (in addition, sometimes, to an empirical one) is a dimension of epistemological projects concerning modes of knowing. Kant's 'fulfilment' of psychology, turning on his demonstration that the soul cannot be a substance and affects cannot be attributes of the soul-substance, did not finish rational psychology. Subsequent idealist thought from Hegel to Schopenhauer preserves rational psychology as a moment of philosophy of mind, and of the real.

The innovation of Heidegger is to have reduced Dasein to a site for a question of Being, which is universal, soul-free and relates to its environment through attunements (*Stimmungen*). That innovation comes in relation to Husserl, who has this much of idealism left in his philosophy that his *Ideas* can speak of the persistence of a universal structure of consciousness even in the event of the destruction of all cultural and historical givens around it. For Husserl, the subject-pole, in its universality, precedes and makes possible any discussion of its own being, or that of the world.

Whether this is the last word on Husserl's intent or not is secondary here. Obviously, the noetic-noematic relationship must remain a unity, and because it can give rise to scientific or objective operations like geometry, this unity is not merely psychological but gnoseological, connected to the structure of reason itself. Yet Husserl's noetic-noematic unity remains modelled on the medieval *adæquatio* between things and soul. And his noetic-noematic activity is tied firmly to subject poles, it is *for* a subject-consciousness, however minimal its structure. To think past subjectivism, to free the thinking of Being from this subject-tie is part of Heidegger's project, especially after his so-called Turn (*Kehre*).

Now, Levinas was profoundly inspired by the way Heidegger's philosophy addressed problems of existence. He wrote as much in his third cycle

doctorate in 1930: 'Only M. Heidegger dares to confront deliberately this problem, considered impossible by all of traditional philosophy, the problem that has for its object the meaning of the existence of being . . . and we believe we are entitled to take our inspiration from him.'<sup>1</sup>

Despite this, Levinas always laid claim to his Husserlian grounding in the concepts of intentionality, passive synthesis, above all the presentability or describable nature of all that takes place in the theatre of consciousness. This means that a minimal subjective leaning is present in Levinas even as he develops an ontology that contrasts sharply with that of Heidegger.

One more thing bears repeating about the subjective leaning in Levinas. In 1920s Strasbourg, Levinas studied psychology extensively. It may be harder to see the influences of his Strasbourg *maîtres*, like Maurice Pradines,<sup>2</sup> but they are there. They remain even in Levinas's disavowal of psychology (principally of psychoanalysis) and its central error, at least, in what Levinas took to be Freud's fundamental error: to posit an unconscious and proceed as though it were functionally comparable to consciousness and its contents. For Levinas, then, the unconscious has thoughts, affects and memories much like consciousness. It also means that the unconscious, like consciousness, gets posited according to a logic of container with contained things: the contained things are the affects and thoughts, the container is the fact of consciousness itself or, indeed, the fact of the unconscious. This positing was to Levinas a sort of category error. How could one determine the function of a lack, of an invisible structure, on the sole basis of a more or less visible one? How could the economy of consciousness provide a key to an 'economy' less acquiescent to exploration in the laboratory of the analyst's couch and certainly, less deductively evident?

As a truncated reading of Freud,<sup>3</sup> Levinas's objection holds good. Nevertheless, when he criticizes psychology extensively, as he does in *Existence and Existents* (written between 1938 and 1944), he makes this point about the blind spot in the psychology of the unconscious precisely because he has been influenced by the anti-Freudian psychology of Pradines and Blondel, and because, writing against Heidegger in the 1930s and 1940s, he argues that everyday affectivity and the facts of embodied consciousness (like falling asleep and waking up, like his phenomenological descriptions of fatigue and indolence – or those of shame and nausea in his 1935 work *On Escape*) afford us the means with which to describe subjective life, without positing an unconscious or resorting to the rather utilitarian modes of being of Heidegger's *Dasein*. For Levinas, as for Husserl, embodied consciousness evinced modes comparable to a comet's tail of gradations, ranging from waking consciousness all the way to the unconsciousness of somnolence and sleep.<sup>4</sup> In thus characterizing living consciousness as a spectrum, Levinas followed a French school of psychology that was deeply suspicious of the omnipresence of sexuality in Freud's *voie royale* to the unconscious: parapraxes, dreams and neuroses. For all that, Levinas required an

unconscious in his own philosophical project (if only sleep), because, in this regard still a Husserlian, consciousness must emerge from itself, for him, even before it inhabits a world. Thus, Levinas's work in rational psychology, like the influence of Husserl on him, pulled him in a certain 'subjectivist' direction even as he worked out an ontology structurally comparable to Heidegger's, but materially divergent from it. Moreover, Levinas's conscious-unconscious pair actually grounds his own early projects of fundamental ontology, in 1935 and 1945.<sup>5</sup>

Now, though Levinas was throughout his life influenced by psychology and by Husserlian phenomenology, and though he follows the aforementioned subjectivist pull, the subjectivity he describes is neither Husserlian nor psychological *stricto sensu*. It was Heidegger's fundamental ontology that awakened him, in the late 1920s with the greatest challenge to subjectivist orientations. This awakening must have been a shake up, because Levinas speaks readily of the strong emotions he felt in Heidegger's seminars.<sup>6</sup> In 1930, his praise of Heidegger is strong and it drops, like a proverbial 'hair in the soup', into the 'Conclusion' of his dissertation on Husserl's theory of intuition. There suddenly is Heidegger, whose philosophy 'allows us to approach concerns of existence' like no other thought could do at that time.

Heidegger shakes up Levinas's philosophical heritage to the point of inducing him to rethink and continuously rework Heidegger's ontology. The reworking project begins with Levinas's 1935 essay, *On Escape*. It continues through *Existence and Existents* (1945), and it culminates in *Otherwise than Being* (1974). In this essay, I will concentrate on those three works, taking them as path marks in the development of Levinas's philosophy of Being. I am *not* saying that Levinas has a full-blown ontology like Heidegger's, or even that he wanted one. Nevertheless, Levinas's ethics requires a consistent conception of Being. That conception unfolded as a *counterpoint* to Heidegger's ontology and project of *thinking* after metaphysics. Three aspects of Levinas's critique of Heidegger will be discussed here: the relationship between Being and *Dasein* (Existence); that between Being and temporality; and finally the relationship between Being and language. If we want to understand Levinas's ontology, we must understand both the role of the 'subject' and 'self', in his thought, and his relationship to Heidegger's thinking of Being.

Concerning the first motif, viz., the relationship between being and human existence. First, there is the gap Levinas perceives in Heidegger between Being as such, even if it is immanent, and the being for whom it is a question, that is, the (human) *Dasein*. Whether he judged Heidegger rightly on this gap or not is secondary here. Levinas rejects this gap in 1935, and he does so in an original essay that searches for affective access to Being that is different from Heidegger's anxiety (or Heidegger's 1929 'attunements' of

boredom and joy). In that essay, entitled *On Escape*, the affects that reveal being most decisively include shame and nausea. In nausea, we see the most extreme expression of what Levinas then conceived as a fundamental condition of our existing 'in' Being: that of being *trapped* within Being; trapped indeed to the point of being suffocated by it. The longtime student of Levinas who introduced *On Escape*, Jacques Rolland, has argued that political circumstances in Germany may account for Levinas's interpretation of this 'condition' of entrapment and nausea: Levinas was writing after all at a time when being Jewish in Germany or France was to be trapped in a violent being, surrounded by others with whom there was no reliable *Mitsein*. All this is quite right. Yet Levinas was approaching Being and our attunement to it within a philosophical framework, to which actuality served essentially as one index among other possible ones.

Levinas's attunements of shame and nausea 'give' us Being as seamless, inescapable and neuter – and we may glimpse these through what Heidegger called *existentiell* (factual, derived) experiences of a world falling apart in violence. (Already in 1933, many Jews and non-Jews realized that Being or existence had changed perhaps forever. Leo Baeck, the much-loved chief Rabbi of Berlin, recognized the meaning of Hitler's election on 30 January 1933; it meant simply that 'Das Ende des deutschen Judentums ist gekommen.'<sup>7</sup>) Curiously, Levinas abandoned his 1935 project of approaching Being through shame and nausea. I believe this was because he proposed it as a study of being that was more than circumstantial. That is, Levinas was working toward universal attunements using shame and nausea rather than anxiety and boredom, and these would have required considerable development to become a counter-ontology to Heidegger's. It might even be said that the affective states Levinas explored in *Existence and Existence* enlarge his counter-ontology. But in that 1945 work, Being gets interpreted differently, as light not impotence and suffocation. 'The world is light in its existence',<sup>8</sup> writes Levinas in 1945. That is, Being is light as well as a certain dark chaos. He thus revisits Being in 1945 in a Schellingian (but also Jewish mystical) reading of it as light growing out of a foundation in darkness, where a substantive, dark element grounds all of Being. But this darkness, for Levinas, is the darkness of vigilance and falling asleep after a bout of disturbed wakefulness in which the neutrality of Being surrounds and suffocates – or horrifies – us. Suffice it to say that Being, by 1945, is explored for itself, but always in a different relation to an existent, a *Dasein*, than it was for Heidegger. Moreover, Levinas's light-dark motif is *not* directly parallel to Heidegger's disclosure and withdrawal of Being. And Levinas's world as light begins with a minimal subjectivity quite different than Heidegger's *Dasein*.

In twelve years' time, then, Levinas produces two ontologies: one elementary and characterized by Being as *full*, 'impotent' and nauseating. This Being is *our* own existence: we are revolted by *our* Being most patently in



bouts of nausea, where the gap between Being and our Being is narrowest. The second ontology, that of *Existence and Existents*, is dualist. It is characterized by light (precisely as active consciousness) and by an impotent darkness. In both cases, Levinas rethinks Being with an attention to its moral and aesthetic qualities that we do not find in Heidegger. The debt to Heidegger has gone through significant changes. As Jacques Rolland remarked in his 'Introduction' to *On Escape*:

That which is firstly taken up without debate from Heidegger is a certain comprehension of philosophy, by virtue of which a problem will be considered philosophical *par excellence* inasmuch as it confronts us with the 'ancient problem of being *quâ* being'.

Two things should be noted here: first, in 'leading us to the heart of philosophy' (DE, 74; OE, 55), the problem of Being also brings us to a question, which is for Levinas neither spatial nor temporal. That is, if Being, which *arises* as a question only because it is a question for Dasein, is finite (i.e. limited or related to Dasein), then is Being in some sense *not* 'sufficient' to itself? For Levinas, the fact that Being *requires* Dasein poses the question of the finite and the infinite. Now, the 'infinite' may be just a signifier. And Being's finiteness may be just the result of Being becoming a question in relation to the being (i.e. Dasein) concerned about its Being. *Yet* already in Levinas's thinking the question of the infinite – or the 'not-finite' – has arisen even before it enters a religious register of any kind. Levinas tells us that the infinite suggests itself in literary *and* actual attempts to get out of Being. We find it in escapist literature and in philosophy. Therefore, in this youthful essay, Levinas argues that 'escape' means getting away from the Being that is social reality. *But most noticeably* from the Being that one calls oneself, since for him it is no longer a question of getting one's being 'into view as a whole', as it was for Heidegger when he discussed authenticity. Getting out of Being points to our urge, or need, to get away from ourselves, and this points to a self that cannot get itself into view as a whole and feels suffocated by Being, internal and external.

Now this conception of Being actually ventures to collapse any distinction between inside and outside, between self and world. That is its radicality. About the urge to get out of Being, Levinas writes:

The impossibility of getting out of the game [*sortir du jeu*] and of giving things back their toy-like uselessness announces the precise moment where childhood ends, and defines the very notion of seriousness. What counts, then, in all this experience of Being is not the discovery of a new characteristic of our existence, but by its very fact, that of the permanent quality itself of our presence.

(DE 70; OE, 52)<sup>9</sup>

The notion of the seriousness of Being scans his entire philosophical career.

He adds to this, 'the being of the I [*moi*], which war and war's aftermath have *allowed* us to know, leaves us with no further games. The need to be right, or justified, in this game can only be a need for escape' (DE, 71; OE, 53). Beyond collapsing the hiatus between Being and the Dasein we are, it is clear that *two* readings – a factual and a foundational one – are indispensable to understanding this text. The reference to 'war's aftermath' could only be the German phantasm of a *Dolchstoss*, a Jewish 'stab in the back', its rhetoric and consequences.

So Levinas's first original essay – published ironically in the year the Nazis announced the Nuremberg Laws defining Jews as a separate sort of 'existent' and stripping them of their civil rights – presents a surprising, in some senses Husserlian, critique of Heidegger's ontology. In *On Escape*, Being has two levels of historicity, as it also does in Heidegger. Being has a social and political, even a 'world-historical', level,<sup>10</sup> and it has a deeper level that is virtually an '*existential*', virtually a Heideggerian condition of possibility. Yet Levinas seems to hesitate over Heidegger's distinction between authentic and inauthentic historicity. He describes general events by which we are led to want to escape. But he always refers these to their condition of possibility, which is the embodied self. Moreover, Levinas ignores Heidegger's 'resoluteness' and the 'loyalty to Self' by which Heidegger described authentic historicity.<sup>11</sup> Thus Levinas keeps the authentic–inauthentic distinction troubled and unstable: 'loyalty to Self' becomes imprisonment in Self. Moreover, the Being by which we are surrounded is not governed by spatial binaries like inside–outside; what is *in* us precisely *is* us and it is Being as well.<sup>12</sup> And this is not so far from Heidegger himself, when he writes, 'Dasein is an entity for which, in its Being, that Being is an issue. The phrase "is an issue" has been made plain in the state-of-Being of understanding . . . as self-projective Being toward its ownmost potentiality-for-Being. This potentiality is that for the sake of which any Dasein is as it is . . .'<sup>13</sup>

This is also why for Heidegger, as for Levinas, 'Existing is always factual. Existentiality is essentially determined by facticity.'<sup>14</sup>

Heidegger's Dasein has two levels of historicity, as does Being conceived as that which is in question for the Dasein that asks about it. This being, Dasein, also finds itself in the world, in Being, uncanny and 'not-being-at-home'. And, almost like Levinas's phenomenology of shame, Dasein is always on the verge of 'being brought back from its absorption in the "world" through anxiety'.<sup>15</sup>

Thus, although Levinas preserves the levels or modes of historicity and of being-in-the-world that he learned from Heidegger, he does *not* preserve anxiety or Heidegger's imperative of 'being brought back from [our] absorption in the "world"', which is a fallen mode of being in any case.<sup>16</sup> Instead,

Levinas *inflects* these themes toward a different specificity of being-there. For Heidegger, being-in-the-world is experienced as falling and as fleeing from oneself and one's mortality, into things and groups. The affects and states of 'wishing', 'worry', 'hankering' as we fall, and even our very 'urge "to live"', are all derivative from Care in Heidegger, and likewise from our existence, which is to be out-ahead-of-itself and always 'already-in-the-world' (BT, 237; SZ, 192). For Heidegger, the *derivative* quality of wishing, worrying and urge is revealed thanks to anxiety.

Levinas inverts this schema. In 1935, wishes and the urge to live are for him more definitive of our being than Heidegger's 'Care' and 'concern'. Levinas writes,

A quest for the way out [of Being], this is in no sense a nostalgia for death, because death is not an exit . . . the ground of this theme is constituted [instead] by the *need* for excendence. Thus, to the need for escape, Being appears not merely as an obstacle that free thought would have to surmount, nor even as the rigidity that, by inviting us to routine, demands an effort toward originality; rather, [Being] appears as an imprisonment from which one must get out.

(DE, 73; OE, 55)

We see the two levels operative here in Levinas's insistence that a need for 'excendence', as getting out of Being, is not reducible to 'nostalgia for death' - Levinas's translation of Heidegger's authenticity. As need or wish, excendence is what is fundamental. And excendence is existential, here, not spiritual: it is neither reducible to a creative urge ('*élan créateur*', DE, 72; OE, 54), nor comparable to 'that need for "innumerable lives"', which is an analogous motif, he says, 'in modern literature, albeit totally different in its intent' (DE, 73; OE, 55). For Levinas, the creative urge and the need for innumerable lives are derivative in regard to our existential wish to escape from Being. Levinas will thus read Dasein's temporality, its out-ahead-of-itself, as a 'need for a universal or infinite' (ibid.). Moreover, he will criticize Heidegger's Dasein for 'supposing a peace become real at the depths of the I [*moi*]', that is, as the acceptance of Being' (DE, 74; OE, 55). For Levinas in 1935, factual existence presented neither peace without nor peace within. Instead, he argued that the acceptance of being was not existentially primary for humans - perhaps not even structurally possible for us, given our wish to escape from being.

There is no debate, then, that Levinas's 1935 project must be read in light of events around him. What interests me is that he takes seriously Heidegger's characterization of inauthentic historicity as preoccupation with the time and history of things 'ready-to-hand and present-at-hand'. Levinas is deliberately working at an ontological level. Thus, we must read *On Escape* through two lenses, notably in light of what survivor Jean Améry

wrote, retrospectively of the period 1933–45. Améry absolutely bears quoting on this,

In the end, nothing else differentiated me from the people among whom I pass my days than a vague, sometimes more, sometimes less perceptible restiveness. But it is a *social* unrest, not a metaphysical one . . . It is not Being that oppresses me, or Nothingness, or God, or the Absence of God, only society . . . In my . . . effort to explore the basic condition of being a victim – in conflict with the necessity to be a Jew and the impossibility of being one – I . . . have recognized that the *most extreme expectations and demands directed at us are of a physical and social nature*.<sup>17</sup>

Jean Améry took the path of a secular Jew – a task both possible and impossible, as he points out. On the other hand, a religious path was always present in some sense in Levinas, though never as a *credo per se*. And, of course, Améry's words were written retrospectively at the time of the first Auschwitz trials in 1946–47. In 1933, Levinas, still impressed with Heidegger's project, seemed to be excavating the structures of excedence and escape, whose factual expression Améry's 'most extreme demands' translate and contest.<sup>18</sup> But the tension between society and ontology is already there. It produces a counter-project to Heidegger, which will not presuppose the acceptance of Being, because it understands Being more extensively than Heidegger did.<sup>19</sup> In developing his *urge* to escape, against Heidegger's mood of *Angst*, not to mention the affect of shame and the physical experience of nausea as *ontological* events, Levinas turned inward to the Being that is Dasein, and seemed almost to psychologize its experiences. Is this the inevitable first response of a universalist consciousness, to an existence turned into ongoing trauma? Levinas writes,

In the identity of the I [*moi*], the identity of Being reveals its nature as enchainment, for it appears in the form of suffering and invites us to escape. Thus escape is the need to get out of oneself, that is, to break that most radical and most unalterably binding of chains, the fact that the I [*moi*] is the oneself [*soi-même*].

(DE, 73; OE, 55)

Rather than attribute the need to escape to legal and political circumstances, Levinas's approach to Being as suffering passes through a being that is more embodied than Heidegger's Dasein; it passes through a being who is consciously tied to its *physical* self. This is why need, shame and nausea – well before the onset of something like anxiety – are its modalities of predilection. 'Nausea', Levinas writes, 'reveals to us the presence of Being in all its impotence, which constitutes it as such. It is the impotence of Being in all its nakedness' (DE, 92; OE, 68).

We might suppose that pulling Being toward a psychology and a physiology of the being we are defeats any strategy based on an ontological difference. Formally, and in regard to establishing a transcendental ontology, that is likely. But this inflection reveals something new about Being as such, which is hard to gainsay. If we glimpse Being through the being that we are, concerned as we are about our being, then it is not its finiteness that we flee or anticipate resolutely, it is Being's self-entrapment. And this entrapment must be both within itself, as well as in the Being that is outside us. Levinas's merging of the inside and the outside is affectivity, suffering. Against the claim that it 'psychologizes' our experience Being, I would argue that it is seeking a site that is prior to Heidegger's being-in-the-world alongside of things. This is a move Heidegger himself seems almost to make when he says that anxiety volatilizes beings around us. But in 1935, Levinas does not find this prior site. He circumvents being-in-the-world while subtly acknowledging it. In 1945, he will have found his site. For now, though, Being reveals itself in nausea as impotence. And Levinas adds,

Thereby . . . does nausea appear also as an *exceptional fact* of consciousness. If, in every psychological fact, the [*de facto*] being of consciousness is confused with its knowledge . . . its nature is confused with its presence. The nature of nausea, on the contrary, 'is nothing other than its presence'.

(DE, 92; OE, 68)

Since it cannot become an object for consciousness or a representation, nausea – like anxiety but intensified physiologically and affectively – reveals the impotence of Being uniquely as that to which we are permanently riveted.<sup>20</sup> Yet, as if he saw coming the charge of psychologism, his discussion of nausea leads Levinas to ask: 'What is the structure of this pure Being?' (DE, 74; OE, 56). And he wonders, is it really so universal? Or is it, 'on the contrary, nothing other than the mark of certain civilization, installed in the *fait accompli* of Being?' (ibid.). This is his most radical move; it is also the moment where Levinas comes closest to Jean Améry. Rather than situate history as epochs of Being, as Heidegger did, Levinas subjects Being, even as *the* question for philosophy, to the question of historical and social contexts, what Heidegger called, pejoratively, the 'world-historical' context.

Between the everyday urge to get out, its intensifications in nausea and shame, and what these reveal about Being, the tension remains like a play of forces. If Heidegger's ontological difference moves, in Levinas, toward the difference between the *moi* and the *soi-même*, then a tension persists there as well. This is the tension predictable in the merging of exterior and interior, and the *difficulty* of holding that merger together consistently. These two tensions remain throughout *On Escape*. In effect, the tensions inhabit

Levinas's acceptance of Being as *the* question for philosophy (at least, as Heidegger thought it through) as against the 'mere mark of a secularized civilization' – that same civilization for which Revelation and the 'call' are empty ontological formalisms. Now, as Levinas knew well, Heidegger's formalizing élan gave him his existential structure of time, as awaiting and announcement, when he emptied the structure of Paul's *kairos* of its contents, as the life of the early Christian community, expressed in Paul's letters.<sup>21</sup> I will return to this.<sup>22</sup> What is remarkable here is that Levinas *accepts* the question of Being and time *for* philosophy, while also seeing clearly and critically that this question takes shape through the secularization of an older content or its total evacuation; he recognizes differently than did Heidegger that the ontological difference is not binarist, and that the form-content opposition must be problematized phenomenologically. This was best done by starting from the embodied Self.

What is important here are Levinas's inflections. 'Would infinite Being need to get out of itself?' he asks, without exploring exactly what infinite Being is. But that question crosses through his presentation of ontology from 1935 to 1974. As does Being, conceived as impotence, disorder and even '*bourgeois*', as he says, in its current self-understanding. The emphasis on Being as the particular Being that is *soi-même* becomes important when it is grasped prior to intentional consciousness in nausea, or as fatigue and indolence. Being thus reveals itself to a 'me' in the affect of shame and state of nausea, which ground my being as a civil or an ethnic status, without sublating my 'Jewishness or my nose', as Améry put it.

These tensions of levels in Being (a universal one and a factual-personal one) are more than a tension of opposites: the drama of suffering and nausea represents an overbidding on Heidegger's *Angst* and a reversal of his fleeing in the face of death. Heidegger's being-alongside-things has become entrapment amongst them. Heidegger's derivative 'urge to live' has become an urge to get out, which is primordial. And yet no one would doubt that Levinas also accepts 'care' (Heidegger's *Sorge*) for things and for others in his analyses of urges and shame: one must care somewhat about those from whom one wants to hide one's nakedness, which is Levinas's definition of shame.<sup>23</sup>

One might ask, if this were not 1935, and Levinas were not a Lithuanian Jew, would we read this text so 'knowingly', so cleverly? And, if we read it otherwise, could we take it otherwise seriously as a counter-project to Heidegger's ontology in *Being and Time*?

The question concerns the impact of finite, circumstantial facticity on philosophical thinking. It has been asked in regard to Heidegger as well. For now, I will suspend it as over-determined and hold on to the fact that Levinas began, then abandoned, then began again his counter-ontology that unfolded prior to the distinctions of finite and infinite, origin and end, inside and outside. He writes,

But how to consider, the finite and the infinite in the fact of positing [se poser]? Is there a more or less perfect way of positing [se poser]? What is, is. That there be a birth and a death in no way affects the absolute character of an affirmation that refers only to itself.

(DE, 76; OE, 57)

This affirmation, whose temporality goes unexplored, but cannot be futural like Dasein's, is elucidated by the inescapable *now* of nausea. This now is not precisely Bergson's duration, and it is not precisely unitary or punctual. Because Levinas rehabilitates the escapable now of nausea, shame, need, and later fatigue and awakening – because he lays his philosophical emphasis on the now as *suffering* and effort, not as the momentary, we are perhaps more inclined to inquire about *his* now, and *his* selfhood and particularity, than we are about Heidegger's particularity. But I would suspend that question; I am only inquiring about why it may be so tempting to his readers.

## II. Ontology in *Existence and Existents* (1945)

The essays contained in this thin volume make a number of important reversals in Levinas's Heidegger critique and in his themes from *On Escape*. These reversals include Being in-the-world, now interpreted as Desire; intentionality defined as lived affectivity, and a different conception of the world and of actuality: the world is now more political and ethical. It is the 'world itself, where there can be confession' (DEAE, 68). The critique of Heidegger's ontology is also more sure of itself. It even allows itself to be glib: 'There are only things behind their objects in ages of poverty', he declares (DEAE, 68).

Before examining this prison camp writing further, I want to recall something that may be familiar to everyone here. It concerns the possibility of the question: Why is there Being instead of simply nothingness?

It has been suggested that this is a non-question. Sometimes that suggestion is just the result of an uncharitable reading of Heidegger. At other times, the sceptic reminds us that the question of being and nothingness is meaningful precisely within a specific culture, as Levinas had already pointed out in 1935. The second sceptic is thinking not of Leibniz but of the Christian conception of creation *ex nihilo*. There is not space, here, to go into Heidegger's complex relation to and forgetting of Christianity. But it is important for our look at Levinas that, in Judaism, God does *not* create out of nothingness. He extracts light from darkness, but darkness has its being too. The Tanakh's version of Bereshit or Genesis reads, 'When God began to create heaven and earth, the earth being unformed and void, with darkness over the face of the deep and a wind from God sweeping over the water.' Later, the stars are called 'signs for the set times'. They separate the *being* of the light from the *being* of darkness.

This heritage survives in non-Jewish philosophers like Schelling, who recognized a 'dark principle' as preceding the light and making it possible for light to be raised out of it. 'So there must be', Schelling writes in the *Essence of Human Freedom*, 'another basis for the birth of Spirit.'<sup>24</sup>

We see something similar emerge in *Existence and Existents*. There, Levinas first speaks of the 'there is' as the ground of Being. Thus nausea, as the sheer experience of the impotence of Being, turns into the horror and dissolution of our 'me' – like Lévy-Bruhl's primitive religious 'participation' – in 'an atmosphere of presence' (DE, 104; OE, 88). But this 'atmosphere' is not nothing. And it does not withdraw. The there is, or *il y a*, is 'a field without master' and it does not simply pass over us in anxiety. Rather, we emerge from it by waking up. Or again, we escape from it by falling asleep: our encounter with the ground of Being is bordered by consciousness on one side and by an unconscious on the other. So, though it is 'there', there-is being, and consciousness emerges from it like light out of darkness, consciousness nevertheless *emerges from itself* in fully waking up, out of insomnia or a deep sleep. And consciousness suspends the ground of Being, the 'there is', by falling asleep, when it can do so. The ground is thus *Da*, a 'there', different from Heidegger's 'there'. The 'there' in Levinas is 'here', as it were. It is my body and self, the same place whence I fall asleep and suspend the *there* of the 'there is'. The base, then, is me, a corporeal me. This is my first 'where', my first site before any 'being-alongside-things-in-the-world' (DEAE, 122).

And so, though the ground of being exists as the moiling darkness of the there is, Being, before it is the being of things or of world, is the being of the oneself that we have already discovered in *On Escape*. Now, in 1945, the parallels with Husserl's *Ideas I*, Paragraph 49, are unmistakable<sup>25</sup> – although Paragraph 49 speaks of the irreducibility of consciousness in *epistemological* terms, while Levinas transposes this irreducibility to an existential level, the primacy of embodied consciousness remains as *our* ground. So too does the co-belonging, or correlation, between consciousness and a certain unconscious.

At a level higher than that of the *there is*, which is chaos and darkness, we find the *me*, arising from itself: consciousness comes out of unconsciousness. And here we find consciousness explicitly equated with Being, which is now equated with the world of light. Being as light now stands contrasted with Being as darkness. Instead of Being eventing or withdrawing, we have Being in its materiality (the dark *there is* is material, [DEAE, 90, 98]) and Being as light and consciousness, which is already 'a certain mastery of Being' (ibid.).

If this ontology appears more traditional than Heidegger's, Levinas's 1945 project might be compared to a struggle between dark Being and light Being – alongside the re-assertion of the primacy of Husserlian selfhood *minus* Husserl's constitutive intentionality. In 1935, the 'attunements' of need, shame and nausea imposed themselves. In 1945, with the struggle that is waking



up, and beginning again, the temporality of the present is *reaffirmed*. And, with the pre-eminence of time as the present, Levinas can assert the specificity of sensation. Here, we see the influence of Maurice Pradines's work *Philosophie de la Sensation*<sup>26</sup> on Levinas. This influence, I believe, will grow, hesitantly, to the point where it becomes significant, in 1974, to *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*, with its analyses of the self's sensuous vulnerability to its world and the Other. But in 1945, the present is light and Being: 'The antithesis of the a priori and the a posteriori is overcome by light', writes Levinas (DEAE, 76). Light, really the very heart of phenomenological intuition, is awakened consciousness, whose intentionality Levinas reinterprets, following Heidegger, as attunement or 'lived affectivity' (DEAE, 56). In 1945, the affect characteristic of being-in-the-world is desire. It is sincere; it enjoys. 'Enjoyment and sincerity, like sensation itself', Levinas argues, 'precede care.' 'All the rest is biology', he concludes, with a rhetorical arabesque (DEAE, 56).

Without exploring the ontological *meaning* of this biology, let us just emphasize that, like Pradines, perhaps even like Heidegger for whom a science like biology simply concerned a region of Being, the Being that is consciousness in 1945 is a Being that begins and ends with itself. It falls asleep, it awakens, it keeps watch. Above all, it is explicitly prior to Kant's *a priori-a posteriori* distinction, as well as to Heidegger's existential, Care.

Does Levinas's strategy work? As 'subjectivist', it seems more traditional than the project he sketched in *On Escape*. Inasmuch as it does work, it does so by supposing two things. First, that we can speak of the materiality of Being as darkness and as an embodied, *ontological* unconscious-conscious continuum (DEAE, 57). Note, here, that a non-analytic unconsciousness is as important to Levinas as an analytic unconscious is to psychoanalysis, and he emphasizes that psychoanalysis *missed* something important: the *ontological* function of the unconscious. Second, if Levinas's strategy works, it is thanks to the *intelligence* of sensation, or thanks to sensation's *spirituality*. 'Sensation is always already [*d'ores et déjà*] knowledge and apprehension', he writes in 1945 (DEAE, 77). To the Cartesian luminosity of consciousness, he grafts the 'permeability of *esprit*' - Maurice Pradines's formula - which becomes the heart of sensation itself. So in 1945, we are no longer driven to *escape* Being (though it is *our* Being), for the luminosity of consciousness and the spirituality of sensation make the 'subject' into an 'infinite power of recoil' (DEAE, 78). We do not require Heidegger's anxiety to retire from things. One could almost say it is we who glimmer in awakening, *not* Being; or better: we - conceived as primordial light and intelligent sensation - are that Being that glimmers or withdraws. Levinas's idiosyncratic rapprochement of inside and outside continues here. But this is not so surprising a strategy, given his 1935 experiment. And if one would call his move a Husserlian 'option', then one should admit that Levinas radicalizes Husserl by *existentializing* Husserl's consciousness. Indeed, by 1945, neither

Heidegger nor Husserl is partly recognizable in Levinas's philosophy. The counter-project to Heidegger's ontology has become an ontology *sui generis*.

Something else is taking shape here as well. Unlike Jean Améry's witness, and chronicling of the fabrication, then destruction, of 'the Jew' and 'the Jews', the prison-camp essays of Levinas are deploying a philosophy of particularity and intersubjectivity – and with these, an important rethinking of Being that *could not* start from the Leibnizian-Heideggerian or Christian, question: Why is there being instead of simply nothingness?

This may be an impossible philosophy so far as its context would deny its possibility, or have it vanish. I mean this in Améry's sense, when Améry writes, 'Metaphysical distress is a fashionable concern of the highest standing. Let it remain a matter for those who have always known who and what they are . . . and *that they are permitted to remain so*' (AML, 101). But, for Améry's part – and this was perhaps the perverse triumph of the epoch in which Heidegger and Levinas grew up – 'Physical and social demands' render metaphysics or first philosophy otiose or just ideological. 'The most extreme expectations and demands directed at us are of a physical and social nature,' said Améry. Of these expectations we can simply bear witness, he would say, maybe engage ourselves – but not write metaphysics. Levinas would not reject Améry's assertion. Instead, by *Otherwise than Being*, Levinas has not only said 'yes' to his own impossible philosophy, he has combined philosophy *and* witnessing in a single work of thinking.

### III. Ontology in *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence* (1974)

'C'est là, dans la priorité de l'autre homme sur moi que . . . Dieu me vient à l'idée . . .'

'Notre humanité consiste à pouvoir reconnaître cette priorité de l'autre.'  
Lévinas, interview with Roger-Pol Droit<sup>27</sup>

Mais une question se pose: la faute de l'onto-théo-logie a-t-elle consisté à prendre l'être pour Dieu – ou plutôt à prendre Dieu pour l'être?

Lévinas, 'Lecture on Heidegger', 7 November 1975<sup>28</sup>

This juxtaposition of quotes from the 1970s is only possible because of the way in which Levinas deepened his analysis of the relationship between language and Being in *Otherwise than Being*. It is largely accepted, now, that there are and legitimately can be a secular and a religious reading of Levinas. Jacques Rolland has drawn the dividing line between these along the axis of the 'third party' in Levinas's logic. For Rolland, that means that the face-to-face is an experience of secular, affective transcendence with a time dimension. But, from it flows our use of signifier, 'God'. If Rolland is right,

then taking the effect of the face-to-face relation for Being – as the third quote suggests – means we lose something of both being *and* the other. We lose the notion of infinity, even as a question, already posed in 1935.

One of the great contributions of *Otherwise than Being* is the perspicacious turn it makes toward what resonates *unsaid* within language. This turn requires Heidegger's work on Being, resonating in the Greek of the Presocratics and later in the German of Hölderlin's poetry. We see in *Otherwise than Being* that Levinas clearly *does* read Heidegger after the *Kehre*. He put it succinctly in a 1975 lecture: "The most extraordinary thing that Heidegger brings [us] is a new *sonority of the verb "to be"*: precisely its *verbal* sonority. To be: not that which is, but the verb, the "act" of being."<sup>29</sup> This is why language becomes the house of Being over the course of Heidegger's thought, and why it is the *site* of what remains of the ontological difference (conceived non-foundationally, where Being does not ground beings epistemically).

This listening to the sonority of language allows Levinas to pose a new question. He wonders whether something could resonate in language other than as a noun or a verb (like the infinitive, Being). Could something resonate in language that would be close to a verb but not determined by the verb's 'act' or activity; something like an adverbial resonance? That is the question of his 'otherwise', *autrement*, which is literally 'otherly'.

Thus, Levinas writes,

Apophansis – the red reddens, or A is A – does not double up the real. In predication, the essence of the red, or the reddening as an essence, becomes audible for the first time. The nominalized adjective [*or adverb!*] is first understood in predication as an essence, and a temporalization properly so called. *Essence* is not only conveyed in the Said . . . but originally – though amphibologically – [it] resounds in the Said qua essence. *There is no essence or entity behind the said, behind the Logos.*<sup>30</sup>

Here, the debt to Heidegger is obligatory. Now, we should align this remark with Levinas's 1945 statement that 'there are only things behind their objects in ages of poverty'. The active quality of Being, essence, resonates in what is said, it is created as a said. We can understand this, provided we give up the naïveté that simply pairs signifiers with things.

Given this, witnessing as spectacle, which I said enters Levinas's philosophy performatively, here, becomes a different way of letting the 'otherwise' than Being, or the ad-verbialness, or extra-ontological responsibility for another person, *resonate*. 'Poetry', Levinas says with acumen, 'is productive of song, of resonance, and sonority, which are the verbalness of verbs, or essence' (OBBE, 40). What is true of poetry is true – with the inflection of the adverb 'otherwise' – of psalms, 'prophetism'. In a word, it is true of witnessing or speaking to another in sincerity.

But the term 'amphibological' suggests something else. If Heidegger's Being withdraws even as it resonates in language and requires a thinking altogether different from what constructed metaphysics, thinking responsibility and the divided self that Levinas now calls 'substitution' also require a change in thinking. And they are, like Heidegger's Being as resonance, open to rational doubt. Levinas's Substitution also 'glimmers' and withdraws when we identify it like a thing. Levinas's 'amphibology', or reciprocal indication, is like a wavering of meaning inside and outside conceptual constructions and the 'fit' we usually presume ingredient in ordinary predication.

So Levinas borrows the notions of resonance, of what overflows substantives as a modality. He even borrows the idea that something could suggest itself as it concealed itself, and thereby get forgotten: all this and more he borrows from Heidegger.

Marlène Zarader, who explored Heidegger's originary language and wrote a long essay on his 'unthought debt' to the 'Hebraic heritage' in 1990, argues that Levinas not only borrowed structures from Heidegger's thought, he did so fully aware of his choices. But Levinas made his formal borrowings only to reinsert into Heidegger's structures a content that Heidegger had left behind, resulting in his 'philosophy of the neuter', where Being is what is neuter. The evacuated contents were in part biblical and, for Heidegger, deliberately and exclusively Neo-testamentary. But they were also – and from the first – structures found in older mysticism and in a specifically Jewish way of reading the biblical and talmudic texts.<sup>31</sup> What Levinas realized, Zarader argues, is that these contents – minimally the Gospels and Pauline epistles – themselves referred back to older writings, whose core was devoted broadly to ethics and witnessing. In short, Levinas realized clearly what he intended to do in placing ethics as 'first philosophy' there, where the thinking of Being is found in Heidegger.<sup>32</sup>

It is therefore not surprising that Levinas could be a violent reader of Heidegger.

We might well say that Levinas 'forgets' everything that in Being, in Heidegger's sense, might be liable to bring [Heidegger] close to the Other . . . But this forgetting is a decision. A reasoned decision that takes the *exact measure* of [both men's] distance . . . 'to count' only 'the essential'. Now, the essential, in the heritage that comes [to Levinas] from Jerusalem . . . is precisely not pure structures but the Other, who is embodied or incarnate in them.

(DI, 159)

Thus Levinas's last work becomes a labour of reinsertion, a 'process of deneutralization' (DI, 161), because for him, Heidegger's thinking of Being is a philosophy of the neuter. It is a formal ontology of donation without a

face, of a call without a concrete message, and an ontology that listens to a language, which 'in a sense, says effectively nothing other than itself' (ibid.).

To deneutralize Heidegger's ontology, Levinas returns to Kant, Husserl and even Maurice Pradines. (We should add that, with Pradines, Merleau-Ponty, one of his best students, is in the wings.) Levinas explores what resonates in language and what overflows language differently than Heidegger did. Against Heidegger's futurity – his themes of awaiting and passivity, against Heidegger's concept of 'epochs' as a certain way in which Being shows itself<sup>33</sup> and unfolds the history of Being – Levinas returns to Husserl's 'so little explored manuscripts concerning the "living present"' (OBBE, 33). Levinas argues for the initial 'non-intentionality of the primal impression' (ibid.), which, he says, 'surprises us' even after it has been 'synthesized' – whether by a Kantian 'synthesis of apprehension' (OBBE, 34) or by a 'passive synthesis' of flowing time consciousness, here understood as the unthinking 'work' of 'retention'.

'Kant', writes Levinas, 'caught sight of the diverse syntheses of the imagination, *before* every idealization of the sensible' (OBBE, 35).

Further on, Levinas makes the arresting remark in regard to Husserl, that:

To speak of time in terms of flowing is to speak of time in terms of time, and not in terms of temporal events. The temporalization of time [also a very Heideggerian notion<sup>34</sup>] – the openness by which sensation manifests itself, is felt, modifies without altering its identity, doubling itself by a sort of diastasis [or stretching out – another adaptation of Heidegger] of the punctual, putting itself out of phase with itself – [all this temporalization] is neither an attribute nor a predicate expressing a causality 'sensed' as sensation. The temporal modification is not an event, nor an action, nor the effect of a cause. *It is the verb to be.*

(OBBE, 34)

In this temporal diastasis, or stretching – which in Levinas is proper to sensation even *before* sensation is synthesized and represented, that is, in the diastasis of sensation *before* it becomes an 'experience' in Kant's sense – Levinas finds a way past the authentic–inauthentic way of Being of the Self that is Dasein. He sets this down as a *question* for ontology. In the temporalization of time as flow – which is Husserl's locus of identification – is sensation not other, or *more*, than the signifiers by which we thematize it (whether we use verbs or nouns)? He asks, does this more, or this other than, not point toward the 'how' mode that is proper to sensation, rather than pointing to the *that* mode, which is just the fact that sensation happens? If that is so, if sensation in its lived immediacy resonates in language but overflows, or cannot fully enter into language, then how can we avoid accepting an adverbial quality inherent in sensation? Can we not see in this

adverbial quality Levinas's ontological unconscious, which attaches to Heidegger's verbal quality of Being – and does this without modifying Being qua Being? The adverbial and pre-reflective quality of sensation – Pradines's intelligence of sensation – inflects but does not change Being itself. Here, then, is a path out of Being. This time, it is more modest than in 1935. It is as though Levinas has dug his way around Heidegger's Being.

If nausea, in 1935, was the modality of Being, in which the being we *are* suffocates in its own existing and is driven to escape it, then the 1974 temporalization of time within language, that 'House of Being' in which man dwells, has opened a different way out. This path proceeds thanks to what Pradines called a certain 'spirituality of sensation' or sensibility. This is the last way out of ontology. It is not a substantial 'exit', because it modestly inflects the 'order of being' without denying or transcending it metaphysically.

#### IV. Concluding remarks

More should be said about Levinas's final ontology and his thinking of the sensuous openness by which we are vulnerable to the other human being. This occurs in a way so embodied and primitive that we are affected even as the event is integrated into the flow of consciousness, like a disruption of consciousness. Moreover, this 'experience' has its immanence in the form of memory. But affective memory is hard to identify if it has no specific connection to a word of an idea. Let us leave that for now. More should be said, too, about Levinas's exploration in 1974 of the split within the subject, or self, which prolongs his older theme of the *soi-même* 'beneath' the *moi*. There is not enough space to do so here. I want, instead, to close with a question and a step backward. The question is this: Is the hiatus I described in the passive flow of time consciousness and the adverbial 'how' of sensibility through which the self discovers itself inhabited by something other than itself (in a non-psychoanalytic way) – is this hiatus *enough* to ransom Being in light of its tendency toward disorder and violence?

Being in Levinas was always dual, and dual in two respects. First, structurally, Being is both the disorder or darkness of the 'there is' and the everyday being of light, representation and words said. Second, Being is act, epic. Being has a verb-like quality, though Being also remains as it was in *On Escape*, it is the Being *I am*. There is almost a Gnostic element here, as there was in Jewish mysticism and in Schelling, who gave his 'dark principle' due weight when he addressed the origin of evil. In *Otherwise than Being*, the 'gravity' of Being acts like a force of disorganization. It is visible in history and politics as horror and irrationality. Yet this dull weight – worse somehow in the late Levinas than in Heidegger's philosophy of the neuter or the early Levinas's 'impotence' of Being – also lends seriousness to our gifts to others. It is the risk and danger we find often enough in history. And we

are wont to flee it. This is what is meant by the dual quality of Being in Levinas, which is two sides of a common 'thatness' – *dass es ist*.

Is the *autrement*, the otherly than being, outside of being? We might expect an affirmative answer, but it is not so simple. If the binaries of inside–outside, immanence and exteriority, are undercut by a pre-intentional phenomenology, then it is an open question how and where the otherwise than being glimmers. It is wrong, too, to assume this is Levinas's 'moral' or metaphysical transposition of Heidegger's early ontological difference. After all, Levinas already acknowledged that Being 'is' differently than beings are. To be sure: Being 'essences', he recalls, in his 1975 lectures on onto-theo-logy.<sup>35</sup>

Can we say the otherwise than being is 'in' Being punctually (as sensuous overflow in intersubjectivity), while it is outside Being figurally? All Levinas will say is that it is an exception to Being (in the sense of *ex-cipere*, escaping Being's hold), made visible somehow by the Being that 'feels' it; namely, I or we. But it is also suggested in acts of generosity. We may be able to say that generosity, risk, witnessing, speaking to another sincerely, and listening, point toward a *how* in Being, which is not characteristic of Being 'carrying on its business of Being'.<sup>36</sup> But that move pulls factual generosity and speaking into existentiell structures with a condition of possibility in a nominalized 'otherwise' than being. We may like that, but it is a reification. Any reification just draws the 'otherwise' into an ontic-ontological sort of logic, which Heidegger himself ultimately gave up.

We must assume the doubt. It must be enough to admit that the adverbial 'how' is much lighter than the 'what' of Being as act. That is, we must remain wary about what resonates in language even as we accept that something of life, world, the face-to-face resonates, under the appropriate linguistic conditions. How far do our metaphors take us really? And, if the 'otherwise' points to, or suggests an Other – contracted to the point of vanishing like the Kabbalist Isaac Luria's God, who shrinks to a point for the sake of its creation – if this 'how' gives rise to the word 'God' as Levinas maintains,<sup>37</sup> then it remains true that the disheartening unpredictability of responsibility to the Other resonates within an order that also seems dominated by a material 'dark principle'.

Thus, we must hold fast to one thing. Language does *not* simply pair up signifier and entity. Even Saussure's signifier–signified structure of the sign cannot secure the signified, or concept denoted, as more realistic than the signifier. Beneath words are concepts. But concepts are words. And, when we speak of beings, we may insist that we stumble over them, so they must be more real than our words. But we also must say all that. I mean, all that 'reality' over which we stumble must likewise be signified, spoken. This does *not* mean there is nothing 'out there'. It simply means that it is neither idealism nor solipsism to say that existence must resonate in language. To understand this *gives* us being rather than limiting our ontology.

So we come to a choice: either the fragility and unverifiable quality of Levinas's responsibility explains why Being is more tragic than it is neutral, or the same fragility accounts for the surprise there is in human intersubjectivity – and this may kindle our hope. But the adverbial 'otherwise', that characterizes ethical responsibility in his late work, can neither save Being nor provide it with an eschaton. The otherwise is a wager. And for Levinas, it is a question whose answer confronts the choice I described. Either it can take the form it took in Améry and Paul Celan *or* it can take that of Levinas, Ernst Bloch and perhaps Maurice Blanchot. The choice of answer is tied to a number of factors: to our political aesthetics, perhaps to the question of our character and, certainly, to what Levinas called 'religion'.

### Notes

- 1 E. Levinas, *Théorie de l'intuition dans la phénoménologie de Husserl* (Paris: Vrin, 1930, 1963), p. 218. My translation.
- 2 Pradines is thanked in the dissertation *Théorie de l'intuition*, for his 'remarks on the philosophy of Husserl in his work on sensation', p. 7.
- 3 That is, it is a reading that eschews Freud's royal road to the unconscious as primary process: dreams. It is impervious to the other 'revealers' like parapraxes, neuroses and certain psychoses as well. Part of the explanation of Levinas's 'short reading' of Freud can be found in the influence of Maurice Pradines, who, in teaching psychoanalysis (course called *Psychanalyse*, 1924) did not spare himself the trouble of denouncing it as making man 'a cochon triste' with its 'obscénité promue scientifique'. Yet Pradines was a man of courage and the young Levinas was very fond of 'le maître admirable . . . qui a si bien parlé de Dreyfus'. See Marie-Anne Lescourret, *Emmanuel Levinas* (Paris: Flammarion, 1994), pp. 56–63.
- 4 This metaphor is, of course, from Husserl when he speaks of internal consciousness of time as flow (*with* fixed positions in that flow) of ever passing present moments, all filled with immediate retention and anticipative protentions and all flowing back dynamically.
- 5 The subjective turn described here in regard to Husserl and Levinas dates significantly from Kant. Though the Kantian 'revolution' unseated substantializing rationalist psychologies (of the soul as substance) in favour of universal structures of intuition and category-governed understanding, these structures remain the deductive universals of a 'subject' of science or mathematics, like a Newton. The Kantian ontology is in a sense dual, it is an ontology of objects for and in a 'subjective' (with scare quotes) experience that can become scientific or mathematical, and it is an ontology of an indeterminate manifold, conceived heuristically as what makes possible its own synthesis for a finite, universal subjectivity. The noumenon as a vague external condition of possibility, indeterminate and unstructured by the *a priori* forms of intuition, remains as a limit to experience no matter what our speculations might be about it. This much is true, even if the third *Critique* ventured a different approach to the manifold through the 'experiences' of the beautiful and the sublime. There, if intuition is still synthesized with the categories, it is synthesized *differently* than in cases of an intuition-poor experience like drawing a line.



The point is simply that a structural, cognitive 'subjectivity' and the noumenon represent the heritage of twentieth-century philosophy and psychology. And they come to represent the dilemma for twentieth-century philosophy. The thing-in-itself remained a perversely abiding concern for Kant's successors, from Schopenhauer and his noumenon, the Will, to Freud's teacher of cerebral anatomy Josef Meynert with his noumenal 'force'. It is less well known that Freud hoped briefly to set his unconscious in the place of the Kantian noumenon. His Zurich colleague Ludwig Binswanger recalls a 1908 discussion in which Freud asks his friend Paul Häberlin whether the unconscious is not, truly, the thing-in-itself. This is important for us, here, because Freud is an inheritor of Kantianism. His desire was to expand Kantian epistemology into 'abnormal psychology'. But that meant bringing affects, memories, screen memories, phantasies – those things that Kant cordoned off in his pragmatic anthropology as outside the critical project – into the heart of criticism, for the sake of an enlarged psychology or philosophy of mind. The enlargement extended to a tentative reading of the noumenal as the unconscious, and to a certain interpretive insistence that embodied consciousness is multi-layered and primordial, so much so that, in a broader sense, a structural 'subjectivity' is sufficient to give us what we might call the real. In fact, this structural subjectivity (which is not just the site from which I say 'I' but memories, affects, ideas, conscious and unconscious) is basically coextensive with the real insofar as the subjectivity constructs its objects in light of its experience, its pathologies, and its cultural context (which itself may permit an analysis that cannot be completed because cultural analysis is conditioned by the culture of the analyst). Did Freud replace Kant? Of course not; and yet Freud deployed a level of analytic work that reintegrated the subjective residua – affects, memories, unconscious 'ideas', phantasies, associations, language use and misuse – into the purview of our investigation of conscious life, thereby pulling in a structurally subjective direction questions of the being of objects and the world.

This pull was also Husserl's phenomenological project, since any experience of consciousness ought to be describable to the phenomenological gaze, provided it obtains the proper access to the object in question. And that is the goal of the work of phenomenological and transcendental bracketing. Husserlian, like Freudian, ontology is approached as the relation of consciousness to objects it discovers in itself, in consciousness. Like any project so generally described there are moments of hesitation, failures, as when Husserl acknowledges that for the complex synthesis of time as flow and fixity, 'words are lacking'. Or the failure of the Freudian principle of 'free association' as a path towards repressed contents of a patient's unconscious: who after all says, or can say, everything that comes 'into' consciousness? So the hesitations and failures imply limitations inherent in interpretive work and even in language and its illusions to be apt to 'say everything'. See L. Binswanger, *Sigmund Freud: Reminiscences of a Friendship*, tr. N. Guterman (New York: Gune and Stratton, 1957), pp. 7–8.

- 6 In 1937, Levinas writes to his friend and mentor Jean Wahl that Heidegger's thought is of a 'radicalism that is without precedent in the history of philosophy'. In a 1992 interview with Roger-Pol Droit for *Le Monde*, Levinas says he will 'always recall his studies with Heidegger with the greatest emotion'. See Levinas, *Les imprévus de l'histoire*, ed. Pierre Hayat (Montpellier, Fata Morgana, 1994), pp. 13 and 208 respectively.

- 7 'The end of German Jewry has come.' See Leonard Baker, *Days of Sorrow and Pain: Leo Baeck and the Berlin Jews* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), p. 145. Leo Baeck was then 60 years old. He had served in the First World War and had a strong loyalty to both his Jewish and his German identity. It was not

until the 1930s that he considered Zionism a real option for German Jews. Yet despite his clairvoyance, there were many divergent perspectives among Jews in Germany even in 1933. After all, anti-Semitism was evident throughout Europe and America. 'Some Jews', Sarah Gordon reminds us, 'even supported Hitler despite his anti-Semitism . . . Hans Joachim Schoeps headed the German Vanguard, the German-Jewish followers of Hitler.' See S. Gordon, *Hitler, Germans, and the 'Jewish Question'* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984), p. 45. What Levinas no doubt saw included the May burning of books and the dozens of laws about *Rassenfreunde* and *Rassenschänder* (race-friends and race-defilers) that began even in the first years of Hitler's power.

- 8 Levinas, *De l'existence à l'existant* (Paris: Vrin 1978), p. 76. Hereafter written *From Existence to the Existent* and abbreviated as DEAE.
- 9 DE refers to Levinas's *De l'évasion* (first published in *Recherches Philosophiques* V, 1935/36, pp. 373–92; thereafter Montpellier: Fata Morgana, 1982). OE refers to the English translation, *On Escape*, tr. Bettina Bergo (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2003).
- 10 In Heidegger's sense of both the 'historizing of the world in its essential existent unity with Dasein' and the 'historizing within-the-world of what is ready-to-hand and present-at-hand' (things we discover in the already existing world) (cf. M. Heidegger, *Being and Time*, tr. J. Macquarrie and E. Robinson (New York: Harper and Row, 1962), ¶ 75, pp. 440–1; German edition's pagination 389. Hereafter abbreviated as BT, with the English pagination preceding the German pagination).
- 11 What he might do with Heidegger's conception of authentic historicity as 'anticipatory repetition', that repetition that 'deprives the "today" of its [lost or errant] character as present and weans one from the conventionalities of the "they"', seems to have to wait for its answer until repetition is reconceptualized in Levinas's *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence* (Dordrecht and Boston: Kluwer Publishers, 1974). Also see BT, 443–4 (*Sein und Zeit*, pp. 392–93).
- 12 Heidegger's use of binary distinctions is not the end of the story in his ontology; he recognizes the limitations of spatialized binaries as well.
- 13 BT, 236, 192.
- 14 Ibid.
- 15 Ibid., 233.
- 16 Recall Heidegger's remarkable claim that 'Only because Dasein is anxious in the very depths of its being, does it become possible for anxiety to be elicited physiologically', BT, p. 234.
- 17 Jean Améry, 'On the Necessity and Impossibility of being a Jew', in *At the Mind's Limits: Contemplations by a Survivor on Auschwitz and Its Realities*, tr. Sidney Rosenfeld and Stella Rosenfeld (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1980), pp. 100–1. Hereafter abbreviated and cited as AML.
- 18 Indeed, Levinas's rejoinder to Améry might well be this, 'A religious age or an atomic age – these characterizations of the modern world . . . hide a deeper trend. In spite of the violence and madness we see every day, we live in the age of philosophy . . . Beyond the progress of science, which uncovers the predictable play of forces within matter, human freedoms themselves (including those thoughts which conceive of such a play) are regulated by a rational order.' See Levinas, 'Judaism and the Present', in Seán Hand (ed.) *The Levinas Reader* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1989), p. 253.
- 19 I mean this in the following way: what experience did Heidegger have, in 1935, of the being that surrounded Jewish Europeans? If existentiell experiences, that is, experiences of everyday life for an embodied Dasein, point us toward their

- conditions of possibility, then what conditions are indicated by the experience of radical exclusion and rising terror and violence? To argue that these 'experiences' have no indicative value for a being concerned with its being or existence, strikes me as impossible to sustain; a sort of cordon would have to be drawn around existence such that only certain modalities would be admissible as justly, correctly, indicative of their grounds in Being qua Being.
- 20 This resonates with something Levinas points out elsewhere, that one cannot 'desert Judaism', despite prosperity, assimilation, nationalisms.
  - 21 Another tension that persists throughout *On Escape* is that between the *question* of accepting Being as an existential choice, or destiny, and the flight from Being conceived as political and physiological violence in the midst of an overarching impotence.
  - 22 For an elaborate discussion of this debt, see Marlène Zarader, *La Dette impensée: Heidegger et l'héritage hébraïque* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1990), see esp. 'Le Problème de la transmission', pp. 163–83. Translated into English by Bettina Bergo, *The Unthought Debt: Heidegger and the Hebraic Heritage* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2004).
  - 23 In fact, Heidegger's existential 'care' is implicitly present in Levinas's analyses, but it is obscured by the primacy of the desire to get out of, or lighten the weight of Being.
  - 24 F. W. J. Schelling, *Philosophical Inquiries into the Nature of Human Freedom*, tr. James Gutman (La Salle, Ill.: Open Court Press, 1936), p. 54; German edition p. 377. And this was something a Christian writer, like Kierkegaard, could not fathom. In his 1844 work, *The Concept of Anxiety*, he exclaims that he cannot make the slightest sense of the presence of a speaking serpent in the Garden.
  - 25 See Husserl, *Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and to a Phenomenological Philosophy*, Book I, tr. F. Kersten (Dordrecht and Boston: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1982), pp. 109–12. Husserl writes, there, 'all of that does not imply that there *must* be some world . . . The existence of a world is the correlate of certain multiplicities of experience distinguished by certain essential formations. But it *cannot* be seen that actual experiences can flow *only* in such concatenated forms; nothing like that can be seen purely on the basis of the essence of perception taken universally. It is instead quite conceivable . . . that there might no longer be any world. Nevertheless, in that case it could be that . . . crude unity-formations become constituted, transient supports for intuitions where were mere analogues of intuitions of physical things.'
  - 26 Maurice Pradines, *Philosophie de la Sensation*, vol. I: *Le Problème de la sensation* (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1928); vol. II: *La Sensibilité élémentaire* (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1932).
  - 27 See Emmanuel Lévinas, *Les imprévus de l'histoire*, ed. and intro. Paul Hayat (Montpellier: Fata Morgana, 1994), p. 201.
  - 28 Levinas, *Dieu, la mort et le temps* (Paris: Grasset, 1993), p. 141.
  - 29 Ibid., p. 138. First emphasis added.
  - 30 Levinas, *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*, p. 39. Hereafter abbreviated and cited as OBBE.
  - 31 *A propos* the unsaid in language, which Heidegger sought in the Presocratics, and in the 'voice of silence' (*Läute der Stille*), Zarader writes, 'The Jewish tradition constructed an entire hermeneutic apparatus to order the relationships between the text and its commentary.' From this flowed 'a specific conception of language . . . one of the most remarkable traits of which was the *infinity* of interpretations'. For this claim to be conceivable the text had to be considered as unfolded each time a commentator brought his/her interpretation to bear on it.

'Understood as the silent heart of the discourse, this unsaid [in the text and as important as the text itself] is nothing negative. It is not what escapes the words said [au dire] but what crosses through it entirely.' See Zarader, *La Dette impensée*, pp. 105–6.

Levinas thinks that by concentrating on the silent language (of being) 'without knowing it, Heidegger would have "Judaized" the Greeks.' Levinas, *Dieu, la mort et le temps*, p. 173.

Compare the above with Levinas's uncontroversial remark that 'The Revelation is this continual process of hermeneutics, discovering new landscapes in the written or oral Word' (see 'Revelation in the Jewish Tradition', in Hand, *The Levinas Reader*, p. 199).

Of the ancient heritage of the Gospels and especially the language and conceptuality of the Pauline letters, see Zarader 'Le Problème de la transmission', in *La Dette impensée*, pp. 163–83. She writes there, 'It is remarkable that Heidegger treats the Neo-testamentary text as a univocal point of departure, which should have no *background*' (p. 174). But the biblical text as a whole constitutes the background of the New Testament, as the German theologians (cf. Bultmann) and biblicists of Heidegger's time realized. More surprising is that Heidegger would elide this ground, given 'the attention constantly devoted by him, from his early years of training, to the dimension of the *original*' (p. 174). Zarader's discussion of the heritage is richer than I could begin to show in a note.

Compare this with Levinas's point, rendered briefly, that 'The Talmud [the 'oral' Torah] affirms the . . . verbal origin of Revelation, but lays more emphasis on the voice of the person listening. It is as if the Revelation were a system of signs to be interpreted by the auditor . . . The Torah is no longer in heaven, it is given to men . . . Man is not therefore a "being" among "beings" . . . He is, at the same time, the person to whom the word is said . . . Man is the site of transcendence, even if he can be described as . . . Dasein.' See Levinas, 'Revelation in the Jewish Tradition', pp. 204ff.

32 Zarader, *La dette impensée*, p. 158. Hereafter abbreviated and cited as DI.

33 Levinas, *Dieu, la mort et le temps*, pp. 137–8.

34 See BT, Chapter V, 'Temporality and Historicality', pp. 427ff.; 374–5. Heidegger writes, 'The movement [*Bewegtheit*] of existence is not the motion [*Bewegung*] of something present-at-hand. It is definable in terms of the way Dasein stretches along. The specific movement in which Dasein *is stretched along and stretches itself along*, we call "*historizing*".' Further, the Self, or 'who' of Dasein consists of Self-constancy, which is 'grounded in a specific temporalizing of temporality' (BT, 427; 375). This is original historicity, as opposed to history as the object of a science. And this Self, unlike Levinas's *soi-même*, is inauthentically dispersed but authentically constant to self in a way that the later Levinas would not accept.

35 Levinas, 'To Begin with Heidegger', in *Dieu, la mort et le temps*, p. 139.

36 Ibid., p. 138.

37 This is what is at stake when he says his reflection 'seeks to think God as a beyond of Being' (in a non-spatial sense, see *Dieu, la mort et le temps*, p. 183).

# HEGEL AND LEVINAS

## The possibility of forgiveness and reconciliation

*Robert Bernasconi*

Source: *Archivio di Filosofia* 54 (1986): 325–46.

The severity of Levinas's treatment of Hegel is notorious. Only Heidegger is dealt with more harshly. According to Levinas, Hegel is one of the leading representatives of the philosophical tradition which has effaced the ethical face of the Other by insisting on the priority of ontology. In an interpretation which takes its inspiration from Rosenzweig, Hegel is cast as a spokesman of « the ancient privilege of unity », the all embracing totality.<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless it would be quite wrong to present Levinas as in constant opposition to Hegel. Wrong and self-defeating. In the first place, if Levinas did no more than oppose Hegel, he would remain confined within the Hegelian orbit and his attempt to break with the tradition would be frustrated. This argument-form is frequently employed by Derrida in his examination of the oppositional dualisms which dominate the history of Western ontology and various versions of it are to be found in Derrida's early essay on Levinas, *Violence and Metaphysics*. Although Derrida is sympathetic to Levinas's attempt to make « the very difficult passage beyond the debate — which is also a complicity — between Hegelianism and classical Hegelianism », <sup>2</sup> he acknowledges that « as soon as he *speaks* against Hegel, Levinas can only confirm Hegel, has confirmed him already » (ED 176/120). Secondly, Derrida in *Violence and Metaphysics* suggests that the *Phenomenology of Spirit* describes a transcendental symmetry « whose trace appears nowhere in Levinas's descriptions » and yet which is the condition of possibility for the empirical asymmetry described by Levinas (ED 188/128). This would provide a measure of Levinas's failure to go beyond Hegel.

Levinas is not simply opposed to Hegel. Levinas's debt to Hegel, to the *Phenomenology of Spirit* particularly, has often been observed and Levinas himself readily acknowledges the high esteem in which he holds that book.<sup>3</sup> But Levinas's most striking acknowledgement of Hegel is to be found in an

essay published in 1978, *La pensée de l'être et la question de l'autre*, where, while constructing a list of the occasions on which the relation of transcendence has shown itself in the philosophies of knowledge, he included alongside his favourite examples of Descartes' idea of the infinite and Plato's « Good beyond being », the sobriety of reason in Heidegger and « the quest for recognition by the *other man* in Hegel ».<sup>4</sup> Hegel is thus included on this occasion on Levinas's list of the moments when the history of ontology has been — to borrow a word Levinas uses elsewhere — *interrupted* by a saying of transcendence, a list which in some ways recalls Heidegger's lists of the words of Being or Derrida's lists of « supplementary » words. But this does not mean that Levinas is now reconciled with Hegel. In an interview held in 1981, Levinas described Hegelian dialectics as « a radical denial of the rupture between the ontological and the ethical ».<sup>5</sup> If weight is to be given to this remark then it would mean that we must look for the rupture precisely at the point where Hegelian dialectics attempts to contain the ethical within the bounds of the ontological.

It is important for what follows to offer a preliminary clarification of this notion of the *interruption* of an ontological text.<sup>6</sup> To say, for example, that transcendence shows itself in Descartes' Third Meditation, is not in any way to underwrite the proof of the existence of God to be found there, nor the ontological presuppositions on which Descartes relies, such as the distinction between formal and objective reality. But nor is it to disregard all textual detail, which would be to reduce the recognition of such words to an arbitrary exercise. The transcendence which Levinas names with the word *infinite* is situated in the ambiguity of the relative order of the *cogito* and God, the finite and the infinite, an ambiguity to which Descartes himself was not entirely blind. Only by this ambiguity is the separation of the I from God secured, so allowing for the transcendence exhibited in the final paragraph of the Third Meditation where Descartes shows that this God is not only the God of ontotheology, but also a God before whom one can kneel. This same structure or « formal design » also shows itself in the determination of the I as both « atheist and created » (TI 60/88), an apparently contradictory determination which nevertheless may be situated in Descartes' text in the ambiguity of the *res cogitans* as both *fundamentum absolutum* and *substantia finita*. In the same way, Levinas can rupture the ontological or totalitarian discourse of Hegel only in so far as he resists simply opposing an ethical discourse to it, and finds rather the point at which transcendence interrupts it. To say this is not to diminish the significance of ethical opposition — in philosophy or elsewhere — when it arises from the impossibility of remaining silent, as can be most clearly illustrated from the case when one realizes that something has to be said, even though it is unlikely to have effect. But opposition frequently comes to the painful realisation that it seems to serve what it opposes, as if it were in complicity with what it seeks to negate. Such complicity needs to be interrupted, in a manner which

recalls, but is not the same as, the deconstruction of a conceptual opposition. The interruption of a text arises at the point where (to put it in words which Levinas transformed in the course of his reading of Descartes) the *infinite* is reflected in the *finite*. Or one could say, again with words whose meaning has been transformed by Levinas, the metaphysical in the ontological, the saying in the said, the face of the Other. The interruption arises as a *surplus* over what dominates, but the surplus is awoken within what is interrupted rather than brought from outside. It appears as an ambiguity which cannot be controlled.

This is not simply a response to a conceptual necessity, which is how deconstruction presents itself. To show the point at which a text interrupts itself is to fulfill the ethical task of announcing the ethical. And that this should be well done is a question of « justice ». I do not say *only* a question of justice, for Levinas in pointing to the difference between the ethical relation which is always in favour of the Other, and the egalitarian relation of justice certainly does not wish to diminish the latter. Its justification lies in the ethical relation which must always be the arbiter and judge of justice according to a standard which justice can never satisfy. But this is already enough to show that Levinas' treatment of Hegel cannot be allowed to stay as it stands. *Cannot* both as a matter of doing *justice* to Hegel, but also as the *ethical* demand to find the point at which transcendence interrupts Hegel's discourse, a necessary task — to the point of being an obligation — for Levinas, but one which he has barely begun to fulfill when he supplies no more than the phrase « the quest for recognition by the *other man* in Hegel ».

I have indicated that Derrida in *Violence and Metaphysics* seems to criticize Levinas from a Hegelian point of view on the issue of whether I can recognize myself as Other for the Other. Levinas, according to Derrida, fails to acknowledge the transcendental symmetry of the two empirical asymmetries. For Derrida « the other, for me, is an ego which I know to be in relation to me as to an other » (ED 185/126). He continues: « Where have these movements been better described than in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*? ». Even if to cite Hegel against Levinas in this way might be thought to be too swift a dismissal of the radical challenge that Levinas poses both to Hegel and to the ways of thinking that Hegel's name is here being used to sanction, there is no doubting the force of the question. Equally, there is no doubting that so long as Derrida's objection is not met, Levinas's claim to challenge Hegel is weakened.

Derrida, drawing on the analyses of Husserl's *Fifth Cartesian Meditation*, insists that the asymmetry of radical alterity to which Levinas accorded priority was itself only made possible by a symmetry in which I recognize the other as an *alter ego*. « The other is absolutely other only if he is an ego, that is, in a certain way, if he is the same as I » (ED 187/127). Hence Derrida calls it a *transcendental* symmetry in the sense of the « conditions of possibility ». It does not simply underlie that empirical asymmetry by which the Other is



Other to me, but also refers to the empirical asymmetry by which I am Other to the Other. « Where have these movements been better described than in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*? The movement of transcendence toward the other, as invoked by Levinas, would have no meaning if it did not bear within it, as one of its essential meanings, that in my ipseity I know myself to be other for the other. Without this, "I" (in general: egoity), unable to be the other's other, would never be the victim of violence » (ED 185/126). Derrida goes on to suggest that the trace of this strange symmetry whereby « I am also essentially the other's other, and that I know I am, . . . appears nowhere in Levinas's descriptions » (ED 188/128). This is not strictly speaking true.<sup>7</sup> Furthermore, Levinas writes that « the alleged scandal of alterity presupposes the tranquil identity of the same » (TI 178/203), thus suggesting a double origin, similar to that which he recognised in Descartes' treatment of the problem of the relative order of the *cogito* and God.

The phrase « the quest for recognition by the *other man* in Hegel » points in the first instance towards Hegel's chapter « The Dependence and Independence of Self-Consciousness: Lordship and Bondage ». Like so many of the other French thinkers and writers of his generation, Levinas in the 1930's would on occasion attend Kojève's lectures on the *Phenomenology of Spirit* and was taught to find the key to that book in the master-slave dialectic. Certainly it is this discussion which Levinas specifies when he refers to the Other in Hegel: the Other is my enemy.<sup>8</sup> I do not want to appear to prejudge the question of a Levinasian investigation of this particular chapter of the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, which is outside the scope of the present essay. Let it suffice for the moment to recall that in *Totality and Infinity* Levinas contrasted the « idealism of a *consciousness* of struggle » with the ethical resistance of the Other (TI 173f/199). This is not a terminological difference. In the latter the fear of death is inverted to become the fear of committing murder (TI 222/244).

In Levinas the ethical relation is characterised by asymmetry, where the Other appears to me as from a height, making a demand on me which I can never fulfill. I go out to the Other, but there is no return to self and the asymmetry in favour of the Other is maintained. I am challenged by the Other. Hegel's discussion of the struggle unto death and of the relation of master and slave is concerned with the quest for recognition as it takes place in « the double movement of the two self-consciousnesses ».<sup>9</sup> Recognition is conceived of as reciprocal: « each is for the other what the other is for it » (PG 111/144/113). But through the life and death struggle, the play of forces as documented in the chapter on Understanding comes to be repeated in consciousness. The discussion of master and slave is characterised in terms of the distinction between recognized and recognizing, which corresponds to that between solicited and soliciting. The recognition is not reciprocal, but one-sided (PG 113/147/116). As is well-known, the dependent consciousness chooses servitude to the master rather than death. The quest for recognition



by the other human being gives rise to the unequal relation of the slave in the face of his master and in the face of his absolute master, death. But the master finds no satisfaction in this relation just as his *desire* is also thwarted. Attention shifts therefore to the slave, in whom the negativity introduced by his relation to death, makes possible *work*. Hegel takes up this development as it occurs in the history of spirit in the discussion of Stoicism, Skepticism and Unhappy Consciousness.

This is not the place to pursue that discussion, but Derrida in *Violence and Metaphysics* already briefly posed the question of the relation of Levinas' notion of transcendence to Hegel's account. He did so in terms of the notion of desire and concluded that Levinas' concept of desire was as anti-Hegelian as it could possibly be (ED 137/92). « Hegelian desire would be only need, in Levinas' sense », he says, referring to the latter's distinction between need and desire, where the latter is a need which can never be satisfied. Not that it is quite so simple. Derrida voices the suspicion that « things would appear more complicated, if one followed closely the movement of certitude and the truth of desire in the *Phenomenology of Spirit* ». Nevertheless the fundamental difference remains that Hegel's discourse is governed by « the horizons of a reconciliatory return to self and absolute knowledge », whereas in Levinas there is no return. If Levinas' position might at times invite being confused with what Hegel calls « unhappy consciousness », Derrida quite properly denies the identification. « For desire is not unhappy. It is opening and freedom. Further, a desired infinite may govern desire itself, but it can never appease desire by its presence » (ED 138/93).

# I

In the chapter « The Ethical Relation and Time » Levinas engages in a discussion which seems particularly relevant to the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, and particularly the section on the Independence and Dependence of Self-Consciousness. With a single exception, which I shall return to later, Hegel is not mentioned by name in this place, a reserve which at once seems appropriate given the impossibility of confronting the System piecemeal, but which at the same raises the question — Heidegger's question — of whether thinking today can take up a theme in the absence of an *explicit recollection* of its treatment in previous thinking, without surrendering itself to the danger of *unwittingly* (unknowingly and thoughtlessly) repeating what has already been thought. And to be shown not to have repeated *exactly* what has been thought before is no evidence that one has avoided the danger. The absence of Hegel's name is anyway not decisive, as I would maintain that it is impossible to read this discussion (except superficially) without reference to Hegel. The question is only whether this reference to Hegel remains external to a genuine encounter with Hegel, or whether it could be said that the necessities which determine Hegel's texts have been addressed.

Levinas is concerned with the social relation as a surplus (TI 196/221) and the chapter begins with an examination of war and commerce. Neither war nor commerce can be characterized as face to face relations, for the former is waged against a mass and the latter aims at the anonymous market (TI 204/228–229). But these two forms of pluralism both presuppose the face and there is, furthermore, a sense in which war is waged against « a being that appears in a face » (TI 198/222), whereby violence would be a refusal of totality rather than a refusal of relationship (TI 198/223). Violence is thus to be understood as a « living contradiction », a relation between terms that are « partially independent and partially in relation ». Levinas seeks to address this contradiction not with reference to the further *abstract* contradiction of a « finite freedom » which would anyway mean no more than an indetermination of being within the totality, but in terms of *postponement*. This postponement is preeminently (*contra* Heidegger's *Sein zum Tode*) the « not yet » of the retreat before death, the fact that there is still time. In violence this postponement is situated in the skill with which I parry the blows the other directs at me, the way my skill takes into account the skill of the other.<sup>10</sup> The skill is inscribed in the body as « a simultaneity of absence and presence ». It is here in the separation produced by this postponement that Levinas situates transcendence. And because the face of the Other presents a moral resistance, whereby I come to fear killing the Other more than my own death (TI 224/246), it is asymmetrical — « a transcendence of the Other with regard to me which, being infinite, does not have the same signification as my transcendence with regard to him » (TI 200/225).

The corresponding symmetrical relation is that of commerce. In commerce, separation is lost, but it can nevertheless return, in the first instance in the distance which opens up between the product and its producer. The I absents itself from this work by retreating into an interiority secured by anonymity. And yet it can only *postpone* handing itself over the determination of the Other through its work, for the I exposes itself or « surrenders itself » to the Other in its product. Furthermore, through its works the I comes to play a part in history. History is « hostile to the will » (TI 204/228) in the sense of corporeity, which is again understood as a simultaneity of presence and absence.

I have repeated these descriptions of violence and commerce not least because they exhibit Levinas's procedure of showing the infinite in the finite. This procedure can also serve as a model for showing transcendence in Hegel's text. And it is at this point in his discussion of violence and commerce that Levinas introduces the themes which inevitably evoke thoughts of Hegel. Levinas toys with the idea that where courage is developed to the point when it is willing to accept death, the will has attained a position of total independence. Such a will would seem to have withdrawn itself to the point where the Other cannot touch it and we would have to say that the relation to the Other had been completely effaced in the production of

an isolated subject. And yet what if its death was precisely the goal willed by the Other? Would it not thereby in the very « struggle unto death » unwittingly give satisfaction to the Other, in spite of every attempt to refuse consent? These ideas do not seem to address the master-slave dialectic at the level of detail, not even as a thought experiment on the role of recognition in the life and death struggle, except in so far as they are a reversal of Hegel's discussion. The issue of recognition takes the form not of my recognition *by* the Other, but my recognition *of* the Other. What if the Other wills my death? Then it would appear that I satisfy the Other in my very effort to deny the Other. Which is only to say that the designs of the Other are impossible to calculate, so confirming not only the unpredictability of the Other, but also the impossibility of escaping the Other. « The Other cannot be contained by me: he is unthinkable — he is infinite and recognized as such. This recognition is not produced anew as a thought, but is produced as morality » (TI 107/230). What could perhaps be said is that Levinas with this discussion attempts to show first that the « struggle unto death » — like violence generally — cannot be contained in the totality. Unless the struggle is construed as the « play of antagonistic forces », that is from the perspective of a totality or a whole, as is the case with Hegel. The « antagonism of forces or of concepts presupposes a subjective perspective and a pluralism of wills » (TI 197/222). That is to say, violence is integrated into the totality by being given a meaning other than that which it has for the subjectivity who faces the Other. And this, secondly, draws attention to the unwarranted presupposition that recognition by the Other can be sought without the Other having already been recognized as Other. Such observations no doubt reflect an important tendency in Levinas's thinking, but they remain at the level of opposition to Hegel and in the absence of a more specific interpretation of Hegel, their force is far from clear.

The key to Levinas' discussion is at this point still to come. Betrayed in so far as it is exposed to violence, to seduction and threat (TI 208/229), the will retreats into its own inviolability and posits itself as « subject to a jurisdiction which scrutinizes its intentions » and from which comes « pardon, the power to efface, to absolve, to undo history » (TI 207/231). The inward will is faithful to itself, a religious will, a will which seeks its fidelity by repentance and prayer. And it waits, as does the will exposed to betrayal, on an exterior will. In its case, a will which passes judgement. Not that the will exposed to betrayal and the interior will are two distinct wills operative at separate moments. They are simultaneous so that the will *in its mortality* is understood by Levinas as a « duality of betrayal and fidelity » (TI 208/232).

In the final part of the chapter on « The Ethical Relation and Time » this duality of the will is taken up as two senses of judgement. There is the verdict of history which alienates the will, regarding only its work. This judgement « kills the will as will ». And there is the judgement demanded by apology in order to obtain justice and be confirmed against death. This

duality of a quest and a denial of justice gives rise to what Levinas calls a « dialectical situation ». It is then that Hegel is explicitly referred to, specifically his « great meditation on freedom » which permits us to understand that « the good will by itself is not a true freedom as long as it does not dispose of the means to realize itself » (TI 218/241). Freedom is not to be found outside political institutions, not even by accepting one's death. And yet, Levinas subsequently maintains, this freedom, which corresponds to the judgement of history, is simply another form of tyranny, « that of works alienated », submission to the universal and the impersonal. It excludes the apology which speaks always directly in the first person and which does not lend itself to this external view. « The possibility of seeing itself from the outside does not harbour truth either, if I pay for it the price of my own depersonalization » (TI 220/243). This apology is always invisible, an offence to the judgement of history, which strives in its turn to make the apology visible, so that the apology is offended as well as offending. We might say that the meaning of the dialectical situation resides here in the relation of the two judgements.<sup>11</sup> And yet has not Levinas construed them as an antagonism of forces, albeit in the very effort to avoid conceiving them as such? Not only that. Has he not himself conceded that virtually every attempt to make visible the invisible realm of the apology destroys it? « Virtually » because Levinas also insists that « the invisible must manifest itself if history is to lose its right to the last word » (TI 221/243). A necessity which seems to be, and perhaps can only be, argued for ethically rather than logically. So if Levinas at times offends against the apology this is only the philosophical equivalent of the infinite order of responsibility where « the more I am just the more I am guilty », « a responsibility increasing in the measure that it is assumed » (TI 222/244). The more one attempts to avoid the « traps » the more one falls into them and the more serious it is, but this does not render the exercise worthless.

The section « The Ethical Relation and Time » includes a discussion of fecundity where « the truth of the invisible is ontologically produced » (TI 221/243), as it is also in forgiveness. This is where the section ends, with infinite time as the condition for both goodness and the transcendence of the face. I shall take up Levinas's discussion of the infinity of time at the end of this essay after I have examined Hegel's discussion of forgiveness. But before doing so I can say a further word about Levinas's evocation of Hegel in this discussion. Levinas repeats the account of apology and of existence in history in the introductory remarks at the beginning of the section « Beyond the Face ». Here Levinas refers to « impersonal reason », a phrase which would seem to have been introduced to suggest Hegel, although his name is again absent, as if Levinas himself recognized that his discussion could only be sustained by maintaining it at the level of impersonal caricature. The summary of the earlier discussion issues in an objection. This (Hegelian) impersonal reason reduces me to my role in history so that

I remain unrecognized (*méconnu*). « This renunciation of one's partiality as an individual is imposed as though by a tyranny. Moreover, if the partiality of the individual, understood as the very principle of his individuation, is a principle of incoherence, by what magic would the simple addition of incoherencies produce a coherent impersonal discourse, and not the disordered din of the crowd? » (TI 230–231/252–253). My individuality, Levinas continues, is quite different from this animal partiality, but is rather the singularity of apology as personal discourse. Apology is « the original phenomenon of reason » (TI 229–230/252), but, the implication seems to be, it could not be recognized by this impersonal reason which reduces the apology to silence. On this account my recognition by the other is impossible, when that other is the Hegelian system or takes place within it.

## II

The specific section of Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit* that I would like to introduce into the discussion is the passage to reciprocal recognition as it takes place in the last six paragraphs of the chapter entitled « Spirit ». These pages have rarely received the attention that Hegel himself gives them in the chapter on Absolute Knowing, almost as if the commentators have been exhausted by all that has gone before and have lacked the energy to cope with the intricacies they find there. So far as I am aware, Levinas does not refer to them, except in so far as they occasion some dismissive remarks about the « beautiful soul » (AQ 61/47) — and also, of course, in so far as « the quest for recognition by the other human being » applies equally well to this discussion as it does to the master-slave dialectic. The close of the sixth chapter of the *Phenomenology of Spirit* is structurally important, because reciprocal recognition is attained there.

I shall offer a reading of these paragraphs which close the section entitled « Conscience, The Beautiful Soul, Evil and Forgiveness ». It will be at best only a preliminary reading and not because I am failing to take up the way the section as a whole is to be read as an extended commentary on the heirs of Kantian morality, although this is not to be dismissed. Fichte, Jacobi, Schlegel, Novalis, Schiller, Goethe, Hölderlin and no doubt others have all been mentioned by various commentators. This is the immediate context of Hegel's remarks. But more important, more difficult and impossible to accomplish in isolation is to read the book as *we* (who can provisionally be identified as those who are not reading the *Phenomenology* for the first time) are to read it. *We* would witness here, as elsewhere in the book, the passage of consciousness to its element — « pure self-recognition in absolute otherness » (PG 22/24/14). Hegel uses the word « certainty » to describe the relation of consciousness to itself in self-knowledge. But for Hegel certainty is insufficient, if consciousness in its certainty does not also relate to what is other than consciousness. The word « truth » is reserved for that relation.

The « truth » of a specific form of consciousness is that standard which is for the most part conventionally thought of as residing outside the consciousness and which it adopts as its standard. Self-recognition in absolute otherness is attained only when consciousness' certainty and its truth coincide. I shall return to this question later, but only in an effort to hint at what is lacking from this reading.

Hegel has already sought to show that consciousness does not find certainty (*Gewissheit*) simply in following its conscience (*Gewissen*). Hegel is concerned here, it seems, with establishing the conditions under which we can recognise an action as being performed in accordance with the universal. Of course, because what we have here is a phenomenology, Hegel is not trying to provide a theoretical answer to that question; rather the issue is the historical one of the raising of the individual to the universal. As the chapter comes to a close, Hegel's focus has passed from the acting consciousness to the judging consciousness, that is to the onlooker who simply observes from outside. Acting consciousness has already attempted to overcome the ambiguity which threatens all action by accompanying the action with words. Only the agent's own testimony that he or she is following his or her duty ensures that the deed is recognised as the performance of duty. The individual must specifically place the action under the universal, must affirm his or her conviction that the deed is in accord with conscience, if the action is to be relieved from the ambiguity. Doing one's duty does not reside in action alone, but must be accompanied by a declaration that that is what one is doing. But because this testimony is one that no outsider can provide, it is equally the case that the individual's claim to be acting in accordance with conscience cannot be challenged so that it is enough for each consciousness simply to give its assurance that it is following its conscience. Each person's intention is right simply because it is their own and duty has become an empty word. By this means everything is permitted. The individual has not been raised to the universal, but universality has effectively been reduced to the individuality of the agent.

Or so it seems to the onlooker. What the onlooker sees is a consciousness which maintains that it is acting in accordance with the universal, but which could equally well be going its own particular way. Hence the agent is open to the charge of hypocrisy: the agent uses the language of duty, which is the language of universality, but he or she is acting only in accordance with his or her own conviction. What would be the need for an appeal to conscience to legitimate the action if it was acting in accordance with what is universally acceptable (PG 357/465/402)? At this point Hegel diverts our attention towards the judging consciousness itself. It seeks to keep its hands clean by refusing to act. It is a form of what in the literature of the day had come to be known as « the beautiful soul », who « to preserve the purity of its heart flees from contact with actuality » (PG 354/463/400). Hegel's point is that it is unsuccessful in maintaining its purity for it is guilty of hypocrisy and

partiality in much the same way as it is supposed acting consciousness to be. It is no more in possession of a universally acknowledged standard than the agent was. Its response to a situation where it seems to it that everything is permitted is to condemn everything. « No action can escape such judgement », says Hegel and he shows how the contribution of judging consciousness was to introduce a merely formal analysis of the agent (PG 358/467/404). But analysis reduces all motives for action to selfishness, because having separated the action from the intention there is nothing left to which the intentions may be referred except the individual self itself. This recalls Hegel's account in the Preface of how formalistic or argumentative thinking refuses to be involved in the content to be thought (PG 42/49/36). Just as critical reason was there criticised for being entirely negative, destructive and without proposals, judging consciousness for all the superior insight into duty that it likes to think of itself as displaying in its talk, nevertheless itself fails to act. Hegel pours scorn on the absurdity of a talk about action which never leads to action.

In both cases duty has been reduced to a talk which is at odds with actuality. The actuality of acting consciousness has been reduced to the selfish expression of its goal and the actuality of judging consciousness is its failure to act altogether. Whether or not one understands the forgoing discussion as describing the tension within the individual,<sup>12</sup> it now unambiguously takes the concrete form of two consciousnesses confronting one another. We must now put aside abstractions and recognise it as a concrete situation, as Hegel himself indicates by calling it a « scene » (PG 359/469/405). Nor is the scene to be observed from the outside. What we have is a meeting in which an acting consciousness encounters a judging consciousness. The observer has lost his or her third party status and has been introduced into the encounter as a participant.<sup>13</sup>

How does Hegel accomplish within three of four pages the passage from this apparent blind alley of two forms of consciousness confronting each other to their reconciliation? The first step is that acting consciousness comes to see itself in judging consciousness. This recognition of itself in the other is not by negation, by defining oneself with reference to what is opposed to one. There is an identity, an equality or likeness (*Gleichheit*) which Hegel has already established with reference to their hypocrisy, the way their words are distinct from their actuality. Having recognised itself in judging consciousness, acting consciousness makes its confession.

What is the nature of this confession? It is in the first person. It takes the form « I », but it is not an expression of particularity as, for example, when an individual in shame admits guilt before someone and submit him- or herself to their judgement. The recognition of likeness means that acting consciousness does not see judging consciousness in that role. Nor is this confession an avowal in the face of hostility. In both those kinds of confession the one who confesses isolates himself before another or others either

as someone less than them or else as someone in possession of a truth which they lack. It is the recognition of identity which is the subject of confession. Confession is the renunciation of particularity, rather than its expression. In consequence when Hegel says that the inner comes out into the *Dasein* of speech, we would be ill-advised to understand the word *Dasein* in such a way that speech appears as something external in contrast to what is inner. One person recognises a similarity with another and announces it in the form of a statement about him- or her-self, expecting a similar response, an acknowledgement of that similarity. If I make a confession to someone, that person may suppose, when I start out, that I am about to say something about myself as a particular individual. But it can happen that the hearer recognises himself in what is said, finds himself in the predicate, loses his bearings, can no longer pigeon-hole me and so announces to me his recognition of our similarity in a similar confession. Acting consciousness seems to expect something like this to happen when it makes its confession. But judging consciousness cannot accept that they are equal and maintains the previous contrast between them. Being too busy trying to remain consistent or identical with him- or her-self, judging consciousness is unable to respond and dismisses the confession in silence.

This silence is crucial. Acting consciousness is denied the identity of spirit by the silence of judging consciousness. In consequence its attempt to renounce its particularity fails in the face of judging consciousness's hard heartedness. Judging consciousness's failure to let the shedding of particularity which has taken place in the words of the confession be validated as a true shedding contradicts the fact that its own interiority has its existence in speech in the form of judgements. Its failure to respond brings about a disparity or inequality between the two consciousnesses. But even though acting consciousness has found itself denied, it is judging consciousness which through this contradiction and its failure to attain actuality is said to be « disordered to the point of madness, wastes itself in yearning and pines away in consumption » (PG 360/470/407). This is because the denial of the Other in silence was a denial of itself.

Hegel has led us to another apparent impasse. What differentiated acting consciousness from judging consciousness were the two characteristics, its particularity and its action. The acting consciousness, which has in its confession renounced its particularity, presents itself as universal and turns away from its external actuality in action. But judging consciousness lacked the power to divest itself of its being-for-self. Its particularity is only surrendered through its suffering, the madness brought about by the contradiction in which it finds itself following its refusal to speak, its failure to respond to the confession of the Other in spite of the fact that its existence lies in speech. Similarly, although acting consciousness already in its confession denied its particularity, its individuality remained in its « intention » to elicit a similar confession (PG 360/470/407). Both that consciousness which



confessed without response and the beautiful soul now find themselves devoid of spirit. In consequence both find the residue of one-sidedness still belonging to them broken and are ready to discover the power of spirit. It is on this basis that Hegel finds in their inequality (*Ungleichheit*) the necessity of their equalization (*Ausgleichung*) (PG 360/470/406–407).

At this point Hegel introduces the word « forgiveness ». The word appears only once in the account of reciprocal reconciliation, even though it is repeated in the title of the section and in the retrospective treatment of these pages in the chapters on Religion (PG 420/547/471) and on Absolute Knowing (PG 424/552/482). What is striking is that there is no separate act of forgiveness. Nor is the forgiveness itself mutual, although it is a prelude to the mutual recognition of the two parties. The consciousness which had been judging consciousness renounces itself, its divisive thinking and its hard-heartedness. Playing on the connection between the two words *Verzeihung* and *Verzicht* Hegel writes: « The forgiveness which it extends to the other is the renunciation of itself » (PG 361/471/407). This consciousness sees itself in the consciousness which it had previously denied. And it might seem that it sees itself in the latter — that which had been acting consciousness — *because* the latter has now not only denied its particularity, but in being rejected lost that particularity and because the former too has suffered and thereby surrendered its particularity. « The breaking of the hard heart, and the raising of it to universality, is the same movement which was expressed in the consciousness that made confession of itself » (PG 360/470/407). In that case its act of forgiveness would seem to be no more than the withdrawal of its harsh judgements on acting consciousness. But that would be in striking contrast to Hegel's remarks on the power of spirit. Spirit is « master over every deed and actuality, and can cast them off, and make them as if they had never happened » (PG 360/469/406). And again: « the deed is not imperishable; it is taken back by spirit into itself, and the aspect of individuality present in it, whether as intention or as an existent negativity and limitation, straightaway vanishes » (PG 360–361/470/407).

It is remarkable that with Hegel at such pains to establish that the movement whereby each consciousness loses its particularity and discovers itself as universal is the same for the two consciousness, he nevertheless restricted the act of forgiveness to the beautiful soul.<sup>14</sup> This is confirmed by Hegel's recapitulation in the chapter on Religion. He recalls there « the movement of self-certain spirit which forgives evil and in so doing abandons its own simple unitary nature and rigid unchangeableness, or the movement in which what is in an absolute antithesis recognizes itself as the same as its opposite, this recognition bursting forth as the *yes* between these extremes » (PG 420/547/477). Hegel recalls two movements which he joins together with the word *or*. In what sense are they alternatives? Only one consciousness is explicitly described as forgiving, whereas it is clear that both consciousnesses *mutually* recognize each other. « The word of reconciliation

is the existent spirit which beholds the pure knowing of itself as universal essence in its opposite, in the pure knowledge of itself qua absolutely self-contained individuality — a reciprocal recognition which is absolute spirit » (PG 361/471/408). The word of reconciliation is the « reconciling yes, in which the two “Is” let go their antithetical existence, is the existence of the “I” which has expanded into a duality, and therein remains identical with itself . . . , it is God manifested in the midst of those who know themselves as pure knowing » (PG 362/471/409). In spite of the remarkable passages which announce the power of spirit over deed and actuality, passages which can be understood as referring to forgiveness, the role of forgiveness is less than clear. The forgiveness shown it by the beautiful soul is for acting consciousness the recognition by the other human being which it was initially denied. Nevertheless the recognition is a self-recognition in the other. The otherness of the other, in Levinas’ sense, is not recognized.

The « yes » of reconciliation rather than forgiveness is Hegel’s central focus and, reading Hegel and Levinas together, it recalls Levinas’s observation than one can discern in pardon « a surplus of happiness, the strange happiness of reconciliation, the *felix culpa*, given in an everyday experience which no longer astonishes us » (TI 259/283). In the context of Hegel reconciliation means that spirit is not found as such in the individual mind expressing itself. Nor is it a community in which all are lost in each other, and thus lost to each other. Spirit is rather the community where each recognizes the other in opposition and each identifies him- or her-self with the other in this opposition. At the beginning of the the section « Beyond the Face » Levinas writes: « The renunciation of one’s partiality as an individual is imposed as though by a tyranny » (TI 230/252–253). Would this apply to Hegel’s account of renunciation at this point in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*? Does Hegel attempt to « smother the protestation of the private individual, the apology of the separated Being » (TI 171/197)? At the moment it hardly seems so. But the task of this essay is not to compare Levinas and Hegel, still less to compare what Levinas writes about Hegel with some other account. The question is whether the relation of transcendence in some way shows itself in Hegel. And yet if this is not to be a merely piecemeal and therefore arbitrary enterprise, the issues must be referred to the chapter on Absolute Knowing, and indeed in principle — though I shall not do so on this occasion — they ought to be raised in the context of the System as a whole.<sup>15</sup>

The fundamental place of the discussion of reconciliation and forgiveness at the end of the chapter on Spirit is clearly established in the chapter on Absolute Knowing. Hegel explains there that the discussion at the end of the chapter on Spirit provides in the shape of form, what in the chapter on Religion appears as content. The culmination of the chapter on Religion is also reconciliation. In « Revealed Religion » God’s knowledge of himself and man’s knowledge of God are reconciled through the incarnation, crucifixion,

resurrection and founding of the community of the faithful. But the reconciliation is postponed to a beyond, a distant future (PG 420–421/548/478). It is still regarded as alien and the union of man and God is denied by the religious consciousness. The thought of this reconciliation is the content for a community, a universal self-consciousness, but one that does not yet know itself as such. Absolute knowing is spirit that knows itself as spirit (PG 427/556/485) and Hegel presents « absolute knowing » as the drawing of the content of religion, which as religion is still in the form of *Vorstellung*, into the form of absolute spirit.

The passage to absolute knowing is also elucidated in terms of time. « Spirit necessarily appears in time and it appears in time just so long as it has not *grasped* its concept, i.e. has not annulled (*tilgt*) time » (PG 429/558/487). By contrast, « Science does not appear in time and in actuality until spirit has attained to this consciousness about itself » (PG 428/557/486). The *Phenomenology of Spirit* appears initially as a story in time, a slow-moving succession of Spirits, until it is recognized as science. The second reading is that given by the *we*. I shall reserve the question of these readings already inscribed in the *Phenomenology of Spirit* for another occasion. The question now is whether Spirit's power to shed deeds in forgiveness should not be understood with reference to this annulling of time. Is not the casting off of deeds accomplished by the annulling of time? I do not know that any of Hegel's commentators have asked this question. Hegel writes that the deed « is taken back by spirit into itself, and the aspect of individuality present in it, whether as intention or as an existent negativity and limitation, straight-away vanishes ». Were this sentence to be understood as an observation of the « we », it would be possible to recognize already there the passage from « history » in the form of contingency to « history » in terms of the concept (*begriffne Geschichte*) (PG 434/564/493). On this reading, the reading of the « we », the judgement of history would indeed silence the voice of the apology. The ethics of forgiveness would be subordinated to ontology at the point where the quest for recognition by the other human being becomes the « equality » of a symmetrical relation.<sup>16</sup> It is even possible that the discussion of the power of spirit over deeds and actuality is included in the *Phenomenology of Spirit* more for the sake of the annulment of time than for the discussion of forgiveness, which initially occasions it.

The initial reading of the *scene* at the end of the chapter on Spirit is not the same as that of the *we*. There is a question as to whether the former can be contained by the latter. Is not the scene a surplus which is both irreducible to system and unsilenceable? But in the present context, there is another, more pressing, question. Is not forgiveness surplus both to description and to totality or system? In the description of the scene, the forgiveness which the consciousness-which-had-once-been-judging-consciousness showed to what-had-once-been-acting-consciousness was not described. It was referred to renunciation, a renunciation which was in turn referred to (and seemingly

explained as) self-recognition in the other. The asymmetrical relation of forgiveness, like the asymmetrical relation of apology, appeared in Hegel's account, but quickly disappeared into the reciprocal relation of mutual recognition. The recognition was mutual, but not the forgiveness. One consciousness heard the confession of the other and responded after a period of silence with forgiveness. But did not that delay itself need to be forgiven, however necessary it might seem to *us*, the observers? *We* can retrospectively see how it was only by means of that silence that the mutual recognition was supposed to be able to take place. *We* can see that it was *necessary* both that the confession be rebuffed in order to purify acting consciousness of its individuality and also that the beautiful soul must be disordered to the point of madness on account of the contradiction that it has suffered by refusing to reply. But however much it has suffered *should* not the beautiful soul also apologise and seek forgiveness? I hesitate to pass that judgement, judging and the refusing to judge at the same time, because — as Hegel shows and I shall return to it in my conclusion — all such judgements are likely to recoil on themselves. Nevertheless it is striking that it is in this context, the context of the suffering of the beautiful soul, that Hegel makes his comment that « the wounds of the spirit heal and leave no scars behind ». It is possible to read that remark as a response to « the breaking of the hard heart ». But if that is what it was, would it not be supremely arrogant and presumptuous? Would it not exhibit the very « inhumanity » of which Levinas accuses « impersonal reason » (TI 230/252)?

### III

As « works », the texts of Hegel and Levinas are reduced to what Levinas calls « the order of commerce ». Although authors are alienated from their saying in this realm of the said, justice must still be done to what is written and it was with this injunction that I began. I am well aware that the texts have to be read still more carefully. But if the juxtaposition of certain pages from the *Phenomenology of Spirit* with Levinas's discussion of pardon has not been for the sake of some external comparison which attempts to use one thinker to confirm another without regard for their essential differences, it must also pass beyond questions of justice. The issue is rather the *saying* of Hegel, the ethical interruption of his *said*. And this notion of interruption can be more closely bound to forgiveness.

The discussion of pardon in the section on « The Ethical Relation and Time » is taken up by Levinas again at the end of the section « Beyond the Face ». It is given two senses. Forgiveness with reference to moral fault reverses time or rather « conserves the past pardoned in the purified being » (TI 259/283). But this is only a preliminary sense, for pardon is « constitutive of time itself ». « Time is the non-definitiveness of the definitive, an ever recommencing alterity of the accomplished — the "ever" of this

recommencement . . . Time is discontinuous; one instant does not come out of another without interruption, by an ecstasy » (TI 260–261/283–284).<sup>17</sup> And « time triumphs over old age and fate by its discontinuity » in fecundity and youth (TI 258/282). Nor does Levinas forget Hegel when he introduces the discussion of fecundity. That the child is « me a stranger to myself » (TI 245/267) recalls to Levinas similar words by the young Hegel.<sup>18</sup> At this point Levinas comes closest to the structure of self-recognition in otherness, although in Levinas discontinuity is more prominent than Hegel could allow.

That Levinas here gives to time the name of *forgiveness* might suggest that he has simply reversed Hegel, in whose *Phenomenology of Spirit* « forgiveness » can be read as another name for the annulment of time. But if forgiveness operates within the *Phenomenology* as an *interruption*, as the saying of transcendence, then it is contained within the text of ontology as that which cannot be contained, either as position or negation. In which case *forgiveness* can come to serve not simply as the name of a moment in Hegel's discussion, but as Hegel's *saying* in so far as that saying cannot be reduced to the *said*. Just as *pardon* is in Levinas an early name for *interruption*, so in Hegel the word *forgiveness* names the time of interruption itself. It is thus a saying which says its own saying.

I offered two readings of the end of Hegel's chapter on Spirit. They were not offered as alternatives. The duality of the two readings — the first reading of natural consciousness and the re-reading on the part of the *we* — is the most elementary fact about the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, although it is a fact which is also not without its difficulties. The first reading followed Hegel's description of the encounter of the two consciousnesses culminating in their reciprocal recognition. A second reading, of which only a sketch was offered, was based on Hegel's retrospective review of the *Phenomenology of Spirit* as it takes place in the final chapter. If I did not make a choice between the two readings, if I did not automatically prefer the second on the grounds that the first is only a « ladder » to it, this was in the conviction that there is no call to choose. However, the issue here is not the ambiguities specific to the « double reading » of the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, so much as the way forgiveness functions in this text. The *interruption* of Hegel's text is not to be identified with either of the two readings, nor with the relation between them. It lies rather in forgiveness itself as surplus to both of them, a surplus *within* both readings. Yet forgiveness has its own duality. Levinas recognizes a duality of, on the one hand, the will exposed to violence and betrayal and, on the other, the inward will, the will faithful to itself and awaiting pardon. This duality corresponds to that between the judgement of history and the judgement of God, which is both a judging and a forgiving. The « terms » of the duality do not belong to the same order, the latter interrupts the former, but each nevertheless requires the other. The judgement passed by Levinas on Hegel is a form of *opposition*. To say that it

reduces itself to the level of that which it condemns is not to underestimate its importance, even its necessity. But in whatever name such a judgement is passed, however praiseworthy its motives, however genuine its credentials, it belongs to the order of history. Forgiveness interrupts this order. But forgiveness does not simply come from outside. Nor is it blind. It is not equivalent to forgetting. There is only forgiveness where there is *recollection* and *condemnation*. And yet the act of forgiveness as an asymmetrical relation in favour of the other is not the product of the virtue of the one who forgives, but lies in the other who is to be forgiven. It is recognition of the Other, recognition of the saying in the said. Such recognition is an interruption not only of history and continuity generally, but also of its own condemnation and recollection. Forgiveness does not ignore history, but frees us from some of its burdens.<sup>19</sup>

### Notes

- 1 *Totalité et Infini*, The Hague, Martinus Nijhoff, 1961, p. 75; trans. A. Lingis, Pittsburgh, Duquesne University, 1969, p. 102. Henceforth TI.
- 2 *L'écriture et la différence*, Paris, Seuil, 1967, p. 164; trans. A. Bass *Writing and Difference*, London, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1978, p. 111. Henceforth ED. The argument which Derrida uses has its roots in Hegel, which is in its own way further testimony of the difficulty of going beyond Hegel. See note 4.
- 3 *Ethique et Infini*, Paris, Librairie Arthème Fayard et Radio France, 1982, p. 34; trans. R. Cohen *Ethics and Infinity*, Pittsburgh, Duquesne University Press, 1985, p. 37.
- 4 *De Dieu qui vient à l'idée*, Paris, Vrin, 1982, p. 185. Henceforth DVI. In the same place Levinas himself acknowledged as « Hegel's great discovery » that « Negation, while pretending to refuse being, is still in its opposition, position on a ground on which it itself relies. It bears the dust of the being which it rejects » (DVI 177).
- 5 RICHARD KEARNEY, *Dialogues with Contemporary Continental Thinkers*, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 1984, p. 66.
- 6 See, for example, *Autrement qu'être ou au-delà de l'essence*, The Hague, Martinus Nijhoff, 1974, p. 216; trans. A. Lingis *Otherwise than being or beyond essence*, The Hague, Martinus Nijhoff, 1981, p. 170. Henceforth AQ.
- 7 Levinas acknowledges the sense in which « I myself can feel myself to be the other of the other », but refuses in the same context to recognize the « theoretical idea of another myself » as being adequate to the infinite (TI 56/84). The former Levinas explicates as language so that « To present oneself as other is to signify or to have a meaning » (TI 37/66). As for the latter, my relation to the other as an *alter ego*, Levinas consistently opposes to the idea of a humanity united by resemblance, the conception of fraternity (TI 189/214). Later Levinas explicates this fraternity explicitly as « an incessant correction of the asymmetry of proximity » by which I revert into a member of society so that there is justice also for me. This takes place « thanks to God », that is to say through *illeity* (AQ 201–202/158–159). With these passages Derrida could perhaps have made much of the fact that Levinas held the reverse position to that which he recommended: the symmetrical relation is understood by Levinas to be empirical and the relation of transcendence to be « transcendental », although this word can only be applied provisionally because it is an ontological determination.

- 8 *La trace de l'autre. En découvrant l'existence avec Husserl et Heidegger*, Paris, Vrin, 1974, p. 193; trans. Daniel J. Hoy *On the Trail of the Other*, *Philosophy Today* X, 1, 1966, p. 39.
- 9 *Phänomenologie des Geistes*. Gesammelte Werke 9, hrsg. W. Bonsiepen and R. Heede, Hamburg, Felix Meiner, 1980, p. 110; hrsg. J. Hoffmeister, Hamburg, Felix Meiner, 1952, p. 143; trans. A. V. Miller *Phenomenology of Spirit*, Oxford, Oxford University, 1977, p. 112. Henceforth PG with the references always in this order.
- 10 Compare the Greek concept of *metis*. See M. DETIENNE and P. VERNANT, *Cunning Intelligence in Greek Culture and Society*, Brighton, Harvester, 1975, p. 18.
- 11 It should be noted that in the 1940's in *De l'existence à l'existant* and *Le temps et l'autre* « dialectic » does not mean Hegel to Levinas, but rather he uses it often to describe his own activity and to distinguish it from phenomenology. See especially *Le temps et l'autre*, Paris, Presses Universitaires de France, 1983, p. 67. In TI however it is usually introduced to allow Levinas to distance himself from Hegel. See particularly TI 178/203.
- 12 AS JEAN HYPOLITE, *Genesis and Structure of Hegel's Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. S. Cherniak and J. Hekman, Evanston, Illinois, Northwestern University Press, 1974, p. 518.
- 13 It is worth bearing in mind that Hegel's *we* (having already passed through these stages and now observing them — able to observe them only because *we* have already passed through them — so that *we* are never strictly speaking *external* observers) must also learn not to be merely observers.
- 14 A manuscript known under the title *The Spirit of Christianity and its Fate*, dating from about seven years before the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, characterizes beauty of soul as a heart open to reconciliation. Only a heart « disentangled from everything objective » is in a position to renounce everything and thus to forgive others. Readiness to forgive the other is the condition of being forgiven oneself. Hegel also recognizes there the ambiguity of this form of consciousness, specifically that it may renounce everything in order to save its own self. In that case its supreme innocence would have given way to supreme guilt. *Theologische Jugendschriften*, ed. H. Nohl. Tübingen, 1907, p. 286; trans. T. M. Knox *Early Theological Writings*, University of Chicago Press, 1948, p. 236. Henceforth TJ. « Yet the man who seeks to save his life will lose it ». This dual character of the beautiful soul arises out of its latent quality as « being-for-self ». In the same place Hegel writes that « only like Spirits can know and understand one another » (TJ 289/239); only like Spirits can forgive one another and love the beauty in one another.
- 15 In this regard, however, it can be noticed that the discussion on which I have been focusing does not recur in the mature system except for a faint allusion in the *Philosophy of Right* at section 140.
- 16 That Hegel insists on the symmetry of the relation and that recognition takes the form of self-recognition in the other would appear to constitute irreducible differences between Hegel and Levinas. But that this symmetry and self-recognition is secured only by the *we* should surely suggest that any appeal, such as Derrida's, to these « descriptions » in the *Phenomenology of Spirit* as an attempt to impose a transcendental symmetry on Levinas must be viewed with the most extreme caution and reserve, if one is not prepared to underwrite the *we*. At the same time however it should be noted that at that point in Derrida's discussion the reference to Husserl carries more weight than that to Hegel.
- 17 The theme of pardon was already taken up by Levinas in 1947. « Reaching the other . . . is, on the ontological level, the event of the most radical rupture of the very categories of the I, for it is for me to be somewhere else than my self;

it is to be pardoned, not to be a definite existence ». *De l'existence à l'existant* Paris, Vrin, 1947, p. 144; trans. A. Lingis *Existence and Existents*, The Hague, Martinus Nijhoff, 1978, p. 85.

- 18 « Hegel in the writings of his youth was able to say the child *is* the parents » (TI 245/267). The reference is to TJ 381/308. The passage in the original manuscript was crossed out. Levinas also refers to fecundity as a « dialectical conjuncture » (TI 256/279).
- 19 I would like to express my thanks to both Mary Rawlinson of the State University of New York at Stony Brook who commented on an early draft of my interpretation of the concluding paragraphs of the sixth chapter of the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, and to Tina Chanter who advised me on what would otherwise have been the final version.



# THE ORIGINAL TRAUMATISM

## Levinas and psychoanalysis<sup>1</sup>

*Simon Critchley*

Source: S. Critchley, *Ethics-Politics-Subjectivity: Essays on Derrida, Levinas and Contemporary French Thought*, London: Verso, 1999, pp. 183–97.

Es gibt gar keine andern als moralische Erlebnisse, selbst nicht im Bereich der Sinneswahrnehmung.

Nietzsche, *Die Fröhliche Wissenschaft*

### Two hypotheses: subjectivity and ethical language

Let me begin with a first working hypothesis: the condition of possibility for the ethical relation to the other – that is, the condition of possibility for ethical transcendence, communication and beyond that justice, politics and the whole field of the third party with the specific meanings that Levinas gives to these terms – is a conception of the subject.<sup>2</sup> Thus, it is only because there is a *certain affective disposition towards alterity within the subject, as the structure or pattern of subjectivity*, that there can be an ethical relation. Levinas writes in the 1968 version of 'Substitution', that we will have more than one occasion to come back to,

It is from subjectivity understood as a self, from the ex-cidence and dispossession of contraction, whereby the Ego does not appear but immolates itself, that the relationship with the other is possible as communication and transcendence.<sup>3</sup>

Or again,

It is through the condition of being a hostage that there can be pity, compassion, pardon, and proximity in the world – even the little there is, even the simple 'after you sir'.

(p. 91)

So, to make my claim crystal clear, Levinas's account of ethics understood as the relation to the other irreducible to comprehension and therefore to ontology finds its condition of possibility in a certain conception of the subject. In Kantian terms the ethical relation to the other presupposes a rather odd transcendental deduction of the subject. In other terms, it is only because there is a disposition towards alterity within the subject – whatever the origin of this disposition might be, which, as we will see, is the question of trauma – that the subject can be claimed by the other.

Levinas tries to capture this disposition towards alterity within the subject with a series of what he calls 'termes éthiques' or even 'un langage éthique': accusation, persecution, obsession, substitution and hostage. Of course, and this is already a huge issue, this is not what one normally thinks of as an ethical language. A related second working hypothesis announces itself here: the condition of possibility for the ethical relation lies in the deployment or articulation of a certain ethical language. This is already highly curious and would merit separate attention: namely, that Levinas deploys an ethical language that attempts to express what he calls 'the paradox in which phenomenology suddenly finds itself [*le paradoxe où se trouve brusquement jetée la phénoménologie*]' (p. 92). The *paradox* here is that what this ethical language seeks to thematize is by definition unthematizable, it is a conception of the subject constituted in a relation to alterity irreducible to ontology, that is to say, irreducible to thematization or conceptuality. Levinas's work is a *phenomenology of the unphenomenologizable*, or what he calls the order of the enigma as distinct from that of the phenomenon.

Of course, the claim that Levinas is offering a phenomenology of the unphenomenologizable does not make his work unique, and one thinks both of the late Heidegger's description of his thinking in his final Zähringen seminar in 1973 as the attempt at a 'phenomenology of the inapparent' (*das Erscheinen des Unerscheinbaren*) and the important recent debates that this has given rise to in France about the alleged theological turn within French phenomenology (Janicaud, Marion, Henry), discussed in chapter 7. As Wittgenstein might have said, the ethicality of thought is revealed in its persistent attempt to run up or bump up against the limits of language. The ethical might well be nonsense within the bounds of sense demarcated by the *Tractatus*, but it is important or serious nonsense, and it is arguably the animating intention of both Wittgenstein's earlier and later work.

Thus, and here I bring together the two hypotheses, the disposition towards alterity within the subject that is the condition of possibility for the ethical relation to the other is expressed linguistically or articulated philosophically by recourse to an ethical language that has a paradoxical relation to that which it is attempting to thematize. As so often in the later Levinas, it is a question of trying to say that which cannot be said, or proposing that which cannot be propositionally stated, of enunciating that which cannot be enunciated, and what has to be said, stated or enunciated is subjectivity itself.

In this chapter, I want to discuss just one term in this ethical language, namely *trauma* or 'traumatisme'. Levinas tries to thematize the subject that is, according to me, the condition of possibility for the ethical relation with the notion of trauma. He thinks the subject as trauma – ethics is a traumatology.<sup>4</sup> I would like to interpret this word 'trauma', and its associated ethical language and conception of the subject, in *economic* rather than strictly philosophical terms; that is to say, in relation to the metapsychology of the second Freudian topography first elaborated in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*. For Freud, it is the evidence of traumatic neurosis, clinically evidenced in war neurosis, that necessitates the introduction of the repetition compulsion. Now, it is the drive-like or pulsional character of repetition that overrides the pleasure principle and suggests a deeper instinctual function than the earlier distinction of the ego and sexual drives. Thus, for Freud, there is a direct link between the analysis of trauma and the introduction of the speculative hypothesis of the death drive, and it is this link that I would like to exploit as I read Levinas.

What is the justification for this economic understanding of Levinas? Well, there is absolutely none really, and certainly nothing in Levinas's *intentions* to justify this link. However, as is so often the case with Levinas, his *text* is in a most illuminating conflict with his intentions. It is only by reading *against* Levinas's denials and resistances that we might get some insight into what is going on in his text: its latencies, its possibilities, its radicalities. Although Levinas includes such terms as obsession, persecution and trauma in his ethical language – not to mention his invocation in one place of 'psychosis' (p. 102) and of the ethical subject as 'une conscience devenue folle' – he does this by specifically refusing and even ridiculing the categories of psychoanalysis. For example – and there are other examples – Levinas begins a paper given at a conference with the title 'La psychanalyse est-elle une histoire juive?' with the confession, 'My embarrassment comes from the fact that I am absolutely outside the area of psychoanalytic research.'<sup>5</sup> For Levinas, psychoanalysis is simply part and parcel of the antihumanism of the human sciences, which, in criticizing the sovereignty of 'Man' risks losing sight of the holiness of the human (*la sainteté de l'humain*).<sup>6</sup>

### From ego to self: Levinas's refusal of psychoanalysis and the paradox of the unconscious

Before giving a more careful reading of Levinas and trying to make good on my initial hypotheses on the subject and ethical language, I would like to illustrate the tension between Levinas's intention and his text in relation to psychoanalysis with an example.

In the original version of 'Substitution', Levinas asks: 'Does consciousness exhaust the notion of subjectivity?' (p. 82). That is to say, is the ethical

subject a conscious subject? The answer is a resounding 'no'. The whole Levinasian analysis of the subject proceeds from a rigorous distinction between subject and consciousness or between the *le Soi* (the self) and *le Moi* (the ego). Levinas's work, and this is something far too little recognized in much of the rather too edifying or fetishizing secondary literature on Levinas, proceeds from the rigorous distinction between consciousness and subjectivity, where 'c'est une question de ramener le moi à soi', of leading back the ego of ontology to its meta-ontological subjectivity. For Levinas, it is the reduction of subjectivity to consciousness and the order of representation that defines and dominates modern philosophy. It is necessary to reduce this reduction – such is the sense of Husserlian intentional analysis for Levinas, where what counts is the overflowing of objectivistic, naïve thought by a forgotten experience from which it lives; that is to say, the pre-conscious experience of the subject interlocuted by the other.<sup>7</sup> Levinas breaks the thread that ties the subject to the order of consciousness, knowledge, representation and presence. Levinas gives the name 'psychism' to this subject that constitutes itself and maintains itself in a relation to that which escapes representation and presence: the subject of the trace, of a past that has never been present, the immemorial, the anarchic, etc. In brief, consciousness is the belated, *nachträglich* effect of the subject as trace, the dissimulating effect of a subjective affect. *Consciousness is the effect of an affect*, and this affect is trauma.

Of course, the Freudian resonances in what I have already said will already be apparent, but any possible rapprochement between the Levinasian analysis of the subject and Freudian psychoanalysis is specifically and violently refused by Levinas in the text we are commenting upon. He writes, once again in the 1968 version of 'Substitution':

But to speak of the hither side of consciousness is not to turn toward the unconscious. The unconscious in its clandestinity, rehearses the game played out in consciousness, namely the search for meaning and truth as the search for the self. While this opening onto the self is certainly occluded and repressed, psychoanalysis still manages to break through and restore self-consciousness. It follows that our study will not be following the way of the unconscious . . .

(p. 83)

It should hopefully go without saying that this is a pretty lamentable understanding of Freud. But, provisionally, one can note two things:

1. That if Levinas appears to believe that psychoanalysis seeks to restore self-consciousness, then it is interesting to note that he says exactly the opposite – and rightly – in an important text from 1954, 'Le moi et la totalité', where it is claimed that psychoanalysis, 'throws a

fundamental suspicion on the most unimpeachable evidence of self-consciousness'.<sup>8</sup>

2. Although Freud arguably always harboured the therapeutic ambition of restoring self-consciousness, an ambition expressed in the famous formula, 'Wo Es war soll Ich werden', one should note that there are other ways of returning to the meaning of Freud, and other ways of reading that formula, notably that of Lacan, where he interprets the Freudian *Es* as the subject of the unconscious and where the imperative driving psychoanalysis is to arrive at the place of the subject beyond the imaginary *méconnaissance* of the conscious ego.<sup>9</sup>

However, the tension that interests me has not yet been established. Returning to the above quote on Levinas's refusal of the psychoanalytic concept of the unconscious, what is fascinating here and typical of the relation between Levinas's intentions and his text, is that Levinas's statement that he will not be following the way of the unconscious is flatly contradicted in a later footnote in the 1968 'Substitution' text, just after a couple of key references to trauma:

Persecution leads back the ego to the self, to the absolute accusative where the Ego is accused of a fault which it neither willed nor committed, and which disturbs its freedom. Persecution is a traumatism – violence par excellence, without warning, without apriori, without the possibility of apology, without logos. Persecution leads back to a resignation without consent and as a result traverses a night of the unconscious. *This is the meaning of the unconscious, the night where the ego comes back to the self under the traumatism of persecution* [nuit où se fait le retournement de moi à soi sous le traumatisme de la persécution] – a passivity more passive than all passivity, on the hither side of identity, becoming the responsibility of substitution.

(p. 183, my emphasis)<sup>10</sup>

Here is the paradox (or is it a simple contradiction?): in one breath, Levinas writes that he will not follow the psychoanalytic way of the unconscious because it seeks to restore self-consciousness. But, in the next breath, Levinas gives us the meaning of the unconscious conceived as the night where the ego comes back to the self under the traumatism of persecution. So, the concept of the unconscious, the *pierre angulaire* of psychoanalysis, is strategically denied and then reintroduced with a *méconnaissance* that is perhaps too easily understood within a Freudian logic of *Verneinung*.

My question to Levinas has already been announced but can now be more sharply formulated: *what does it mean to think the meaning of the unconscious in terms of the traumatism of persecution? What does it mean to think the subject – the subject of the unconscious – as trauma?*

### The Levinasian subject

In order to approach this question, I would like to return to my first hypothesis and try to show the central place of the subject in Levinas through a brief overview of the main argument of *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*.<sup>11</sup> As I discussed in detail in chapter 3, Levinas begins his exposition by describing the movement from Husserlian intentional consciousness to a level of pre-conscious, pre-reflective sensing or sentience, a movement enacted in the title of the second chapter of the book, 'De l'intentionnalité au sentir'. In a gesture that remains methodologically faithful to Heidegger's undermining of the theoretical comportment to the world (*Vorhandenheit*) and the subject-object distinction that supports epistemology and (on Levinas's early reading in his doctoral thesis) Husserlian phenomenology, the movement from intentionality to sensing, or in the language of *Totality and Infinity*, from representation to enjoyment, shows how intentional consciousness is conditioned by life (p. 56). But, against Heideggerian *Sorge*, life for Levinas is not a *blosses Leben*, it is sentience, enjoyment and nourishment. It is *jouissance* and *joie de vivre*. Life is love of life and love of what life lives from: the sensible, material world. Levinas's work is a reduction of the conscious intentional ego to the pre-conscious sentient subject of *jouissance*. Now, it is precisely this sentient subject of *jouissance* that is capable of being called into question by the other. The ethical relation, and this is important, takes place at the level of pre-reflective sensibility and not at the level of reflective consciousness. The ethical subject is a sentient subject not a conscious ego.

So, for Levinas, *the subject is subject*, and the form that this subjection assumes is that of sensibility or sentience. Sensibility is what Levinas often refers to as 'the way' of my subjection, vulnerability and passivity towards the other. The entire argumentative thrust of the exposition in *Otherwise than Being* is show how subjectivity is founded in *sensibility* (chapter 2) and to describe sensibility as a *proximity* to the other (chapter 3), a proximity whose basis is found in *substitution* (chapter 4), which is the core concept of *Otherwise than Being*. So, if the centre of Levinas's thinking is his conception of the subject, then the central discussion of the subject takes place in the 'Substitution' chapter of *Otherwise than Being*, that Levinas describes as 'la pièce centrale' (p. ix) or 'le germe du present ouvrage' (p. 125). However – a final philological qualification – the 'Substitution' chapter was originally presented as the second of two lectures given in Brussels in November 1967; the first was an early draft of 'Language and Proximity', which was published separately in the second edition of *En découvrant l'existence avec Husserl et Heidegger*, elements of which were redrafted in the third chapter of *Otherwise than Being*. The original published version of 'Substitution' appeared in the *Revue Philosophique de Louvain* in October 1968. Although much is missing from the first version of this text, particularly

Levinas's qualified endorsement of Kant's ethics, I would say that it is philosophically more concentrated and easier to follow than the 1974 version. So, if the concept of the subject is the key to Levinas's thinking, then the original version of the 'Substitution' chapter might well provide a key to this key.

### Subject as trauma

I would now like to try and analyse this traumatic logic of substitution – a self-lacerating, even masochistic logic – where I am responsible for the persecution that I undergo, and where I am even responsible for my persecutor. No one can substitute themselves for me, but I am ready to substitute myself for the other, and even die in their place.

In the original version of 'Substitution', the first mention of trauma comes after a citation from *Lamentations*, '*Tendre la joue à celui qui frappe et être rassasié de honte*' ('To offer the cheek to the one who strikes him and to be filled with shame' p. 90). Thus, the subject is the one who suffers at the hands of the other and who is responsible for the suffering that he did not will. I am responsible for the persecution I undergo, for the outrage done to me. It is this situation of the subject being 'absolutely responsible for the persecution I undergo' (p. 90) that Levinas describes with the phrase 'le traumatisme originel'. Thus, the subject is constituted as a subject of persecution, outrage, suffering or whatever, through an original traumatism towards which I am utterly passive. This passage, and the pages from which the quote is taken, is dramatically expanded in the 1974 version of 'Substitution', and Levinas adds:

A passivity of which the active source is not thematizable. Passivity of traumatism, but of the traumatism that prevents its own representation, the deafening trauma, breaking the thread of consciousness which should have welcomed it in its present: the passivity of persecution. But a passivity that only merits the epithet of complete or absolute if the persecuted is liable to respond to the persecutor.

(p. 111)

This 'traumatisme assourdissant', this deafening traumatism (which incidentally recalls the opening lines of Baudelaire's 'A une passante', 'La rue assourdissante', where it refers to the traumatic noisiness of nineteenth-century Paris) is that towards which I relate in a passivity that exceeds representation, i.e. that exceeds the intentional act of consciousness, that cannot be experienced as an object, the noematic correlate of a *noesis*. Trauma is a 'non-intentional affectivity', it tears into my subjectivity like an explosion, like a bomb that detonates without warning, like a bullet that hits me in the dark, fired from an unseen gun and by an unknown assailant.<sup>12</sup>

Now, it is this absolute passivity towards that which exceeds representation, a non-relating relation of inadequate responsibility towards alterity experienced as persecuting hatred, that is then described in the 1974 version – very suggestively for my concerns – as *transference*, ‘*Ce transfert . . . est la subjectivité même*’ (‘This transference . . . is subjectivity itself’, p. 111). Thus, *subjectivity would seem to be constituted for Levinas in a transferential relation to an original trauma*. In other terms, the subject is constituted – without its knowledge, prior to cognition and recognition – in a relation that exceeds representation, intentionality, symmetry, correspondence, coincidence, equality and reciprocity, that is to say, to any form of ontology, whether phenomenological or dialectical. The ethical relation might be described as the attempt to imagine a non-dialectical concept of transference, where the other is opaque, reflecting nothing of itself back to the subject. In Lacanian terms, that I will take up in detail in the following chapter, it would seem that the subject is articulated through a relation to the real, through the non-intentional affect of *jouissance*, where the original traumatism of the other is the Thing, *das Ding*. It is only by virtue of such a mechanism of trauma that one might speak of ethics.<sup>13</sup>

The second major reference to trauma in the 1968 version is a few pages further on and has already been partially cited and discussed. Reinforcing his claim about the subject as substitution, Levinas writes, rather awkwardly:

The condition – or non-condition – of the Self [*Soi*] is not originally an auto-affectation presupposing the Ego [*Moi*] – but precisely an affection by the Other – an anarchic traumatism this side of auto-affectation and auto-identification. But a traumatism of responsibility and not causality.  
(pp. 93–4)

Thus, the subject is constituted in a hetero-affectation that divides the self and refuses all identification at the level of the ego. Such is the work of trauma, *die Trauma-Arbeit*, the event of an inassumable past, a lost time that can never be, *contra* Proust, *retrouvé*, a non-intentional affectivity that takes place as a subjection to the other, a subject subjected to the point of persecution.

It is at this point, and in order to elaborate critically this concept of the subject as trauma, that I would like to make a short detour into Freud.

### Trauma in Freud

What is trauma? Trauma is etymologically defined in Larousse as *blesure*, as wounding, as ‘*violence produite par un agent extérieur agissant mécaniquement*’. As such, trauma has both a physiological as well as psychological meaning, denoting a violence effected by an external agency, which can be a blow to the head, or a broken arm, as much as the emotional shock



of bereavement. For Freud, trauma is an economic concept and refers to a massive cathexis of external stimulus that breaches the protective shield of the perceptual-consciousness system or ego. Trauma is shock and complete surprise. In terms of the Freudian model of the psychical apparatus governed by Fechner's constancy principle, trauma is an excess of excitation that disrupts psychical equilibrium and is consequently experienced as unpleasurable. In Lacanian terms, trauma is the subjective affect of contact with the real. It is the opening up of the ego to an exteriority that shatters its economic unity. Recalling Levinas's allusion to a 'deafening traumatism', trauma is like a bomb going off, producing a sudden and violent pain. With the breach in the ego caused by such a trauma, the pleasure principle is momentarily put out of action. However, the ego responds to the cathexis of stimulus caused by the trauma with an equivalent anti-cathexis, by a defensive strategy that seeks to transform the free or mobile energy of the trauma into bound, quiescent energy. If the defensive strategy succeeds, then the economy of the ego is restored and the pleasure principle resumes its reign.

Whence arises the riddle of traumatic neurosis. Traumatic neurosis is the disorder that arises after the experience of a trauma: sexual abuse, a car accident, torture, shell shock, terrorist bombing, Holocaust survival. In clinical terms, the neurosis can manifest itself in a number of ways: from chronic memory loss, depression and aggressive or self-destructive behaviour to paroxysms, severe anxiety attacks, states of profound agitation (compulsive twitching) or sheer mental confusion (shell shock).<sup>14</sup> What characterizes the symptoms of traumatic neurosis, like the other neuroses, is both their compulsive character – and compulsion is one of the main traits of the unconscious (*com-pulsare* = the constraint of a *pulsion*, a drive) – and their repetitiveness. In traumatic neurosis the original scene of the trauma, its deafening shock, is compulsively and unconsciously repeated in nightmares, insomnia or obsessive (another Levinasian term in 'Substitution') reflection. The subject endlessly attempts to relive that contact with the real that was the origin of the trauma, to repeat that painful *jouissance*. That is to say, the traumatized subject *wants* to suffer, to relive the *jouissance* of the real, to pick repeatedly at the scab that irritates it.

Freud writes in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*:

Das Studium des Traumes dürfen wir als den zuverlässigsten Weg zur Erforschung der seelischen Tiefenvorgänge betrachten. Nun zeigt das Traumleben der traumatisierten Neurose den Charakter, das es den Kranken immer wieder in die Situation seines Unfalles zurückführt, aus der er mit neuem Schrecken erwacht. Darüber verwundert man sich viel zu wenig.

[The study of dreams may be considered the most trustworthy method of investigating deep mental processes. Now dreams occurring in

traumatic neurosis have the characteristic of repeatedly bringing the patient back into the situation of his accident, a situation from which he wakes up in another fright. This astonishes people far too little.]<sup>15</sup>

Thus, the dream of the traumatic neurotic repeats the origin of the trauma. Freud's huge theoretical problem here is the following: if this is true – that is, if there is a repetition compulsion at work in traumatic neurosis that repeats the origin of trauma – then how can this fact be consistent with the central thesis of his magnum opus, the *Traumdeutung*, where it is claimed that all dreams are wish-fulfilments and are governed by the pleasure principle? *It cannot*, and it is with the evidence of the repetition compulsion exhibited in traumatic neurosis and fate neurosis that the whole sublime architecture of the *Traumdeutung* and the first Freudian topography begins to fall apart. The move from the first to the second topography is that from *Traumdeutung* to *Trauma-Deutung*.

The dreams of traumatic neurotics are not, then, in obedience to the pleasure principle, but to the repetition compulsion. And not only is this true of traumatic neurosis, it is also true of dreams that bring back the traumas of childhood, hence the importance of the Fort/Da game in Freud, where the infant attempts to sublimate the absence of the mother with a game that repeats the trauma of her departure. Thus, the original function of dreams is not the dreamwork (*die Traumarbeit*) that permits the sleeper to sleep on, it is rather the interruption of sleep, *die Trauma-Arbeit*, that is beyond the pleasure principle. Insomnia is the truth of sleep. Freud writes:

Aber die obenerwähnten Träume der Unfallsneurotiker lassen sich nicht mehr unter den Gesichtspunkt der Wunscherfüllung bringen, und ebensowenig die in den Psychoanalysen vorkommenden Träume, die uns die Erinnerung der psychischen Traumen der Kindheit wiederbringen. Sie gehorchen vielmehr dem Wiederholungszwang, der in der Analyse allerdings durch den von der 'Suggestion' geförderten Wunsch, das Vergessene und Verdrängte heraufzubeschwören, unterstützt wird.

[But it is impossible to classify as wish-fulfilments the dreams we have been discussing which occur in traumatic neuroses, or the dreams during psychoanalyses which bring to memory the psychical traumas of childhood. They arise, rather, in obedience to the compulsion to repeat, though it is true that in analysis that compulsion is supported by the wish (which is encouraged by 'suggestion') to conjure up what has been forgotten and repressed.]<sup>16</sup>

In chapter 5 of *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Freud tries to establish the instinctual or 'drive-like' (*Triebhaft*) character of the repetition compulsion and, vice versa, to establish the repetitive character of the drives. Freud's

claim is that the representatives or manifestations of the repetition compulsion exhibit a highly *Triebhaft* character, being out of the control of the ego and giving the appearance of a 'daemonic' force at work – such is fate neurosis. Once Freud has established the *Triebhaft* character of the repetition compulsion, he is then in a position to introduce his central speculative hypothesis, namely that a drive is an inner urge or pressure in organic life to restore an earlier condition. That is the say, a drive is the expression of a *Trägheit*, an inertia, sluggishness, or laziness in organic life. It is this speculation about the fundamentally conservative nature of drives – wrapped up in a pseudo-biological phylogenetic myth of origin – that entails the extreme (and extremely Schopenhauerian) conclusion of *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*: namely that 'Das Ziel alles Lebens ist der Tod' ('the aim of all life is death').<sup>17</sup> Thus, death would be the object that would satisfy the aim of the drives.

### Levinas after Freud: the structure of ethical experience

After this little detour, and by way of conclusion, I want to use the above Freudian insights to throw some light on what seems to be happening in Levinas. As I hope to have established, the subject is the key concept in Levinas's work. The subject's affective disposition towards alterity is the condition of possibility for the ethical relation to the other. Ethics does not take place at the level of consciousness or reflection, rather, it takes place at the level of sensibility or pre-conscious sentience. The Levinasian ethical subject is a sentient self (*un soi sentant*) before being a thinking ego (*un moi pensant*). The bond with the other is affective.

We have already seen the tension in Levinas's work where – on the one hand – he writes that his analysis of the subject is not going to follow the way of the unconscious because psychoanalysis seeks to restore self-consciousness, but – on the other hand – Levinas gives us the meaning of the unconscious as 'the night where the ego comes back to itself in the traumatism of persecution'. That is to say, Levinas seeks to think the subject at the level of the unconscious in relation to an original traumatism. The subject is constituted through a non-dialectical transference towards an originary traumatism. This is a seemingly strange claim to make, yet my wager is that if it does not go through then the entire Levinasian project is dead in the water.

How does Levinasian ethical subjectivity look from the perspective of the second Freudian topography? In the following way, perhaps: under the effect of the traumatism of persecution, the deafening shock or the violence of trauma, the subject becomes an internally divided or split self, an interiority that is radically non-self-coincidental, a gaping wound that will not heal, a subject lacerated by contact with an original traumatism that produces a scarred interiority inaccessible to consciousness and reflection, a subject that *wants* to repeat compulsively the origin of the trauma, a subject that becomes what Levinas calls a recurrence of the self without identification, a

recurrence of trauma that is open to death, or – better – open to the passive movement of dying itself (*le mourir même*), dying as the first opening towards alterity, the impossibility of possibility as the very possibility of the ethical subject.<sup>18</sup>

The Levinasian subject is a traumatized self, a subject that is constituted through a self-relation that is experienced as a lack, where the self is experienced as the inassumable source of what is lacking from the ego – a subject of melancholia, then. But, this is a *good thing*. It is only because the subject is unconsciously constituted through the trauma of contact with the real that we might have the audacity to speak of goodness, transcendence, compassion, etc.; and moreover to speak of these terms in relation to the topology of desire and not simply in terms of some pious, reactionary and ultimately nihilistic wish-fulfilment. Without trauma, there would be no ethics in Levinas's particular sense of the word.

In this connection, one might generalize this structure and go so far as to say (although in a provisional manner) that without a relation to trauma, or at least without a relation to that which claims, calls, commands, summons, interrupts or troubles the subject (whether the good beyond being in Plato, God in Paul and Augustine, the fact of reason or respect for the moral law in Kant, *das Ding* in Freud, the call of conscience in Heidegger, 'the jews' in Lyotard), there would be no ethics, neither an ethics of phenomenology, nor an ethics of psychoanalysis. Without a relation to that which summons and challenges the subject, a summons that is experienced as a relation to a Good in a way that exceeds the pleasure principle and any promise of happiness (any *eudaimonism*), there would be no ethics. And without such a relation to ethical experience – an experience that is strictly inassumable and impossible, but which yet heteronomously defines the autonomy of the ethical subject – one could not imagine a politics that would refuse the category of totality. The passage to justice in Levinas – to the third party, the community and politics – passes through or across the theoretical and historical experience of trauma. No democracy without the death drive. Now, there's a thought.

## Notes

- 1 First published as 'Le traumatisme originel – Levinas avec la psychanalyse', *Rue Descartes, Actes du Colloque 'Hommage à Levinas'*, Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1997, pp. 167–74. An English version appears in Richard Kearney and Mark Dooley (eds), *Questioning Ethics*, London and New York: Routledge, 1998, pp. 230–42.
- 2 For an exhaustive and exhausting account of the subject in Levinas, see Gérard Bailhache, *Le sujet chez Emmanuel Levinas*, Paris: PUF, 1994.
- 3 'Substitution', transl. P. Atterton, G. Noctor and S. Critchley in A. Peperzak, S. Critchley and R. Bernasconi, eds, *Emmanuel Levinas. Basic Philosophical Writings*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996, p. 92. Subsequent page references to this book are given in the body of text.

- 4 In this regard, see Elisabeth Weber, *Verfolgung und Trauma*, Vienna: Passagen Verlag, 1990; and Michel Haar, 'L'obsession de l'autre. L'éthique comme traumatisme', *Emmanuel Levinas*, Paris: L'Herne, 1991, pp. 444–53.
- 5 'Quelques réflexions talmudiques sur le rêve', *La psychanalyse est-elle une histoire juive?* Paris: Seuil, 1981, p. 114.
- 6 On the importance of the notion of *la sainteté* in Levinas, see above chapters 1 and 2; for Levinas's relation to the anti-humanist and post-structuralist critique of the subject, see chapter 3.
- 7 Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, transl. A. Lingis, Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969, p. 28.

- 8 Ce n'est pas la parole seulement que démolissent ainsi la psychanalyse et l'histoire. Elles aboutissent en réalité à la destruction du *je* s'identifiant du dedans. La réflexion du *cogito* ne peut plus surgir pour assurer la certitude de ce que je suis et à peine pour assurer la certitude de mon existence même. Cette existence tributaire de la reconnaissance par autrui, sans laquelle, insignifiante, elle se saisit comme réalité sans réalité, devient purement phénoménale. La psychanalyse jette une suspicion foncière sur le témoignage le plus irrécusable de la conscience de soi . . . Le *cogito* perd ainsi sa valeur de fondement. On ne peut plus reconstruire la réalité à partir d'éléments qui, indépendants de tout point de vue et indéformables par la conscience, permettent une connaissance philosophique.

'Le moi et la totalité', in *Entre nous. Essais sur le penser-à-l'autre*, Paris: Grasset, 1991, pp. 36–7; see also pp. 44–5.

[It is not only speech that psychoanalysis and history demolish in this way. In reality they lead to the destruction of the *I*, which identifies itself from within. The reflection of the *cogito* can no longer arise to ensure certainty about what I am, and can barely do so to ensure the certainty of my very existence. This existence, which is tributary of recognition by another, and insignificant without it, apprehends itself as a reality without reality; it becomes purely phenomenal. Psychoanalysis casts a basic suspicion on the most unimpeachable evidence of self-consciousness . . . The *cogito* then loses its value as a foundation. One can no longer reconstruct reality on the basis of elements which are taken to be independent of any point of view and undeformable by consciousness, and would thus make philosophical knowledge possible.]

'The Ego and Totality', in *Collected Philosophical Papers*, transl. A. Lingis, Dordrecht: Nijhoff, 1987, p. 34; see also p. 40.

- 9 Lacan, 'La chose freudienne', in *Écrits*, Paris: Seuil, 1966, pp. 416–18.
- 10 A similar line of thought is expressed in 'La ruine de la représentation', in *En découvrant l'existence avec Husserl et Heidegger*, Paris: Vrin, 1967, p. 130. Levinas writes:

Cette découverte de l'implicite qui n'est pas une simple 'déficience' ou 'chute' de l'explicite, apparaît comme monstruosité ou comme merveille dans une histoire des idées où le concept d'actualité coïncidait avec l'état de veille absolue, avec la lucidité de l'intellect. Que cette pensée se trouve tributaire d'une vie anonyme et obscure, de paysages oubliés qu'il faut restituer à l'objet même que la conscience croit pleinement tenir, voilà qui rejoint incontestablement les conceptions modernes de l'inconscient et des

profondeurs. Mais, il en résulte non pas une nouvelle psychologie seulement. Une nouvelle ontologie commence: l'être se pose non pas seulement comme corrélatif d'une pensée, mais comme fondant déjà la pensée même qui, cependant, le constitue.

[This discovery of the implicit which is not a simple 'deficiency' or 'fall' of the explicit, appears as a monstrosity or as a marvel in the history of ideas where the concept of actuality coincided with a state of absolute wakefulness, with the lucidity of the intellect. That this thinking finds itself to be tributary to an anonymous and obscure life, or forgotten landscapes that it is necessary to reconstitute to the very object that consciousness fully believes it holds to, this is exactly what brings us back to the modern conception of the unconscious and its depths. But it is not only a new psychology that results from this. A new ontology begins: being poses itself not only as the correlate of thinking, but as already founding the thinking which, however, constitutes it.]

- 11 Levinas, *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*, transl. A. Lingis, The Hague: Nijhoff, 1981. Further page references are given in the body of the text.
- 12 See Andrew Tallon, 'Nonintentional Affectivity, Affective Intentionality, and the Ethical in Levinas's Philosophy', in Adriaan Peperzak, ed., *Ethics as First Philosophy*, London and New York: Routledge 1995, pp. 107–21.
- 13 I have in mind Lacan's formula in his commentary on Sade, 'la jouissance est un mal. Freud là-dessus nous guide par le main – elle est un mal parce qu'elle comporte le mal du prochain [*Jouissance* is suffering. Freud guides us by the hand on this point – it is suffering because it involves or bears itself towards the suffering of the neighbour].' *L'éthique de la psychanalyse*, Paris: Seuil, 1986, p. 217. Also, think of Kant's remark in the *Critique of Practical Reason* that the relation of the subjective will to the moral law 'must produce a feeling which can be called pain' (transl. L. W. Beck, Indianapolis: Bobbs Merrill, 1956, p. 75). Hence, the Marquis de Sade is a true Kantian.
- 14 For an extremely rich account of trauma from a clinical point of view, see Dori Laub and Nanette C. Auerhahn, 'Knowing and Not Knowing Massive Psychic Trauma: Forms of Traumatic Memory', *International Journal of Psychoanalysis*, vol. 74, 1993, pp. 287–302.
- 15 *Psychologie des Unbewussten*, *Freud-Studienausgabe*, Band 3, Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 1975, p. 223. *On Metapsychology*, vol. 11, Penguin Freud Library, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1984, p. 282.
- 16 *Ibid.*, p. 242; transl. p. 304.
- 17 *Ibid.*, p. 248; transl. p. 311.
- 18 For a discussion of the distinction between *la mort*, death, and *le mourir*, dying, which I borrow from Blanchot, see my *Very Little . . . Almost Nothing*, London and New York: Routledge, 1997.

## DIFFICULT FRIENDSHIP

*Paul Davies*

Source: *Research in Phenomenology* 18 (1988): 149–72.

“... de moi à cet autrui qu'est un ami . . .”<sup>1</sup>

The extraordinary *intrigue* that Maurice Blanchot weaves into the “margins of the books of Emmanuel Levinas”<sup>2</sup> will elsewhere give us cause to question some of the ways in which those books might be read.<sup>3</sup> Most noticeably it will introduce into Levinas’ meditations on language and alterity, into his thought of the first person accusative as the very origin of language (“*me voici*”), the notions of the “fragmentary” and the “neuter.” In this paper we are concerned with one of the perhaps less noticeable difficulties attendant upon that introduction, that conjoining or point of *contact*, a difficulty we approach under the heading or the topic of friendship (*l'amitié*).

In *Difficile liberté* and often in his interviews, Levinas makes things clear: “Friendship with Maurice Blanchot . . .,”<sup>4</sup> friendship since the 1920s; an encounter, 60 years ago, to which Blanchot also refers in a piece he contributed to a volume of texts “for” Levinas, a piece entitled “Our Clandestine Companion.”<sup>5</sup> “Friendship” would be it seems, as it so often is, one of the easiest things to say when talking about Blanchot and Levinas. And yet, in Blanchot’s work, it is one of the hardest words to read. This is particularly so as that work comes more and more to comment on Levinas’. Even in the text for Levinas, where everything should surely be at its simplest, where there must be especial room for such an acknowledgment, the word ‘friendship’ rings strangely, as though it were something that could not be simply said, or that could not simply be said. We shall return to “Our Clandestine Companion” in the final section. For the moment however, consider this difficult construction from *Le Pas au-delà*: “Friendship for the demand (*exigence*) of writing which excludes all friendship.”<sup>6</sup> And this difficult passage from the “Discours sur la patience” and *L’Ecriture du désastre*:

to the proximity of the most distant, to the pressure of what is lightest, to the contact of that which never arrives, it is by friendship that I can respond, a friendship without distribution [*partage*] and without reciprocity, friendship for that which has passed without leaving any traces, the response of passivity to the non-presence of the unknown [*l'inconnu*].<sup>7</sup>

The "most distant," the "lightest," "that which never [yet] arrives," the "unknown" (to which, we might add the "stranger"): each of these *names* is caught up in the complex vocabulary Blanchot construes under the heading of the "neuter" . . .

There are at least two ways in which to complicate Levinas' conviction at the close of *Totality and Infinity* that he has "broken with the philosophy of the Neuter: with the Heideggerian being of the existent (*l'être de l'étant*) whose impersonal neutrality the critical work of Blanchot has so much contributed to bring out."<sup>8</sup> Let us summarize them.

1) The first would be to read Blanchot alongside Heidegger as indeed Levinas claims to have done in his first readings of the "later Heidegger." Here, we would be looking, not so much at what the former explicitly says about the latter and less at what these remarks have in common with Levinas' remarks on Heidegger, but more at the ways in which their *separate* encounters with the (art) *work* and the poem lead them into a constant proximity, the one to the other. Where Blanchot and Heidegger would seem to have everything in common—without thereby saying the same—is in the thought that at a certain moment in its history, a moment that cannot be simply dated, recalled or retold, philosophy attends to something irreducible in the object it has for so long contained and diagnosed, an irreducibility that cannot be subsumed under another category be it even the category of the irreducible as such, which is to say the category of category. In other words, that philosophy at this moment responds to something in the work that calls it away from and refuses to return it to its transcendental projects. To read thoughtfully and as if for the first time the "*Holy*," the "*perhaps*," the "*I would prefer not to*," and all the other words and phrases that lurk at the very center of the poetic or literary *work*. With this calling away from the transcendental and this running up against the work, against the word—the "thing"—in the work, thinking is not halted. It does not give up. There is no embracing of the ruin of thinking, a move that would be all too recognizable: irrationalism. From out of this encounter, rather, the questions as to what *now* is to be the task of thinking and what *now* the criteria for care, "method" and "movement" in thinking arise with a particular urgency. Thinking does not end or does not only end but experiences what seems so like an end as the call into the time of *waiting*, of *expectation* (*das Warten, l'attente*). Something, we might say (and surely Blanchot and



Heidegger do), is given to thought as something that thought cannot think or, better, as something that can only be thought *otherwise*, in another thinking, a thinking of the other. In and from this moment and encounter, we could read the short—and hardly any longer either “critical” or “fictional”—piece entitled “L’Attente” that Blanchot *gives* to Heidegger in the Festschrift of 1959.<sup>9</sup> It would be possible to show that Blanchot’s investigations accompany Heidegger’s and that in such a *careful* companion Heidegger has neither a critic nor an interlocutor. This proximity is neither that of *criticism* (be it transcendental or immanent) nor that of *dialogue*. For such a proximity, it would seem, names are lacking. All we can do perhaps is to note and to follow its effects. If Levinas’ *conviction* does not exactly belie this proximity, it cannot be said to welcome it.

2) The second complication would entail asking about the difference between Levinas’ “breaking with” and what he calls Blanchot’s “bringing out of” neutrality. Here it would not be a matter of retrieving Blanchot and Heidegger (Blanchot *with* Heidegger) from Levinas, but of seeing how, in his own readings of Blanchot, Levinas has already problematized such talk of “moving away from” or “leaving”—in this instance—Heidegger. We would want to say that Blanchot is not so easily secured between Heidegger and Levinas, between “ontology” and “ethics”; that such a *between* is not, even in Levinas’ own terms, entirely possible. But neither is it entirely impossible. In any account of the development of Levinas’ work, Blanchot and what is said about Blanchot could be located “between.” Blanchot would be a *between*, but a *between* always already “outside”: a *between* that brings together in such a way that, unlike any other *between*, it does not let the relation circumscribe it. The two it brings together are not easily named together. There is no overriding principle of opposition, linearity, or commensurability. Blanchot, writing or read as writing *between* Heidegger and Levinas, *between* philosophy and literature, *between* thinking and poetizing, and *between* “ontology” and “ethics,” would interrupt the thinking that thinks these terms together according to a principle. Perhaps the only “model” for such a conjunction, and the only aid to our comprehending it, is to be found in Blanchot’s own meditations on Levinas’ description of the “curvature” of intersubjective or communicational space.<sup>10</sup> If Blanchot interrupts, then he is also the thinker of that interruption. It is the thought of interruption that interrupts thought. What does this interruption do to Levinas’ *conviction*, a conviction that must surely falter when it cannot guarantee the step (*pas*) from the “bringing out of” to the “breaking with”?

Why, when we were so emphatic about not centering our discussion of Blanchot with Heidegger on what Blanchot says of Heidegger, do we begin our discussion of Blanchot with Levinas, with Blanchot’s commentaries on Levinas and with these lines from *Totality and Infinity*? Partly, of course, because here each does speak to the other but also, and far more importantly, because Blanchot and Heidegger come together *as* thinkers of this

“between” whose logic Blanchot so mercilessly charts (*das Zwischen*: the time of thinking *not yet* thinking, the time of writing *not yet* writing). They encounter one another across the texts of Rilke, say, or of Hölderlin, Heraclitus, Nietzsche . . . Something, an issue or a question, draws their work together, whereas the issues or questions that Blanchot and Levinas share arise, in a way that strikes us as unique and whose uniqueness we would like to demonstrate, *from* their encounter.

To this overview, there are two serious objections. The first states that what underlies the encounter is simply the fact of their being *friends*, an extra-philosophical component that could only confuse the main issue: the ‘main issue’ being either Blanchot’s or Levinas’ project in its critical separateness from the other’s. The second objection states that Blanchot and Levinas clearly have themes and issues in common and that these should be our starting point. Moreover, the objection continues, the subsequent readings Blanchot and Levinas produce of each other might well be, on one side or the other (depending on the objector’s preference), misreadings. Hence the lines quoted above, or hence everything that’s really extraordinary in the “extraordinary *intrigue*”—i.e., that each or one or the other gets it wrong. Both of these claims will have to be considered as both would challenge the significance of the texts, essays, and “fragments” with which we are concerned, the very significance for which we are arguing. But to begin with let us hold them at bay just long enough to note the following moves and exchanges.

In 1958, Blanchot’s work seems to change, to change definitely in tone and style, but maybe also in direction and inclination. If the central concerns remain constant, they seem in retrospect—and in Blanchot’s own retrospect—to have begun to lead elsewhere. There is little sign of this change in *Le Livre à venir* published in 1959, a work which continues more or less explicitly the project(s) of *L’Espace littéraire* (1955), and it is not until *L’Entretien infini* appears exactly a decade later that it can be fully evidenced. In that volume, the strongest signs are perhaps the two Nietzsche essays now accompanied and contextualized by a third from 1966/67. But the piece we would briefly like to comment on is not part of *L’Entretien infini* and has never been reprinted. This is perhaps because its pronouncements are too programmatic and the form of the piece too unwieldy for the necessarily tentative nature of its contents. The essay is entitled “L’Étrange et l’étranger” and, like the vast majority of the writings collected in 1969, it appeared as one of Blanchot’s “Recherches” in the *Nouvelle Revue Française*.<sup>11</sup>

For Levinas, in an essay of the previous year (1957) entitled “La Philosophie et l’idée de l’infini,” Heidegger’s *sein* is the “Neuter” and the crucial subordination operating within his “ontology” is that of the relation with the other to the relation with this “Neuter.”<sup>12</sup> Blanchot recalls this line in a footnote to “L’Étrange et l’étranger” and attempts to extricate a certain

conception of the neuter—a conception he has already set to work in the essay—from Levinas' characterization of Heidegger.<sup>13</sup> A characterization, it should be added, with which the footnote concurs. Indeed, Blanchot cites Levinas' summary approvingly and goes on to argue against what he seems to see as Heidegger's nostalgic preference for, or privileging of, an enrooted (*enraciné*) Being over and against its deracinated (*déraciné*) forgetting in the phrase "the forgetting of being" ("*l'oubli de l'être*"). If this view, thirty years later, would be difficult to sustain, it is important to note the way in which Blanchot clearly associates the forgetting or the oblivion with the neuter. The very use of the word "being" would obscure this association: "Being is still a name for the *oubli*."<sup>14</sup> It is only in the *oubli* (a word whose significance for Blanchot cannot be overstated) that the *attente* maintains itself as *attente*.<sup>15</sup>

But let us return to the footnote. Levinas had written that although the Neuter (Being) organizes beings and thoughts, it also "hardens the will instead of making it ashamed [*honte*]."<sup>16</sup> And Blanchot begins his extrication by asking whether there isn't something "a little shameful [*honteux*]" about this thought of the neuter, something that distinguishes it from what had been said about Heidegger's *sein*. The note closes with another important distinction. Blanchot writes: "The thought of E. Levinas is separated radically from the experience of the other as neuter."

On one level, everything is straightforward. Blanchot's concern is not the same as Levinas', and the reference to him is a mere corrective. It says simply that there is more to the neuter than Levinas perhaps realizes. We might formulate it as Blanchot saying to Levinas: "Given the way *we* understand Heidegger's *sein*, it does not correspond to the way *I* understand the neuter." Yet there are hints that something more significant is getting under way here; something that will lead to the slight tension between Heidegger and Blanchot in the "conclusions" to *Totality and Infinity* and to Levinas' saying to André Dalmas in 1971 that the neuter is "wholly other to Heidegger's *sein*."<sup>17</sup> This last statement does not only direct us towards Blanchot's understanding of the neuter but also marks the change in Levinas' use of it, a change wrought solely in the light of that understanding.

We should not overlook the fact that, however obliquely, this footnote provides us with one of Blanchot's first references to the Levinasian *other* and to the ethical relation itself. The phrase "the experience of the other as neuter" which serves as a succinct description of Blanchot's theme appears nowhere else in the essay. Read in the footnote its impact is one of clarification. Blanchot's theme is clarified by its being radically separate from Levinas'. With the phrase "the experience of the other as neuter," Blanchot introduces what is to become, from this point onwards, the crux of his thinking.

How seriously are we to take Blanchot's repetition of "shame" or "shameful"? What happens to such a word and indeed such a vocabulary when appropriated by or rewritten into a radically separate project? It is interesting

to note that Blanchot doesn't announce that he is using Levinas' word. Without looking at Levinas' essay, the reader would remain unaware of the fact and Blanchot's question ("Isn't it a little shameful . . .") would sound even stranger. For Levinas, as is well known, a neutral impersonal thinking always suppresses the moment or the site of openness to the other: a moment in which I am vulnerable and can no longer infer a reciprocal vulnerability on the part of anyone else; the site of a thoroughgoing passivity and the originary *response* of responsibility. If "shame" signifies this suppressed scene where "I" in my particularity am claimed and obliged, what can it signify for Blanchot? It has no resonances in the rest of the essay. On the first reading, we give it maybe one or two casual meanings. The neuter is something a thinking, hitherto defined in terms of its will to mastery, cannot master. The neuter obliges thinking to acknowledge an essential weakness or vulnerability. Both are correct, yet neither would lead us directly to a consideration of the incompatibility of these two statements: I am ashamed in the experience of the other as the other person / Thinking is "shamed" in the experience of the other as neuter. Incompatible, wholly and radically separate; nonetheless one resembles and cites (mimics?) the other. From this moment on they will accompany one another. This companionship comes to the fore in the wake of *Totality and Infinity*. But we are moving ahead of ourselves. We must say something about the content of "L'Étrange et l'étranger," or at least the few paragraphs that concern us here.

The essay opens by distinguishing between *philosophy*, *poetry* and *literature*: three modes of expression capable of resisting and opposing all unilateral discourse, capable we might say of challenging authority. These distinctions function strategically and quickly dissolve. They do not of themselves propose a thesis that Blanchot would wish to defend. In our account, we use the terms in a similar fashion. The first two are attributed with a specificity which the third lacks. Philosophy gives us a means of interrogating. What is proper to philosophy is the question. Poetry gives us a "pure affirmation." What is proper to poetry is the affirmation. And literature?

[Literature gives us] the space of that which does not affirm, of that which does not question, where all affirmation disappears and meanwhile returns—does not yet return [*ne revient pas encore*—from this disappearance onwards [*à partir de cette disparition*].<sup>18</sup>

What then is proper to literature? Is there any positivity at all accruing to this "returning *not yet* returning" of affirmation, a "returning *not yet* returning" which follows on from the disappearance of affirmation?

Something in the philosophical question and the poetic affirmation would be refused by literature (by "literary space"). Literature would be the space of that refusal. As the essay unfolds, Blanchot's theme becomes clearer. It is that of the *stranger*, the *outsider*; a figure who haunts so much modern

writing. But Blanchot is also concerned with the ease with which literary criticism or history can make the stranger into a theme, a familiar theme. For Blanchot, the stranger must frustrate the modes of questioning and affirming and must open up philosophy and poetry to the space of literature.

Philosophy and poetry can cohabit quite comfortably. The former acknowledges that its questioning rests on an affirmation, that it is properly affirmative. Whilst the latter realizes that what it affirms ("purely") remains prior to its meaning, that what it affirms is properly given to philosophy. Philosophy attends to the meaning of the affirmation by questioning it. A problem—no longer simply conceivable or thematizable *as* a problem—arises with the stranger or the unknown (*l'inconnu*). By an ironically familiar gesture, the structure of the philosophical question is such that it can only question what it recognizes, what is in some way familiar to it. Before it questions, philosophy has had to reassure itself as to how it would answer Meno's question. However complex and ingenious the answer at any particular time, reassurance has also come from Meno's having asked his question inside philosophy and from its having been reformulated by Socrates *as* a philosophical question. The stranger *as* stranger would seem to evade philosophy. Blanchot detects a sensing of this predicament in the way poetry seems to have grown suspicious of affirmation and of its own affirmative function. If to affirm is to give to thought something that thought can recognize, then it would seem that the stranger stands as much outside affirmation, and so poetry, as outside philosophy. The stranger would stand apart from the very exchange between poetry and philosophy by which the *meaning* of an affirmation is accomplished.

Poetry—and this is where the terms slide towards the "more general" third term *literature*—begins to attend to the space that opens up between the affirmation and that which is affirmed: a space hitherto quickly and thoughtlessly traversed. This space becomes nothing more than the approach of that which is affirmed *in* the refusal or "disappearance" of affirmation. If, in the affirmation of the stranger, the affirmed (the stranger) recedes and becomes instead the one familiar to thinking, then to refuse affirmation is to refuse to let the affirmed recede. It is to refuse to let the affirmed become familiar, even familiar *as* a theme, a problem or a question. The stranger comes to this space of refusal *as* its (philosophy's, poetry's, literature's) estrangement or alienation from meaning. An inexhaustible estrangement where if meaning returns (which it must) it does so only from out of its own disappearance, which is to say from out of an experience of this estrangement. It never returns us to the security and the reassurance of those "modes of expression" we specified as philosophy and poetry. Hence, I take it, the apparently paradoxical talk of "disappearance" and "return" in our quotation. The question and the affirmation are thus haunted, accompanied, and estranged by *another* voice—a voice which neither questions nor affirms—and the nature of the "gift" poetry brings to philosophy is changed utterly.

At the end of the essay, Blanchot presents what reads like a negative theology of the stranger. He (it) is not the one we do not know who looks at us. Nor it is the feeling, or that which prompts the feeling, of being seen when there is no one there. It is not even the absence of anyone looking, where this absence—which sees nothing—somehow intrudes and disturbs. Each of these, however obscurely, would succeed in characterizing the stranger, in according him a certain specificity. Blanchot writes that “the stranger is only the experience of his approach.” The space of literature is the space of the stranger (*l'espace de l'étranger*)—the essay makes it explicit—and its *only* positivity is the positivity of its approach, its drawing near to thought, poetic or otherwise.

Perhaps the most important moment in the essay is when Blanchot suggests that the refusal of affirmation reveals itself in the adoption of a series of terms: *disparition*, *aliénation*, *absence*, *altération*, etc.<sup>19</sup> Substantives close to verbs, each is verbally neutral. Each is without a subject. First, the stranger is thought as the strange or unknown person and then, second, as estrangement or alienation. No one or nothing *is* the stranger; there is estrangement. No one or nothing disappears; there is the being of disappearance. The other *to* the same is the alteration *of* the same.

In these passages we can hear Blanchot preparing the means by which so much of his subsequent vocabulary will be developed: The words that will come to thought as the very disturbance of thought. Later, in his fullest introduction of the notion of the “fragment”, Blanchot will say that it is a noun having the force of a verb. Unthinkable apart from *fragmentation*, It fragments thought. There, too, we will read that the fragment is “the gift the poem brings to thought.”<sup>20</sup> The later Nietzsche essay, which with the two from 1958 forms such an important triptych in *L'Entretien infini*, will be entitled “Nietzsche and Fragmentary Writing.”

In *L'Étrange et l'étranger* we can also sense Blanchot seeking to clarify—and in a way that will lead him to invoke and to cite the texts of philosophy far more frequently—the movement he has already designated by thinking the work (*oeuvre*) alongside worklessness (*désœuvrement*), this latter being a condition or state which absorbs without affirming and without ever putting anything into question. We re-encounter here, then, the thought that for Blanchot both arouses the greatest anxiety (it keeps us awake at night) and induces the greatest lethargy or indolence.

At the centre of the work, with the approach of literary space, Blanchot describes something that would at the same time can for the most serious thinking *and* provide the most serious threat to thinking. There where it is hardest to think, it is most tempting and so easiest to abandon thought. The tension sustained by these extremes comes about when thinking experiences the weakening of negation, an experience we also find in Levinas (the “*il y a*”, a phrase Levinas and Blanchot literally share<sup>21</sup>). For Blanchot, it was the power of the negative—to establish opposition, to move thought, to insist

on linearity—that led philosophy to accord itself particular goals and tasks. He now confronts the labor, the *work*, of the negative with the *worklessness* (*désœuvrement*) of the neuter.

In 1960, in an essay on Heraclitus,<sup>22</sup> Blanchot argues that this essential vulnerability within negativity constitutes the enigmatic role given to the neuter noun in the Heraclitean fragments: the scene (the written scene) of the first double meanings; the possibility of the first “double reading”<sup>23</sup> and the impossibility of one taking precedence. But of course this isn’t how it is. With the enshrining of power in the negative, the one does take precedence. It becomes the very condition and purpose of possibility. The weakening of that power confronts us as and with the *impossibility* that is the neuter at work in these fragments. It is impossible to read them unless we read the impossibility in them.

In 1963, the neuter receives its most extensive discussion in an essay on René Char,<sup>24</sup> whose work Blanchot has often read alongside Heraclitus. The neuter, neither this nor that, is represented by the third person; the *il*, the *elle*. The fact that the French language has no third or neutral *genre* is oddly felicitous. It means that the neuter cannot be easily or comfortably welcomed into the language. There is no place for it. The neuter belongs to no genre. It is the non-general, the non-generic. If its representation is not a domestication, then its being neither this nor that, neither the one nor the other, is also not a reason for situating it between this and that, between the one and the other. Unthinkable within any oppositional, dialectical or linear logic of relation, the neuter requires that another relation be thought. For it is only thus that there can be a relation or rapport with the unknown, the stranger (a rapport *sans* rapport). The unknown as unknown calls for the experience of the neuter. The neuter is a name designating no one and forming no system: the remains, Blanchot will later say, of another language. Life lived in the face of the unknown is life accompanied by the neuter, by what is a “menace” and a “scandal”—“shameful”—to thought. In an important parenthesis,<sup>25</sup> Blanchot proposes, as an “evident and abusive simplification,” that in the history of philosophy we can recognize attempts to “acclimatize and domesticate the neuter.” Philosophy substitutes for the neuter “the law of the impersonal and the rule of the universal.”

And in 1964, we will read that the storytelling voice (the “narrative voice”)—of which Kafka’s account of the move from the first to the third person (from *Ich* to *Er*) has been for Blanchot since 1949, the exemplary instance—is neuter.<sup>26</sup> If the narrative voice designates nothing and no one, then it no longer names that which delimits the scope of a tale, determines its contents and guarantees their being told. It is no longer evidence of a capacity in man and language to objectify, to hold at a distance. On the contrary, the narrative voice interrupts the demand that everything so arranged and prepared be told. It opens the tale, even in the very telling, to what cannot be told. It marks a response to an approach in which the

language of nearness and distance runs wild: closeness no longer conferring familiarity.

We could continue indefinitely. Suffice it to say, that in "L'Étrange et l'étranger" each of these future texts finds a preliminary echo. If we see it as a change, perhaps it is a move away from the essays that presented themselves as a certain type of criticism or at least gathered themselves around specific literary works. If so, what can we say it is that now obliges Blanchot to continue, to go on? What now obliges him not to abandon thought but to remain as his fictions so often say "loyal" or "faithful" to it? What if not this fact that, here, the space of literature is the space of the stranger? What if not that, here, thinking is opened up to the approach of the other, even if it be an other, as Blanchot says in that footnote, radically separate from Levinas.

Posing Blanchot's concerns in this way discourages us from hearing the neuter as a long sought for clarification or key. Certainly, it clarifies, enabling us to reformulate many of the earlier discussions. But Blanchot's unease at any systematic or programmatic presentation of the neuter—as, say, the central characteristic of those words with which the poem or the fragment names the "unknown as unknown"—is genuine. Such unease is an awareness that the effect of the neuter on the forms of the texts in which it is named must be drastic, and the texts themselves must be uncompromising. The neuter must interrupt any context into which we might be tempted to introduce it.

For this reason, too, our passing reference to Blanchot's fiction was by no means gratuitous. It is around this time that the fictional and the non-fictional elements, gestures, voices, and typographies begin their final and most complex interweaving. If the neuter, on one level, permits us to speak of something in the tales being clarified or brought out, on another level (which cannot simply any longer be another level) it also disrupts our efforts to distinguish between the tale, the told, and the "critical" telling or bringing out of what the tale told.

Perhaps "L'Étrange et l'étranger" intentionally recalls one of Blanchot's earliest tales, "L'Idylle,"<sup>27</sup> in which the "stranger" comes to the refuge (*hospice*), an institution which serves as the *topos* between exile and the city, between inside and outside, and so between being and not being a stranger. He is to remain there until the time when he can move into the city. One way to achieve that end would be for the stranger to marry a woman from the city. This thought is encouraged and made easier by his perception of the relations between the director of the refuge and his wife (the one who had named the stranger "Akim" on his arrival). As the tale proceeds, that marriage becomes increasingly and singularly disturbing. It is described by one of the guards as having introduced, from its inception, an unsettling silence into the house. Despite all the work, the frenetic activity of the place, there is at the center a feeling of "*désœuvrement*." The marriage at the heart



of the home is both the still, "idyllic" center of the tale and the law by which the stranger remains forever estranged: the law by which there is estrangement.

"Communal life?" said the attendant. "Here, each lives pell mell with all the others, but there is no common existence."<sup>28</sup>

What is given to the stanger as he takes up his residence and what the reader finds as she settles down with this story manifests itself as alternately a *guide*, the *law*, and a *threat*, a threat both explicitly violent and idyllically passive. The neuter is disclosed in and speaks through a language that is never its own but one that it serves (or dis-serves) in the guises of these and other figures. If the neuter accompanies *my* language, the word itself insures that this companion is never simply a companion. (Those moments in Blanchot's texts when another voice echoes mine or when I say what I say without understanding it.) The neuter would be a guide whose only gift is the "unknown," a law forever without locus and so ruinous of any diagnostic or *meta* discourse. Therein lies its threat. Levinas, again to Dalmás, seems to say it well and untranslatably:

On ne fraye pas avec lui (le Neutre)—il est "l'effrayant" par excellence.<sup>29</sup>

One cannot associate with what is so frightening, so startling. And, it is not inappropriate to add, one cannot be on friendly terms with what terminates friendship.

All of which leaves us where? With Blanchot in 1958 beginning to respond, in a variety of ways, to what is now being called the neuter. Let us be a little more schematic and note three changes: (1) In the form of the writings and in their self-designation. *Le Dernier homme*, the last "fiction," had appeared in 1957. *L'Attente, l'oubli* (1962) receives no classification. In *L'Entretien infini* many of the pieces are accompanied by or written as "dialogues" and "conversations," sometimes marked by "the double plus-minus sign."<sup>30</sup> (2) In the *presentation* of other texts. The formal innovations also signal a change in the way other texts and writers are referred to by Blanchot. Another type of reading, and a proximity peculiar to such reading, always implicit in Blanchot's projects, now seems to acquire a new clarity. (3) In the significance given to the *theme* of interruption. Again, a neuter word: the interruption of the unknown. The experience of the other as neuter is this interruption.

All three come together, most importantly for us and most clearly for Blanchot, in his extensive and continuing response to Levinas. A response which begins in 1961 with the *entretien* "Connaissance de l'inconnu" with which Blanchot greets the arrival of *Totality and Infinity*. And it continues through the *fragments* of the "Discours sur la patience" (1975) in which Blanchot addresses *Otherwise than Being*.

In *L'Entretien infini*, "Connaissance de l'inconnu" appears as the first of four consecutive pieces that seem to take *Totality and Infinity* as their point of departure for raising the issue of intersubjectivity or "I-You" discourse, of what we might somewhat more ingenuously say as "thinking two together". In the last of these pieces, "L'Interruption: comme une surface de Riemann" (the only one in which Levinas is not named and the only one not written in the form of a dialogue), Blanchot distinguishes between the discontinuity that sustains and so is entailed by all continuous exchange (the silences between us; my interrupting you and vice versa, always vice versa) and a more originary discontinuity. In structural linguistics, the analyses of the first and second persons insist on their having nothing to do with the third person. It is unfortunate and misleading even to speak of the three as persons. In the one case ("I-You"), there is reciprocity, a taking up of discursive space only on the condition of acknowledging its symmetry. In the other case (*il, elle*), reciprocity and symmetry have no function. We would, with Blanchot's encouragement, challenge this theoretical distinction. Not by reducing the one to the other, by retrieving some common essence, but by describing the "interruption" of the one by the other. There is an alteration in discursive space that would lead us to consider the "curvature" of that space. The third (the neuter) interrupts the first and second person exchange. I, open to you, am open to another than you: another who, unlike either you or I, has no place. It interrupts. It is the taking place of this interruption. The approach of the stranger (the only positivity of this "it" or "*il*") interrupts the dialogue, making it difficult to think "I and You" together.

We would need to spend a great deal of time in showing the subtleties of this movement in Blanchot's work from the identifying of the space of literature as the space of the stranger to this concern with the *entretien*. For Blanchot, the *entretien* has always already been interrupted by the stranger. But why should the thought of the stranger lead to the issue of the *entretien*? This is where the response to Levinas is crucial, and this is why the text on interruption belongs to the readings of *Totality and Infinity*. Let us look at the opening of "Connaissance de l'inconnu."

The conversation begins with a question, an "anachronistic" question: "What is a philosopher?"<sup>31</sup> One of the voices, borrowing from Bataille, suggests that the philosopher is someone who is afraid (*qui a peur*). "Fear" is the word Blanchot uses here (it could have been another, this is no *Grundstimmung*, but as we shall see, for our purposes, the choice is not without significance) to indicate a rapport or relation other than those for which philosophy legislates. "Fear" designates a non-philosophical relation, but one that implicates philosophy. Philosophy is one of its terms. The philosopher is someone who can be characterized by a certain fearfulness. Never really an issue for him, he nonetheless has *contact* with it; or rather, through it he has contact with the unknown. "Fear," in this conversation, like

the being alienated, say, in the earlier essay, rests on a rapport with the unknown. It names a mode of access to a radical exteriority: the frightening (*l'effrayant*). We read:

[fear] *fraye*—if you will permit this play on words—with the *effrayant*. The *effrayant* is that which rids us of peace, liberty, friendship . . . there, we have some presentiment of the Other [*l'Autre*]. It seizes us, shakes us [*il nous ébranle*], . . . takes us out of ourselves.<sup>32</sup>

Is it not striking that Levinas should employ the same homophony to insist on a *dissociation* from the neuter as Blanchot uses to insist on an *association*? Not too striking, but striking enough. This association (which would here be philosophy's association with what is ruinous of it) is also thought by Blanchot as the "*rapport sans rapport*." Could it not be, at least in part, that Levinas is compelled to speak of dissociation from the neuter because for him the association that is the "*rapport sans rapport*"<sup>33</sup> must be used to name and only to name another, more privileged but equally disruptive, encounter? For Blanchot, it seems, an answer to the question "What is a philosopher?" must touch or mark that point where an interruption occurs, where there is a relation with what ruins all relations. One of the relations it ruins is friendship, and yet—with that "*fraye*"—Blanchot already seems friendlier towards it than Levinas will. As an attempt to say how thought (philosophy) can live with, from, and in this relation, Blanchot sometimes employs the following formulation: "naming the possible, responding to the impossible."<sup>34</sup> Blanchot would have us hear, in the words with which possibility is buttressed, a response to what is other than possibility. He would have us detect such a response in the "fear" that Bataille ascribes to the philosopher.

It is in this context, having "related" the philosopher to the unknown, and having once more equated the unknown with the stranger, that one of the voices introduces *Totality and Infinity*. The rest of the conversation is taken up with a discussion of the text. One voice explicates, sometimes critically, and argues that Levinas' work succeeds in exposing philosophy to its outside (exteriority). The other voice queries the explications and remains more or less perplexed. The conversation continues in "Tenir parole" (the second piece), beginning, in "Le Rapport du troisième genre" (the third piece), to examine the conversation itself (this exchange between two) as the site of an originary disturbance.

We have noted two ways in which, since 1958, Levinas' name appears in Blanchot's work. First, as we saw in that footnote, his vocabulary is adopted and his view of Heidegger seemingly is shared. And yet the two "others" (*autrui*, *neutre*) are kept radically separate. Second, Levinas is read and questioned. His work becomes exemplary for what Blanchot wants to say about philosophy, just as, once, Blanchot's tales were exemplary for Levinas.

Philosophy (naming the possible, responding to the impossible) seems to find its most serious and patient exponent, at least for Blanchot, in Levinas. Does this mean that Blanchot no longer (i.e., after *Totality and Infinity*) sees his project as separate from Levinas'? Does the second appearance supplant the first? Not at all. What happens from 1961 onwards is that the experience of the other as neuter is thought alongside Levinas' *autrui*. One of the central questions for Blanchot now concerns, precisely, the nature of the relation between *autrui* and the neuter, each thought separately—for their respective thinkers—in a “*rapport sans rapport*.” In other words, the question is how to think *these* two (*autrui* and neuter, but also Levinas and Blanchot) together. As with “*rapport sans rapport*,” the appropriations continue. The same phrases and words crop up in the work of both writers. Let us, finally, look at one recent and extreme instance. It is from *Après coup* (1983). Blanchot is coincidentally, meditating on his story “L'Idylle” in an afterword to a new edition of the book in which it first appeared. He ponders the “unhappiness” of the tale that must betray the very thing it utters. Careful to distinguish this characteristic of the narrative voice (both the condition for and the frustration of the tale) from any notion of catharsis or aesthetic distance, Blanchot writes:

before all distinctions of form and content, of signifier and signified, even before the division between *énonciation* and *énoncé*, there is the unqualifiable *Dire* [saying], the glory of a “narrative voice” that intimates [*donne à entendre*] clearly, without ever being able to be obscured by the opacity or the enigma or the terrible horror of what it communicates.<sup>35</sup>

“Saying,” and “glory,” but especially “saying” is Levinas' word. Once again, like “shame” but far more profoundly, it denotes openness to a primordial claim. Prior to my saying *anything*, there is the response to the alterity of the other. Prior to any conversing (symmetry), there is asymmetry. Here, again, Levinas' word is used (mentioned, cited?) without Blanchot's signalling the fact, used (mentioned, cited?), far more overtly, as synonymous with the neuter. The only acknowledged quotation is his own phrase, “narrative voice.” There is of course much in this passage worthy of comment. We refer to it however in order to conclude one account of the development that so intrigues us, the “moves and exchanges” we spoke of back on page 152. How are we to read it?

Along with the interweaving of the fictional and non-fictional writings, we have found a further interweaving, namely, that of Blanchot's texts and the texts of another: most notably those of Levinas, an interweaving, then, between Blanchot's texts and the texts of a friend.<sup>36</sup> And this is presumably the moment to recall the two earlier objections to our according any real philosophical significance to the development: friendship and/or misreading.

It might seem the most mundane of observations, but couldn't Blanchot and Levinas read each other's work, occasionally seeming to say the same, primarily because they are friends and have been friends for 60 years? Might it not be friendship that most accurately and yet not especially mysteriously names their proximity: friendship writing the proper name of one into the text of the other? Blanchot reads Levinas because he is his friend. Think of the leeway or loophole such a sentence allows us, we who are maybe friends of neither. It justifies our reading the one without even raising the question of the other. Here, we say, there is no need to follow *his* lead, because, here, he writes under the sway of another, extra-philosophical obligation and decision.

If the thought Levinas and Blanchot would ostensibly share is that of interruption, if this word, in some way, describes what the "saying" and the "narrative voice" have in common, then there is a certain irony in having recourse to friendship in order to explain that sharing. The thought these friends share is that which gives difference and a-symmetry, that from which are derived identity and all the more benevolent interruptions that make communication possible. What sort of sharing can it be? How can any concept of friendship not be complicated in the wake of such a thought? As we have seen, the thought is sometimes expressed as being ruinous of friendship. If Levinas and Blanchot would both bring us, but differently, to the predicament of not knowing how to name two together, if thinking two together is shown to be essentially problematic, then how can these two be unproblematically thought together? How can "friendship" remain unchanged?

The word itself occurs infrequently in Levinas, although we have seen it used, apparently straightforwardly, about his relations with Blanchot. In the major works and essays, the "we" of collegiality and fraternity is often presented as being initially free of the disturbance and the unsettling vulnerability that characterize the ethical and erotic encounters. In "*Le Moi et la totalité*,"<sup>37</sup> the couple (the two together) is always exclusive. The dialogue that goes on between its members is not "the true dialogue." When the other *faces* me, it is not as a member of the couple. It is no longer a matter of hostility or friendship. The face is neither friendly nor unfriendly. To be talking with a friend and to have my attention drawn to her empty glass is to respond not to the friend as friend but to the other (*autrui*) who interrupts and has always already interrupted our friendly exchanges. To caress her is not to grasp her body as the body of a friend, but rather to touch that which withdraws and remains hidden from any act of possession or recognition. In neither instance is it a matter of knowing something about the friend. Friendship would be an economy, and it is economies that the thought of interruption interrupts.

For Blanchot, too, at least earlier on, the word "friendship" never quite reaches its mark. It never succeeds in defining the relation to which it is

applied. It is never adequate or appropriate. I am thinking, in particular, of *Au Moment voulu* and *Le Dernier homme*, where "friend" is a role the narrator can neither adopt "himself" nor allot to anyone else. We should note, though, the difference in emphasis from that in Levinas. If, in these tales, 'friendship' falls short of the relation it would seek to name and if it is constantly refused or challenged, it is, nonetheless, an awkward word, a word that has effects.

But, surely, none of this is going to stop us from mentioning the friendship between Levinas and Blanchot, and from sometimes mentioning it in order to explain a reference, a tribute, or a dedication. Moreover, moving on to the second objection, isn't friendship a rather charitable way of accounting for what could be seen as Blanchot's misreading of Levinas? In the remainder of the paper, we will examine Libertson's claim, in his comparative study of Levinas, Blanchot, and Bataille, that such a misreading occurs. In our response to it, we will find ourselves confronted by another more complex conception of friendship, a conception that Blanchot would have us consider.

Libertson finds in Blanchot's readings of Levinas, in everything we have been calling Blanchot's response to Levinas, "a strikingly uncharacteristic confusion."<sup>38</sup> Let us follow his discussion a little way. The three thinkers with whom the book is concerned all begin with an account or an "experience" of the weakening of negation (the *il y a*). This is the moment when, for Libertson, they all break with the tradition. The *il y a* takes on the force and function of a discovery. It makes another type of philosophy possible. Apart from this common *origin* their projects are pursued separately (separately, as Blanchot said). Each works in a different field or area. It is odd that the break doesn't seem to have made such terms and procedures problematic, but we will come to this. The alterity that approaches in the *il y a* is said differently, with respect to different concerns. For Levinas, the concern is intersubjectivity; for Blanchot, literary communication. The trouble sets in, Libertson believes, when Blanchot begins to write about intersubjectivity, when he turns his attention to Levinas' concerns. At that moment, Blanchot is said to transcribe Levinas' terms into those of the neuter and the *entretien*. Libertson argues that Blanchot's notion of the neutral *parole*, the neutral *entretien*, leads him to take a "panoramic view of proximity": "proximity" naming the approach of alterity. Blanchot somehow steps back and overlooks the *specificity* of the ethical relation in Levinas: *my* being claimed by *the* other. The discomfort, in Blanchot's writings—with the very talk of "ethics," with the privileging of speech over writing, and with the insistence on height, the highest, etc. (each brought out in "Connaissance de l'inconnu" and "Tenir parole")—is seen by Libertson as a sign of Blanchot's inability to rid himself of a certain Hegelianism and the thought of reciprocity.

The panoramic notion of the *entretien*, with its stubborn inappropriateness to communication's dissymetry, leads to an implicit rejection of Levinas which rekindles the inspiration that haunts Blanchot more than any other: that of Hegel.<sup>39</sup>

There is a pleasing (unintended?) ambiguity to this "other." Does it say that Blanchot is haunted by Hegel more than by anyone else, or that Blanchot, more than anyone else, is haunted by Hegel? If the former, might there not be reasons, and if the latter, is it so obviously not a virtue?

Libertson's point seems to be that with his interest in the neutral *between* (the space that is the happening of separation, the interruption of the neuter), Blanchot, unlike Levinas, can continue to reverse the relations that obtain between the self and the other. This implicit reciprocity runs throughout all the texts on Levinas in *L'Entretien infini* as well as the later "Discours sur la patience," where Blanchot has apparently not learned his lesson. When it comes to intersubjectivity, this branch of the new research into "proximity," Blanchot's idea of the relation rests, Libertson says, on "a disturbingly dialectical structure."<sup>40</sup>

Whenever we find a reference in Blanchot to "two"—two partners, two voices, etc.—Libertson suspects a refusal of Levinasian dissymetry. In other words, Blanchot has not seen that when it comes to the other, the stranger, the one who claims me, the whole discourse of the neuter is at best ambivalent and at worst, and most likely, insufficient: insufficient because it operates as an axis around which reciprocity and reversibility ("I-You") might be retrieved.

It is interesting to note Libertson's bemusement at Blanchot's seeming to concur with Derrida (who is not "a thinker of proximity") in querying Levinas' vocabulary, as though this were evidence enough of the "strikingly uncharacteristic confusion":

puzzling that Blanchot, whose own understanding of the Levinasian concepts infinitely exceeds that demonstrated in "Violence et métaphysique," associates his reading with this essay in a note added for *L'Entretien infini*. His reader suspects that the ambivalence surrounding the articulations of non-reciprocity in this book [ET] is so compelling that Blanchot chooses as his reference the single publication most clearly intended to reduce the importance of Levinas' concepts.<sup>41</sup>

The first point to make is, in certain respects, now a familiar one. It concerns Libertson's book as a whole. In Levinas, Blanchot, and Bataille, Libertson is convinced that we have three vocabularies that effect a decisive break with "Heideggerian intellectualism," metaphysical or theological contextualism, etc. Their themes and methods are unlike and irreducible to any that have gone before. Libertson seems unable to realize that when

Blanchot and Derrida query this notion of a break, and posit the difficulties involved in even speaking any longer of themes or methods, it is not simply—if at all—a matter of criticism or of arguing against Levinas. Ironically, in this instance, it is they rather than Libertson who recognize and reveal the difficulty of thinking two together, be it “ontology” and “ethics,” philosophy and Levinas’ interrogation of philosophy, or whatever. The “face to face” and the “trace,” no more than the “neuter” or the “unknown,” cannot be thought as part of a new philosophical glossary. Each of these words or phrases, and we could cite many more, only become themselves when they interrupt a context, a totality, etc. Blanchot and Derrida would reopen a relation in which philosophy is always implicated *because* it is interrupted, not left behind or reformed. Furthermore, they would show that it is Levinas, perhaps more than anyone, who teaches us precisely this.

What else can we say to libertson’s view of Blanchot with Levinas? Following on from our earlier account, two points come to mind. (1) The neuter is not a notion which simply pre-existed and so pre-determined Blanchot’s reading of Levinas. On the contrary, from the first, Blanchot is aware of Levinas’ proximity, aware of the need to consider the relation between the neuter (interruption) and the other. Levinas’ proximity determines at least one strand in Blanchot’s meditations on the neuter. (2) The changes marked by the introduction of the neuter are also formal. Libertson never comments on them. He speaks of the “arguments” of “Connaissance de l’inconnu” and the “Discours sur la patience” without even mentioning their being written as an *entretien* and a collection of *fragments* respectively. When Blanchot adds a reference to Derrida in *L’Entretien infini*, as Libertson notes and remarks, is there not a question as to what such an addition might be? Here we have two voices discussing Levinas’ text, and one is qualified or supplemented by a footnote. Who adds the footnote? In whose voice are we to hear it? The result is by no means as clear cut as Libertson would have us believe. These problems are not trivial and in the “Discours sur la patience” they multiply. They touch on the fact that when Blanchot begins to read Levinas, to write about and in the form of the *entretien* (and later the *fragment*), and to develop the thought of the interruption, it is not just because of a new interest in the matter of intersubjectivity. Part of his concern is precisely with himself *and* Levinas, himself *with* Levinas. Part of his concern, and maybe even a major part, is wrapped up with this “we” who share this thought of the approach of the stranger. In all of the places where Libertson hears only echoes of Sartrean interchangeability, there is a concern with the “we” (the impossible, interrupted “we”) who live on, continuing to write in and from the interruption. And perhaps, for this “we”—for this “two” together—“a disturbingly dialectical structure” is a germane and plangent description.

But before moving away from Libertson, isn’t there something to his worrying that Blanchot obscures the specificity so central to Levinas? Recall



"literature" as the "general term" in "L'Étrange et l'étranger." And even if the neuter is the non-general, doesn't its insistence and repetition blur the careful and hard won distinctions Levinas makes between the other and the third (illeity), say, or between ethics and the erotic?

". . . de moi à cet autrui qu'est un ami . . ."

We will suggest, by way of conclusion, that there is a specificity in this phrase hard to find in Levinas, a specificity that seems to go to the very heart of Blanchot's response to Levinas.

*We and "our clandestine companion"*

So far, although there have been hints that Blanchot would say it differently, 'friendship' has been presented as a secondary relation. Perhaps thinking consciously against the tradition, Levinas seems to hold that the exclusivity of friendship serves to demote rather than to distinguish it ethically. The third and highest form of friendship, in Kant, is that of disposition (*Gesinnung*) and fellowship (*Geselligkeit*). It can exist, Kant says, only between two or three friends.<sup>42</sup> We might say, using this familiar scenario, that Levinas' primary interest is in the fourth. The one Kant never mentions, but who—like Kafka's sixth in the story of the five friends<sup>43</sup>—must always be excluded: the one who overhears and the one "we" can never include. But if such a Levinasian emphasis would serve as a check to the traditional understanding of friendship, be it Aristotelian or Kantian, what can we then say about it? Does it cease to be of any real account? If we open friendship up to what would ruin it—namely, the excluded, the stranger—do we then simply stop using the word when speaking of the stranger? The alternative might be the double bind operating in Kafka's story: we can only say "we" by limiting the friendship to ourselves, and, in order to do that, we need the excluded one. Here, friendship, as the result of Kafka's rigorous and subtler logic would both be ruined *and* remain unchanged. Blanchot, as we have said, has always had a sense of this predicament and at a certain moment he begins to think another notion of friendship, one that is opened to, but does not simply include, the hitherto excluded.

What prompts Blanchot to broach this topic? First, again as we have seen, it is the proximity and yet radical separateness of Levinas. This other notion of friendship is developed in and as the response to Levinas. Second, and most movingly, the death of Georges Bataille leads Blanchot to examine what it is to write a text for a, now, forever, absent friend. It is worth remarking the significance that the word "*amitié*" acquires when it is chosen, in 1970, as the title for what seems to be Blanchot's last collection of essays. A word and a piece of writing, one of Blanchot's loveliest, that might otherwise have remained private, secluded, here takes up an important place in the development of his thought.

It has always intrigued me that what we might describe as Levinas' privileging of the neighbor over the friend seems to contradict Nietzsche. Zarathustra teaches that love of the friend must replace love of the neighbor. On closer reading, however, we can sense that the opposition, at least in this formulation, is spurious. For what Levinas deems to have been excluded from all consideration of the neighbor (*prochain*) is his or her *approach*: an approach that always finds me in separation and that always holds me at a distance. Nietzsche, too, employs this metaphoric of distance. But, for him, it is the relation with the friend that initiates the new thought of relation. Love of a friend, even when he or she is closest, is always love of the farthest (*Fernsten-Liebe*).<sup>44</sup> And yet, although the neighbor and the friend, for Levinas and Nietzsche respectively, seem to have the same function or role, there is still a difference. Putting it a little bluntly, might it not be the case that, with respect to the neighbor in Levinas, there is no longer any call for a "we," but that, with respect to the friend in Nietzsche, and to friends everywhere, no matter how difficult, there must be a thinking together? The "we" of friendship must somehow become "we *and* that which holds at a distance." Friendship towards that which interrupts, towards that which makes it hard to name two together as friends.

In "L'Amitie," Blanchot notes the demand that I never simply speak *of* but always *to* my friend. The demand that I never make of him a theme. The demand, in other words, that there be discretion. "Discretion" names the interval ("the pure interval") between me and the other who is a friend. The interval, the between, is the interruption that never lets me finish with the friend, that robs me of any power over him. Blanchot argues against any attempt to think of friendship as terminating in the final arrival of what ruins it, as though there could ever simply be a final interruption. The interruption and the interval, like the *entretien*, are infinite. If it is true that the discretion due to a friend "becomes, at a certain moment, the fissure of death," and if it is true that "there is always already the imminent presence of this final discretion,"<sup>45</sup> with the death of a friend, one also loses this imminent presence. It is not a matter of moving from speech or conversation to silence, but of losing silence as well. If the other to whom, in friendship, I am vulnerable is the approach of death, then the death of a friend is the termination of the approaching itself. Nothing arrives, but the infinite *arriving* ceases.

No longer an exclusive friendship, but a friendship sensitive to the excluded: To supplement or to complete Levinas' check to the tradition, could we not find traces of this more unsettling friendship already operative within it. Might not the excluded, in some way, also be Kant's third? Might not the Aristotelian analyses of the *gift* within "unequal friendship" testify to an interruption of the whole economy? Might we not find, then, in the traditional and ostensibly circumscribed apologies for friendship, the signs of something excessive and the structure of a response: for "to the proximity of what is most distant (furthest), it is by friendship that I can respond."

However strange it might sound, would this friendship not also have an important role in what we know as "double reading." Opening the text, a work, to what would ruin it, and, at the same time, preparing a *space* where the two might co-exist, where what interrupts accompanies the interrupted.<sup>46</sup>

But, to close, we should look at what Blanchot actually says when given the opportunity to comment on his friendship with Levinas. In a section entitled "All, Shamefully, Gloriously" (let us hear an echo of the *honteux* appropriated by Blanchot in 1958), we read that the encounter with Levinas was also the encounter with philosophy:

Philosophy would henceforth be our companion, by day and by night: be it in losing its name, in becoming literature, knowledge, unknown-ledge [*non-savoir*], or in absenting itself. Our clandestine friend whom we respected, loved, and who would not permit us to be bound to it. All the while giving us to believe that there was nothing awakened in us, vigilant right into sleep, which may not be due to its difficult friendship. Philosophy or friendship. But philosophy is precisely not an allegory.<sup>47</sup>

The translation in *Face to Face with Levinas* makes one important error. Instead of "its difficult friendship," we read "our difficult friendship," *We* imposing ourselves there where it should be a matter of letting *it* be.

So many "themes" come together here. Philosophy *responds* to the impossible, not by formulating a response to it or by having something to say about it (this would be the law of the impersonal, etc.), but by welcoming it. "We" are needed for that welcoming. We are obliged. And it is in friendship that we can so respond because it is in friendship that we become "we," and, in becoming "we," are opened to the other than "we."

Levinas' name indicates the moment of Blanchot's entry into this drama, and in the later *responses*, no matter how difficult or 'critical', Blanchot remains faithful to that introduction. *We* would need, now, to begin reading these responses, to see how they work and where they would lead us. But the ease with which we look through the word 'friendship' (as we would have done had we begun with such a reading), the ease with which we leave it to one side, outside the work, is one of the things *this* friendship would put into question.<sup>48</sup>

## Notes

- 1 *L'Amitié* (Paris: Gallimard, 1971), p. 328. (Originally published as "Pour Georges Bataille: l'amitié," *Les Lettres Nouvelles*, no. 29, 1962.)
- 2 "Discours sur la patience," *Le Nouveau Commerce*, no. 30-31 (Spring 1975). See also the opening paragraph of "Tenir parole," *Nouvelle Revue Française* (NRF), no. 106 (1961), p. 676.

- 3 Paul Davies, "A Fine Risk: *Otherwise Than Being or Beyond Essence* in *The Writing of the Disaster*," in proceedings of the Levinas conference held at Essex, England, in May 1987 (forthcoming).
- 4 *Difficile liberté* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1963), p. 405.
- 5 "Notre compagne clandestine," in *Textes pour Emmanuel Levinas*, Trans. D. B. Allison, *Face to Face with Levinas*, ed. R. A. Cohen (New York, SUNY, 1986).
- 6 *Le Pas au-delà* (Paris, Gallimard, 1973), p. 51.
- 7 *L'Écriture du désastre*, (Paris: Gallimard, 1980), p. 47.
- 8 *Totalité et Infini* (TI) (The Hague: Nijhoff, 1961). Trans. A. Lingis, *Totality and Infinity* (Pittsburgh, Dequesne Univ. Press, 1969).
- 9 "L'Attente," *Martin Heidegger zum Siebzigstem Geburtstag* (Pfullingen: Neske, 1959).
- 10 TI pp. 267/291.
- 11 "L'Étrange et l'étranger," (EE), NRF no. 70 (1958), pp. 673–683.
- 12 *En Découvrant l'existence avec Husserl et Heidegger* (Paris: Vrin, 1982), p. 171.
- 13 EE, p. 681.
- 14 *L'Attente, l'oubli* (Paris: Gallimard, 1962), p. 69.
- 15 cf. Foucault, "La Pensée du dehors," *Critique* (1966). Repr. with same title (Montpellier: Fata Morgana, 1986), pp. 47–53.
- 16 op. cit., p. 171.
- 17 *Sur Maurice Blanchot* (SMB) (Montpellier: Fata Morgana, 1975), p. 49.
- 18 EE, p. 673.
- 19 *ibid.*, p. 680.
- 20 "Parole de fragment," *L'Endurance de la pensée: pour saluer J. Beaufret* (Paris: Plon, 1968), p. 103. Altered when reprinted in *L'Entretien Infini* (Paris: Gallimard, 1969).
- 21 cf. Levinas, *De l'Existence à l'existant*, 3rd ed. (Paris, Vrin, 1984), pp. 93–105. Trans. A. Lingis, *Existence and Existents* (The Hague: Nijhoff, 1978), pp. 57–64. And Blanchot, *La Part du feu* (Paris: Gallimard, 1949), p. 320.
- 22 NRF no. 85 (1960). Repr. in *EI*.
- 23 The phrase "double lecture" occurs in the 1960 text.
- 24 "René Char et la pensée du neutre," *L'Arc*, 1963. Repr. *EI*.
- 25 *EI*, p. 441.
- 26 "La voix narrative," NRF no. 142 (1964). Repr. *EI*.
- 27 "L'Idylle," in *Le Ressassement éternel* (Paris: Minuit, 1951). Repr. as *Après coup* (AC) (Paris: Minuit, 1983).
- 28 AC, p. 11.
- 29 SMB, p. 48.
- 30 The phrase is Mike Holland's. See his "Towards a Method," *Sub-Stance* no. 14 (1976), p. 16.
- 31 *EI*, p. 70.
- 32 *ibid.*
- 33 TI, pp. 271/295. *EI*, p. 104.
- 34 cf. *EI*, p. 68.
- 35 AC, pp. 97–98.
- 36 Most notably Levinas, but also Bataille.
- 37 "Le Moi et la totalité," *Revue de Métaphysique et de Morale*, no. 4 (1954), p. 371.
- 38 J. Libertson, *Proximity: Levinas, Blanchot, Bataille and Communication* (The Hague: Nijhoff, 1982), p. 279.
- 39 *ibid.*, p. 281.
- 40 *ibid.*, p. 275.
- 41 *ibid.*, p. 286.

- 42 Kant. *Vorlesungen über Moralphilosophie*, band 27.1 of *Gesammelte Schriften* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1974), p. 427. Trans. L. Infield, *Lectures on Ethics* (Indiannapolis: Hackett, 1930), p. 206.
- 43 Kafka. "Gemeinschaft," in *Beschreibung eines Kampfes* (Frankfurt am Main: S. Fischer, 1969), p. 108. Trans. T. and J. Stern, "Fellowship," in *The Complete Stories* (New York: Schocken, 1971), pp. 435–6.
- 44 Nietzsche, *Also Sprach Zarathustra*, in vol. 2 of *Werke* (Frankfurt am Main: Ullstein Materialien, 1984), pp. 324–25. Trans. W. Kaufmann, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, in *The Portable Nietzsche* (New York: Viking, 1959), pp. 172–4.
- 45 *L'Amitié*, p. 329.
- 46 And the predicament Derrida, notes in *Glas* with respect to Genet or, precisely, *without* respect to Genet: "... if I write for his text, I write against him, if I write for him, I write against his text. This friendship is irreconcilable." *Glas* (Paris: Galilée, 1974), p. 224b. Trans. 220b.
- 47 "Notre compagne clandestine," pp. 80/42.
- 48 We might note one, final, exchange. When "Parole de fragment" first appears, it is in a collection of essays and tributes for and to Jean Beaufret. The piece itself centers around a discussion of Char. A discussion of Char in a book for Beaufret, it is nonetheless accompanied by an intense dedication to Levinas. The dedication speaks of Levinas' unique proximity to Blanchot. It remarks on the "rapport of invisibility" that separates and joins them. When the piece is reprinted in *L'Entretien infini*, the dedication, not surprisingly, is gone. Not surprisingly because of the care with which *EI* presents itself as a book rather than simply a collection. And so we are left, presumably, with a discussion of Char? Not quite. As we said earlier, "Parole de fragment" constitutes what is perhaps Blanchot's most explicit *presentation* of the notion of the "fragment," and to it he has now added three pages of "parentheses," of *conversation*.

"... is the neuter not that which is closest to the other [*l'Autre*]?"

"But also the furthest [from the other]."

"The other belongs to the neuter [*est au neutre*] even if it speaks to us as the Other [*Autrui*], speaking thus of and by the strangeness [*l'étrangeté*] which renders it unsituable and always exterior to that which would identify it."  
*EI*, p. 456.

The neuter would both protect and menace the other. The thought of the neuter would both guard and trouble a thought that would seek to think the other otherwise, as, say, "*Autrui*." The dedication to a companion is rewritten as an expression of this "impossible" companionship.

# SENSE AND ICON

## The problem of *Sinngebung* in Levinas and Marion

*John E. Drabinski*

Source: *Philosophy Today* 42, Supplement (1998): 47–58.

It is probably no overstatement to say that phenomenology, in the Husserlian tradition, is ultimately concerned with the constitution of sense. The problematic of the constitution of sense, to put it simply, interrogates the birth of sense and the conditions of that creative act.<sup>1</sup> In the Third Book of the *Ideen*, Husserl writes that phenomenology

is the science of “origins,” of the “mothers” of all cognition; and it is the maternal ground of all philosophical method: to this ground and to the work in it, everything leads back.<sup>2</sup>

It is important to note that this conception of phenomenology widens the field of research. Contrary to popular images of the Husserlian project—viz., that it is consumed by the operative conception of a Cartesian notion of origin and ground—this passage describes the fundamental aim of phenomenology as the interrogation and articulation of that which gives birth to meaning.

The project is programmatically set up without prior juridical constraints. This is to say, Husserl evokes maternal imagery for the express purpose of orienting the phenomenologist toward that from which all sense arises. This orientation, it is important to add, is prior to Husserl’s famous decision for a non-worldly, transcendental ego. For Husserl the philosopher (as opposed to Husserl the programmatic thinker) the final “mother” is the transcendental ego, and this conclusion has led many to see phenomenology as purely and simply an egological science. But what if sense were to be born otherwise than the ego? What if the ego, in the sense Husserl ascribes to it, were itself born, constituted? How could we describe and account for this other

maternal ground? What phenomenological tools are necessary for such a paradoxical description—a description paradoxical precisely because the very subject who describes is always late to the conditions of its own birth? In the following reflections, we will investigate the resources in the work of Emmanuel Levinas and Jean-Luc Marion for describing this other ground of sense, this other site of birth. The importance of such resources comes from their ability to answer the question that lies at the very heart of the contemporary critique of phenomenology: what remains for phenomenology in the face of radical alterity?

I

In Levinas's work, we find a twofold sense of *Sinngebung*. It is unfortunate that this double concept of sense-bestowal has been overlooked by his commentators, for in it lie some of the most profoundly original contributions Levinas has made to the phenomenological tradition. By nuancing the phenomenological notion of *Sinngebung*, Levinas reminds us of both the reliance of Husserl's employment of sense-bestowal upon the free ego<sup>3</sup> and the fecundity of the bestowal of sense when taken up in the context of the genesis of the responsible subject. Hence, we will find Levinas within the span of only three years—1959 to 1961—evoking the limits of a theory of sense, while at the same time identifying sense-genesis with ethics. This double concept of sense comes, of a certain phenomenological necessity, from Levinas's observation in "Réflexions sur la 'technique' phénoménologique" that "all givens (*toute donnée*) . . . are moments of the work of *Sinngebung*."<sup>4</sup> In the context of that essay, Levinas is primarily concerned with how empirical givens are products of the work of sense-bestowing consciousness, but this claim extends further to the ethical problematic: how I am given to myself as for-the-other is a sense bestowed upon me from the other? This is at least one aspect of the other as teacher. The other teaches me the most profound of lessons: who I am and what it means to say "me" (*moi*). Who I am, what it means to be myself, is a sense that, in the ethical relation, is bestowed upon me from outside the egoic interiority of my self. The subtlety of Levinas's treatment of the problem of sense can be seen when we realize that this "experience"<sup>5</sup> is both the limit of idealism (the disposition that first discovered sense-bestowing acts) and the marker of another direction in the constitution of sense.

It is important to be sensitive to this nuance, for Levinas himself will at times mislead us. A mere perusal of, for example, *Totality and Infinity*, would appear to demonstrate once and for all that *Sinngebung* is a product of the philosophy of the Same. To be sure, the problem of signification in *Totality and Infinity* serves the primary purpose of interrupting the sense-bestowing labor of the idealist's subject. Signification, Levinas will write, "precedes *Sinngebung*, and rather than justifying idealism, marks its limit."<sup>6</sup>

Speech, as the signification of the face, disrupts idealism by surpassing what is set out from the subject. Levinas will remark that:

language is the incessant surpassing of the *Sinngebung* by signification. This presence whose format exceeds the measure of the I is not reabsorbed into my vision. The overflowing of exteriority, non-adequate to the vision which still measures it, precisely constitutes the dimension of height or the divinity of exteriority.

(TeI, 273/296)

The living presence of the face signifies *kath auto*, and so, unlike signification *tode ti*, signifies without return to the conceptual correlate that would hope to literally "make sense" of it. The Other "enters into relation while remaining *kath auto*, where he expresses himself without our having to disclose him from a 'point of view,' in a borrowed light" (TeI, 39/67). It would appear, then, that the problem of *Sinngebung* is a problem of imposing a "borrowed light" of a certain conceptuality upon singularity. *Sinngebung*, it would seem, is violence par excellence.

But Levinas's life long concern with what he, following Husserl's remarks in the *Phenomenological Psychology*,<sup>7</sup> calls the intersubjective reduction turns to another account of the constitution of sense.<sup>8</sup> Consider the following remarks from the essay "Conscience non-intentionnelle," where Levinas reflects on the methodological direction of his work. Levinas writes:

I find in the end a notion of sense that, set out from a study of intersubjectivity, imposes itself on thought in a radically different manner.<sup>9</sup>

It is plainly clear what Levinas means by this "radically different manner." The reduction to the pre-predicative and pre-egoic "life" of the subject takes phenomenology to those moments of subjectivity wherein the sense of the *Moi* is bestowed from outside the interiority of the subject, where the subject is constituted, not in auto-affection, but in the hetero-affective "relation" of traumatic awakening.<sup>10</sup> At the very moment Levinas's notion of signification trumps idealism in *Totality and Infinity*, he will play on the double notion of sense. He writes:

The notion of the face, to which we will refer throughout this work, opens other perspectives: it brings us to a notion of sense (*sens*) prior to my *Sinngebung* and thus independent of my initiative and my power.

(TeI, 22/51)

The face contests my freedom and thus my power of bestowing sense; this much is clear from the entirety of Levinas's work. But it is also the case that



the face “brings us to a notion of sense.” In a 1981 interview with Philippe Nemo, Levinas will say that he does not want to write an ethics, but rather that he seeks the *sens* of the ethical.<sup>11</sup> The face does not render the problem of sense secondary or insignificant. Rather, the face calls for another practice of phenomenology, a practice that accounts for the sense-bestowing structures as set out from the face itself.

To this end, the essay “La ruine de la représentation” gives us Levinas’s most decisive positive articulation of *Sinngebung* and in many ways prepares the phenomenological field for the analysis of the face in *Totality and Infinity*.<sup>12</sup> In this essay from 1959, Levinas’s concern is with the constitutive function of the sensible—that is, the way in which sensibility structures consciousness from the outside. This structuring of consciousness from the outside makes it possible for us to think sense in terms, not of its neutral site between the oneself and the other (as this would be the problematic conception of representation), but rather in terms of how it is constituted as set out from the other. Levinas writes of this notion of *Sinngebung* that:

in a phenomenology where the activity of totalizing and totalitarian representation is already exceeded in its own intention, where representation already finds itself placed within horizons that is somehow has not willed, but with which it cannot dispense, an ethical *Sinngebung* becomes possible, that is, a *Sinngebung* essentially respectful of the Other.<sup>13</sup>

Sense-bestowal set out from the other seals the one-way relation of respect by putting the other first—not first in the order of being, but first at the very origin of my (and here the double meaning of the French is appropriate) *conscience*.

Now, though his language tempts us to the contrary, it is in fact not true that Levinas abandons the project of *une Sinngebung éthique* in *Totality and Infinity*. One sees that this is not the case when attention is turned to his account of how the other bestows my very sense of myself as a subject. Levinas writes that the work of the ethical subject:

is destined to this alien *Sinngebung* from the moment of its origin in me. . . . [T]he work does not defend itself against the Other’s *Sinngebung*, and exposes the will that produced it to contestation and unrecognition; it lends itself to the designs of a foreign will and allows itself to be appropriated.

(TeI, 203/227)

This notion that the other as foreign imposes a sense upon me recurs in *Totality and Infinity*, e.g., when Levinas writes that “transcendence is not a vision of the Other, but a primordial donation” (TeI, 151/174), of the

unsuspected horizons that “endow sense (*prêtent un sens*)” (TeI, xvi/28), and of “the impossibility of *forgetting* the intersubjective experience that leads to that social experience and endows it with sense (*prête un sens*)” (TeI, 24/53). To this latter quote, Levinas adds that social experience endows sense just as “perception . . . endows scientific experience with meaning.” This remark equivocates the logic of perceptual bestowal of sense with that bestowal that happens in the social relation. Such equivocation also hearkens back to Levinas’s first presentation of “Reflexions sur la ‘technique’ phénoménologique,” where, in the discussion that followed, Levinas’s comments centered on the manner in which it is impossible to discuss “empirical objects” without reference to the subject who constitutes them *as* empirical.<sup>14</sup> Just as it is impossible to name empirical objects without the perceptual logic of sense-bestowal, it is impossible for us to speak of moral consciousness without the logic of s/he who obligates me before my will. Perhaps this is what Levinas means when he speaks of a phenomenological *deduction* in the “Preface” to *Totality and Infinity* (cf., TeI, xvii/28f.).

Levinas’s rehabilitation of the positive notion of *Sinngebung* works not simply at the level of explicit pronouncement, but also in the images of the maternal that fold back over into Husserl’s remarks we mentioned at the outset of this essay. Levinas speaks of the subject as referring to the hither-side of its birth, a non-site that is prior to the birth of the subject as responsible. In *Otherwise than being*, Levinas writes that:

both being and vision of being refer to a subject that has risen earlier than being and cognition, earlier than and on this side of them, in an immemorial time that a reminiscence could not recuperate as an *a priori*. The “birth” of being in the questioning where the cognitive subject stands would thus refer to a before the questioning, to the anarchy of responsibility, as it were on this side of all birth.<sup>15</sup>

The other gives birth to the responsible *moi*. To say *me voici* is to already have been born as responsible, to have been created as for-the-other, and so such a response to the call of the other is just that: a response to a prior responsibility. And so *Otherwise than being* is full of allusions to the lapse of time, the dephasing of the subject in diachrony, and the notion that, even in its recurrence, the subject is always late to itself. This lateness is irrecusable precisely because the condition of response presupposes the creative act of bestowing responsibility that is set out from the other. Assignment is *Sinngebung*.

## II

The question remains how successful Levinas is in his articulation of a sense-bestowal from the outside. The logic of this *Sinngebung* has three

essential parts: the subject, the given, and the hither-side. These first two parts denote the relational starting point or *Leitfaden*: the subject under obligation, the other in its singularity. The hither-side is the non-site from which the animation of the given (sensibility, the face) first comes and so is also the non-site from which the identity of the subject is first born. Let us say a bit more about how these component parts work in the *Sinngebung éthique*.

Levinas offers the text of *Totality and Infinity* as a “defense of subjectivity!” This subject, of course, is not the subject of the tradition. It is rather the subject who is subjected to the other, a subject whose freedom is put in question by the face. This reversal of priority, tantamount to the inversion of idealism, is perhaps most systematically worked out in the “Substitution” chapter of *Otherwise than being*. There, Levinas undertakes the task of delineating the structures and figures of the subject accused, the subject put in question. At stake is the identity of the I, where resolving apparent contradictory claims—that the subject both has its self-identity undone by the other *and* is substantial—is of paramount importance. Levinas’s figures for this problem are familiar: liturgy, hypostasis, exposure, vulnerability, exile, and ultimately substitution—all of which are captured in the abuses of language Levinas cites from Rimbaud and Celan.<sup>16</sup> The fundamental movement Levinas attempts to capture and describe is how the oneself is expelled from its self-identical interiority *without* alienation—the logic of, in a word, *recurrence*.

The second element of a *Sinngebung* from the outside is the given itself. There are two sides to this problematic: first, the problem of singularity and, second, the problem of the time-structure of the given as singular. Levinas is of course firstly concerned with the singularity of the face of the other, but the phenomenological explication of the face turns to the materiality of the given. Sensibility in *Totality and Infinity* and the *Urimpression* in *Otherwise than being* name the singular in its concreteness, and the deformatization of both lead to the ethics of the face. The signification of the face takes on the character of expression, captured in the Greek term *kath auto*. Expression and signification *kath auto* both perform the undoing of the very structures of (free) subjectivity that would seek to constitute it. The well-known distinction and relation between the *dire* and the *dit* marks this undoing. As John Llewelyn has put it, “Levinas says that . . . every dictum must be dedicted, or, rather, that it already has been.”<sup>17</sup> Indeed, Levinas closes the “Preface” to *Totality and Infinity* with the remark that what has been said in the prefatory remarks must be submitted to the “unsaying” of the analysis. Every dictation, every dictum, must be dedicted.

Further, as singular, the materiality of the given breaks with the temporal structure of the conventional notion of experience. The singular given is not reducible to perception. This much is clear in all of Levinas’s work. Thus the given is not, properly speaking, exhibited. But this does not put in

question our claim that we must understand the given in its *sense*. In *Dieu, la mort, et temps*, Levinas will remind us that the phenomenological notion of sense is not equivalent to the reduction to "exhibition"; rather, sense must be understood as the "idea of a diachrony of truth where the said must be unsaid."<sup>18</sup> The sense of the given lies in the diachronic time structure in and through which the said is unsaid. We might call diachrony the *medium* through which the given is given as singular and therefore the interruption of a common time that dedicts the dictum.<sup>19</sup> The intertwining of the saying and the said—the given and its temporal medium—doubles the sense of the given, extending its signification outside the time of the subject to whom the said is manifest and over to the time of the other.

The given undoes or unsays presence in diachrony in its extension into immemorial time. But, as Llewelyn has pointed out, this unsaying presupposes the saying itself—"independent," we might say, of its dedictive manifestation in the said. Llewelyn calls this *prediction*. Here is where Levinas's account, and to a certain extent any account, stumbles a bit. Such a stumble is at least in part, inherent in the problematic itself. As Llewelyn puts it:

Prediction can be a saying that has a priority prior to any purely ontological or epistemological apriority. This saying belongs as it were to a past, but a past more passed than any that can be comprehended within a synthesis of recollection. It exceeds the memory of the living and the memory of the dead. . . . This prediction is prior to the diction of heard words and understood message. . . . It is the expression of the human being itself which tears open the envelope in which the message is contained.<sup>20</sup>

This tearing "happens" prior to its being rendered said; the time of the other already is this tearing. The message is torn before the diction of the said is abused and so may be called something like the condition of the abuse of language. Our access to this work of prediction is both necessary and riddled with paradox. Prediction is necessary as that item in sense-bestowal from the outside which animates the saying/said intertwining, that which dedicts the dictum, and therefore that which expels the subject from itself without alienation. At stake, then, is *psychisme*—the "soul of the soul"<sup>21</sup>—the creation of the oneself in the moment of accusation, and so the hither-side itself as the maternal ground of sense.

### III

This is where the work of Jean-Luc Marion becomes phenomenologically significant. In what follows, I would like to suggest the possibility that Marion's notion of the icon works as something along the lines of the

prediction of the given. First, though, some remarks on the proximity of Marion's work to that of Levinas.

Marion's remarks on the *me* at the close of *Réduction et donation*<sup>22</sup> repeat much of the phenomenological ground of Levinas's conception of subjectivity, which, as we have argued above, is an irreducible moment in a sense-bestowal from the outside. For Marion, it is the logic of the claim that disrupts the self-identity of the subject. He writes that:

the claim calls *me*. I have not even been able to say *I* before the claim has already hailed me, and therefore has taken and comprehended me, because it has summoned and named me as a *me*. Indeed, what can I answer to a claim, if not "*me voici!* Speak!," such that I no longer have to speak (myself) in the name of *I*? The claim alone first speaks and therefore exempts me from the *I* and establishes me as a *me*.

(ReD, 297/198)

Marion does not here develop a diachronic notion of the time-structure of this subjectivity—and this may be a problem still unresolved in his phenomenology—but it is clearly called for. The *call* is originary; that is, before its modification in and by the constituting subject, the call already constitutes the subject who is called. The *me* precedes the *I* and this provocation of the *me* by the call puts an absolute hold on the subject subjected to it. Marion writes that, in the experience of the call:

the *I* is experienced as claimed, assigned, and convoked in the accusative, deprived of its right to the nominative that names every thing in the manner of an accused; interpellated in the accusative, dispossessed of the nominative by the appeal lodged against it, the *me* manifests phenomenally the absence of any *I*. Under the in this sense absolute hold of the claim, the *me* that it provokes attests to the relegation of any transcendental or constituting *I*.

(ReD, 298/199)

These two passages establish the proximity, if not coincidence, of the phenomenological field in Marion and Levinas.<sup>23</sup> What still remains to be described in this account is how the given gives itself such that the call assigns the subject in the accusative. Indeed, despite the title of the book, *Réduction et donation* explicates, not so much the given itself, but rather the relation of the call to the subject primarily the subject as *interloqué*, the subject on its last appeal who merely utters, in response, "*me voici*." The call appeals without being subjected to the conditions and determinations of a constituting subjectivity; this is what is discovered in the "third reduction" Marion advocates at the close of *Réduction et donation*. He writes:

The originary absence of conditions and determinations of the claim allow it to appeal, without any limit, as much to what is not objectivated as to what is objectivated, as much to what does not have to be as to what must be. The last reduction reduces to the *interloqué*, and hence gives all that can call and be called.

(ReD, 305/205)

How does this call give itself such that it establishes itself outside of objectivity and Being, beyond the order of knowing and the order of being? This question leads Marion to conclude *Réduction et donation* with the note that to “think givenness as such—as originally unconditional,” new paradoxes must be explored.

This project was to some extent already taken up in *Dieu sans l'être*<sup>24</sup>—published some seven years before *Réduction et donation*—in terms of the contrastive relation between the idol and the icon. The distinction between idol and icon was of course first marked by Marion in *L'idole et la distance*, but the opening chapter of *Dieu sans l'être* most decisively outlines the significance of the icon. Whereas the idol “depends on the gaze (*regard*) that it satisfies” (DSE, 19/10) and “returns the gaze to itself” (DSE, 21/12), the icon “does not result from a vision, but rather provokes it” (DSE, 28/17). Idol and icon are modalities in which transcendence gathers itself in the given, but the difference is decisive: only the icon puts the primacy of seeing, being, and knowing in question.

Iconic givenness is therefore reducible neither to the aim of perceiving consciousness (*le regard*) nor to the general economy of being. The icon does not signify on the basis of something other than itself. Rather, the icon is “an origin without original” and “depends only on itself” (DSE, 33/20). The essence of the icon “comes to it from elsewhere, or comes to it as that elsewhere whose invisible strangeness saturates the visibility of the face with sense (*sens*)” (DSE, 34/21). The icon aims at the gaze, and therefore overturns the logic of the idol. In the icon,

the gaze no longer belongs here to the man who aims as far as the first visible, less yet to an artist; such a gaze here belongs to the icon itself, where the invisible only becomes visible intentionally, hence by its aim. If man, by his gaze, renders the idol possible, in reverent contemplation of the icon, on the contrary, the gaze of the invisible, in person, aims at the human. The icon regards us, it *concerns* us.

(DSE, 31/19)

The concern the icon provokes in us is plain: to be venerated (*à vénérer*). *Le regard* of the subject is displaced as the invisibility of the icon regards the subject in the word and paint. Iconic givenness is dedictive, the constitutive moment of which lies in the reversal of the intentional structure of relation.

Veneration, the proper relation of the subject to the icon, reverses the aim, and so the gaze plays a responsive role, not a constitutive one. The gaze responds to the glory of the icon—or its “height,” to borrow a term from Levinas. Marion claims that:

the icon displaces the limits of our visibility to the measure of its own—its glory. It transforms us in its glory by allowing this glory to shine on our face as its mirror—but a mirror consumed by that very glory, transfigured with invisibility, and, by dint of being saturated beyond itself from that glory, becoming, strictly though imperfectly, the icon of it: the visibility of the invisible as such.

(DSE, 34/22)

The transcendence of the icon shines in the icon, but cannot be reducible to how that light is gathered in the given itself. *That* gathering is appropriate to the idol. The icon, however, measures itself. Or, perhaps better, the icon is measured from the hither-side, and so marks the limits of our visibility by displacing the origin of the sense of the icon from the gaze to the invisible. The wood and paint of the icon is not, properly speaking, *seen*. The icon regards us.

In his recent work, Marion has come to call this iconic givenness *le phénomène saturé*,<sup>25</sup> both in *Étant donné* and in the essay “The Saturated Phenomenon.”<sup>26</sup> In both the book and the essay, Marion outlines the fundamental features of *le phénomène saturé* in terms of its distinction from phenomenon in the Kantian sense of the term, though clearly the distinction is intended to hold for transcendental philosophy in general (and hence for the letter of Husserlian phenomenology). This means primarily that Marion wants to distinguish the modality of givenness of that which is *saturé* from that which is given under the transcendental analytic and the schematism. This is to say, the saturated phenomenon is neither supported by the categories of the understanding nor constituted by acts of the imagination. Marion writes that:

in giving itself absolutely, the saturated phenomenon gives itself also as absolute-free from any analogy with the experience that is already seen, objectivized, and comprehended. It frees itself therefrom because it depends on no horizon. On the contrary, the saturated phenomenon either simply saturates the horizon, or it multiplies the horizon in order to saturate it that much more, or it exceeds the horizon and finds itself cast out from it. But this very disfiguration remains a manifestation.

(SP, 118)

The disfiguration of conventional notions of manifestation in the saturated phenomenon owes to the counter-experiential “origins” of its givenness.<sup>27</sup> The term *contre-expérience*—which does not denote a “non-experience,” but

is rather a counter to subjectively constituted experience—refers to the way in which the saturated phenomenon is not, strictly speaking, “seeable” (*regardable*), as it does not rest on “conditions of objectivation” (ED, 300). Rather, saturation confounds vision. The subject “sees the overabundance of intuitive givenness . . . as blurred by the overly short lens, the overly restricted aperture, the overly narrow frame that receives it”; the saturated phenomenon “overexposes” the eye and “the normal conditions of experience” (SP, 119). This confounding of vision overturns the transcendental idealist prerogative of establishing the subjective conditions of the possibility of intuition. The saturated phenomenon returns to the subject another set of matters altogether:

Because the saturated phenomenon gives without conditions . . . phenomenology discovers its prior possibility: not only the possibility that surpasses effectivity, but the possibility that surpasses the very conditions of possibility, the possibility of unconditioned possibility—said otherwise, the possibility of the impossible, the saturated phenomenon. (ED, 304)

This paradox of unconditioned givenness, givenness without the support of constituting subjectivity, lies in the reversal of the transcendental: what was constituting is constituted. So it is of note that, just prior to this passage, Marion writes that, in this passivity, the bestowal of sense is inverted (*sa donation de sens [Sinngebung] s'inverse*) (ED, 302). And, if we recall the remarks from Husserl that opened the present essay, it is also of note that Marion will elsewhere say that the saturated phenomenon “cannot be born” (SP, 114). The saturated phenomenon cannot be born because it is the unconditioned maternal figure. It gives birth to the subject on its last appeal.

It should be clear then how Marion’s analysis of the unconditioned given, whether as the icon or as the saturated phenomenon, intertwines the dictive and dedictive. Saturation inverts the gaze; what shines forth from the icon is born from the hither-side of the icon—the invisible—and so the gaze is provoked to respond to the glory of its light with veneration, not fascination. There remains still the contribution his work has to give to what we are calling, following Llewelyn, the predictive work of the given. The contribution of the icon and the saturated phenomenon to this problematic lies in our understanding of the term *donation*. In Carlson’s English translation of *Réduction et donation*, the term is rendered as givenness. Now, from a certain standpoint, this is appropriate. The connection between gift (*don*), the given (*donné*), and givenness (*donation*) is of course central for Marion—not to mention the centrality of the German equivalents—so to a certain extent givenness is the appropriate translation.

However, the danger of such a rendering is that, although it might preserve the dedictive function of *donation*, it covers over the predictive function



of the same. Let us briefly consider what a translation based on the literal cognate might offer the term. If we translate *donation* with the straightforward cognate "donation," then we preserve an important ambiguity and double sense. Donation functions as both something substantial and something akin to a gerund or verb. Donation is, perhaps firstly, a noun that denotes some *thing* that is given. This is part the justification for the translation of *donation* as givenness. But donation is also an activity, an activity of bestowing a gift, and so an activity that lies behind the given itself as the condition of both its possibility and of its sense. Donation in its gerundive or verbal sense gathers this action in the term. A donation that is given has its sense on the basis of the giving that gives it; or better, and to avoid the economy of exchange that *donation* seeks to dispute, a donation has its sense only on the basis of donation. The one who donates the donation gives the donation sense. Further, a donation renders, in terms of the double sense of the donation, the I or me who receives passive; I have no say in the sense of the donation, but only a response. Though clarified to the point of complete redefinition by Marion, the term givenness nevertheless runs the risk of concealing the active dimension of *donation* in favor of a description of the qualitative substantiality of the given. And that is a significant risk, for it would make it more difficult to distinguish iconic givenness from a performatively revamped form of phenomenality.

This is precisely why I have here suggested that the term donation preserves both the substantial and gerundive or verbal sense of the term. We can see how this double sense is deployed explicitly in the performativity of the icon as described in *Dieu sans l'être*. The *donation* of the icon alters the performativity of the material medium in which it manifests itself. This alteration is firstly seen in the deductive function of its excess. But the predictive logic is glimpsed when we consider the animation of the visible material by and only from what Marion calls the *invisible*. The icon takes on a *persona*,<sup>28</sup> but it must be understood that:

the *persona* attested its presence only by that which itself most properly characterizes it, the aim of an intention (*stokhasma*) that a gaze sets in operation. The icon lays out the material of wood and paint in such a way that there appears in them the intention of a transpiercing gaze emanating from them. . . . [S]uch a gaze belongs to the icon itself, where the invisible only becomes visible intentionally, hence by *its* aim.

(DSE, 30–31/18–19; my emphasis)

The aim or the intention that animates the iconic elements of wood and paint comes from the hither-side alone. It halts and obligates the gaze that would regard it, and thus it unsays the said of its manifestation. This halting is possible only on the basis of the invisibility that animates from the hither-side. The donation of the icon therefore captures both what is donated (the

saturated wood and paint) and the activity of donating (set out from the invisible itself). This is why Marion will say repeatedly in *Dieu sans l'être* that the icon envisages us. And, we might further wonder if with the notion of icon Marion captures, in an aesthetic example, something of the testimonial dimension of language Levinas struggles to articulate in the final chapter of *Otherwise than being*. Might Celan's poetry, Levi's witness, Lanzmann's *Shoah* all perform as an icon—letters, voices, faces, images that envisage us—and so halt the gaze of the reader-witness with material saturated by the invisible voices of the victims of the Holocaust? If the iconic performance of testimony gathers the invisible in the visibility of word and image, then might *this* icon signify, not God or saintliness, but irrecusable obligation?

#### IV

If the icon offers a performativity that contains a testimonial moment, then we should not be surprised that, for Marion, the saturated phenomenon has ultimate ethical significance. Hence, as a point of conclusion, I would like to briefly outline some of the ethical implications of how Levinas and Marion conceive sense-bestowal from the outside.

The structural proximity of Levinas and Marion has heretofore been made evident, but the ethical purchase of such structures remains to be explored. It is clear how Levinas's conception of *une Sinngebung éthique* clearly places respect for the other first in the interplay of responsibility and response. We will not rehearse his already familiar ethics of the face here, except only to say that a sense-bestowal from the outside puts my obligation to the other first and before my will. The other commands from the position of height in the signification of the facing face. In the case of Marion, our clue to the ethical signification of the icon arises in the displacement of seeing in favor of the first position of veneration.

The icon par excellence is already ethical; Marion writes of "every icon where *agapé* would envisage us" (DSE, 171/119) as the most fundamental field of investigation. Indeed, *agapé* is the moment where the play of the icon envisages our gaze with is immediately transpiercing force, where love blurs the vision the subject has of his/her own world. Marion writes that

the icon begins to play . . . only at the moment when *agapé* envisages our gaze; henceforth our gaze alone cannot pretend to the icon except by deceiving itself again, since in no way does it depend on our gaze that a face envisages it, that it is envisaged by the distance that *agapé* dispenses and traverses. From *our* real point of view, the *agapé* that envisages remains unenvisageable (since, precisely, the icon intervenes only when it takes the initiative to envisage us and consists only in such an inversion of the gaze).

(DSE, 160/110–11)

*Agapé* establishes distance, but, in its ethical signification, traverses the distance between love and the oneself, between love and the *me*. This traversal is what makes it possible for love to concern me, for veneration to be transformative of my being, and for the message of the beyond being to speak commandingly and immediately in its excess. Love is imposed upon me; the subject subjected to love responds. Marion writes further that:

if we remain incapable of recognizing in it the ultimate advance of love, the fault is not its responsibility—love gives itself . . . love accomplishes the gift entirely, even if we scorn this gift: the fault returns to us, as the symptom of our impotence to read love, in other words, to love.

(DSE, 252/178)

Love is given to us within the economy of being, but its genesis “begins” outside being. Therefore, the play of being—of love and liberation, hatred and oppression—cannot contest the gift of love, nor can that play establish it. Liberation and oppression are at the level of response, always late to the *donation* of the *don*, late to the love given to humanity by, on Marion’s account, ~~God~~. One can see echoes of Levinas’s conception of the ethical relation here, as well as how Marion’s conception of *agapé* avoids some of the problems Levinas has identified with love. The echo of a Levinasian ethic comes in the figure of distance and traversal. Consider, e.g., those places where, in *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas will speak of the futurity that comes across “an absolute interval whose other shore the Other . . . is alone capable of marking” (TeI, 260/283), of “the absolute interval of separation” (TeI, 30/59), and how, in the living presence of the face there “gapes open the interval of transcendence” (TeI, 210/233). *Agapé*, for Marion, begins with ~~God~~ and therefore, if the argument of *Dieu sans l’être* is successful, love is not reducible to the economy of Being. Because love comes from outside being (as obligation does for Levinas), love is fundamentally inaccessible to us, while at the same time commanding us to charity; indeed, Marion will write that to say love and charity is to say the same thing (DSE, 12/3). Charity is the response of responsibility. (One can wonder further at this point what proximity there is in Marion’s evocation of charity and Levinas’s claim that liturgy is the work of the ethical subject.)<sup>29</sup> With regard to Levinas’s hesitations about the concept of love, the fact that Marion locates the genesis of love outside being makes it impossible to claim that love absorbs the lovers, cutting them off from the others who also obligate. Charity, the response to the gift of love, obligates us without closure, for to close the relation of love (as between lovers) would certainly be to return love to being.

But there is an important difference. For Levinas, the sense of obligation issues from the singular other. And in this singular other, the third party—all others—also signifies. On Marion’s account, however, we are obligated

to the other on the basis of a love issued from beyond the social relation; ~~God~~ gives the gift of *agapé*, not the other. A number of issues arise. Firstly, what account of temporality would allow Marion's love and sociality to work? Diachronic time, seemingly called for in his account of the call, would still leave the other and myself in a shared time; the dislocation of time would be between the time of ~~God~~ and us. How would this shared time obligate me to the other as singular? Or am I only obligated to the other insofar as I am obligated by ~~God~~'s gift of love? Does this authorize a certain kind of indifference to the other as singular? Though he clearly wants to distinguish himself from those, like Kant, who conceive God as the moral author of the universe,<sup>30</sup> does not Marion return to a kind of moral authorship in his conception of *agapé*? Is the charitable response to the other really a response of responsibility?, for to respond responsibly would be to respond to the intertwining of the site/non-site of ethical sense. Do we respond to the other in charity, or to ~~God~~? That is, do we concern ourselves with the other for the sake of the other, or for the sake of ~~God~~? To be bluntly phenomenological, is this genuinely the way in which obligation arises?

We have now arrived at questions that far exceed the present essay. But, as I hope to have shown, they are questions justified ultimately by the sense-bestowal that comes from a world saturated by something beyond what is merely given, beyond what I may render of its words, images, and faces. It is a world whose saturation renders me.

### Endnotes

- 1 Fink has, perhaps most notably, conceived of sense-bestowal as a creative act. For example, see his "Die Phänomenologische Philosophie Edmund Husserls in der Gegenwartigen Kritik," in *Studien zur Phänomenologie 1930-1939* (Den Haag: Martinus Nijhoff, 1966). There, Fink writes: "Wenn wir auch dieses transzendente Leben nicht mehr als rezeptiv auffassen, so bleibt sein eigentlicher Charakter noch unbestimmt. Erst die konstitutive Interpretation desselben weist es als *Kreation* aus" (p. 143).
- 2 Edmund Husserl, *Ideen zu einer reinen Phänomenologie und phänomenologischen Philosophie. Drittes Buch, Die Phänomenologie und die Fundamente der Wissenschaften*, ed. M. Biemel. *Husserliana V* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1971), p. 80; *Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and to a Phenomenological Philosophy: Third Book*, trans. Ted Klein and William E. Pohl (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1980), p. 69. For some remarks on the language of "mothers," see the opening pages of James Hart, *The Person and the Common Life* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1990).
- 3 The link between freedom and sense bestowal is the basic thesis of Levinas's 1940 essay "L'oeuvre d'Edmund Husserl," in *En découvrant l'existence avec Husserl et Heidegger* (Paris: Vrin, 1988), p. 39; "The Work of Edmund Husserl," in *Discovering Existence with Husserl*, trans. Richard Cohen and Michael Smith (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1998), p. 75.
- 4 Emmanuel Levinas, "Réflexions sur la 'technique' phénoménologique," in *En découvrant l'existence avec Husserl et Heidegger*, p. 123; "Reflections on Phenomenological 'Technique,'" *Discovering Existence with Husserl*, p. 102.

- 5 "Experience" is of course a contested term. I here employ the word to indicate the leading clue to the constitutive structures of the ethical relation. Directly to the heart of our present topic, Levinas will remark in *Dieu, la mort, et le temps* (Paris: Bernard Grasset, 1993), p. 241, that "it is necessary to put in question experience as the source of every sense." It is therefore necessary to be sensitive to the term in its traditional sense and the sense Levinas ascribes to it in, for example, *Totality and Infinity*: a radical empiricism.
- 6 Emmanuel Levinas, *Totalité et infini* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1961), p. 182; *Totality and Infinity* trans. Alphonso Lingis (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic, 1996), p. 207. Hereafter cited as TeI, with French edition pagination first, followed by English translation pagination.
- 7 In 1928–1929, Levinas attended lectures of Husserl where, in addition to lectures on intersubjectivity, the Master repeated the "Phenomenological Psychology" course of Summer 1925 (published as *Husserliana X*). Husserl's unpublished additions to those lectures from 1929 (cf., e.g., B I, 9, VII) include reflections on the meaning of the term "intersubjective reduction," hence it would seem clear that the term originates from this encounter with Husserl's thought (and not simply from Levinas's own prerogative).
- 8 It is important to note that Levinas closes the 1930 *Theory of Intuition* book with remarks concerning the richness of the intersubjective reduction, and then explicitly rehabilitates the term, with some detail, as late as "Philosophie et eveil" from 1978. Indeed, throughout Levinas's career the term intersubjective reduction is evoked as the "other side" of Husserl's analyses, though always somewhat cryptically.
- 9 Emmanuel Levinas, "Conscience non-intentionnelle," in *Entre Nous* (Paris: Éditions Grasset, 1991), p. 133.
- 10 On the contrast between auto- and hetero-affection, see Levinas's *Autrement qu'être, ou au-delà de l'essence* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1974), p. 155; *Otherwise than being, or Beyond Essence*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1988), p. 121. Hereafter cited as AE with French edition pagination first, followed by English translation pagination.
- 11 Emmanuel Levinas, *Éthique et infini* (Paris: Fayard, 1982), p. 85; *Ethics and Infinity*, trans. Richard A. Cohen (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1988), p. 90.
- 12 For a more elaborate reading of this essay, see my "From Representation to Materiality," *International Studies in Philosophy* 30:4 (1998): 23–38.
- 13 Emmanuel Levinas, "La ruine de la représentation," in *En découvrant l'existence avec Husserl et Heidegger*, p. 135; "The Ruin of Representation," in *Discovering Existence with Husserl*, p. 121.
- 14 Cf., Emmanuel Levinas, "Réflexions sur la 'technique' phénoménologique," in *Cahiers de Royaumont: Philosophie No. III* (Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1959), 111; "Reflections on the Phenomenological Technique," pp. 105ff.
- 15 Emmanuel Levinas, *Autrement qu'être*, p. 33; *Otherwise than being*, p. 26.
- 16 Rimbaud: "Je est une autre," from his letters to Izambard and Demyen, and Celan's "Ich bin du, wenn/ich ich bin."
- 17 John Llewelyn, "Levinas's Critical and Hypocritical Diction," *Philosophy Today* 41 (Supplement 1997): 36.
- 18 Cf., *Dieu, la mort, et le temps*, p. 241.
- 19 "The diachrony of the time of the other interrupting my time interrupts any question of priority presupposing a common time, just as no question of logical question can arise between the diction of the saying and the diction of the said unless the former is neutralized by being reduced to the latter" (Llewelyn, "Levinas's Critical and Hypocritical Diction," p. 36).

- 20 Ibid., pp. 30–31.
- 21 Ibid., p. 30.
- 22 Jean-Luc Marion. *Réduction et donation* (Paris: PUF, 1989); *Reduction and Givenness*, trans. Thomas A. Carlson (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1998). Hereafter cited as ReD with French edition pagination first, followed by English translation pagination.
- 23 It is important at this point to mark the difference between the direction Levinas takes these insights and the way Marion, at least in his early work, insists that “to outwit (*déjouer*) Being thus would require more than the revocation of ontological difference in favor of another difference” (DSE, 126/85). See also Marion’s *L’idole et distance* (Paris: Éditions Grasset et Fasquelle, 1977), especially pp. 279–283.
- 24 Jean-Luc Marion, *Dieu sans l’être* (Paris: PUF, 1991); *God without Being*, trans. Thomas A. Carlson (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991). Hereafter cited as DSE with French edition pagination first, followed by English translation pagination.
- 25 On the relation between the icon and *le phénomène saturé*, see Jean-Luc Marion, *Étant donné* (Paris: PUF, 1997), especially pp. 324f., where he describes how the icon gathers together the particular characteristics of the saturated phenomenon. This text will hereafter be referred to as ED.
- 26 Jean-Luc Marion, “The Saturated Phenomenon,” trans. Thomas A. Carlson, *Philosophy Today* 40 (Spring 1996): 103–24. Hereafter referred to as SP.
- 27 See SP, pp. 119ff. and ED, pp. 300ff.
- 28 Marion notes that the Latin *persona* is a Church Fathers translation of *hypo-stasis*, and so does not denote substantial presence, but rather the emanation of the invisible through the visible (DSE, 30f./18f.).
- 29 On liturgy, cf., Emmanuel Levinas, “La trace de l’autre,” in *En découvrant l’existence avec Husserl et Heidegger*, p. 198. Also, see Levinas’s remark that “charity is impossible without justice” and that “justice is deformed without charity.” “Philosophie, justice, et amour,” in *Entre Nous* (Paris: Éditions Grasset, 1991), p. 139.
- 30 This is a problem for Marion because, to put it simply, such authorship is based on a finite determination of “God” (see DSE, 46ff./30ff.).

## AUTONOMY AND ALTERITY

## Moral obligation in Sartre and Levinas

*Steven Hendley*

Source: *Journal of the British Society for Phenomenology* 27(3) (1996): 246–66.

The idea of autonomy is a radically contested notion in the work of Jean-Paul Sartre and Emmanuel Levinas. For Sartre, on the one hand, it is absolutely central to his moral and political thought. Throughout the twists and turns of his life's work the idea of autonomy has formed an endlessly reworked, but never abandoned, horizon for the articulation of his normative vision of human existence. For Levinas, on the other hand, it is just such an emphasis on autonomy that is radically misguided in most modern moral and political theory. In a critique of what he sees as a tendency running with few exceptions throughout the western philosophical tradition, Levinas argues that the pursuit of autonomy has blinded us to the properly heteronomous grounds of our moral obligations to others<sup>1</sup>, an unconditional sense of obligation that is found only in our acknowledgment of the alterity of the Other. Sartre, in contrast, argues that autonomy is only genuinely possible in a socially responsible sense. As he put it, "I cannot make liberty my aim unless I make that of others equally my aim."<sup>2</sup> Apart from this horizon in which autonomy would be realized through the cooperative affirmation of everyone's liberty, a sense of obligation toward others only constitutes a rather mystified form of alienation.<sup>3</sup>

In this paper, I propose to assess the cogency of Levinas's concerns with the idea of autonomy in terms of the difficulties inherent in Sartre's moral philosophy and to examine the way Levinas's work provides a mode of addressing Sartre's concerns with the alienating character of a sense of obligation that would not be a product of our cooperative affirmation of liberty. For Levinas's ideas may be used in such a way as to go productively beyond the limits of Sartre's understanding of our normative relations with others without, as might be expected, simply undercutting his concerns with autonomy. Though, as I shall argue here with Levinas, a Sartrean affirmation

of autonomy provides an insufficient basis to account adequately for our moral obligations to others, it is possible to think Sartre's concerns with autonomy and Levinas's concerns with alterity together. Indeed, they must be thought together as two distinguishable, though essentially connected aspects of a just community – one capable of autonomously pursuing its shared concerns and projects but also capable of a respect for the alterity of the Other which makes that sense of autonomy possible while also calling it into question.

### I. The ethical foundations of our relation to the other in Sartre and Levinas

Sartre and Levinas have sometimes been contrasted with respect to the relative optimism or pessimism of their portrayals of interpersonal relations.<sup>4</sup> Admittedly relations to others look rather bleak in *Being and Nothingness* where the predominant terms of description are conflictual, the Other cast as a perpetual threat to my freedom.<sup>5</sup> Certainly Levinas's account in terms of "generosity, incapable of approaching the other with empty hands"<sup>6</sup> offers a more affirmative vision of interpersonal relations. But as Sartre's own reflections on generosity and authentic love in the posthumously published *Notebooks for an Ethics* bear out and as his discussions of positive forms of reciprocity mediated by shared social practices in his later works had previously established, this contrast does not touch on any fundamental difference between them.<sup>7</sup>

Fundamental differences only begin to emerge with respect to their understandings of the ethical foundations of our relations to others. For Sartre my affirmation of the Other's freedom is a consequence of my authentic affirmation of my own freedom. As he put it in "Existentialism is a Humanism,"

when once a man has seen that values depend upon himself, in that state of forsakenness he can will only one thing, and that is freedom as the foundation of all values. . . . And in thus willing freedom, we discover that it depends entirely upon the freedom of others and that the freedom of others depends upon our own. . . . I cannot make liberty my aim unless I make that of others equally my aim.<sup>8</sup>

There are two parts to his argument. The first concerns why those who have overcome the "spirit of seriousness," in which values are taken as objectively inscribed in Being, and authentically accepted their own freedom as the foundation of all values must will that freedom itself as a value.<sup>9</sup> The second extends this affirmation to the freedom of everyone by claiming that I cannot will my freedom without also willing the freedom of others.

How Sartre does or could attempt to defend these claims is a subject that has been extensively discussed and we cannot hope to reproduce the nuances



of that discussion here. There is, however, one feature of the argument that merits our immediate attention and that is the argument's teleological structure. As Thomas Anderson has noted, Sartre's position judges the ethical validity of an act with respect to its consequences for our freedom.<sup>10</sup> But beyond that, the argument is based in an appeal to freedom as a good an agent cannot but affirm as the ultimate telos of his or her endeavors, at least once the authentic insight that freedom is the foundation of all values has been achieved.

Why this should be the case is, yet again, a subject of much discussion. Most have supposed that the argument assumes the value of logical consistency, leaning on an observation made by Sartre just prior to the quotation above that the attitude of good faith is one of "strict consistency."<sup>11</sup> On this interpretation, the argument turns on the logical inconsistency that would be involved in willing anything as valuable and not also willing the freedom that is the foundation of that value and so is presupposed in willing it.<sup>12</sup> In an account that seems more faithful to the active or performative character of Sartre's argument (the argument turns, after all, not on what authentic individuals must logically affirm but on what they must do or will), Thomas Flynn has suggested that the argument may turn on a "counterperformative" rather than logical sense of inconsistency. As he puts it, "Once I am aware that my freedom is the foundation of all values . . . I cannot mean what I say when I utter the sentence: 'I hereby choose unfreedom.' This would be a futile and empty gesture; in fact, a *nonact*, one might say. . . . Here choosing unfreedom is like choosing not to choose."<sup>13</sup> For those who are aware that their freedom is the foundation of all their values not willing their freedom would amount to not willing anything of value. It would be an act that performatively undermined the action of freely willing anything as valuable by failing to will the freedom they know is involved in that very action. They could, of course, deceive themselves about the freedom they are performatively affirming in willing anything of value. But in doing so they would cease to be authentic.

On this reading, it is the structure of the act of becoming authentically aware of freedom as the foundation of all values that impels us to value freedom itself. The act of valuing freedom, in other words, is a spontaneous consequence of that awareness. For this reason it is misleading to speak of an obligation or a duty to will my freedom. An obligation or a duty, in its traditional deontological sense, is an unconditional command to do what is right regardless of what I desire or value as good. It implies a sense of what is right that is, as John Rawls puts it, borrowing from Kant, "prior to the good" in that sense.<sup>14</sup> Sartre's ethic, on the other hand, appeals to the spontaneous value that freedom must have for any agent who authentically recognizes it as the foundation of all value. It is an ethic grounded in the teleological pursuit of that good. As Sartre himself argues in his *Notebooks for an Ethics*, "the end that my freedom posits never has the character of a

demand or a duty, but only that of an ideal. My free choice posits values and objects of value. It cannot posit obligations."<sup>15</sup>

Likewise, willing the freedom of others is not an obligation to which authentic individuals must submit but is simply part and parcel of what must be done in order to will the good of their own freedom.<sup>16</sup> The fundamental difference with Levinas lies here. For Levinas morality begins in the way my relation to the Other calls the pursuit of my freedom into question.<sup>17</sup> As he develops this idea, everything else in the world is an invitation to my freedom, a potentially unlimited expanse of opportunities to pursue my life as I see fit. But in the face of the Other I find my freedom to use the world as I see fit called into question. Not that other people are too strong to succumb to my will. Often they are not. But even then, there is what Levinas describes as a resistance to my aims that is "beyond all measure . . . the resistance of what has no resistance . . . ethical resistance." Or, as he also puts it, the face of the Other appears to me in the form of a command: Thou Shalt Not Kill.<sup>18</sup>

I believe Levinas's point here is just that one cannot experience the alterity of another person, their presence as another like oneself but also totally other than oneself, without having one's freedom to act as one pleases called into question. The one necessarily implies the other. To recognize the alterity of the Other is to recognize another like oneself who has claims to make on the world in terms of their own concerns and sense of what is valuable. And this is to experience one's freedom as judged in the light of those claims, as called to justify itself in the light of that judgement. In just the way my engagement in a conversation requires a recognition of the right of my interlocutor to a response to his or her questions and proposals, so Levinas argues that my most primordial relation with the alterity of another person always involves a recognition of the right of the Other to a response – to a justification of my position which takes the judgement of the Other into account.<sup>19</sup> Or, to turn the issue around, my failure to recognize that right is also a failure to recognize any fundamental difference between another person and any other thing I might use in the world around me – a failure to recognize the Other *as other*.

Levinas's characterization of my encounter with the Other is not entirely alien to Sartre's. Both stress that my most primordial relation with the Other is not a matter of grasping the Other as an object of cognition but of finding myself in the gaze of the Other or, for Levinas, finding myself judged by the other.<sup>20</sup> But Levinas goes beyond Sartre's analysis in calling attention to what he argues is an essentially ethical dimension of that relation.<sup>21</sup> "The face," Levinas writes, "opens the primordial discourse whose first word is obligation."<sup>22</sup> To find myself before another is not merely to find myself objectified by the Other's gaze. It is to find myself obliged to respond to the Other in a way which makes the concerns of the Other my own, even to the point of "substitution," as Levinas has it, "of putting oneself in the place

of the other."<sup>23</sup> Being called to justify myself before the Other is being called to put myself in his or her place, to cease subordinating the claims of the Other to my own and begin a disinterested<sup>24</sup> discourse in which I subordinate my concerns with my claims to a concern with their justification for the Other.

An ethical relation to the Other, for Levinas, is one that responds affirmatively to this call. It is not grounded, as with Sartre, in the affirmation of my freedom, in the teleological pursuit of a good I cannot but will in authenticity, but in a deontological sense of obligation which, as Sartre notes, cannot spring from my free choice of myself but only, as Levinas emphasizes, from a relation to the Other which calls my freedom into question. There can be, therefore, no justification of why I should respect the Other in the same way there could for Sartre. For there is no appeal to do the right thing by the Other as part and parcel of the pursuit of a good I value in its own right, such as my freedom. The face of the Other constitutes, for Levinas, the emergence of an unconditional sense of obligation that appears, as with Kant's moral law, as an unjustifiable fact.<sup>25</sup>

But it is this unjustifiable, unconditional sense of obligation toward the Other which underlies any genuine peace between myself and the other. Outside of this dimension of heteronomy there can only be multiple conflicting interests all asserting themselves for themselves against each other, as in war, or limiting themselves in relation to one another out of a concern for their own survival, as in the peace of the social contract. The dominance of autonomy in the Western philosophical tradition has, Levinas believes, occluded this dimension of heteronomy in human life leaving us unable to think of social relations beyond the options of war and a sense of peace that is founded on war, that is to say, on a self-interested desire to avoid the inconveniences of war. Levinas does not dismiss the value of this sense of peace. As he says, "Commerce is better than war . . ." <sup>26</sup> But in retrieving the heteronomous basis of our relations with others, Levinas means to articulate a sense of peace that would go beyond the tenuous peace that presupposes the interests of war and is always just this side of collapsing back into war; a sense of peace that would rest on a disinterested concern for justice rather than an enlightened, though still self-interested, concern for liberty.<sup>27</sup>

## II. Willing the liberty of the other in Sartre

These Levinasian concerns with autonomy and heteronomy bring us back to Sartre. For Levinas's account of the heteronomous character of our moral relations to others presupposes the moral inadequacy of an account based on an affirmation of our autonomy. We must, then, turn to an examination of Sartre's arguments for willing the liberty of others as a consequence of willing my own liberty to gauge the cogency of Levinas's critical account of autonomy as well as its relation to Sartre's normative project.

The arguments which Sartre has advanced for his claim<sup>28</sup> that in willing my freedom I must also will the freedom of others may, I believe, be usefully divided into two categories. There are those which attribute a structural or essential connection between willing my liberty and that of the Other by linking an authentic recognition of my liberty as valuable with a recognition of the liberty of the Other as valuable as well. The very idea of the value of my liberty, in other words, implies the value of the liberty of others. And there are those which attribute an instrumental connection between willing my liberty and that of the Other, arguing that it is instrumentally necessary or, at least, advantageous to the realization of my desire for a free life that I will the liberty of others.<sup>29</sup>

The most widely known argument of the first, structural sort is made in "Existentialism is a Humanism" in connection with a discussion of responsibility and runs as follows:

When we say that man chooses himself, we do mean that every one of us must choose himself; but by that we also mean that in choosing for himself he chooses for all men. For in effect, of all the actions a man may take in order to create himself as he wills to be, there is not one which is not creative, at the same time, of an image of man such as he believes he ought to be. To choose between this or that is at the same time to affirm the value of that which is chosen; for we are unable ever to choose the worse. What we choose is always the better; and nothing can be better for us unless it is better for all.<sup>30</sup>

As applied to the specific issue of willing the freedom of others, the point seems to be that in willing the value of my freedom I sketch an image of human beings such as I believe we ought to be and so choose to value not only my freedom but the freedom of all human beings in that very gesture. The argument turns, in effect, on what it means to apprehend something as good. As many commentators have pointed out, Sartre is not making a Kantian point here about universalizing rules of conduct but is instead arguing that my apprehension of something as good involves the projection of an image of that thing as an *exemplary* good, that is, as good for anyone capable of appreciating it.<sup>31</sup> It is in this sense that I cannot apprehend something as good for me without also apprehending it as good for others. Of course, it is possible to affirm something as good for me with respect to such a unique feature of who I am that it has no exemplary character beyond my own case. One must qualify Sartre's claim somewhat, then, with the standard proviso that one's affirmation of something as valuable is generalizable only to others who are similarly situated. But, as Anderson notes, we are all similarly situated with respect to freedom as the foundation of all values. In willing my freedom in that sense, as a foundation of all values, I am willing a sense of freedom that is shared by all human beings.<sup>32</sup> And so, in

affirming the value of my freedom I am affirming the value of the Other's freedom as well.

Granting the validity of the argument to this point, it is still unclear precisely what valuing the freedom of the Other entails. Anderson, in particular, argues that it need not entail that I "positively act to increase or enhance" the freedom of the Other.<sup>33</sup> Surely just because I recognize that something is good for all of us I am not, by virtue of that recognition, committed to struggling to increasing its presence for everyone. I may think that observing Picasso's "Guernica" is an exemplary good from which everyone would benefit. But I am not bound by that to raise funds to send it on the road so that everyone has ready access to it. Anderson does argue, however, that it entails opposing any interference with the freedom of the Other. It would seem strange, after all, if after affirming the value of everyone's viewing "Guernica" I then turn around and steal it, keeping it for my viewing alone. Similarly, it seems equally odd to recognize the value of everyone being free and then turn around and exploit, oppress, or otherwise interfere with the realization of that freedom.

As odd as that seems, however, I am not convinced that it is an incoherent option for reasons Anderson himself advances in connection with another structural argument of Sartre's from the *Notebooks for an Ethics*. Sartre argues there, in connection with his analysis of an appeal for help from another, that a refusal to respond positively to an appeal, to valorize the goal of the Other as a good whose realization merits my assistance, presupposes the spirit of seriousness in which I take my values, which I refuse to put aside in favor of the Other's, as "absolute."<sup>34</sup> The implicit idea here seems to be that the only reason I would have for not affirming the Other's goals as equally worthy of realization as my own is because I believed that mine were objectively more valuable, objectively more worthy of realization. But, as Anderson points out, I could simply "prefer" my goals, the realization of my freedom to that of the Other. "Preferring one freedom to another need not imply that it possesses some intrinsic value that the Other lacks. One may simply choose to value a particular freedom and not others, and that very choice will confer on it a value that the others will lack."<sup>35</sup> Sartre would be right *if* I had to give a reason for my choice that could, in principle, be as convincing to the Other as it is to myself. For in this context I would have to appeal to something worthwhile about my freedom which justified its meriting greater consideration than the Other's. But why should I have to justify my choice in such an impartial way? If I prefer my freedom to the Other's that is sufficient for it to have greater value *for me*.

But could not the same point be made in relation to opposing any interference with the freedom of others in the first argument? I may recognize the value of everyone's freedom and so regret any loss of freedom. But if I *prefer* my freedom to that of the Other and our projects conflict with one another, their loss of freedom may simply be a regrettable price I am willing

to pay for the realization of what is to me, because of my preference, a greater good: the realization of my freedom. Though it may seem odd and somewhat perverse for someone who affirms the value of everyone's having a chance to observe Picasso's "Guernica" to steal it and keep it for their viewing alone, it is a perfectly coherent gesture so long as they prefer their viewing to that of others. In such a case, the regrettable loss of denying access to others may be more than outweighed by the gain in access for oneself. Indeed, in a less perverse context, it is perfectly coherent for participants in competitive contests to recognize the value of anyone winning since they value it themselves and even to be able to share in the enjoyment of another contestant's victory. But this is not to say that it is inconsistent for them to put all their energies into making sure that everyone else loses. For even though they may value winning *per se* as an exemplary good, they prefer it in their own case.

Sartre's argument only makes the case that I should oppose any interference with the liberty of others if we presuppose not only that I value everyone's freedom but that I value everyone's freedom equally. But I fail to see how this sense of impartiality is implied in his argument. For with my gratuitous preference for my freedom I am not denying the value of freedom insofar as it is shared by everyone as the foundation of all values. I am simply preferring my freedom insofar as it is mine.<sup>36</sup> One might argue, however, that adopting a moral point of view toward one's choices implies a willingness to provide reasons for them that are impartial in the sense that they could be as convincing to the Other as they are to the one giving them. But such an appeal would amount, in a Levinasian spirit, to a recognition of the right of the Other to call me to justify my preferences, to call my freedom into question. It would, therefore, invoke the very dimension of heteronomy that Sartre's arguments intend to avoid.<sup>37</sup>

If equal consideration for the liberty of others is not essentially or structurally implied in the authentic recognition of the value of liberty, then perhaps it is instrumentally implied as a necessary or advantageous moment in the realization of my liberty. This seems to be the thrust of some of Sartre's other arguments whose basic character is summed up in the claim from "Existentialism is a Humanism" that "in thus willing freedom, we discover that it depends entirely upon the freedom of others and that the freedom of others depends upon our own. . . ." There appear to be two and, perhaps, three different versions of this line of argument. Anderson identifies two: an argument from social-political dependency and another from psychological dependency. He also discusses an argument from our desire for a meaningful existence which makes a similar instrumental connection which I will also consider here.

The first two arguments involve a reference to different ways in which the realization of my freedom is conditioned by the freedom of the Other. Both with respect to my concrete engagement in a social-political field and my

ability to know myself as a particular sort of person, my freedom to realize myself in the way I project for myself is conditioned by the decisions and actions of others. As Sartre has argued persuasively in the *Critique of Dialectical Reason*, individual freedom lived in isolation from others in a material field which otherwise unites us is only a freedom to act according to the exigencies of the social system as we find it. I am only free to realize the possibilities that have been opened up for me in terms of my position within the social ensemble but not free to reorganize the character and distribution of those possibilities. Hence, my freedom is alienated to the imperatives of the worked matter which forms and shapes our social existence. Only by willing the freedom of everyone, as members of a free community capable of pursuing shared practices in a milieu of reciprocity, is it possible to overcome this sense of alienation.<sup>38</sup>

In a similar vein I find myself dependent on others for my sense of self. As Sartre argued in "Existentialism is a Humanism," expanding on insights developed in *Being and Nothingness* with respect to my "being-for-others" and later developed especially in his studies on Genet and Flaubert,

the man who discovers himself directly in the *cogito* also discovers all the others, and discovers them as the condition of his own existence. He recognizes that he cannot be anything (in the sense in which one says one is spiritual, or that one is wicked or jealous) unless others recognize him as such. I cannot obtain any truth whatsoever about myself, except through the mediation of another.<sup>39</sup>

Though it is not immediately obvious why this psychological dependence should entail willing the freedom of others, the point becomes clearer as one reflects on the sort of recognition a person who values freedom would desire from another. As Robert Stone puts it, "inasmuch as I need recognition of my characteristics if I'm to realize them as mine at all, only a free recognition will count in my own eyes. A slave can 'recognize' me only as a being devoid of subjectivity, that is, as a master. But it's my freedom, not my domination, that I need recognition of."<sup>40</sup> Hence, any meaningful realization of myself as a free person depends on willing the freedom of others who might recognize me as such.

Taken together, these two senses of interdependency provide ample reason for Sartre's claim that in willing my freedom I discover that it depends on the freedom of others. No one is capable of freely inventing their lives as they project for themselves in isolation from others. Hence, any meaningful exercise of freedom depends on fostering the conditions for a free community. And from this perspective, the distinction between positively enhancing the liberty of others and merely opposing any interference with their liberty blurs. Though it may not be, strictly speaking, necessary that I actively support the freedom of others, it is clearly advantageous.

As Anderson argues, "Since I am dependent on others if I am to be free in the concrete order and to *be aware* of and value my freedom, I ought to acknowledge, value, and promote their freedom since that is the most likely way of encouraging a similar response from them."<sup>41</sup>

From a slightly different vantage point, Anderson has also made the case for a generally overlooked argument from both Sartre's and Simone de Beauvoir's texts based not so much on a valorization of freedom as our spontaneous desire for meaning in life.<sup>42</sup> Sartre writes in the *Notebooks for an Ethics* that the "task" of a human being not tempted by the desire to be God can only be to unveil the world, creating a meaning for the world where prior to that unveiling project there is only the indifference of being-in-itself.<sup>43</sup> But in willing the liberty of others I continue this task by willing the unveiling of the world from a multiplicity of perspectives. As Sartre puts this point,

to want others to make being exist in the world . . . to have a multi-dimensional future perpetually come into the world, to replace the closed-off and subjective totality as the ideal of unity by an open diversity of outward movements building on one another is in every case to posit that freedom is worth more than unfreedom.<sup>44</sup>

Hence, willing the liberty of others offers an advantageous way of enriching my own unveiling of the world, of providing a world richer in meaning than I could create for myself.

All told these three arguments go a long way, I believe, toward making the case Sartre wants to make for a sense of autonomy that can only be realized, as he put it in his 1964 lectures to the Gramsci Institute in Rome, through the "praxis of all men in association."<sup>45</sup> And as equal consideration for the liberty of the Other is clearly a necessary condition for such a free community, a dimension of impartiality is achieved that is lacking in the first structural arguments we considered. But it is difficult to see how this sense of equal consideration would extend to everyone, to the "praxis of all men," as Sartre intends it. Anderson makes this point in connection with the first two arguments from social-political and psychological interdependency.<sup>46</sup> For the degree to which others concretely impact on the realization of my freedom is variable. Some may be vitally important to my ability to be and recognize myself as the kind of person I desire while others are of only negligible importance for that project. Surely I do not need the recognition of everyone, but only those with whom I feel an affinity, whose judgement I value. And, though, in the best of all possible worlds my freedom might be maximized through what Marx called a "world-historical cooperation of individuals,"<sup>47</sup> lacking any persuasive arguments for the feasibility of that goal, it may make as much, if not more, sense to work cooperatively with those I can while ignoring the claims of those for whom remoteness or conflict of interest make such cooperation unlikely.



These reservations also seem applicable to the third argument, however, inasmuch as my unveiling of the meaning of the world is only enhanced by the freedom of those with whom I have some contact. For those whose lives are remote from mine it would seem unlikely that I would find any concrete point to willing their liberty. And in the case of those whose unveilings of the world conflict with mine,<sup>48</sup> my pursuit of meaning would tell against it. The general point is just that insofar as my interest in willing the liberty of others is an instrumental one, contingent on what is necessary or advantageous to realizing my liberty, my interest in the liberty of others is itself a conditional one. It is strong to the degree that our liberties affect one another and provide a concrete possibility of cooperation and reciprocity. It is weak to the degree that they do not.

But this is, after all, what one would expect given the teleological character of Sartre's argument. As we noted, there is no unconditional obligation to others that would be prior to or independent of advancing my own sense of the good. I will the liberty of others only as a function of willing my own. This need not imply that I will the liberty of others merely as a function of self-interest, as an enlightened way of using the Other as a means to my ends.<sup>49</sup> The sense of fraternity which is involved in joining with others in a common praxis seems to involve the emergence of a common sense of the good between us that is irreducible to a mere happy convergence of individual interests.<sup>50</sup> Though I may be led to will the liberty of the Other through its instrumental connection to that of my own, what I affirm through this is not merely the good of my own liberty, but that of a sense of liberty that can only be enjoyed in association with others – the good of belonging to a free community.<sup>51</sup> I come to discover, in effect, that I can only will my liberty in fraternity with others as *our* liberty.

But even understood in this way the conditional character of willing the liberty of the Other is not undermined. It is just that "the Other" is displaced to the position of those who do not, for one reason or another, share in our sense of fraternity. The traditional problem with a communitarian politics of the common good is precisely the possibility that our shared sense of the good will become an authoritarian principle which excludes dissent and marginalizes those who would call it into question.<sup>52</sup> This need not necessarily be the case. But the question still remains open as to why I or, perhaps more properly, we should respect, let alone foster, the liberty of those who do not impact or contribute to that of our own.

### III. Obligation, alienation, and the heteronomous grounds of autonomy

The conditional character of Sartre's arguments undercut their intended universality. Much as Levinas's position would lead us to expect, Sartre's

efforts come up short in failing to affirm an unconditional sense of obligation to the Other. But, for Sartre, accepting this sense of obligation is equivalent to accepting the alienation of my liberty to the Other. As we have already touched on, Sartre argued in his *Notebooks for an Ethics* that my free projection of an end as valuable cannot of itself give rise to an obligation. But if not from myself, then from whence does obligation arise? Sartre's answer is unequivocal: "the demand, the obligation, duty, come to the For-itself from the Other."<sup>53</sup> As he goes on to analyze it, a sense of duty or obligation implies the subordination of my freedom to that of the Other, to another's ends which make unconditional demands on my freedom. The abstract and impersonal sense of subordination to principle is ultimately grounded in the concrete subordination to another human being. "The ethics of duty is the ethics of slaves."<sup>54</sup>

Sartre analyzes the alienating character of obligation on this basis.

From the start the obligation has a dimension in the element of the other that I cannot reach. So it is not myself that I realize in this operation. Or rather I found myself along with the end, as is normal, but the end absorbs me without founding itself on me . . . The person who acts out of duty *does not recognize himself in his world*.<sup>55</sup>

As I am not the foundation of the ends which are posited for me by my obligations, I do not realize myself in fulfilling them. Consequently, I am alien to myself, unable to recognize myself in my endeavors in the same way workers are unable to recognize themselves in their labor under capitalism. Eventually Sartre was to come in the *Critique* to identify the grounds of these two senses of alienation with the practico-inert (Sartre's term for the inert, reified character of social multiplicities) field which places untranscendable demands on an isolated agent's conduct, whether these take the form of a demand for a particular form of work at a machine or for a particular form of life.<sup>56</sup> In either case, my freedom becomes, as in Kant's analysis of noumenal freedom, other to me, the realization not of my ends, but of the ends of the Other. "Not freedom as a choice to be made in some situation, but freedom as a *choice already made* . . ."<sup>57</sup>

In some respects Levinas's analysis of moral obligation is not that far removed from Sartre's. As with Sartre, Levinas places its emergence in my presence to the Other and describes it in terms of an asymmetrical relation of service or sacrifice to the Other. "In proximity the other obsesses me according to the absolute asymmetry . . . of the one-for-the-other: I substitute myself for him, whereas no one can replace me, and the substitution of the one for the other does not signify the substitution of the other for the one."<sup>58</sup> There is nothing conditional about my relation to the Other for Levinas. To be obligated to another is to find myself bound to sacrifice the dominance of my concerns in a way that is not contingent on the Other's reciprocal

sacrifice. As Levinas also puts it, the Other "approaches me from a dimension of height and dominates me."<sup>59</sup>

But in numerous places Levinas denies that the asymmetry of this relation implies any "slavish alienation."<sup>60</sup> Rather than a loss of freedom, my relation to the Other involves an "investiture that liberates freedom from the arbitrary."<sup>61</sup> Unfortunately, Levinas does not expand on these claims in a way that adequately addresses Sartre's concerns. Indeed, the image of an invested freedom that would find justification in service to the Other only adds fuel to those concerns by sketching the image of what Sartre would consider a "mystified" being that lives in terms of what he calls "the mirage of the unconditioned end."<sup>62</sup> We may, however, sketch a more constructive point of engagement here if we recall Sartre's claim that "the person who acts out of duty does not recognize himself in his world," does not realize him or herself in that endeavor. Given the grounds of obligation in my relation to the alterity of the other, this claim makes sense for both Sartre and Levinas. But this need imply a sense of alienation for me only if I am looking to realize myself, to inscribe my goals for myself in the world and recognize myself on that basis. It is Levinas's contention, however, that my presence to the Other calls me to a disinterested perspective that no longer gives priority to such self-interested desires. But if I am no longer looking for myself it makes no sense to speak of being lost to myself.

Alienation implies a project of self-realization which is undermined or stolen from me as when workers find that they are unable to realize or recognize themselves in their work because of the power of their employers to dictate the terms and character of their labor. With my sense of obligation, on the other hand, there is nothing preventing me from pursuing my self-realization. There is no power the Other has over me to redirect my endeavors toward ends other than my own. There is only a relation which calls my project of self-realization into question, forbidding me to pursue that project in indifference to the Other without the power to actually prevent me. As such, I am called to a mode of existence in which the question of alienation is not appropriate, in which alterity appears not as theft of my powers but as an invitation to live in terms of something other than my powers – a concern for the Other.<sup>63</sup>

We need to distinguish, therefore, a sense of alterity that does imply my alienation from one that does not. Contrary to a very pervasive equation which appears to dominate all of Sartre's work between alienation and what he characterizes as "the predominance of the Other in the pair Other and Same . . .,"<sup>64</sup> we must insist that there is alienation only when that predominance undermines or steals my project from me, not when it calls it into question in the ethical manner discussed here. But aside from these reservations, there may still be a point to Sartre's concerns which cannot be dismissed so easily. For if acting morally involved the complete sacrifice of my project of self-realization and self-recognition to a heteronomous attitude in which

I live in complete service to the other, there would be, I believe, an irreducibly servile element to that service. Though it would not be alienating by virtue of stealing my project from me, it would, nevertheless, leave me with a perspective onto life in which the very conditions of attempting to realize or recognize myself in the world were lacking. To this extent, it would be alienating, perhaps, in a more profound sense; not by virtue of stealing my project from me but by virtue of sacrificing the conditions which make it possible.

But these observations draw their conceptual strength from an abstraction: the isolation of the asymmetrical moment of obligation to the Other from concrete considerations of justice in which I must come to terms not only with what I owe the Other in his or her singularity but to what I may owe many others and, indeed, what they may owe me as an Other to them. To this end, Levinas insists that "The presence of the face . . . (is) a presence of the third party (that is, of the whole of humanity which looks at us) . . ."<sup>65</sup> In the presence of any singular Other I am also in the presence of every Other, of what he calls the third party. But, as Levinas continues this line of thought, the presence of the third party raises the question of equity, of balancing my concerns for all the others, as well as the question of what I am owed as an Other to the others. Levinas speaks of this moment specifically as the moment of justice, a moment when the asymmetry of my sense of obligation to the Other in his or her singularity is preserved but also transcended toward a sense of equality and reciprocity that would be based upon it, called forth by it. For my concern for myself in this account would be framed within the disinterestedness I gain from my asymmetrical sense of obligation to the Other, an impartial concern for myself as an equal among equals.<sup>66</sup>

Herein lies the bridge toward a renewed sense of autonomy that would not be antithetical to our ethically heteronomous relation to the Other but would presuppose it. For it seems clear that a concern with justice is not merely a concern with the equitable distribution of goods in society. It is also a concern that everyone, including myself, have a say in the determination of questions relevant to that distribution. My obligation to justify myself in the light of the judgement of the Other is surely, first and foremost, an obligation to give the Other a voice in the political deliberations through which questions of mutual concern are decided. As Levinas says, "Justice is a right to speak."<sup>67</sup> As such, the idea of a democratic form of collective autonomy seems directly implied in the idea of justice as Levinas develops it. Cornelius Castoriadis has stressed this sense of autonomy in his work as an "unlimited self-questioning about the law and its foundations as well as the capacity, in light of this interrogation, *to make, to do, and to institute* . . ."<sup>68</sup> Autonomy, in this sense, would be formed through everyone's recognition of the Other's right to call our institutions into question and, of course, the ability to act on the deliberations formed in that self-questioning.

Thinking Levinas's conception of justice in terms of autonomy in this way, it is possible to redeem a teleological dimension of moral action that may be unfairly excluded by the emphasis Levinas himself places on the unconditional character of obligation in his work. For a sense of obligation to the Other does not imply the sacrifice of my concern for myself, of my desire to realize my projects in the world and recognize myself on that basis. It only implies the sacrifice of an unjust preference for myself that would leave me indifferent to the Other. And with this sacrifice I am opened up to a good that would not be mine alone but would emerge in terms of a solidarity with those who are involved with us in cooperative efforts to construct a world we can all affirm as fair to everyone's concerns. The servile and alienating dimensions of obligation are overcome, therefore, as we are opened up to a common good in which we may all come to recognize ourselves as an autonomous community.

There need be, in other words, no unresolvable conflict between the deontological sense of obligation in Levinas's work and the teleological pursuit of the good of autonomy in Sartre's. Thought concretely in terms of a concern with justice, a Levinasian sense of obligation leads to a Sartrean pursuit of autonomy which establishes a good to be attained through the acceptance of that unconditional sense of obligation, a telos opened up within the parameters of that deontological horizon. This is not a good that would justify an unconditional acceptance of our obligations to others. But it does provide a point to that acceptance, a good that can motivate and anchor it in a milieu of solidarity formed through the cooperative construction of a common endeavor.<sup>69</sup>

This last point bears on the conditions of the realization and maintenance of a just community. Levinas is correct, I believe, to emphasize an unconditional sense of obligation to the Other as an essential presupposition of a justice that would not be limited to those with whom I find converging or common areas of interest. But, though essential, it seems unreasonable to claim that it is any more than a necessary but not sufficient condition. A just community demands mutual respect for the alterity of all its members. But it also demands a sense of solidarity in which to anchor that respect, to transform it from a fundamentally passive moment in which I find my free projects interrupted, called into question by the other, into an active pursuit of common goals constructed by all of us in the light of our obligations to one another.

But as we have already noted, a concern for the common good is not in and of itself sufficient to insure justice in a community. Indifference to the concerns of those who call the common good into question by challenging the goals or limitations of our common endeavors can only be overcome through an unconditional form of obligation to take the concerns of every Other into account whether or not our aims converge. Though there are always some aims and projects we ought not to support – after all, some

objectives are unjustly premised on *not* taking the concerns of others into account – the justice of a common praxis always turns on our willingness to place its organization and aims into question in the light of anyone whose concerns may be unjustly marginalized or oppressed. This entails, then, the permanent deferral of the realization of the community in a common praxis that would be settled, closed to further debate, the permanent disruption of the common good those shared endeavors make possible. A properly just project of autonomy, in other words, demands its own “incompletion,”<sup>70</sup> its own detotalization in the alterity of those whose concerns have always yet to be adequately taken into account.

Sartre always recognized that every common praxis is as detotalizing as it is totalizing.<sup>71</sup> There is no organic unity to a community that would allow it to consolidate itself as a social totality without interruption. The integration of any individual within a group always remains, therefore, “a *task to be done*,”<sup>72</sup> as differences and divisions are dealt with through either the reorganization of the common praxis itself or the liquidation of those divisions. It is always a moving ensemble of tasks and relationships that are perpetually disrupting any momentarily achieved unity. And the integral role of reciprocity in the consolidation of a common praxis constitutes, I believe, an implicit normative recognition of that point as well. As determined through a practice of reciprocity the articulation of our shared concerns must always be a contestable issue in which the “elimination of the minority” is never an option but only their integration into the common praxis as “an adopted heterogeneity.”<sup>73</sup>

But his apparent equation of any sense of alterity that is not an integral and controlled moment of a common praxis,<sup>74</sup> any sense of alterity, in other words, that would imply “the predominance of the Other in the pair Other and same . . .,” with alienation tends to undermine this recognition. It is important to distinguish, therefore, in a way in which Sartre did not, those moments of dislocation in an autonomous community against which we ought to struggle from those we ought to respect. As we touched on earlier, it is not every sense of alterity which is alienating. That which calls our autonomy into question in an ethical sense institutes that autonomy in the very gesture in which it disrupts it through affirming our ability to call any settled form of life into question and pursue its reorganization. A respect for that sense of alterity, the alterity of the Other whose concerns have yet to be adequately integrated into our common endeavors, is a respect for the heteronomous conditions of autonomy itself.

In conclusion, it is necessary to recognize two distinct, though intimately interwoven threads in the pattern of a just community. There is our pursuit of the good of autonomy but also our obligation to respect and support the Other. Our obligations to others constitutes a heteronomous ground for a just pursuit of autonomy which, in turn, serves as a *telos* for the fulfillment of our obligations to others. Sartre is mistaken in seeking the normative

ground for my support of the freedom of others in the pursuit of autonomy alone. But he is right in projecting a normative vision of human history which "has reality only through the unconditioned possibility for man to realize himself in his full autonomy . . . as praxis of all men in association." A Levinasian retrieval of the heteronomous grounds of that sense of autonomy should not lead us to repudiate it but should only deepen our appreciation of it and our commitment to it.

### References

- 1 See Emmanuel Levinas, "Philosophy and the Idea of Infinity" in *Collected Philosophical Papers*, trans., Alphonso Lingis (Dordrecht: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, 1987), especially pp.47–50.
- 2 Jean-Paul Sartre, "Existentialism is a Humanism", in *The Existentialist Tradition*, ed., Nino Langiulli, trans., Philip Mairet, (U.S.A.: Anchor Books, 1971), pp.412–413.
- 3 See Jean-Paul Sartre, *Notebooks for an Ethics*, trans., David Pellauer (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1992), pp.252–267.
- 4 See, for example, the last paragraph of Joanne M. Pier's "Sartre/Levinas: An Is/Ought Gap of Ethics?", *Dialogue*, April 1989, p.57. Also see Christina Howells's "Sartre and Levinas" in *The Provocation of Levinas*, ed., Robert Bernasconi and David Wood (New York: Routledge, 1988, who softens this contrast with an appeal to Sartre's more affirmative discussion of authentic interpersonal relations after the purifying reflection has been attained in his posthumously published *Notebooks for an Ethics*.
- 5 See Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, trans., Hazel E. Barnes (New York: Washington Square Press, 1966), Part 3, Chapter 3, "Concrete Relations with Others".
- 6 Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, trans., Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969), p.50.
- 7 See *Notebooks for an Ethics*, trans., David Pellauer (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1992), for example, pp.275, 281 and 499. One did not have to wait till the publication of the *Notebooks*, however, to grasp that Sartre did not mean to exclude the possibility of non-conflictual human relations even in *Being and Nothingness*. Many had already noted Sartre's footnote in that work at the end of his descriptions of sadism and masochism that "These considerations do not exclude the possibility of an ethics of deliverance and salvation. But this can be achieved only after a radical conversion which we can not discuss here." (p.534) See, for example, Thomas C. Anderson, *The Foundation and Structure of Sartrean Ethics* (U.S.A.: The Regents Press of Kansas, 1979), pp.75–78 where he discusses the various modes of conflict present in Sartre's ontology of human relations and the possibility of positive interpersonal relations on that basis. For a discussion of positive modes of reciprocity in Sartre's later work, see his *Critique of Dialectical Reason*, trans., Alan Sheridan-Smith (London: NLB, 1976), Book II, Chapter 1, "The Fused Group" as well as Chapter 3, pp.463–479, "Reciprocity and Active Passivity."
- 8 Sartre, "Existentialism is a Humanism", pp.412–413.

- 9 For Sartre's understanding of values and the "spirit of seriousness" see *Being and Nothingness*, Part 2, Ch.1, Section 3, "The For-Itself and the Being of Value", and p.796.
- 10 See Thomas C. Anderson, *The Foundation and Structure of Sartrean Ethics*, p.61.
- 11 Sartre, "Existentialism is a Humanism", p.412.
- 12 See, for example, Anderson, *The Foundation and Structure of Sartrean Ethics*, Ch.3 where he reviews the literature on this issue. Linda Bell has more recently taken up this approach in stressing the analytic nature of Sartre's argument. "Because freedom stands in a unique position of means to every choice, the choice of anything whatsoever as a value logically entails the choice of freedom as a value." See her *Sartre's Ethics of Authenticity* (Tuscaloosa, AL: The University of Alabama Press, 1989), p.56 and Ch.3 for her general discussion of Sartre's argument.
- 13 Thomas R. Flynn, *Sartre and Marxist Existentialism* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1984), p.38.
- 14 See John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1971), p.31 and Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, trans., Lewis White Beck (USA: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, Inc., 1956), p.65.
- 15 Sartre, *Notebooks for an Ethics*, p.246. Also see Thomas Anderson, "Is a Sartrean Ethics Possible?" *Philosophy Today* 14 (Summer 1970), p.121, where he writes, "strictly speaking Sartre himself does not say that man is *obliged* to choose freedom; rather he says that if one becomes aware that he imposes values, he can only 'want' freedom."
- 16 We shall examine Sartre's arguments for this claim after examining Levinas' position.
- 17 See Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, trans., Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969), p.303.
- 18 Emmanuel Levinas, "Philosophy and the Idea of Infinity", p.55. Also see Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, p.199.
- 19 See Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, p.40, where he writes, "the very fact of being in a conversation consists in recognizing in the Other a *right* over this egoism, and hence in justifying oneself."
- 20 For Sartre, see *Being and Nothingness*, Part 3, "Being-For-Others", Ch.1, Section IV, "The Look". For Levinas, see "Philosophy and the Idea of Infinity", in particular, p.59.
- 21 Or, more accurately, he argues that the intelligibility of my relation to the Other at this foundational level is essentially ethical. See Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*, trans., Alphonso Lingis (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, 1981), p.94 where he writes, "The mode in which a face indicates its own absence in my responsibility requires a description that can be formed only in ethical language."
- 22 Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, p.201.
- 23 Levinas, *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*, p. 117.
- 24 Levinas uses this term to describe the suspension of my interest with my own perseverance in Being to which the Other calls me. See, in particular, *Otherwise than Being*, pp.4-6.
- 25 For Kant see *Critique of Practical Reason*, p.48. For the "factual" character of obligation in Levinas, see Adrian Peperzak who comments on it in his *To the*



- Other: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas* (West Lafayette, Indiana: Purdue University Press, 1993), p.22, as well as Jean-François Lyotard who makes a connection with Kant as well in his "Levinas' Logic" in *The Lyotard Reader*, ed., Andrew Benjamin (Cambridge, Mass: Basil Blackwell, Inc., 1989), pp.290–291.
- 26 Levinas, *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*, p.5.
- 27 This is the sense I take from a number of Levinas's comments on war, peace and their relation to the Western philosophical tradition. See, in particular, "Philosophy and the Idea of Infinity", p.57, *Totality and Infinity*, pp.21–22, *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*, pp.4–5 & 16. Also see Peperzak's *To the Other*, pp.126–127. "Disinterest" is a term Levinas comes to use in *Otherwise than Being* to highlight the way in which the interests all beings have with their own preservation in being is transcended in the ethical relationship with the other. See, in particular, p.4.
- 28 As the reader will come to see, I find most of Sartre's arguments in what is coming to be known as his "first ethics", the short address, "Existentialism is a Humanism". I have largely ignored his unpublished "second ethics", principally the notes for lectures he gave to the Gramsci Institute in Rome in 1964, because they seem to shed no new light on the specific question of our obligations to others. See Thomas Anderson's comment in his *Sartre's Two Ethics: From Authenticity to Integral Humanity* (Chicago: Open Court, 1993) to this effect. "Neither in the Rome lecture nor in any other work of the period of the second ethics does he explicitly formulate a comparable argument to demonstrate that we should seek the human fulfillment of others along with our own . . ." (p.157)
- 29 This distinction is based on one Thomas Anderson draws in his essay, "The Obligation to Will the Freedom of Others, According to Jean-Paul Sartre" in *The Question of the Other*, ed., Arleen Dalery and Charles Scott (Albany, N.Y.: SUNY Press, 1989), between an argument based on the universalization of the idea of liberty and arguments based on our interdependency. I have expanded and modified his classification to include arguments from Sartre's *Notebooks for an Ethics* which Anderson did not consider in that essay.
- 30 Sartre, "Existentialism is a Humanism", p.396.
- 31 See *Ibid.*, p.398, "I am also obliged at every instance to perform actions which are examples." For the best discussion of this point in the literature, see Flynn, *Sartre and Marxist Existentialism*, pp.34–35.
- 32 See Anderson, *The Foundation and Structure of Sartrean Ethics*, p.80 and Anderson, "The Obligation to Will the Freedom of Others", p.65.
- 33 Anderson, "The Obligation to Will the Freedom of Others", p.66.
- 34 Sartre, *Notebooks for an Ethics*, p.276.
- 35 Thomas C. Anderson, "From Freedom to Need: Sartre's First Two Moralities" in *Inquiries into Values*, ed., Sander Lee (Lewiston: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1988), p.333, n.18. Also see his "Authenticity and the City of Ends in Sartre's *Notebooks for an Ethics*" in *Writing the Politics of Difference*, ed., Hugh J. Silverman (Albany, N.Y.: SUNY Press, 1991), p.108 and *The Foundation and Structure of Sartrean Ethics*, p.93, where he makes the same point in relation to a similar argument from *Anti-Semite and Jew*.
- 36 And insofar as I am affirming my freedom only insofar as it is mine no exemplary value beyond that of my own case attaches to my choice.

- 37 In an argument that may have some relevance to this point, Linda Bell has defended Sartre from the charge that he illicitly imports the value of consistency into his arguments for freedom as a value by arguing that Sartre does not import this value into his arguments but only draws on what is presupposed in the "framework of human communication" in which his arguments take place. (*Sartre's Ethics of Authenticity*, p.570) As impartiality is a hallmark of rational dialogue, one might expand this argument in a Habermasian way, claiming that anyone who engages in argumentative discourse is committed not only to the logical rules of consistency but also to more general rules of rationality such as impartiality which have, as Habermas has argued, ethical import. (See Jürgen Habermas, "Discourse Ethics: Notes on a Program of Justification" in his *Moral Consciousness and Communicative Action*, trans., Christian Lenhardt and Shierry Weber Nicholson (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 1990). There are two problems with responding this way for Sartre, however: 1) though it might suffice as an account of why a moral theorist such as Sartre should be impartial in the course of their arguments, it would not account for why any agent who is not necessarily engaging in argumentative discourse should be impartial or logically consistent, for that matter. For that one would need to argue, as Habermas has done, that the sense of rationality involved here is not only a presupposition of argumentative discourse but of any communicative interaction. And I see no basis for such an argument in Sartre's work. But 2) even if one could make that point with Sartre, it would entail the recognition of another foundation for ethics than autonomy in the kind of respect that is demanded of one another in any communicative interaction. But this is not that far from the point I want to make here with Levinas: that respect for the other is not grounded in a pursuit of autonomy but comes simply from my presence to the Other *as* other.
- 38 For Anderson's discussion of this argument, see "The Obligation to Will the Freedom of Others", pp.68–69.
- 39 Sartre, "Existentialism is a Humanism", pp.407–408.
- 40 Robert V. Stone, "Freedom at a Universal Notion in Sartre's Ethical theory", *Revue Internationale de Philosophie* nos. 152–153 (1985), p.146. Also see Anderson's discussion of different senses of recognition in "The Obligation to Will the Freedom of Others", pp.70–72.
- 41 Anderson, "The Obligation to Will the Freedom of Others", p.73.
- 42 See Anderson, "Authenticity and the City of Ends in Sartre's *Notebooks for an Ethics*", pp.108–109. Also see *The Foundation and Structure of Sartrean Ethics*, pp.86–89.
- 43 See *Notebooks for an Ethics*, p.484. Also see Jean-Paul Sartre, *Truth and Existence*, trans., Adrian van den Hoven, ed., Ronald Aronson (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1992) where he discusses unveiling the world in its truth as "mission" which the for-itself "prescribes itself in its very upsurge". (p.33)
- 44 Sartre, *Notebooks for an Ethics*, pp.280–281.
- 45 This citation is from a selection of extracts from those notes, published in Sartre, ed., Francis Jeanson (Paris: Desclée de Brower, 1966), p.137, under the title, "Notes sur les rapports entre le morale et l'histoire". For more on the complete lecture notes, see Robert Stone and Elizabeth Bowman, "Dialectical Ethics: A First Look at Sartre's Unpublished 1964 Rome Lecture Notes", *Social Text* 13/14 (Winter/Spring 1986), 195–215.

- 46 See especially Anderson, "The Obligation to Will the Freedom of Others", pp.73–74. Also see Anderson, *The Foundation and Structure of Sartrean Ethics*, p.94.
- 47 See Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *The German Ideology* in Karl Marx, *Karl Marx: Selected Writings*. Ed., David McLellan. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977, p.172.
- 48 Note Anderson's qualification in his summary of Sartre's argument: "other freedoms also confer meaning and value on my life and world and, if the meaning they confer supports my freedom and its projects, this certainly enriches the solitary justification I have given myself." (emphasis mine) "Authenticity, Conversion, and the City of Ends in Sartre's *Notebooks for an Ethics*, p.109.
- 49 See Anderson, "The Obligation to Will the Freedom of Others", p.73 and *The Foundation and Structure of Sartrean Ethics*, pp.89–90 who makes a point of distinguishing Sartre's position from ethical egoism.
- 50 For Sartre's understanding of fraternity, see *Critique of Dialectical Reason*, "Fraternity and Fear", pp.428–444. For a very good account of how a common sense of the good eludes a convergence of individual interests, see Charles Taylor's distinction between "common goods" and "convergent goods" in his "Cross-Purposes: The Liberal-Communitarian Debate" in *Liberalism and the Moral Life*, ed., Nancy Rosenblum (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989), pp.168–170.
- 51 As Sartre argues, a group only maintains its existence through some form of pledge in which it posits "itself for itself in a reflexive practice and becomes its own objective". *Critique of Dialectical Reason*, p.443.
- 52 For a recent liberal critique of a communitarian conception of a politics of the common good, see Will Kymlicka, *Liberalism, Community and Culture* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), pp.85–96.
- 53 Sartre, *Notebooks for an Ethics*, p.258.
- 54 *Ibid.*, p.267. Also see p.258.
- 55 *Ibid.*, pp.252 & 256.
- 56 See Sartre, *Critique of Dialectical Reason*, p.247, note. For a discussion of the relationship between Sartre's analysis of values and imperatives between the *Notebooks* and the *Critique*, see Juliet Simont, "Sartrean Ethics" in *The Cambridge Companion to Sartre*, ed., Christina Howells (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), pp.182–184 & 203–204.
- 57 Sartre, *Notebooks for an Ethics*, p.254.
- 58 Levinas, *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*, p.158. Also see, for example, p.120.
- 59 Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, p.214.
- 60 Levinas, *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*, p.105. Also see pp.54, 59, and 112.
- 61 Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, p.85.
- 62 Sartre, *Notebooks for an Ethics*, p.255.
- 63 It is not as if Sartre is completely oblivious to this Levinasian sense of disinterestedness. In the *Notebooks for an Ethics*, he describes the attitude of generosity and the gift it implies as "gratuitous . . . and disinterested", (p.368) relating it to a "favourable prejudgment" of every human goal, whether it be mine or the Other's, as having "value in itself". (p.275) But this favourable prejudgment seems, for Sartre, a consequence of my inability, by his lights, to authentically

prefer my goals to that of the Other (see my analysis of the second "structural" argument for why I should will the liberty of the Other). But, as I have argued, Sartre is unable to derive this sense of disinterest from an affirmation of freedom as the foundation of all value. It, therefore, remains theoretically isolated in his work and appears not to have survived its initial elaboration in the *Notebooks*.

- 64 Sartre, *Notebooks for an Ethics*, p.413. Also see p.382.
- 65 Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, p.213.
- 66 See Levinas, *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*, pp.157–161.
- 67 Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, p.298.
- 68 Cornelius Castoriadis, "Power, Politics, Autonomy" in his *Philosophy, Politics, Autonomy*, trans., David Ames Curtis (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), p.164. For more on Castoriadis's understanding of autonomy, see my "Reconsidering the Limits of Democracy with Castoriadis and Lefort" in *Selected Studies in Phenomenology and Existential Philosophy, Volume 20* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, forthcoming).
- 69 The point I am arguing here has parallels with the strategy John Rawls adopts in *A Theory of Justice* where he initially argues for his theory of justice in an unconditional, deontological sense, but concludes his book with an account of the good that can come through the realization of a just society.
- 70 I take this image from Jean-Luc Nancy's work, *The Inoperative Community*, ed., Peter Connor (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), especially, Ch.1.
- 71 See, for example, Sartre *Critique of Dialectical Reason*, p.443.
- 72 *Ibid.*, p.408.
- 73 See *Ibid.*, pp.529–530.
- 74 See his discussion in the *Critique of Dialectical Reason* of the positive sense of alterity which emerges in the distribution of functions within an organized group as "a relation defined by a rule, in conformity with a *praxis* . . ." (p.465)

# THE PRIMACY OF ETHICS

Hobbes and Levinas

*Cheryl L. Hughes*

Source: *Continental Philosophy Review* 31 (1998): 79–94.

## Abstract

At several points in his writings, Levinas is implicitly critical of Hobbes's view that the political order is required to restrict violent conflict and competition and make morality possible. This paper makes Levinas's criticisms explicit by comparing Hobbes's descriptions of human nature and human relations with Levinas's radically different descriptions of the ethical relation of responsibility and the consequent kinship of the human community. I use insights from Levinas to argue that ethics cannot be reduced to politics and that the primacy of the ethical relation provides a more adequate description of human relations and justice in the human community.

At several points in his writings, Levinas is implicitly critical of Hobbes's view that the political order is required to restrict human bestiality and make morality possible. In his radio interviews with Philippe Nemo, for example, Levinas includes this suggestive comment:

It is extremely important to know if society in the current sense of the term is the result of a limitation of the principle that men are predators of one another, or if to the contrary it results from the limitation of the principle that men are *for* one another. Does the social, with its institutions, universal forms and laws, result from limiting the consequences of the war between men, or from limiting the infinity which opens in the ethical relationship of man to man?

(EI 80)<sup>1</sup>

What is only implied in this quote can be developed into explicit criticisms of Hobbes's descriptions of the hypothetical state of nature as a state of war and his claim that morality depends on the establishment of a political order. In this essay, I compare Hobbes's view of human nature and human relations with Levinas's radically different description of the fundamental conditions of human subjectivity. In contrast to Hobbes, I present Levinas's claim that the ethical relation of responsibility is prior to and takes priority over self-interest, self-preservation, and relations of conflict and competition. As Levinas describes it, ethical responsibility implies a fundamental connection between oneself and others, and this means that community is not properly understood as an implicit contract among self-interested rational agents. Rather the human community is best understood as a kinship built up by multiplying what Levinas describes as the face to face relation and the responsibility of one for another. I also compare Hobbes's account of the minimal moral laws that can only be instituted under the security of a political order with Levinas's insistence that ethics cannot be reduced to politics – that infinite responsibility is prior to any considerations of prudential reason and does not depend on any social conventions or political institutions. I conclude by arguing that Levinas's emphasis on the primacy of ethical responsibility provides a more adequate description of human relations and justice in the human community.

### I. Thomas Hobbes: The war of all against all

Hobbes wrote *Leviathan* in 17th century England during a time of rapid social, religious, and political change punctuated by civil war. As his subtitle indicates, he was most concerned with political arguments aimed at restoring and maintaining order, peace, and security in the commonwealth.<sup>2</sup> He asks his reader to imagine what it would be like to strip away civil society so that we could observe human beings in the hypothetical state of nature. Hobbes assumes fundamental scarcity of resources; he argues for relative equality of needs and desires and relative equality of strength and ability so that the state of nature is characterized by competition, conflict, the threat of violence, and a general insecurity of life and the means to live well. Under these conditions, Hobbes claims that human beings would be self-interested and selfishly motivated. He says for example, that “of all voluntary acts, the object is to every man his own good” (L 118); and that “every man by nature seeketh his own benefit, and promotion” (L 145). Furthermore, according to Hobbes, in the hypothetical state of nature, the principal end and motive of all human beings is self-preservation. It is therefore a natural right to use whatever means each person judges will best preserve his life; thus “every man has a right to every thing; even to one another's body” (L 103). Unrestrained self-interest, unlimited natural rights, and “a restless desire of power in all men” (L 80) lead to diffidence – distrust and dread –

and a constant disposition to war. Thus we come to the famous passage where Hobbes describes the state of nature as the condition in which "every man is enemy to every man . . . and the life of man, solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short" (L 100).

Hobbes ignores any natural connections between individuals, and he denies any fundamental interest in the welfare of others. The preservation of life, one's own life, is the first and fundamental duty and all moral and political obligations are founded on the desire for self-preservation. According to Hobbes, there are laws of nature, which he also refers to as moral virtues; but it is clear from his definition that the laws of nature merely dictate the rational means to preserve one's life.<sup>3</sup> In the context of life-threatening conflict and competition, reason leads men to see the necessity for moral rules (the laws of nature) that might permit human beings to live together peacefully. Thus the fundamental law of nature is to seek peace, and derivative laws include keeping one's covenants, mutual accommodation, gratitude, modesty, equity, and mercy – the moral virtues that would make social life possible.

Although these laws of nature are immutable and eternal, Hobbes claims that they do not always bind us to action. He explicitly argues that where life is not secure, it is contrary to one's self-interest and self-preservation to fulfill moral obligations. Thus Hobbes says,

The laws of nature oblige *in foro interno*; that is to say, they bind to a desire they should take place: but *in foro externo*; this is, to the putting them in act, not always. For he that should be modest, and tractable, and perform all he promises, in such time, and place, where no man else should do so, should but make himself a prey to others, and procure his own certain ruin, contrary to the ground of all laws of nature. . . .

(L 123)

In other words, the natural laws or moral virtues cannot be effective without the laws and conventions of civil society that guarantee reciprocity. Thus according to Hobbes, self-interested inclinations and aversions are primary, attention to moral obligations is secondary and dependent on the fact that I cannot meet my own needs without the help (or at least the non-interference) of others. Ethical life depends on political order and the security of a common public authority. If we strip away the laws and conventions of civil society, we might still have the inclination to seek peace and the desire to be kind, generous, and merciful, but acting on such desires would be contrary to self-preservation. And since one never gives up the right to self-preservation, the fundamental conditions of the state of nature remain just beneath the surface of civil relations, and it is always possible to revert to the brutality, amorality, and isolation of the natural condition.

Of course, Hobbes insists that he is not giving a historical account of the natural condition or the actual cause of civil society. Rather he is using a thought experiment to uncover the defining properties of human nature and the rational means for maintaining a peaceful, productive, and just society. His most sympathetic interpreters claim that he is using the hypothetical state of nature as a warning against the dissolution of political order and authority; he is describing the inevitable reality of human conflict and mistrust and the inevitable necessity for political authority to mediate conflict and maintain civil society.<sup>4</sup> But does Hobbes's thought experiment adequately describe the fundamental conditions of human existence? Is self-interest the primary motive and self-preservation the primary aim of human beings? Are reciprocity and social conventions the necessary conditions for moral responsibility? Are conflict, competition, and mistrust the only aspects of human relations that must be taken into account in the constitution of the political order? Does an implicit social contract adequately describe the just society? These are some of the critical questions that can be addressed through a comparison of Hobbes with Levinas.

## II. Emmanuel Levinas: The responsibility of the one for all

As a Lithuanian Jew who emigrated to France in 1923, Levinas witnessed the horrors of fascism, war, and the Holocaust. Thus although he lacks the explicit political agenda of Hobbes, he is nevertheless concerned over analogous problems of war, peace, justice, and the relation between ethics and politics. These themes are clearly announced in the Preface to *Totality and Infinity* where the question of ethics is raised in the light of the violence of modern politics and war.<sup>5</sup> But Levinas does not provide an argument from experience or an analysis of the tensions between ethics and politics. Like Hobbes in a sense, Levinas asks us to penetrate beneath our everyday experience to undertake a complex meditation on the conditions of primordial human existence. But whereas Hobbes uses a thought experiment to arrive at the necessary conditions for order and security in civil society, Levinas uses phenomenological descriptions as part of his effort to uncover the meaning of human ethical experience in primordial human relations.

In *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas begins his descriptions of human existence with what he refers to as "separated being" or self-sufficient egoism. And the first moment of this egoism, the upsurge of the self, occurs in enjoyment. According to Levinas, enjoyment is an elemental condition of human being in a world of plenitude. Every thing I encounter offers itself to enjoyment, and enjoyment accompanies every use of things. This enjoyment is naive, carefree and playful, not bound up with any struggle for existence: "... it consists in sinking one's teeth fully into the nutriments of the world, agreeing to the world as wealth, releasing its elemental essence" (TI 134).



The separated being is first simply a hungry stomach enjoying the wealth of nutriments that satisfy hunger.

Although we can imagine hunger in Hobbes's state of nature, he makes no mention of enjoyment, nourishment, or satisfaction. By contrast, Levinas begins with the "animal complacency" of enjoyment, but he is not naive about plenitude in the world of nourishments. According to Levinas, enjoyment has no security; and the uncertainties of the future remind the separated being of its dependence on the things in the world. Levinas says, "The happiness of enjoyment is stronger than every disquietude, but disquietude can trouble it; here lies the gap between the animal and the human" (TI 149). The pain of need, although it refers to the happiness of satisfaction, reminds the separated being that the freedom of enjoyment is limited. Thus the analysis expands to include the necessity of economic existence.

Economic existence requires labor and possession to master the uncertainty of future needs. And these activities are made possible, according to Levinas, by habitation, by dwelling in a home. Levinas describes the home as a retreat and a refuge, a place of inwardness and intimacy that provides rest from labor in the world; the separated being dwells in the familiarity of nourishments that conform to its needs. But according to Levinas, dwelling is also characterized by the intimacy and familiarity of a human welcome. This intimate welcome in the home is produced as gentleness and warmth; it is not a confrontation but an acceptance and sharing of enjoyment which Levinas characterizes as discretion. He describes this situation carefully:

And the other whose presence is discreetly an absence, with which is accomplished the primary hospitable welcome which describes the field of intimacy, is the Woman. The woman is the condition for recollection, the interiority of the Home and inhabitation. . . . The Other who welcomes in intimacy is not the you [vous] of the face that reveals itself in a dimension of height, but precisely the thou [tu] of familiarity. . . . This alterity is situated on another plane than language and nowise represents a truncated, stammering, still elementary language. On the contrary, the discretion of this presence includes all the possibilities of the transcendent relationship with the Other. It is comprehensible . . . only on the ground of the full human personality, which, however, in the woman, can be reserved so as to open up the dimension of interiority. (TI 155)

Discretion is thus an attribute of "feminine alterity;" it is produced as the cautious reserve of gentle familiarity rather than as a confrontation or challenge. In the home, the intimate and discrete Other is part of the solitude of egoist existence.

Of course, there have been some objections to this interpretation of welcome in the dwelling as the dimension of the feminine.<sup>6</sup> Perhaps in anticipation of these objections, Levinas says,

The feminine has been encountered in this analysis as one of the cardinal points of the horizon in which the inner life takes place – and the empirical absence of the human being of “feminine sex” in a dwelling nowise affects the dimension of femininity which remains open there, as the very welcome of the dwelling.

(TI 158)

Levinas does not mean to reduce the human status of women but only to use femininity as one human quality that brings to light the human intimacy, comfort, and respite from competition which do not appear in Hobbes's analysis. The human relation in the intimacy of the home includes all of the possibilities of equality and even conflict; but it is the possibility of welcome rather than challenge that makes this relation a significant part of dwelling in the home. Thus femininity is the attribute of the human being (whether man or woman) who provides the first welcome, warmth, gentleness, and intimacy that transform the dwelling into a home.<sup>7</sup>

The separated being may now move out into the world of plenitude and labor: grasp, seize, and take away elements to put them in reserve in the home. By taking possession, by seizing and depositing elements in the home, labor suspends the uncertain future. As property, elements lose their independence and become things. But just as intimacy in the home remains part of the domain of separated being, so also labor and possession are still part of self-sufficient egoism. The resistance of matter, of the non-I, is already broken as I labor to relate the element to my own need. In consuming the non-I, I clearly overcome the resistance of matter as other; but even placing a thing in my home as a possession defines that thing as mine and as part of my egoist existing.

So now we have Levinas's picture of the primordial solitude of the isolated ego, enjoying the plenitude, laboring to provide some security for enjoyment, resting in the welcome of the home, but still wholly caught up in egoist existence. In these first moments of existence, the ego is enchained to itself in solitude, locked into self-reference in the monotonous series of instants that make up the present of economic time, and related to a world that is merely part of that solitude. The solitude of material existence is a circle of desire, labor, possession, consumption, and new desire. But Levinas insists that this solitude is a problem. The solitary existent is a burden to itself, occupied with itself, responsible for itself; it is master of its existing but it remains closed upon itself in solitude.

Levinas uses the term salvation to refer to an escape from this initial self-absorption; but according to Levinas, the only true salvation from this

enchainment to oneself occurs in relation to the "indiscreet" Other, in the face to face relation. Face to face with an other that is absolutely other, an unknowable mystery, something I cannot grasp, consume, or possess, my solitude is broken. This Other is not part of my familiar world and does not share my home. This indiscreet Other calls into question my naive enjoyment and possession; and this calling into question is manifested in language. The Other breaks into the closed circle of solitude by speaking to me, by calling my solitary existence into question. The Other speaks to me from outside my material existence, speaks from a transcendent exteriority that Levinas describes with the terms "height" and "mastery". Speaking is a generalization that offers the world to the Other and therefore language is "a primordial dispossession, a first donation" (a first giving of the world to the Other) (TI 173). Language transforms a world that was wholly mine into a common world, a world in which things receive a name.

But the constitution of a shared world through language is not the only outcome of this encounter with the face of the Other. According to Levinas, it is only in approaching the Other that I attend to myself, it is only in being attentive to the call of the Other that I can become conscious of myself. Commanded by the Other, called to respond, I am conscious of myself as subject to the Other. In speaking to the Other, in responding to the challenge of the Other, I express myself, reveal myself, and thereby become conscious of myself. Self-conscious subjectivity can only occur when the solitude of separated being is broken by the indiscreet Other. The call of the Other brings the separated being out of egoist solitude and contentment, evokes desire for transcendence, and gives rise to responsibility. The relationship with the Other is desire for the Other; and to speak face to face is to offer one's being to the Other. Thus Levinas says,

The surpassing of phenomenal or inward existence does not consist in receiving the recognition of the Other, but in offering him one's being. To be in oneself is to express oneself, that is, already to serve the Other. The ground of expression is goodness.

(TI 183)

This is the ethical relation, the relation that breaks through the solitude of spontaneous egoism and permits self-conscious subjectivity.

Levinas uses the term epiphany to capture the claim that the face is neither simply seen nor touched, that the face refuses to be comprehended or contained in my sense experience. Epiphany also describes the situation of speech, where speaking to one another is a *relation* that maintains absolute *difference* and separation. As an interlocutor, the Other is free from any theme and contests any meaning I ascribe to him. The face resists possession, resists both enjoyment and knowledge. Levinas says, "The expressions the face introduces into the world does not defy the feebleness of my powers,

but my ability for power [Mon pouvoir de pouvoir]" (TI 198). The Other, facing me, opposes my power to take or consume or comprehend; the Other opposes my power to kill. But the face of the Other only resists me with what Levinas calls ethical resistance: "This infinity, stronger than murder, already resists us in his face, is his face, is the primordial expression, is the first word: 'you shall not commit murder'" (TI 199). The face presents a purely ethical resistance because it is not a matter of perception or of conscious struggle but of a transcendence, a relation with what is beyond my own material existence.

And this ethical resistance is not merely negative; the Other presents itself in expression, speaks to me with both height and humility, surprises me, appeals to me and solicits my response:

To manifest oneself as a face is to *impose oneself* above and beyond the manifested and purely phenomenal form. . . . The being that expresses itself imposes itself, but does so precisely by appealing to me with its destitution and nudity – its hunger – without my being able to be deaf to that appeal.

(TI 200)

The face of the Other is naked before me. There is both "mastery" and "poverty" in the face of the Other that evokes "Desire" in me. My desire for transcendence, desire for something I cannot find in myself, characterizes my response to the face as transcendent mastery. And desire to give of myself and my wealth characterizes my response to the face as destitute, as exposed to me without defense and yet questioning my naive enjoyment. The Other is the one to whom I owe everything, even my self-conscious subjectivity; and the face of the Other evokes both submission and generosity in me. Whatever the possibilities for violence or disregard in relation to the Other, Levinas insists that this analysis of the ethical relation with the face is primary. The face speaks, and face to face with the Other, I do not simply contemplate in silence, I respond.

Confronted by the Other, I come to see my egoism as contingent, my solitary and spontaneous freedom as arbitrary, and I become a self-conscious self only in my response to the Other, as subject to the Other in an asymmetrical relation of infinite responsibility. My self-conscious subjectivity is thus constituted as one-for-another. Responsibility is an essential structure of human subjectivity. I do not assume or take up this responsibility for another; it does not depend on any act of my will and it is not the result of any rational argument or implicit contract. I am first responsible for the Other before I am for myself. The human being does not simply live life satisfied with spontaneous natural existence; the human being is awakened by the Other and called to justify its spontaneous consuming and possessing and its natural compulsion to survive.

It might be objected at this point in my presentation of Levinas, that he is offering a description of human existence that is merely an alternative to Hobbes's description. Levinas's claims regarding human intimacy and infinite responsibility for the Other must still be reconciled with the real experiences of conflict, competition, violence, and mistrust that concern Hobbes. Perhaps Hobbes is simply being realistic in his emphasis on the need for a common power to mediate conflict and enforce moral obligations. But is Hobbes as realistic in his talk of a covenant or social contract that transfers natural rights to the sovereign power? How could Hobbes's self-interested, rational calculators in a natural condition of diffidence ever come together in the mutual trust required to make a covenant? Given Hobbes's description of human nature, if the implicit social contract were ever dissolved, how could it be re-established? Someone would have to take the risk of acting first, the risk of sacrifice for another. Levinas's description of the face to face relation and asymmetrical responsibility for the Other is such a moment of generosity. Responding to the Other without any guarantee of reciprocity makes it possible to initiate a covenant.<sup>8</sup>

But this points to a deeper disagreement between Hobbes and Levinas since Levinas's appeal to generosity involves an implicit rejection of Hobbes's account of human nature and human relations in the state of nature. Hobbes claims that we are individuals first and social creatures second, that all of the basic qualities and abilities that define us as human are intrinsic to individuals, and that social interactions do not play any essential or necessary role in forming us as human beings. David Gauthier summarizes these commitments in his description of Hobbes's individualism,

... individual human beings not only can, but must, be understood apart from society. The fundamental characteristics of men are not products of their social existence . . . man is social because he is human, not human because he is social. In particular, self-consciousness and language must be taken as conditions, not products of society.

(Gauthier 138)<sup>9</sup>

According to this reading of Hobbes, society has instrumental value for individuals, but cooperative interactions are always primarily based on self interest and it is irrational to make oneself vulnerable to others. By contrast, according to Levinas, one is not yet a self-conscious human subject in the egoistic solitude of material existence; responding to the face of an Other, speaking face to face, is the only way to become conscious of oneself. There is not yet any question of prudential reason in one's vulnerability to the Other; entrance into self-conscious subjectivity is by way of subjection to the Other – by way of responding, “*Here I am*” [*me voici*]. And there is no question of avoiding sociality; one's being human is commanded by the

other; the situation of speaking face to face constitutes a shared world and marks one's entry into the human community.

In addition, Levinas insists that the relation of responsibility for the Other is fundamental and inescapable. As an essential structure of human subjectivity, responsibility is prior to any rational calculation and it must be presupposed even when we emphasize the realities of conflict and violence among human beings. He explicitly treats this issue in an essay titled "Ideology and Idealism" where he says:

I have been speaking about that which stands behind practical morality; about the extraordinary relation between a man and his neighbor, a relation that continues to exist even when it is severely damaged. Of course we have the power to relate ourselves to the other as to an object, to oppress and exploit him; nevertheless the relation to the other, as a relation of responsibility, cannot be totally suppressed, even when it takes the form of politics or warfare. Here it is impossible to free myself by saying, "It's not my concern." There is no choice, for it is always and inescapably my concern.<sup>10</sup>

Hobbes admits that the moral virtues are always present as rational inclinations, but he claims that we cannot risk our lives by acting on these inclinations in the natural condition. Levinas insists that the relation of responsibility for the Other means that we must act on these moral virtues even under conditions of war. Even when the laws and conventions of civil society cannot provide security or promise reciprocity, we remain responsible.<sup>11</sup>

But how do we move from this face to face relation to the multiplicity of social relations that constitute the human community? We cannot be infinitely responsible for everyone or subject to everyone; nor could we accept that ethical responsibility was infinitely directed to one Other without regard for the broader responsibilities to a plurality of others including oneself. Levinas answers that the face to face relation is not exclusive, never closed to all the Others. Instead, he claims,

Language as the presence of the face does not invite complicity with the preferred being, the self-sufficient "I-Thou" forgetful of the universe . . . The third party looks at me in the eyes of the Other – language is justice . . . the epiphany of the face qua face opens humanity.

(TI 213)

The face of the Other who regards me is first a challenge and an infinite demand, but also and at the same time, the revelation of any possible human being. The Other is not my beloved or my friend but the revelation of any Other. This third party, always present in the face, does not have any specific feature but remains simply the poor one, the stranger, destitute and

naked and equal because what is revealed in the face is otherness. And here Levinas points to the fact that the Other who faces me is also the servant of an Other. If the Other who faces me is already obliged by another, then I am commanded to join in this obligation to the third and thereby join in a whole network of relations to Others. The fact of the third party does not diminish my responsibility to the Other but multiplies it so that my ethical responsibility is extended to concern for the needs of all the Others. As Levinas says in his later work, *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*,

In no way is justice . . . a degeneration of the for-the-other, a diminution, a limitation of anarchic responsibility . . . justice remains justice only in a society where there is no distinction between those close and those far off, but in which there also remains the impossibility of passing by the closest. The equality of all is borne by my inequality, the surplus of my duties over my rights. The forgetting of self moves justice.

(OTB 159)<sup>12</sup>

I am thus answerable for all. And Levinas offers a second formulation of his implicit criticism of Hobbes: "It is then not without importance to know if the egalitarian and just State in which man is fulfilled (and which is to be set up, and especially to be maintained) proceeds from a war of all against all, or from the irreducible responsibility of the one for all, and if it can do without friendships and faces" (OTB 159-160).

Thus the face to face relation is not only the putting in question of my naive enjoyment or the call to responsibility; it is also the institution of human community and the call to justice. Levinas insists that the human community instituted by language, must be understood as a kinship, a community built up from the face to face relation. It is infinite responsibility rather than unlimited natural rights that must be modified by the just institutions, conventions, and laws of society. Based on the priority of responsibility, justice involves the attempt to address the needs and define the responsibilities of each person.

And justice is not the last word. Again in implicit rejection of Hobbes, Levinas claims that the political order is not enough to secure morality. There is a violence in all our efforts to institute justice, a violence that must be modified by charity, apology, and mercy. Ethics must retain the role of challenging the universal laws and institutions of the political order, maintaining the human faces and the proximity that permits human beings to constantly seek a better justice. Levinas's view of human society is that of a community peopled by men, women, and children, lovers, friends, neighbors, and strangers who are not only and not primarily involved in relations of conflict but are primarily involved in the extended kinship of responsibility for one another.

### III. Conclusion

Thus we can see the radical reversal of priority and vision between Hobbes and Levinas. Hobbes's materialism leads him to present human beings as self-interested, autonomous individuals who are primarily motivated by the desire to preserve their lives. Hobbes emphasizes scarcity, violent competition, and constant insecurity as the natural human condition. The desire for self-preservation under such conditions leads human beings to enter into a self-interested agreement that institutes an absolute sovereign with the power to mediate conflict and make contracts and cooperation possible. In Hobbes's account of the state of nature, there is no natural ground for cooperation other than fear of death; there is no ground for responsiveness to others since this sets up an irrational vulnerability; and there is no ground for moral responsibility since this is also irrational and impractical until there is a coercive political order with the power to enforce contracts.

By contrast, according to Levinas, the primordial relations between human beings are not material relations of conflict and competition. Levinas claims that we are not 'allergic egoisms' competing for scarce resources and intent on preserving our lives and freedom against hostile others. Although it may be true that human beings have a strong desire to preserve their lives, it is crude and simplistic to claim that this desire is prior to all other desires in everyone. Levinas provides a more adequate account of material existence and human relations – an account that includes both human intimacy and human conflict. He describes a fundamental generosity and responsiveness to others that provides the ground for human sociality and cooperation. He claims that the possibility of ethical responsibility implies a primordial connection between oneself and others, and he traces this connection to a description of individuals who are constituted as self-conscious subjects in relation to one another, in the face to face relation of responsibility. We are not first autonomous, rational, self-interested individuals; we are social creatures who only become self-conscious individuals in relation to others. Responsiveness and responsibility are constitutive of human subjectivity and are therefore always present even under the worst conditions of conflict and competition.

According to Levinas, again in implicit opposition to Hobbes, ethics cannot be reduced to politics; ethical responsibility cannot depend upon social conventions or the security of a political order. One of the real problems for Hobbes's political theory is the initial covenant that institutes the political order; people who are incapable of keeping their promises and contracts in the state of nature must somehow make a covenant to escape the state of nature. If this problem is solved by a strictly self-interested agreement to institute a sovereign, then the resulting moral and political order depends solely on maintaining an external coercive power. Any breakdown of the political order – in war, for example – implies that moral responsibility



is suspended in favor of self-interested self-preservation. Thus, despite his claims that the moral laws are eternal and immutable, Hobbes makes morality dependent on social conventions and political institutions; he makes it irrational to demand moral behavior apart from the security of a well-policed civil society.

By contrast, according to Levinas, responsibility for others is prior to the security of civil society. Properly understood, the ethical relation of infinite responsibility is entirely outside experience and prior to self-conscious subjectivity.<sup>13</sup> Only the traces of this prereflective and primordial human condition are available to us. We can imagine a solitude prior to the origin of self-consciousness because we can be wholly absorbed in momentary enjoyments. The trace of the insecurity that troubles this solitary enjoyment remains in everyday hunger pangs. In moments of illness, physical pain or pleasure, moments when we are wholly absorbed in corporeal sensible existence, we experience the trace of the enchainment to oneself that Levinas ascribes to egoist solitude. There are traces of the familiarity of a human welcome in a shared home; and there are traces of the absolute alterity of the Other in the face of a stranger, traces of an otherness that escapes the human effort to comprehend. Our everyday relations with one another, including simply speaking to one another, bear witness to the face to face relation. Responsibility for the Other is a goodness we do not always find in ourselves; and yet we find the desire for this goodness and the traces of this goodness in our compassion, generosity, charity, and occasional self-sacrifice. Utopian concern for the Other is "out of place in this world" and yet it manifests itself in conscience, cutting through rational self-interest. The cry of the Other opens the self to the interhuman order and interrupts complacent and self-satisfied existence. As a condition of human subjectivity, moral responsibility for others cannot be set aside; it precedes the political order and remains in force even when there is no external coercion to guarantee one's contracts or preserve one's life. Thus even under the brutal conditions of war, outside of any political order, and before any considerations of prudential egoism or practical reason, we remain responsible.

Finally, even though Levinas does not offer a complete social philosophy, his work provides a more adequate conception of justice within the social and political institutions of the human community. As in all social contract theories, Hobbes presents a rational reconstruction of the state as an entity that is created and maintained by human beings in order to provide order and justice. But under Hobbes's account of human nature and human psychology, the state is most needed to mediate conflict and make contracts and cooperation possible. If we are naturally self-interested and violently competitive, then the just society can only place minimal but necessary limitations on our self-interested competition and protect some set of individual rights based on an abstract equality. But I have used Levinas's account to argue that human beings are not primarily violent or self-interested.

Outside of any political order, we are still interdependent and capable of generosity and cooperation with one another. The human community is not merely a voluntary association of individuals who agree to non-interference and limited cooperation for common goals. The human community is constituted by language, by speaking to one another in the face to face relation that maintains responsibility and respects difference. No social contract is necessary to construct the human community. But social and political institutions are still needed to realize the equality and distribute the infinite responsibilities that arise in the face-to-face relation. An adequate conception of justice, therefore, involves more than a judgment between the conflicting rights of anonymous and faceless citizens. Justice must be rooted in the necessary responsibility of the face-to-face relation; it must include social, economic, and political institutions that attempt to address the needs of each person. Equality and universal justice must be realized without ignoring differences, and this means that the institutions of the political order must be held in check by the responsibility of a unique I to a unique Other – a responsibility that might call for something other than universality would demand. Thus even in the necessary administration of just laws and social institutions, the face-to-face relation, the ethical relation of responsibility has a primacy and priority that cannot be effaced.

### Notes

- 1 Emmanuel Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity: Conversations with Philippe Nemo*, trans. Richard A. Cohen (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1985). Cited as EI.
- 2 Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan, Or the Matter, Forme and Power of a Commonwealth Ecclesiasticall and Civil* (New York: Macmillan, 1962). Cited as L.
- 3 Hobbes defines a law of nature as "a precept or general rule, found out by reason, by which a man is forbidden to do that, which is destructive of his life, or taketh away the means of preserving the same; and to omit that, by which he thinketh it may be best preserved" (L 103).
- 4 Two recent sources for interesting interpretations of Hobbes's moral philosophy are George Shelton, *Morality and Sovereignty in the Philosophy of Hobbes* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1992) and R. E. Ewin, *Virtues and Rights: The Moral Philosophy of Thomas Hobbes* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1991).
- 5 Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969). Cited as TI.
- 6 Simone de Beauvoir, for example, objects that Levinas deliberately takes a man's point of view and asserts the traditional male privilege that regards man as the rational Subject and woman as the Other, defined relative to man and therefore denied her own subjectivity and freedom [*The Second Sex* (New York: Knopf, 1952)]. And Tina Chanter has summarized possible feminist objections to this description of the feminine including the fact that the woman first appears in the serene abode of the home, that the feminine is characterized by gentleness and intimacy and therefore deprived of authority and self-assertion, and that the equation of femininity with discretion exemplifies the historical invisibility of

- the woman behind the scenes ["Feminism and the Other" in *The Provocation of Levinas*, ed. Robert Bernasconi and David Wood (New York: Routledge, 1988)].
- 7 The issue of Levinas's relation to feminism deserves more attention than I can provide in this essay, but there is support among some feminists for Levinas's fairly traditional treatment of femininity. Many feminists have embraced traditional feminine qualities as positive and valuable characteristics of women, to be celebrated as fundamental human qualities and used to promote social change. There is a growing body of literature in feminist ethics, for example, that resists the patriarchal devaluation of the feminine and attempts to develop alternative ethical theories based on women's experiences. See Carol Gilligan, *In a Different Voice* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982). Nel Noddings, *Caring* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984). Eva Feder Kittay and Diana T. Meyers (eds.), *Women and Moral Theory* (Savage, MD: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 1987). And Sara Ruddick, *Maternal Thinking* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1989).
  - 8 Many of Hobbes's contemporary critics and more recent scholars, such as Jean Hampton, have pointed to the problem of trust in the initial covenant that institutes a sovereign. In her book, *Hobbes and the Social Contract Tradition* (Cambridge University Press, 1986), Hampton uses modern game theory to argue that instead of a contract or covenant based on trust, persons in the state of nature would only need to make a "self-interested agreement" to institute a sovereign. Self-interested rational calculation is the only motive needed to perform such an agreement and the agreement cannot be disrupted by distrust because each party has a clear self-interest in acting on the agreement. [See Hampton, Chapter 6] This solution to the problem of instituting the sovereign, however, actually purges Hobbes's theory of any literal human covenant or social contract [Hampton, 187]. It therefore reinforces my claim that certain ethical behaviors, especially responsiveness to others and responsibility for others, have no ground in Hobbes's account and remain wholly dependent on self-interested motives or external coercion.
  - 9 David Gauthier, "The Social Contract as Ideology" in *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, vol. 6, no. 2 (1977), pp. 130–164.
  - 10 Emmanuel Levinas, "Ideology and Idealism" in *Modern Jewish Ethics*, ed. Marvin Fox (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1975), 137.
  - 11 In this description of responsibility as fundamental and inescapable, Levinas goes against the traditional Western philosophical understanding of responsibility as originating with the free actions of a subject. Infinite responsibility is prior to freedom because responsibility is constitutive of subjectivity; it constitutes an unmediated obligation that binds us to the Other before understanding or decision. We do not *have* responsibility for the other; rather subjectivity *is* initially *one-for-another*. Levinas claims that his entire philosophy depends on the idea that with the appearance of the human there is something more important than one's own continued existence and that is the life of the Other. But he also makes a careful distinction between this ideal of infinite responsibility and the morality of everyday life. He refers to infinite responsibility as an "ideal of saintliness," a utopian ideal that cannot be fully realized but that provides a first and undeniable value. Thus according to Levinas, the ethical responsibility of the face to face relation must inspire and direct the moral and political order, but it cannot be universalized or legislated.
  - 12 Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Boston: Martinus Nijhoff, 1981). Cited as OTB.

- 13 Levinas carefully describes the face to face ethical relation as "pre-original." This relation is prior to experience, prior to thought, prior to critical consciousness. These claims are perhaps most clearly stated in an early essay, "The Ego and the Totality" in *Collected Philosophical Papers*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Boston: Martinus Nijhoff, 1987). In that essay, Levinas refers to solitary enjoyment as "biological consciousness," a consciousness without problems, "a purely inner world . . . to which the term unconscious or instinct corresponds" (26). And he claims that thought can only begin when this vital consciousness becomes conscious of exteriority and therefore self-conscious:

For exteriority to be able to present itself to me, it, as exteriority, must overflow the "terms" of vital consciousness, but at the same time, as present, it must not be fatal to consciousness. This penetration of a total system into a partial system which cannot assimilate it is a miracle. The possibility of thought is the consciousness of a miracle, or wonder. . . . Thought begins with the possibility of conceiving a freedom external to my own.

(27-28)

But because this ethical relation is prior to experience, it is not itself an origin but "pre-original;" It is not itself a foundation for experience but remains outside experience, "otherwise than Being," prior to representation and therefore misrepresented in any description. We can only uncover the traces of this paradoxical past "experience" that is beyond the limits of knowledge or memory.

# READING LEVINAS READING DESCARTES' *MEDITATIONS*

*Dennis King Keenan*

Source: *Journal of the British Society for Phenomenology* 29(1) (1998): 63–74.

Descartes' *Meditations on First Philosophy* plays a major role in Levinas's work. The profundity of the *Meditations* lies, for Levinas, in "[t]he ambiguity of Descartes's first evidence, revealing the I and God in turn without merging them, revealing them as two distinct moments of evidence mutually founding one another."<sup>1</sup> This ambiguous "double origin"<sup>2</sup> of the *cogito* and the infinite is performed in a reading that progresses from the First Meditation to the discovery of the infinite in the Third Meditation. This performance of what I would suggest is a "drama in several acts" (TeI 258/TaI 282, see also TeI 260/TaI 284) is the production of a trace of the *infinition* of the infinite, of the infinite *as* interrupting the thought that thinks it. This performance is re-enacted throughout Levinas's work.

The role played by Descartes' *Meditations* in Levinas's work is not, however, limited to the performance of the "double origin" of the *cogito* and the infinite. Levinas also reads the performance of an irreducible double movement into Descartes' presentation of the evil genius.

The performance of these two irreducible double movements not only interrupts a traditional reading of Descartes' *Meditations*, but also interrupts a too easy reading of Levinas's work.<sup>3</sup>

Levinas frequently characterizes his reading of Descartes' *Meditations* in terms of two distinct movements.

If, in a first movement, Descartes takes a consciousness to be indubitable of itself by itself, in a second movement – the reflection on reflection – he recognizes conditions for this certitude.

(TeI 186/TaI 210)

Before undertaking a close textual reading of Levinas's reading of Descartes' *Meditations* it is necessary to situate these two movements within the context of the distinction Levinas makes between comprehension and critique.

In the opening sections of *Totality and Infinity* Levinas makes a distinction between knowledge or theory understood as comprehension and the critical essence of knowing. In its comprehension of being, knowledge or theory is concerned with critique.

It discovers the dogmatism and naïve arbitrariness of its spontaneity, and calls into question the freedom of the exercise of ontology; it then seeks to exercise this freedom in such a way as to turn back at every moment to the origin of the arbitrary dogmatism of this free exercise. This would lead to an infinite regression if this return itself remained an ontological movement, an exercise of freedom, a theory. Its critical intention then leads it beyond theory and ontology: critique does not reduce the other to the same as does ontology, but calls into question the exercise of the same.

(TeI 13/TaI 43)

Knowledge or theory seems, therefore, to be characterized by an ambiguity – two distinct movements.

Critique or philosophy is the essence of knowing. But what is proper to knowing is not its possibility of going unto an object, a movement by which it is akin to other acts; its prerogative consists in being able to put itself in question, in penetrating beneath its own condition. It is not drawn back from the world because it has the world as its object; it can have the world as its theme, make of it an object, because its exercise consists, as it were, in taking charge of the very condition that supports it and that supports even this very act of taking charge.

(TeI 57/TaI 85)

These two movements are not, however, *merely* opposed to one another. Although oriented in inverse directions, and therefore opposed, they nevertheless call for being thought at the same time. The movement of comprehension, "working on straight ahead" (TeI 61/TaI 89) is, as was pointed out in the passage cited above, inverted "*at every moment [à tout moment]*" (TeI 13/TaI 43, emphasis added) by the movement of critique. In another passage alluding to the temporal relationship of comprehension and critique, Levinas writes: "The search for the intelligible and the manifestation of the *critical* essence of knowing, the movement of a being back to what precedes its condition, *begin together [commence du même coup]*" (TeI 56/TaI 84, emphasis added), and yet they are oriented in inverse directions. These two movements necessarily yet impossibly call for being thought at the same time. "Knowing becomes knowing of a fact only if it is *at the*

same time [*en même temps*] critical, if it puts itself into question, goes back beyond its origin – in an unnatural movement to seek higher than one's own origin, a movement which evinces or describes a created freedom" (TeI 54/TaI 82–83, emphasis added). This unnatural movement of critique is what Levinas calls "ethics" or "morality." "Morality begins when freedom, instead of being justified by itself, feels itself to be arbitrary and violent" (TeI 56/TaI 84). This suggests, as Bernasconi has noted, "that the ambitions of epistemology are only fulfilled when it recognizes itself as morality,"<sup>4</sup> when comprehension is called into question by critique. Levinas discovers this ambiguous double movement, and therefore an "ethical" structure, in Descartes' *Meditations on First Philosophy*.

The critical essence of knowing leads – according to Levinas's reading of Descartes' *Meditations* – beyond the knowledge of the *cogito* (TeI 58/TaI 85). It penetrates beneath knowledge understood as comprehension, beneath knowledge which takes itself to be indubitable of itself by itself.

If, in a first movement, Descartes takes a consciousness to be indubitable of itself by itself, in a second movement – the reflection on reflection – he recognizes conditions for this certitude.

(TeI 186/TaI 210)

In a second movement – that is, the critical reflection on the reflection characteristic of comprehension – Descartes recognizes conditions for the certitude of comprehension. This certitude, Levinas provisionally states, is due to the clarity and distinctness of the *cogito*. Levinas goes on to point out that while certitude is indeed due to the clarity and distinctness of the *cogito*, certitude itself is sought because of "the presence of infinity in this finite thought, which without this presence would be ignorant of its own finitude" (TeI 186/TaI 210). That is, without this "presence," consciousness would be unable to posit and conceive its own finitude, its own doubt (TeI 185/TaI 210). It would be unable to be certain of its own doubt, unable to actualize the first movement. Levinas is referring here to the following famous passage from the Third Meditation.

I clearly understand that there is more reality in an infinite substance than in a finite one, and hence that my perception of the infinite, that is God, is in some way prior to my perception of the finite, that is myself. For how could I understand that I doubted or desired – that is, lacked something – and that I was not wholly perfect, unless there were in me some idea of a more perfect being which enabled me to recognize my own defects by comparison?<sup>5</sup>

How could I understand that I doubted, how could I have posited and conceived my doubt, my finitude, my imperfection – which, in the Second

Meditation, established the certitude of the *cogito* (that is, I understood, I was certain, I had no doubt, that I doubted) – unless there were always already in me some idea of a more perfect being which enabled me to recognize my own defects by comparison? Descartes here discovers in a second movement – that is, “after the fact” or in the critical reflection on the reflection characteristic of comprehension – the “condition” of the certitude characteristic of the first movement, the condition of what was initially taken to be “indubitable of itself by itself,” an absolute origin. Descartes discovers in the Third Meditation a pre-originary origin – the infinite.

The way in which the infinite is articulated in the finite devolves from the two distinct movements outlined earlier. Levinas establishes the proximity of this reading of Descartes’ *Meditations* with his own descriptions of death and the future, in that part of *Totality and Infinity* entitled “Atheism or the Will.” The reading undertaken in this section, like the reading cited above, characterizes the *Meditations* in terms of two distinct movements. The first movement is called the chronological order and the second movement is called the “logical” order. These two distinct movements are likewise articulated by the distinction between comprehension and critique.

The being infinitely surpassing its own idea in us – God in the Cartesian terminology – subtends the evidence of the *cogito*, according to the third *Meditation*. But the discovery of this metaphysical relation in the *cogito* constitutes chronologically only the second move of the philosopher. That there could be a chronological order distinct from the “logical” order, that there could be several moments in the progression, that there is a progression – here is separation. For by virtue of time this being is not yet [*n’est pas encore*] – which does not make it the same as nothingness, but maintains it at a distance [*à distance*] from itself. It is not all at once [*n’est pas d’un seul coup*].

(TeI 24–5/TaI 54)

It is important to keep in mind that the passages describing the *cogito* as “not yet” and “not all at once” are descriptions characteristic of knowledge as comprehension written from the perspective of a reader/writer who has discovered the infinite in the Third Meditation. It is at this *moment*, that is, the *moment* of the discovery of the metaphysical relation in the *cogito*, that Levinas describes the *cogito* as “not yet” and “not all at once.” The condition of the actualization of the *cogito* is yet to come (note: from the perspective of the chronological order, the *cogito* is *already* assumed to be an *actual* entity, indubitable of itself by itself). This does not, however, make the *cogito* the same as nothingness, or, the same as potency. At the *moment* of the discovery of the infinite, the *cogito* is maintained at a distance from itself in the interval between being and nothingness, between act and potency. It is maintained in the interval of the “not yet” (or, the “not all at once”). It is



this interval – an interval that marks the production of a trace of separation or alterity – that, I would suggest, Levinas calls “dead time” (*le temps mort*). Even God is “not yet.” Even God is “still to come.”

Even its [i.e., the *cogito*’s] cause, older than itself, is still to come [*est encore à venir*]. The cause of being is thought or known by its effect as though it were posterior to its effect.

(TeI 25/TaI 54)

The cause of being (God) is thought or known by its effect (the *cogito*) as though the cause were posterior to its effect. “Dead time” marks the moment in comprehension when comprehension finds itself at a distance from itself. An attentive reading of Descartes’ *Meditations* demands the critique (and, at the same time, the recognition) of comprehension. At this moment of the discovery of the infinite, that is, at this moment of critique (if only for a moment), what is critiqued (that is, comprehension) retains all of its value in the very critique.

Referring to these passages, Levinas writes: “Thus already theoretical thought [...] articulates separation” (TeI 25/TaI 54). “Theoretical thought” here refers to both comprehension and critique which articulate not merely the reflection, but the production of separation. For “[s]eparation,” Levinas writes, “is not reflected [*réflétée*] in thought, but produced [*produite*] by it” (TeI 25/TaI 54, emphasis added). To fully appreciate this passage it will be necessary to clarify what Levinas means by “production.”

Levinas introduces the ambiguous term “production” in the Preface to *Totality and Infinity*.

The term “production” [*production*] designates both the effectuation [*l'effectuation*] of being (the event “is produced” [*«se produit»*], an automobile “is produced” [*«se produit»*]) and its being brought to light or its exposition (an argument “is produced” [*«se produit»*], an actor “is produced” [*«se produit»*]). The ambiguity of this verb conveys the essential ambiguity of the operation by which the being of an entity simultaneously is brought about [*s'évertue*] and is revealed.

(TeI XIV/TaI 26)

The ambiguous term “production” is crucial for a proper understanding of the following passage which, as will become apparent later, is likewise crucial for a proper understanding of Levinas’s reading of Descartes’ *Meditations*:

The I is not a contingent formation by which the same and the other, as logical determinations of being, can in addition be reflected [*se refléter*] within a thought. It is in order that alterity be produced [*se produire*] in being that a “thought” is needed and that an I is needed.

(TeI 9–10/TaI 39)

The alterity of the same and the other is not merely reflected within the thought of an "I." This passage, which alludes to Levinas's discussion of the *cogito*, suggests that the *cogito* is needed in order that alterity be produced in being. The passage continues:

The irreversibility of the relation can be produced [*se produire*] only if the relation is effected [*accompli*] by one of the terms as the very movement of transcendence, as the *traversing* of this distance, and not as a recording of, or the psychological invention of this movement. "Thought" and "interiority" are the very break-up of being and the production [*production*] (not the reflection [*reflet*]) of transcendence. We know this relation only in the measure that we effect [*effectuons*] it; this is what is distinctive about it. Alterity is possible only starting from *me*.  
(Tel 10/TaI 39–40)

We know the relation, we can reflect upon it, only in the measure that we *effect* it (that is, bring it about). But what is known or reflected upon in this effectuation, what is revealed, is *not* the unambiguous appearance of something, as is usually the case in production (which ambiguously conveys *both* effectuation *and* being brought to light or appearing). For what is produced in *this* effectuation is not something that unambiguously appears, but rather what infinitely approaches (or withdraws from) revelation and merely leaves a trace of itself in an ambiguity. Therefore, what is "known" or "reflected upon" is an irreducible ambiguity – a trace of what infinitely approaches (or withdraws from) revelation.

It is now possible to appreciate properly what Levinas means when he writes: "Separation is not *reflected* in thought, but *produced* by it" (Tel 25/TaI 54, emphasis added). Separation is produced by thought in that one *effects* a progression through the two movements of the *Meditations*, in the measure that one *effects* a performance of a reading of the *Meditations*. But what is reflected upon in this effectuation is *not* the appearance of something, as is usually the case in production (which ambiguously conveys *both* effectuation *and* being brought to light or appearing). For what is produced in *this* effectuation is an inversion of order with respect to the chronological order and the "logical" order. What is produced in *this* effectuation is the "double origin" of the *cogito* and God.

The ambiguity of Descartes's first evidence, revealing the I and God in turn without merging them, revealing them as two distinct moments of evidence mutually founding one another, characterizes the very meaning of separation. The separation of the I is thus affirmed to be non-contingent, non-provisional. The distance between me and God, radical and necessary, is produced [*se produit*] in being itself.

(Tel 19/TaI 48)

What is produced in *this* effectuation is not something that unambiguously appears, but rather an irreducible ambiguity. What is produced in *this* effectuation is not something that unambiguously appears, but rather what infinitely approaches (or withdraws from) revelation and merely leaves a trace of itself in this ambiguity. Therefore, what is "reflected upon" is an irreducible ambiguity – a trace of what infinitely approaches (or withdraws from) revelation.

One must be careful here not to hypostatize the infinite. The infinite is not anything that first exists and then reveals itself.

The production [*production*] of the infinite entity is inseparable from the idea of infinity, for it is precisely in the disproportion between the idea of infinity and the infinity of which it is the idea that this exceeding of limits is produced [*se produit*]. The idea of infinity is the mode of being, the *infinition*, of infinity. Infinity does not first exist, and *then* reveal itself. Its infinition is produced [*se produit*] as revelation, as a positing of its idea in *me*. It is produced [*se produit*] in the improbable feat whereby a separated being fixed in its identity, the same, the I, nonetheless contains in itself what it can neither contain nor receive solely by virtue of its own identity.

(TeI XIV–XV/TaI 26–7)

Among all of Descartes' ideas, the idea of God or the infinite is, according to the Third Meditation, exceptional. Descartes' investigation makes use of the scholastic distinction between formal reality and objective reality. The formal reality of an object is the intrinsic reality of the object. Objective reality refers only to ideas. The objective reality of an idea is the representational content of the idea. It is the object as it is represented in an idea. With the exception of the idea of the infinite, it is conceivable that there is enough formal reality in the "I," in the thinking thing, to be the cause of the objective reality contained in every idea possessed by the "I."

[T]he idea of infinity is exceptional in that its *ideatum* surpasses its idea, whereas for the things the total coincidence of their "objective" and "formal" realities is not precluded; we could conceivably have accounted for all the ideas, other than that of Infinity, by ourselves.

(TeI 19/TaI 49)

Because the *ideatum* of the idea of infinity surpasses its idea, because "infinity overflows the thought that thinks it," "[t]he relation with infinity cannot [...] be stated in terms of experience" (TeI XIII/TaI 25). "Its very *infinition* is produced [*se produit*] precisely in this overflowing" (TeI XIII/TaI 25). What is experienced or known is the "effect" of the overflowing, the "effect" of the performance of the two movements that produces an irreducibly ambiguous "double origin." Yet all that the infinite "is" is its effect. All

the infinite "is" is the revelation "after the fact" of the pre-originary origin (which is produced in the performance of the two movements that produces an irreducibly ambiguous "double origin").

The effectuation of this "double origin" makes possible those descriptions of the *cogito* pointed out earlier – those descriptions which must have been written from the perspective of a reader/writer who has *already* effected a progression through the two movements of the *Meditations*. For example: the *cogito* is "not yet," is "not all at once," or God is "still to come." Another example pointed out earlier is the following phrase: "The cause of being is thought or known by its effect *as though* it were posterior to its effect." The effectuation of an inversion of order, of a "double origin," makes possible the production of this logically absurd inversion of the "posteriority of the anterior" (TeI 25/TaI 54) by thought. "Thus already theoretical thought," on the basis of the effectuation of an inversion of order, "articulates separation" (TeI 25/TaI 54). Returning to the sentence in question: "Separation is not reflected in thought, but produced by it. For in it," Levinas writes, reiterating the logically absurd inversion of the "posteriority of the anterior," "the *After* or the *Effect* conditions the *Before* or the *Cause*: the *Before* *appears* and is only welcomed" (TeI 25/TaI 54). It "appears," however, only as the irreducible ambiguity of the chronological and "logical" orders. Therefore, what is reflected upon in this effectuation is *not* the unambiguous appearance of something, as is usually the case in production, but the ambiguous trace of what infinitely approaches (or withdraws from) revelation, of what is "not yet."

The performance of the two movements of Descartes' *Meditations* is a production of a trace of the "not yet" of the *cogito* and the "not yet" of the infinite. The performance of these two movements is the production of a trace of the *cogito* *as* interrupted and the infinite *as* interrupting. It is the production of a trace of what Levinas calls "dead time."

The productionlessness or *désœuvrement* characteristic of Levinas's reading of Descartes' *Meditations* is marked by "dead time."

The interval of discretion or of death is a third notion between being and nothingness.

The interval is not to life what potency is to act. Its originality consists in being between two times. We propose to call this dimension dead time [*temps mort*]. The rupture of historical and totalized duration, which dead time [*le temps mort*] marks, is the very rupture that creation operates in being.

(TeI 29/TaI 58)<sup>6</sup>

"Dead time" marks the "relation without relation" (*relation sans relation* or *rapport sans rapport*) (TeI 52, 271/TaI 80, 295) of the *cogito* and the infinite.

The phrase "relation without relation" articulates the fact that one "term" of the "relation" – the infinite – absolves itself from the "relation," infinitely approaches (or withdraws from) the "relation," or said otherwise, merely leaves a trace of itself in the production of a "double origin" in which it, momentarily appearing as an origin, is interminably vulnerable to being reappropriated by the *cogito*.

The reading of Levinas' reading of Descartes' *Meditations* undertaken so far has focused on the relationship of the *cogito* and the infinite. But "dead time" not only marks the "relation without relation" of the *cogito* and the infinite, but also the "relation without relation" of the *cogito* and the evil genius.

In that part of *Totality and Infinity* entitled "Truth Presupposes Justice" Levinas points out that taking the *cogito* as the "first certitude" – which is characteristic of the first movement – constitutes "an arbitrary halt which is not justified of itself" (TeI 65/TaI 92–3).

Doubt with regard to objects implies the evidence of the exercise of doubt itself. To deny this exercise would be again to affirm this exercise. In the *cogito* the thinking subject which denies its evidences ends up at the evidence of this work of negation, although in fact at a different level from that at which it had denied. But it ends up at the affirmation of an evidence that is not a final or initial affirmation, for it can be cast into doubt in its turn. The truth of the second negation, then, is affirmed at a still deeper level – but, once again, one not impervious to negation. This is not purely and simply a Sisyphean labor, since the distance traversed each time is not the same; it is a movement of descent toward an ever more profound abyss which we elsewhere have called *there is [il y a]*, beyond affirmation and negation.

(TeI 65–6/TaI 93)

"Dead time" marks the *moment* when the certitude of the *cogito* finds itself at a distance from itself. It is as if the certitude of the *cogito* – which is characteristic of the first movement – were "not yet," as if every attempt to actualize it were interrupted *in* the very attempt. At this *moment*, if only for a moment, what is doubted retains all of its value *in* the very negation.

Levinas prefaces this part of *Totality and Infinity* by drawing an analogy between the spontaneous freedom of the "I" characteristic of the first movement and the fate of Gyges who not only sees without being seen, but also knows that he is not seen.

But does not Gyges's position involve the impunity of a being alone in the world, that is, a being for whom the world is a spectacle? And is not this the very condition for solitary, and hence uncontested and unpunished, freedom, and for certitude?

(TeI 62/TaI 90)

Levinas calls this "pure spectacle" a "silent world," presumably because the spontaneous freedom and certitude of the "I" is uncontested by any revelation. Nothing exterior to the solitary "I" disturbs its silent interiority. But Gyges' position, that is, the first movement of Levinas' reading of Descartes' *Meditations*, is not as unequivocal as these remarks lead one to think. The spontaneous freedom and certitude of the "I" is always already haunted by the doubt arising from the evil genius, a disturbance that is *seemingly* distinct from the infinite's interruption of the *cogito* in the Third Meditation.

Levinas joins his own account of the *il y a*, the "there is," that he had offered in *Existence and Existents* and in *Time and the Other* with Descartes' description of the evil genius in the *Meditations*. The evil genius is introduced by Descartes to extend the range of issues which might be put into doubt. But the doubt arising from the evil genius is not only more extensive but also more potent than any doubt arising from a personal reflection on the fallibility of our senses. The potency of the doubt arises from the possibility, not the actuality, of the evil genius, from the nagging possibility that things "which all seem to manifest themselves for good" *only seem* to manifest themselves for good.

The evil genius does not manifest himself to *state* his lie; he remains, as possible, behind things which all seem to manifest themselves for good. The possibility of their fall to the state of images or veils codetermines their apparition as a pure spectacle, and betrays the recess that harbors the evil genius; whence the possibility of universal doubt, which is not a personal adventure that happened to Descartes.

(TeI 63/TaI 90)

I would suggest that universal doubt is not a personal adventure that happened to Descartes because of what Levinas calls the "arbitrary halt" at the first change of level in the spiralling movement of descent toward the ever more profound abyss called the *il y a*. The equivocation characteristic of the spiralling movement of descent is a deepening on Levinas's part of the doubt arising from the evil genius as it is presented in Descartes' *Meditations*. It is a deepening of that equivocation that opens "that interspace between the illusory and the serious in which a subject who doubts breathes" (TeI 64/TaI 91).

This interspace is marked by the interval of "dead time," which is *between* being and nothingness.

The equivocation here is not due to the confusion of two notions, two substances, or two properties. It is not to be counted among the confusions produced within a world that has already appeared. Nor is it the confusion of being and nothingness. What appears is not degraded into

a nothing. But the appearance, which is not a nothing, is not a being either – not even an interior being, for it is nowise *in itself*.

(Tel 63/TaI 91)

The equivocal appearance of the phenomenon is neither pure nothingness nor a straightforward appearance *in itself* which, as such, would enable one to dismiss it with certitude. Appearance is terrifying precisely because of this equivocality, precisely because it *might* deceive one.

This equivocal interspace likewise has consequences for the thinking subject. This is especially evident in that spiralling movement of descent that deepens the doubt arising from the evil genius as it is presented in the *Meditations*. The “I” in this spiralling movement of descent, in this “work of infinite negation” (Tel 66/TaI 93), does not find in the *cogito* itself a stopping place. Like the subject interrupted by the infinite, it dwells in the equivocal interval between being and nothingness. In that part of *Existence and Existents* entitled “Existence Without Existents” Levinas writes:

When the forms of things are dissolved in the night, the darkness of the night, which is neither an object nor the quality of an object, invades like a presence. In the night, where we are riven to it, we are not dealing with anything. But this nothing is not that of pure nothingness. There is no longer *this* or *that*; there is not “something.” But this universal absence is in its turn a presence, an absolutely unavoidable presence. It is not the dialectical counterpart of absence, and we do not grasp it through a thought. It is immediately there. There is no discourse. Nothing responds to us, but this silence; the voice of this silence is understood and frightens like the silence of those infinite spaces Pascal speaks of. *There is [il y a]*, in general, without it mattering what there is, without our being able to fix a substantive to this term. *There is [il y a]* is an impersonal form, like in it rains, or it is warm. Its anonymity is essential. The mind does not find itself faced with an apprehended exterior. The exterior – if one insists on this term – remains uncorrelated with an interior. It is no longer given. It is no longer a world. What we call the I is itself submerged by the night, invaded, depersonalized, stifled by it. The disappearance of all things and of the I leaves what cannot disappear, the sheer fact of being in which *one* participates, whether one wants to or not, without having taken the initiative, anonymously. Being remains, like a field of forces, like a heavy atmosphere belonging to no one, universal, returning in the midst of the negation which put it aside, and in all the powers to which that negation may be multiplied.<sup>7</sup>

This return in the midst of the negation that puts something aside brings one back to Levinas's reading of doubt in Descartes' *Meditations*.

It was pointed out above that taking the *cogito* as the “first certitude” – which is characteristic of the first movement – constitutes “an arbitrary halt which is not justified of itself” (TeI 65/TaI 92–3). For in the *cogito* the thinking subject which negates its evidences

ends up at the evidence of this work of negation, although in fact at a different level from that at which it had denied. But it ends up at the affirmation of an evidence that is not a final or initial affirmation, for it can be cast into doubt in its turn. The truth of the second negation, then, is affirmed at a still deeper level – but, once again, one not impervious to negation. This is not purely and simply a Sisyphean labor, since the distance traversed each time is not the same; it is a movement of descent toward an ever more profound abyss which we elsewhere have called *there is [il y a]*, beyond affirmation and negation.

(TeI 65–6/TaI 93)

Levinas outlines here, I would suggest, two movements not wholly unlike those outlined with respect to the *cogito* and the infinite. Even though Levinas prefaces this section of *Totality and Infinity* by positing an absolutely silent world that is “the very condition for solitary, and hence uncontested and unpunished, freedom, and for certitude” (TeI 62/TaI 90), his subsequent description calls this unequivocal world characteristic of the first movement into question. This world is fraught with equivocation. It is *not* simply silent (“it is as though in this silent and indecisive apparition a lie were perpetuated, as though the danger of error arose from an imposture, as though the silence were but the modality of an utterance”), it is *not* simply solitary (it “comes to us from the Other, be he an evil genius”), it is *not* simply certain (“[t]he evil genius’ lie [ . . . ] is in that interspace between the illusory and the serious in which a subject who doubts breathes”), and, as such, it is *not* uncontested (TeI 64/TaI 91). The first movement is interrupted by a second movement. The spontaneous freedom and certitude of the “I” is always already haunted by the doubt arising from the evil genius, a disturbance that is *seemingly* distinct from the infinite’s interruption of the *cogito* in the Third Meditation.

This reading of Levinas’s reading of Descartes’ *Meditations* is disruptive on several different levels. First, doubling the two irreducible movements interrupts any linear reading of the *Meditations* that would easily step from the evil genius to the certitude of the *cogito*, and then to the *cogito*’s relationship with the infinite. That is, it interrupts any reading that would leave the evil genius behind, that would treat it as merely a step on the way to the *cogito*’s relationship with the infinite. Second, doubling the two irreducible movements likewise interrupts any linear reading of Levinas’ work. One can locate such an interruption in the relationship of silence and language



considered by Levinas in the context of his reading of Descartes' *Meditations*. Levinas writes that language is

an attitude of the same with regard to the Other irreducible to the representation of the Other, irreducible to an intention of thought, irreducible to a consciousness of . . . , since relating to what no consciousness can contain, relating to the infinity of the Other. Language is not enacted within a consciousness; it comes to me from the Other and reverberates in consciousness by putting it in question.

(Tel 179/TaI 204)

Language, for Levinas, is itself the "relation without relation" of the "I" and the infinity of the Other. But the "total frankness ever renewed [*franchise totale, toujours renouvelée*]" (Tel 71/TaI 98) characteristic of language cannot simply be *opposed* (as Levinas sometimes leads one to think) to the "ever renewed equivocation [*équivoque toujours renouvelée*]" (Tel 63/TaI 91) characteristic of the doubt arising from the silence of the evil genius/*il y a*. By the same token, this silence cannot easily be inscribed in a linear reading that would situate it as a step on the way to the frankness of language. The "ever renewed frankness" is always already accompanied (haunted?) by the "ever renewed equivocation." In fact, the "ever renewed equivocation" is the "inverse of language" (Tel 64/TaI 91), the inverse of the "ever renewed frankness" characteristic of language. Rather than being opposed to one another, they seem to describe inverse sides of the *same* "relationship." This calls any simple step from the *equivocation* arising from the evil genius/*il y a* into the *frankness* of language, into the *frankness* of the "ethical" relation with the Other, into question.

## References

- 1 Emmanuel Levinas, *Totalité et Infini. Essai sur l'extériorité* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1971) 19, hereafter cited in the text as Tel. *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969) 48, hereafter cited in the text as TaI.
- 2 This is *not* Levinas' phrase. It is borrowed from Derrida who uses it in a different context in "Ellipsis". See Jacques Derrida, *L'Écriture et la différence* (Paris: Seuil, 1967) 435. *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978) 299.
- 3 This close reading will be limited to Levinas' reading of Descartes' *Meditations* in *Totality and Infinity*.
- 4 Robert Bernasconi, "The Silent Anarchic World of the Evil Genius", in *The Collegium Phaenomenologicum: The First Ten Years*, ed. John C. Sallis, Giuseppina Moneta, and Jacques Taminiaux (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1988) 265.

- 5 René Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy*, trans. John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff, and David Murdoch, in *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988) 31.
- 6 Levinas also refers to “dead time” in that part of *Totality and Infinity* entitled “The Infinity of Time”.

Being is no longer produced [*se produit*] at one blow, irremissibly present. Reality is what it is, but will be once again, another time freely resumed and pardoned. Infinite being is produced [*se produit*] as times, that is, in several times across the dead time [*le temps mort*] that separates the father from the son. It is not the finitude of being that constitutes the essence of time, as Heidegger thinks, but its infinity. The death sentence [*l'arrêt de la mort*] does not approach as an end of being, but as an unknown, which as such suspends power. The constitution of the interval that liberates being from the limitation of fate calls for death. The nothingness of the interval – a dead time [*un temps mort*] – is the production [*production*] of infinity.

(TeI 260/TaI 284)

- 7 Emmanuel Levinas, *De l'existence à l'existant* (Paris: Vrin, 1990) 94–5. *Existence and Existents*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1978) 58.

## GOD AND CONCEPT

### On the love of the neighbour in Levinas and Bergson

*Leonard Lawlor*

At this moment, it does not seem controversial to say that Heidegger's re-opening of the question of being in 1927 is the defining event of twentieth-century philosophy. At the least, this event means that the question of being is answered by the being of the question. Twentieth-century philosophy (on the side that we commonly call 'Continental')<sup>1</sup> spreads out then as a kind of diffraction from this event. The diffraction generates a spectrum of philosophical options based on the experience of the question, on interrogation.<sup>2</sup> In his 1974 *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*, Levinas says that 'the knot knotted in subjectivity', which is 'an allegiance of the Same to the Other', 'is still attested to in *questioning*'.<sup>3</sup> In his 1968 *Difference and Repetition*, Deleuze says, 'There is, as it were, an ontological "opening" . . . which relates being and the *question* to one another. In this relation being is Difference itself.'<sup>4</sup> In these two quotes, despite their similarity, we can see a divergence, a divergence that puts Levinas and Deleuze at opposite ends of the philosophical spectrum diffracting from Heidegger. We can characterize the divergence, of course, by saying that Levinas is the philosopher of alterity and transcendence, while Deleuze is the philosopher of difference and immanence.

Yet, we cannot explain the divergence easily. It is not possible to do what is obvious, that is, to say that Levinas is the phenomenologist, while Deleuze is the Bergsonian. Their relationship to both phenomenology and Bergsonism is complicated. For instance, Levinas is critical of *both* Bergsonism and phenomenology. In fact, we might say that Levinas is as critical of phenomenology, of phenomenological immanence, as Deleuze is. Now, while it is not possible to explain the divergence simply by aligning Levinas with phenomenology and Deleuze with Bergsonism, an examination of their relation to *both* phenomenology and Bergsonism will give us the means to explain the divergence and to understand it. Thus, in what follows I am going to try

to explain the divergence between Levinas and Deleuze on the basis of the relation that both maintain with both phenomenology and Bergsonism. This explanation will be my concern in the first section; the explanation will also give us a way of understanding the divergence as an opposition between God and concept. The thesis I am presenting in this first section is that the divergence between Levinas and Deleuze results from the one being oriented by Bergson's *Matter and Memory* – this is Deleuze – while the other has been oriented by *The Two Sources of Morality and Religion* – this is Levinas (or at least the later Levinas). But this essay goes further; it primarily concerns Levinas's relation to Bergson. It seems to me that the Levinas–Bergson relation is not well understood, while Deleuze's relation to Bergson is well understood.<sup>5</sup> Thus in a second section, I am going to examine Levinas's explicit relationship to Bergson. However, like his relation to Husserl's phenomenology (and perhaps even like his relation to Heidegger's ontology), Levinas's relation to Bergsonism remains an open question. Indeed, Levinas concludes his most explicit criticism of Bergson by saying: 'That is possible.' That is hardly a conclusion. We might say that the essay that follows pursues this 'possibility' – and it pursues this possibility through the Bergsonian idea of mystical experience as it is found in *The Two Sources of Morality and Religion*. Thus, in the third and final section, I shall examine the three ways in which Bergson construes this experience; each way bears a strong resemblance to Levinas's idea of 'à-Dieu'. Mystical experience in Bergson concerns charity, and charity consists in an idea that contains more than can be grasped. This essay goes farther, however, than a comparison of Levinas and Deleuze, farther than even the reconstruction of the relation between Levinas and Bergson. The purpose of this essay consists in opening up, again, the question of thinking. Thus my concluding remarks will concern thinking.

### I. God and concept

Starting from Heidegger, the experience of the question, of being put in question, brings Levinas and Deleuze into agreement. While one can characterize either of their philosophies in many ways, the thought of both Levinas and Deleuze concerns thinking itself (AE, 21/8; DR, 188/144).<sup>6</sup> Because both are concerned with thinking, both oppose the classical concept of representation. Of course, the theme of the 'ruin of representation' is pervasive throughout Levinas's writing,<sup>7</sup> and Deleuze (with Foucault) analysed the classical concept of representation.<sup>8</sup> Both Levinas and Deleuze are opposed to representation because it defines thinking as a form of mediation. In any philosophy of mediation, a question would have to be based on a general form; the concept expressed by the question outlines in advance any possible answer; therefore a sameness or identity mediates the alterity or difference of a response, in a word, its singularity. By means

of representation, the response is *continuous* with the question; the other is reduced to the same. Both Levinas's and Deleuze's philosophies therefore are anti-Hegelianisms insofar as they are both philosophers of immediacy. To oppose the concept of representation always results in a philosophy of immediacy. But also, both Levinas and Deleuze turn this criticism of representation, which indeed derives from Heidegger, back against Heidegger himself. For Levinas, Heidegger's idea of a *Versammlung* is a representation; Levinas says, for instance, in *Otherwise than Being*, 'In [time's] temporalization, in which, thanks to retention, memory and history, nothing is lost, everything is presented or *represented*, everything is consigned and lends itself to inscription, or is synthesized or, as Heidegger would say, *gathered* [*rassemblé*]' (AE, 22/9; my emphasis). Similarly, Deleuze says, 'Does [Heidegger] conceive of the being in such a manner that it will be truly disengaged from any subordination in relation to the identity of representation? It would seem not, given his critique of the Nietzschean eternal return' (DR, 91/66).

With the mention of Nietzsche's name here, we can start to see the divergence between Levinas and Deleuze. In *Otherwise than Being*, Levinas writes, 'Such a reconsideration [of man] is hardly conceivable in a world where infidelity to Nietzsche, even an infidelity conceived outside of all National-Socialist contamination, is (despite "the death of God") taken as blasphemy' (AE, 272/177). Written in 1974, this comment comes after the rise of French Nietzscheanism, a movement led of course by Deleuze (and Foucault). The flipside of this Nietzscheanism is anti-Platonism. Thus, in *Difference and Repetition* and in his 1966 essay 'Renverser le platonisme',<sup>9</sup> Deleuze had announced: 'The task of contemporary philosophy has been defined: to reverse Platonism' (DR, 82/59). For Deleuze, to reverse Platonism, in short, is to destroy the height of the Platonic Good and the ranking of things that results from it; this destruction of transcendence results in a plane of immanence and allows sense to be plural, a 'clamor'. In opposition to the immanence of this anti-Platonism, Levinas, in his 1964 essay 'Meaning and Sense', invokes precisely Plato's good beyond being as a source of sense, as transcendence; this invocation installs the good as a height which allows sense to be a *sens unique*, a 'one-directional sense'.<sup>10</sup> But, in 'Meaning and Sense', Levinas asserts *both* that 'Platonism is vanquished!' and that he 'is returning to Platonism in a new way'.<sup>11</sup> Similarly, Deleuze says in *Difference and Repetition* that the reversal of Platonism must conserve many Platonic characteristics (DR, 82/59). These comments show how difficult it is to understand the divergence between Levinas and Deleuze.

On the basis of the opposition to representation, Levinas and Deleuze agree that certain conceptions of transcendence and immanence must be opposed. Levinas can say, like Deleuze, that Platonism is vanquished because he is opposed to a conception of transcendence as a 'beyond' entirely unrelated to experience, an 'unbridgeable', transcendence that is

‘elsewhere’.<sup>12</sup> For example, in ‘Meaning and Sense’, Levinas says, transcendence is ‘not “another world” behind the world’.<sup>13</sup> But the traditional, Platonic transcendence is not really at issue for Levinas and Deleuze. What is at issue is phenomenological transcendence and therefore as well phenomenological immanence. In *Otherwise than Being*, Levinas says that in philosophy ‘consciousness of’ is called transcendence (AE, 114/70). Here, transcendence is a function of consciousness, and thus a function of immanence in consciousness. It is transcendence as a property of the ego, related to consciousness: ‘cogitation comes out of itself, but the cogitatum is *present to* cogitation’.<sup>14</sup> The transcendence that defines Levinas’s philosophy is not this phenomenological transcendence and the immanence that Levinas opposes *is* phenomenological immanence. Because of his opposition to phenomenological immanence and phenomenological transcendence, Levinas in ‘Transcendence and Intelligibility’ calls for – sounding very much like Deleuze – a ‘destruction’ of phenomenology (TRI, 18/153).

Let us institute a convention and call phenomenological immanence (that is, present consciousness) and phenomenological transcendence (that is, transcendence related to present consciousness) the ‘bad transcendence’ and the ‘bad immanence’. It seems that, while there is a ‘good transcendence’ in Levinas, there is no ‘good immanence’. No matter how it is conceived, immanence, for Levinas, is always bad. Similarly, it seems that, while there is a ‘good immanence’ in Deleuze, there is no ‘good transcendence’. For him – Deleuze – immanence becomes reduced to transcendence whenever it is related to something other than itself, to something like consciousness. So, for Deleuze, what he calls ‘the plane of immanence’ must be thought as such, and similarly, for Levinas, transcendence must be thought ‘as such’. Both Deleuze’s good immanence and Levinas’s good transcendence are kinds of sensibility. In *Difference and Repetition*, Deleuze speaks of a sensation, which is not related to an object that can also be represented. He calls this sensation the ‘*sentendum*’ (DR, 182/139–40). The *sentendum* makes a difference, forcing sensibility to try to sense not an object but that which can only be sensed, that which is in fact ‘insensible’ (DR, 182/140). The experience of it is an ‘encounter’ (DR, 182/139), which suggests proximity. Similarly, in *Otherwise than Being*, Levinas says that ‘proximity, which would be the meaning of the sensible, does not belong to the movement of knowledge’ (AE, 103/63). Here too proximity is not a sensation related to an object of knowledge, to an idea or a representation; it is an ‘invisibility’ (AE, 158/100). Levinas calls it a ‘wounding’; it ‘denucleates’ the egoity of subjectivity (AE, 104–5/64). In other words, it makes the same be other; it is ‘the one-for-the-other’, which Levinas compares to maternity (AE, 126/78–9). We can take the similarity between the ‘good transcendence’ of Levinas and the ‘good immanence’ of Deleuze farther. Both Deleuze and Levinas agree that it is necessary to stop conceiving either good transcendence or good immanence – in a word, sensibility – in terms of the present. We must stop

thinking in terms of the present. Both Levinas and Deleuze then speak of a past that was never present; both speak of an unforeseeable future. In opposition to the synchrony of the present, Levinas speaks of diachrony (AE, 221/141), Deleuze of the untimely (DR, 171/130). Because diachrony and the untimely are not experiences of the present, neither functions as a kind of principle. An 'arche' is always defined by being in the present. Therefore, both Deleuze and Levinas speak of 'anarchy', in the literal sense (AE, 158-9/100; DR, 60/41).

At this point, we can say that the criticism of the phenomenological concepts of immanence and transcendence explain the divergence between Levinas and Deleuze. Yet, this explanation is only a negative one: both Levinas and Deleuze are *not* phenomenologists (at least not in the traditional sense). Moreover, we have not come to an understanding of the divergence. The similarities are all that we can see: sensibility, proximity and encounter, diachrony and untimeliness, anarchy. To understand the divergence, we must return to the dative relation. The later Deleuze repeatedly defines transcendence by means of the dative relation. The later Levinas as well defines transcendence, 'the good transcendence', by means of the dative relation. Playing on the word 'à-venir', Levinas in 'Diachrony and Representation' refers phenomenological immanence precisely to 'the "à Dieu"'.<sup>15</sup> This expression, 'à-Dieu', implies that the relation of transcendence has been reversed; no longer does transcendence refer to the immanence of consciousness, no longer is immanence immanent to consciousness, but rather immanence refers back outside itself to God. In *What is Philosophy?*, Deleuze (with Guattari) describes this reversal as 'the contemporary moment':

In this contemporary moment, we are no longer satisfied with thinking immanence as immanent to a transcendent; we want to think transcendence within the immanent, and it is from immanence that we expect a rupture. . . . No longer satisfied with attributing immanence to something, immanence itself is made to disgorge the transcendent everywhere. No longer content with sending immanence to the transcendent, we want that immanence sends the transcendent back, that it reproduces the transcendent, and that immanence itself manufactures the transcendent.<sup>16</sup>

It would seem that Levinas's reversal of the dative relation would make the divergence between Levinas and Deleuze as sharp as possible; it seems to be indeed the case that Levinas is the philosopher of transcendence and Deleuze the philosopher of immanence. Yet, as Levinas says in 'Diachrony and Representation', 'All the figures and words that try to express [the "à-Dieu"] are already derived from it. . . . The prepositions themselves, including the *à* and the *pro*, are already only metaphors of time, and could not serve in its constitution.'<sup>17</sup> Therefore, to understand the divergence we

must go beyond the dative relation. Both Levinas and Deleuze are attempting to conceive the relation between thought and that about which one is thinking without reducing that about which one is thinking to the conscious present. Something is present that is not present; something is there that is not there. As if following one of the philosophical options opened up by Plato's *Sophist* for conceiving negation, Levinas conceives this relation as one of same and other. As if following the other option for conceiving negation that the *Sophist* has given to us, Deleuze conceives this relation by means of difference. We might say that a philosophy of transcendence is always a philosophy of alterity, while a philosophy of immanence is always a philosophy of difference.

But we can go still farther in our understanding of the divergence between Levinas and Deleuze. According to Levinas, in 'Diachrony and Representation', the transcendence of the 'à-Dieu' means that I find in me an obligation or responsibility to the other that precedes my birth and extends beyond my future death. For Levinas, 'à-venir', the future, means 'à-Dieu', literally, 'to God', but also it means 'goodbye' (*adieu*); in the future I will leave when I die, and yet the responsibility to the other still torments me. It is as if, in Levinas, my responsibility to the other always goes through the *detour* of God. Here, as is well known, Levinas understands God according to Descartes's Third Meditation, as the idea of the infinite. In the idea of the infinite, 'thought thinks more than it can contain', more than could be re-presented and recognized.<sup>18</sup> Because thinking of God (*penser à Dieu*) overflows the idea, thinking for Levinas is always a thought of the new.<sup>19</sup> Yet, Deleuze too speaks of the new (DR, 121–2/90). Even more, according to Deleuze, there is an imperative in the experience of the question (DR, 255/197). When I am being interrogated, as in a police interrogation, I am being forced to respond. Here too in Deleuze, we can speak of responsibility. As in a police interrogation, the person asking the questions is unrecognizable due to the torment of the interrogation (DR, 255/197). Insofar as I respond to the question, I think. And, thinking for Deleuze is the creation of concepts, where a concept is understood neither as an eternal form nor as a representation but as a multiplicity of components that becomes in relation to other concepts.<sup>20</sup> A concept is new, because its 'components are neither constants nor variables but pure and simple variations', 'variations that are still infinite'.<sup>21</sup> Here we come to the most precise way of understanding the divergence between Levinas and Deleuze. Levinas is the thinker of the infinite God, while Deleuze is the thinker of the infinite concept. Where, for Levinas, God is what exceeds a concept understood literally as a grasp which gathers together, thus as a representation (TRI, 14–15/152), for Deleuze, the concept itself is what cannot be grasped in an identity, in a representation. And yet, for Deleuze, despite the fact that a concept cannot be grasped or because it remains a paradox in the literal sense (*para-doxa*), it is knowledge (*episteme*), while, for Levinas, God's intelligibility cannot be



classified as knowledge because God is a paradox. Because of these determinations – God and concept – we can say that Levinas's thinking is religious: 'would not religion be the original combination of circumstances . . . in which the infinite in its ambiguity . . . comes to the idea?' (TRI, 22/156). In contrast, Deleuze's thinking is philosophical: 'the question of philosophy is the singular point where concept and creation are related to one another'.<sup>22</sup> And yet, both Levinas and Deleuze call themselves metaphysicians.

But here we come, as well, to the most precise way of explaining the divergence between Levinas and Deleuze. The destruction of phenomenology in which both Levinas and Deleuze engage opens the way for a return to Bergson. Yet there are at least two ways to return to Bergson. On the one hand, one can return to the Bergson of *Matter and Memory*. In *What is Philosophy?*, Deleuze (and Guattari) say,

Will we ever be mature enough for a Spinozist inspiration? It happened once with Bergson: the beginning of *Matter and Memory* marks out a plane that slices through the chaos – both the infinite movement of a matter that continually propogates itself and the image of a thought that everywhere continually spreads out in principle consciousness (immanence is not immanent 'to' consciousness but the other way around).<sup>23</sup>

Indeed, virtually at the time of *Matter and Memory*, in 1901, Bergson says that 'To philosophize consists most often not in opting for concepts but in creating from them.'<sup>24</sup> On the other hand, one can return to the Bergson of *The Two Sources of Morality and Religion*. In 'Diachrony and Representation', Levinas asks, 'Is it forbidden to recall that the duration of *Time and Free Will* and *Matter and Memory*, thought as the *élan vital* in *Creative Evolution*, means, in *The Two Sources of Morality and Religion*, love of the neighbor and what I have called "à-Dieu".' Indeed, in *The Two Sources*, after saying that preaching will not make us attain 'the love of the neighbor', Bergson says that 'Religion expresses this truth in its own way by saying that it is in God that we love all other humans.'<sup>25</sup> So, the divergence we find between God and concept in Levinas and Deleuze is already a divergence within Bergson himself. We are now going to leave Deleuze aside and turn solely to the relation of Levinas and Bergson.

## II. God and representation

The criticism or 'destruction' of the concept of representation in phenomenology appears very early in Levinas, in his first book, *The Theory of Intuition in Husserl's Phenomenology*.<sup>26</sup> *The Theory of Intuition* is published in 1930, after Heidegger's *Being and Time*. It is clear that Heidegger inspires Levinas's criticism of Husserl, but Heidegger is not the only source. Attending to the letter of Husserl's then published works, like *Ideas I*, Levinas

shows that phenomenology is based on 'the primacy of theory'.<sup>27</sup> According to Levinas, for Husserl, 'representation' is the basis of all acts of consciousness; the primacy of 'contemplative consciousness' 'gives [Husserlian] intuition an intellectualist character'.<sup>28</sup> Yet, Levinas equates Husserl's 'primacy of theory' with what Bergson had called 'intellectualism'. We might say that the entire *Theory of Intuition* is concerned with overcoming the Bergsonian opposition between intelligence and intuition, with finding a kind of intelligence that is still rooted in concrete life,<sup>29</sup> in 'the source of all being', in 'absolute life'.<sup>30</sup> Already in *The Theory of Intuition*, Levinas seems to see a kind of 'kinship' between phenomenology and Bergsonism.<sup>31</sup> Because of this kinship, however, Levinas is able later to extend the criticism of phenomenology to Bergsonism.<sup>32</sup> Thus, like Husserlian intuition, Bergsonian intuition is based in representation.

The basic criticism of Bergsonism – intuition is representation – appears in Levinas's major works, *Time and the Other*, *Totality and Infinity* and *Otherwise than Being*. In all three texts, the criticism aims at the idea of continuity in Bergson's philosophy. In *Time and the Other*, the criticism appears in the discussion of fecundity, which, Levinas tells us, is what Bergson calls the *élan vital*.<sup>33</sup> Yet, Levinas stresses that having a son does not amount to 'confusion' between the father and the son; the Bergsonian *élan* does not take account of 'a pluralist existing'. *Totality and Infinity* takes up the criticism in the same form; again in the discussion of fecundity, Levinas states that Bergson does not take seriously the fact that 'the *élan vital* propagates itself across the separation of individuals, that its trajectory is discontinuous'.<sup>34</sup> In *Otherwise than Being*, the criticism takes a related but different form. It is related to the earlier fecundity criticism since, here in *Otherwise than Being*, Levinas stresses that time is discontinuous (AE, 221/141). But the criticism is different, since now Levinas describes alterity in terms of anarchy. Referring to Bergson's claim in *Creative Evolution* that the concept of disorder is nothing but a different order, Levinas says that 'anarchy troubles... over and beyond these alternatives' between disorder and order (AE, 160 n. 1/194 n. 3, also AE, 159–60/101). Underlining the fact that anarchy is neither order nor disorder, Levinas at one point calls anarchy a 'disorder' and at another point calls it 'the order that prescribes' (*l'ordre qui ordonne*) (AE, 114 n. 1/191 n. 6, also AE, 220/140). Anarchy in *Otherwise than Being* is a discontinuous event, an event which could not be made continuous with the past by means of a representation. Beyond these three major works, Levinas's basic criticism of Bergson appears in its most extended form in three late essays: 'The Old and the New' in 1980, 'Diachrony and Representation' in 1982 and 'Transcendence and Intelligibility' in 1984. We are now going to turn our attention to them.

We must stress that, in each of these major works, Levinas always praises Bergson's philosophy while criticizing it. This criticism with praise occurs in these three late essays as well. For example, in 'The Old and the New',

Levinas says that 'It is important to underline the importance of Bergsonism for the entire problematic of contemporary philosophy; it is an essential stage of the movement which puts in question the ontological confines of spirituality.'<sup>35</sup> Or, in 'Transcendence and Intelligibility', he says that 'Bergson is an essential stage of the movement which puts in question the framework of a spirituality borrowed from knowledge [*savoir*] and therefore from the privileged and primary signification of presence, being, and ontology' (TRI, 20/154). Levinas can say that Bergson is an essential phase of the movement that puts in question the traditional framework of spirituality, because, as we have already seen, Levinas is concerned with a different kind of thought than that of consciousness or presence or representation or knowledge. As always, Levinas refers to Descartes; the *cogito* designates 'multiple dimensions of the same act of consciousness, which is the act of knowing' (TRI, 12/150-1). The act of knowing is a grasping, according to Levinas, by the hand (*la main*) in order to gaze at the thing clearly now (*main-tenant*). The criticism is, to say this again, that this seeing reduces what is other than consciousness to being the same as consciousness. And although Levinas is praising Bergson here, it is still this kind of seeing that, for Levinas, defines Bergsonian intuition. As we said at the beginning, Levinas's relation to Bergson remains an open question because of this ambiguity between praise and criticism.

In any case, as if after more than fifty years, he is still trying to resolve the Bergsonian opposition between intuition and intelligence, Levinas argues in these three late essays that there is a kind of intelligibility appropriate to transcendence, that it is possible to think otherwise than consciousness, that it is possible to think the other as other. Here too in the statement of his positive position, Levinas, as always, refers to Descartes, to Descartes's idea of the God as infinite perfection (TRI, 23-4/156).<sup>36</sup> According to Levinas, the idea of the infinite is a thought 'released' (*dégagé*) from consciousness. But this 'dégagement' does not mean that we are now speaking of the unconscious. The idea of the infinite is an idea or a thought; I am thinking of God (*penser à Dieu*); the idea is my relation to God (*à Dieu*) (TRI, 22/156). But, it is an idea that cannot be grasped by the hand – thus it is really 'otherwise than knowledge' – because it contains more than it is capable of containing, more than the idea's capacity as a *cogito* (TRI, 23-4/156). Because it cannot be grasped by the hand, the thought is not 'a modification of vision as a pure negative abstraction' (TRI, 24/157). The thought of God in me is a voice, a sonority (AE, 229-30/146-7).<sup>37</sup> It is an event and that is why Levinas uses it to describe diachrony. Concretely, this event of the voice of God in me 'conserves for reflection the paradoxical knot that is already tied to religious revelation' (TRI, 22/155). Revelation, in turn, is linked towards humans; the idea of God is love of the neighbour. The idea of God therefore for Levinas is accomplished ethically as a relation to the other humans (TRI, 24/157). And in this way this thought does more than

think (TRI, 27/158); thus it is not mere contemplation of God, but action or work or liturgy. This love accomplished in action is for Levinas 'the supreme grace of spiritual energy' (TRI, 23/156; TRI, 29/159).

### III. Charity

This phrase, 'the supreme grace of spiritual energy' (*la grâce suprême de l'énergie spirituelle*), refers to Bergson. Indeed, in the discussion following the presentation of 'Transcendence and Intelligibility' in 1984, Levinas says that 'it is in Bergson, in his notion of duration, that there is not only this idea of "novelty," but also this idea of intelligibility through time' (TRI, 36).<sup>38</sup> But in a 1988 interview, Levinas says 'in *The Two Sources of Morality and Religion*, intuition, that is, life itself, . . . [is] interpreted as a relation with the other and with God' (TRI, 36).<sup>39</sup> We have already noted the importance of Bergson's final book for Levinas. In the 'Final Remarks' of *The Two Sources*, Bergson calls for a renewal of 'spiritual energy'.<sup>40</sup> But, for Bergson, this renewal can come about only through mysticism, through what he calls the dynamic religion and the open morality, in a word, charity. That mystical experience, in Bergson, does not consist in a representation or mere contemplation is why it must be seen as the source of Levinas's idea of 'à-Dieu'. In fact, mystical experience is Bergson's own way of overcoming the opposition between intelligence and intuition. We are now going to reconstruct Bergsonian mystical experience in terms of two sides: emotion or image (cf. MR, 1170/229). This disjunction refers to what Bergson himself calls the 'reciprocal implication of the vital impetus (*élan vital*)' (MR, 1072/115). There is a 'reciprocal implication' between image and emotion that defines the form of the mystical experience. Bergson gives us three different ways to construe the 'reciprocal implication': a) the voice; b) the tests; and c) the detour.

#### *First way of construing the 'reciprocal implication' between emotion and image: the voice*

In *The Two Sources*, Bergson aims to distinguish mystical experience from the morbid psychological states that afflict the mentally ill. The reason we associate mystics with those who suffer from mental illness is that both undergo 'abnormal psychological states' (MR, 1169/228). In both, there is an experience of imbalance or disequilibrium. But, in contrast to a lunatic, what in the mystic is out of balance is the feeling of 'well-being' (*bien-être*). There is a lack of well-being 'at the times when one's customary maxims of conduct look to be insufficient' (MR, 1004/34). These times ('à des heures') of emotional disturbance are the beginning of mysticism. The first side of the mystical experience therefore is the feeling or emotion that disturbs well-being. The other side of the mystical experience is an image. But even before

the mystic undergoes an image, she<sup>41</sup> experiences 'a call' (*un appel*) (MR, 1003/34) or a 'voice' (MR, 1170/230). We might even say that in general the mystical experience is the mystery of the voice. Nevertheless, the form of the mystical experience requires this voice, since Bergson stresses that the emotion that opens the mystical experience is 'inexpressible' (MR, 1189/252; MR, 1013/46). The emotion, being an emotion, is non-linguistic, silent. The voice therefore, for Bergson, must be 'tacit' (MR, 1004/35) or 'silent' (MR, 233/232). To define it in the most minimal way, we must say that this silent voice is a non-vocalized voice, which means that the voice is internal. The mystical experience is an internal dialogue (auto-affection). Indeed, Bergson speaks of 'silent conversations' (*des entretiens silencieux*) (MR, 1173/233); moreover, he says that prayer in dynamic religion, that is, in mysticism, 'is indifferent to its verbal expression; it is an elevation of the soul that would be able to do without speech' (MR, 1146/201). By means of listening to this voice (which is *in* the mystic), the mystic 'senses [*sent*] an indefinable presence or divines [*devine*] it' (MR, 1170/230). This presence is at first an 'invisible presence' (cf. MR, 1110/159, also MR, 1125/176) found not out in nature but in me: God in me.<sup>42</sup> Mysticism, in Bergson is 'entirely interior' (MR, 1127/179) and yet this presence comes from 'the outside' of consciousness (cf. MR, 1011/43).

Bergson stresses that the sensing or divination of the presence is not a direct perception (MR, 1170/230). In addition, he says that 'dynamic religion', that is, mysticism, supports humans not by 'imaginative representations' (MR, 1127/179), that is, not by voluntary hallucinations. But the sensing of the presence, the 'apperception' of it (MR, 1172/232), brings forth images. That there are images in the experience is why Bergson (quoting the great mystics) warns that the images may be hallucinations (MR, 1170/229). In the sensing, the voice, the invisible and silent presence has transformed itself into an image, into, as Bergson says, a 'symbolic vision' (MR, 1170/230; MR, 1172/232). The result of this image is that the mystic has detached herself from life. This detachment from life means that the mystic is now *in* God (MR, 1170–1/230); the detachment from life means attachment to God. As Bergson says, 'then comes a boundless joy, all-absorbing ecstasy or an enthralling rapture' (MR, 1170/230).

*Second way of construing the 'reciprocal implication' between  
emotion and image: the tests*

The Bergsonian mystical experience therefore is an experience of the emotion joy, and not of well-being or pleasure. The joy comes from the pure contemplation of the symbolic vision. For Bergson, any mysticism that stops here, that 'rests' (MR, 1171/230) in contemplation remains 'incomplete mysticism' (MR, 1166/225). Indeed, for Bergson, mysticism could stop here, as it did in ancient Greek mysticism and in the Eastern mysticisms. But, if

the mystic's joy relinquishes its space in the mystic's soul to anxiety (*inquiétude*), then the mystic will move forward into complete mysticism. The mystic undergoes anxiety for two reasons. First, the vision does not endure (MR, 1170/230). That the vision does not endure means that it fades into the past; it is as if the vision died (and the mystic herself is indeed detached from life).<sup>43</sup> The second reason for the mystic's anxiety consists in the fact that her life is not yet divine. Even though the union with God is 'close' (*étroite*), even though there is no longer any 'distance' between thought and the object of thought, even though there is no longer a 'radical separation' between the one who loves and the one who is beloved, there is still something of the mystic that remains 'outside' the union. The union then is not 'total' and therefore not 'definitive' (MR, 1170/230). What is still not absorbed in God is the mystic's will. If the mystic acted, her action would be based only on herself, on her human will. This exteriority of the will and action in relation to God brings forth anxiety and agitation. Here we can see that the two reasons for anxiety are connected. If the mystic acted, she would be reattaching herself to life and moving forward into the future; thereby she would force the vision into the past.

Now, according to Bergson, when this feeling of anxiety has grown to the point that it resides everywhere in the mystic, thereby displacing the joy that comes with the vision, then this anxiety becomes 'the impetus' (*élan*) for the mystic to move forward beyond contemplation. The vision has faded and the mystic finds herself alone, desolate, lost in the shadow (MR, 1171/231). Quoting Saint John of Cross, Bergson says that the idea of the 'darkest night' is 'perhaps what there is most significant, in any case most instructive, in Christian mysticism' (MR, 1171/231). He says this because the darkest night brings on the 'definitive phase' of complete mysticism. This definitive phase is the final preparation for action. Bergson tells us that, in this final preparation, the mystic submits herself, each part of herself 'to the hardest tests' (*aux plus dures épreuves*). The mystic therefore 'eliminates' everything from her substance that 'God cannot use' (MR, 1172/231-2). By means of the tests of herself, the mystic does not feel the deprivation of what she has eliminated (cf. MR, 1025/59).<sup>44</sup> But insofar as they eliminate, the tests are precisely tests of the will (MR, 1172/231). While in contemplation, the mystic's soul was attached to God; she was *in* God; now, after the tests, she is attached to life but God is *in* her (MR, 1172/232). As Bergson says, 'for the soul there is a superabundance of life. There is a boundless impetus. There is an irresistible impulse that hurls it into the most vast enterprises' (MR, 1172/232), in a word, into action. The 'definitive consequence' of the tests is that the mystic becomes a 'genius of the will' (MR, 1023/58; MR, 1172/232; MR, 1169/228). The mystic has 'superior good sense' (MR, 1169/228). As Bergson says, 'An innate science, or rather an acquired innocence, suggests to her at the first blow the useful procedure, the decisive act, the word that has no rejoinder' (MR, 1172/232). Even though the mystic's

actions now 'flow from a spring [*source*] which is the very impetus of life' (MR, 1172/232), even though she is elevated, she feels no pride or vanity. Instead, the joy she felt in the contemplation of the symbolic vision has become 'great humility' (MR, 1173/232).

Before turning to the third way of construing the 'reciprocal implication' between emotion and image in the Bergsonian mystical experience, I am going to summarize what we have seen in the first two ways. The first two ways have charted the transformation of both emotions and images. In the first way, we saw the feeling of disturbed well-being transform itself into the joy. Between the two emotions is the tacit voice that expresses an invisible presence calling to the mystic. This voice then transforms itself into a vision, through which the mystic experiences joy. What links the first two ways is the fact that the vision does not endure; it fades into the past and becomes a memory. This fading of the vision causes the feeling of anxiety in the mystic; eventually the feeling of anxiety transforms itself into humility. But the mystic also feels anxiety insofar as her will is *external* to the union with God experienced in the vision. The first two ways also chart a movement of inside and outside. In the first way the voice had started out as being internal to the mystic, but as it became a vision the mystic unifies herself *into* the vision. The second way starts out with the recognition that the mystic's will is external to the union. God needs to be brought *into* the mystic's will. The tests achieve this. But how? The image in the vision becomes an example and that is why Bergson speaks of the vision being 'symbolical'. The mystic now is able to follow the example; thereby God acts in the mystic's action. But what are these acts? According to Bergson, they are acts of love. This example and this love bring us to the third way.

*Third way of construing the 'reciprocal implication' between  
emotion and image: the detour*

Bergson separates emotion from sensation, although emotion is a 'feeling' (*sentiment*) or a 'manifestation of sensibility', an 'affective state' (MR, 1011/43). That emotion is not sensation means that emotion is not a 'psychical transposition of a physical stimulus'. In *The Two Sources*, Bergson distinguishes between creative or supra-intellectual emotions and infra-intellectual emotions. The distinction is simple. A supra-intellectual emotion comes temporally before representations; indeed it generates representations; this is why Bergson calls it creative. On the other hand, there are emotions, like pleasure, that come temporally after representations or sensation; indeed, the sensation causes the emotion. Now, in the mystical experience we are concerned with creative emotion; in fact, we are concerned with the emotion of love.

The love that forms a side of the mystical experience is not the love of one's country, one's fellow citizens or one's family. If we ascend from our

family to the nation, according to Bergson, this emotion varies only by degrees. Instead, here we have a difference in kind between patriotism and mystical love. But, the object of mystical love cannot be represented. Bergson says that the object is too vast (MR, 1005/36), since it includes not just all humanity, past, present and future but also animals, plants and all nature (MR, 1006-7/38). It is only because the mystic *cannot* represent the object of its love that the love can be creative. If it could represent the object of its love, its love would only copy the representation; the emotion would only be infra-intellectual. Because the mystic has no representation of all of humanity that could be copied, it can create only by means of what Bergson calls a 'detour' (MR, 1002/33). What is this detour?

We come now to the most crucial description of the reciprocal implication of emotion and image. It is found in *The Two Sources*'s first chapter. The detour, Bergson says, is:

a personality brought up from the depths of the soul into the light of consciousness, stirring into life within us, which we felt might completely pervade us later, and to which we wished to attach ourselves for the time being, as the disciple does to the master. As a matter of fact, this personality is outlined from the day we have adopted a model; the desire to resemble, which is ideally the generator of a form to be taken, is already resemblance; the word, which we shall make our own, is the word whose echo we have heard within ourselves.

(MR, 1004/35)

The personality that we are to become or to which we aspire, Bergson says here, is outlined from the day we have adopted a model. There is a desire to resemble a model or an example (MR, 1003/34) or an image, something or someone singular. The image – and here we understand again why Bergson in his description of the mystical experience speaks of a *symbolic* vision – could be indeed a model, that is, the image or vision could become entirely representational or symbolic, a linguistic formula. Bergson says that the model might be a 'parent' or a 'friend' that we evoke in thought or that it could be a person whose life story we have heard. It could even be a mediocre professor mechanically teaching a science that had earlier been created by geniuses (MR, 1158/215). But it could just as well be something we had to memorize during childhood, like a poem or a prayer. Because Bergson speaks of resemblance and echo here – he also speaks of imitation (MR, 1003/34) – this relation between personality and image is a duplication or repetition. But this is a strange repetition since, according to Bergson, the repetition ideally creates the form that is to be taken, that is, it creates the form that is to be repeated; it duplicates that which is to be doubled. This creative repetition happens, according to Bergson, when the formulas are filled with matter and the matter is animate (MR, 1005/36). In other words, the depth of the



soul has to rise to the surface; this depth is emotion. Then the desire to resemble is replaced by love. Then 'the materials furnished by intelligence first fuse and then solidify again into ideas . . . informed by spirit itself' (MR, 1014/46). Now the form is transformed, now pleasure becomes joy.

This transformation means that the mystic is going to create a new genus. The mystic feels the need not just to act in order to save humanity, this kind of action would be based on an emotion caused by the representation of suffering humanity, caused by the representation of the human genus. The mystic feels a need however to transform humanity itself; the mystic wants to create a 'divine humanity' (MR, 1175/235). The image into which the mystic detours is, in fact, the very image of God (MR, 1002/33). The mystic therefore wants to create beings who love to create, as God Himself creates (MR, 1191-2/254-5).

As is well known, the mystical experience in Bergson is Christian; the only dynamic religion is Christianity. As Bergson says, 'mysticism and Christianity condition one another indefinitely' (MR, 1178/239). The 'beginning' of mysticism, the 'origin' of Christianity is 'the Christ' (MR, 1178/239); 'the great mystics are indeed . . . the imitators, and original but incomplete continuators of what the Christ of the Gospels was completely' (MR, 1179/240). But Bergson continues, 'He Himself can be considered as the continuator of the prophets of Israel' (MR, 1179/240). At the beginning of Christian mysticism, before 'the Christ', Bergson makes us 'recall the tone and accent of the prophets of Israel' (MR, 1038/76). The prophets of Israel provided 'the impetus' (*l'élan*) for Christian mysticism since they 'had the passion for justice, demanded [*réclamèrent*] it in the name of the God of Israel' (MR, 1179/240). When a 'great injustice has been done and condoned', '[the Jewish prophets] raise their protest from the depth of the centuries'.<sup>45</sup>

We are going to conclude our reconstruction of mystical experience in Bergson with the concept of justice. Bergson makes a distinction within justice. On the one hand, Bergson claims that 'the idea of justice must have already taken shape as far back as the days of exchange and barter' (MR, 1033/69). Justice, of course, has always evoked ideas of equality, of proportion, of compensation. Here we have equality between different things established by measuring them against a definite third thing, by weighing them in a scale or balance. Because justice is established in relation to a third thing, and the third thing is determined by the society (by the customs of a closed society), Bergson calls this first kind of justice 'relative justice' (MR, 1035/72). The other kind of justice, which Bergson calls 'absolute justice', comes only after Christianity (MR, 1040/77). With Christianity, the step was taken towards universal brotherhood, towards 'the idea that everyone, insofar as being human, were of equal worth and that the community of essence conferred on them the same fundamental rights' (MR, 1040/77). But Bergson's concept of absolute justice goes further than equality of rights. Unlike relative justice in which each individual has a measurable value, in

absolute justice each individual has an incommensurate value (MR, 1037/74). Here justice has become 'categorical and transcendent' (MR, 1039/76). In fact, insofar as each individual is priceless, absolute justice is actually charity, in the literal sense of the word: *carus, cher* (cf. MR, 1025/59, also MR, 1007/38; MR, 1016/49). According to Bergson, this charity is the essence of mysticism (MR, 1238/309). It is the love of all humanity, Christian love of the neighbour. Each person is so 'dear' or 'expensive' that justice can be rendered only by giving oneself (MR, 1166–7/225). And even this gift of oneself does not balance the scales. Playing on the etymology, we can say that 'ex-pensive' means 'outside of compensation', 'outside of the weighing', 'outside of the balance'. In this sense, charity is always 'unjust charity'.<sup>46</sup> Being essentially unjust, charity involves a complete representation only 'at infinity' (MR, 1036/74). Here we have an idea – the detour through God – that contains more than can be grasped.

### Conclusion: options for thinking

The purpose of this investigation was to try to understand and determine philosophical options, options that have arisen from certain relations to both phenomenology and Bergsonism. Both Deleuze and Levinas are opposed to immanence understood as present consciousness in the form of a representation. Thus both are engaged in a kind of 'destruction' of phenomenology that opens the way for a return to Bergson. But here, due to what is probably a divergence in Bergson himself, we saw that the good immanence in Deleuze is the concept, while the good transcendence in Levinas is the idea of God. It turned out that, by pursuing the relation between Levinas and Bergson, we are to bring into view one of the possible ways to overcome the opposition between intelligence and intuition. Indeed, in our pursuit of this relation, we were able to see one of the options for thinking about thinking. The criticism of representation, all anti-Cartesianism, always leads us back to the question of thinking. In the option for thinking about thinking that we were able to bring into view, thinking consists in an emotion, love, and extends beyond the thought of God (*penser à Dieu*) into action, into charity. This thinking is a religious thinking that always accomplishes itself ethically.

Yet, our investigation remains incomplete. Is it not necessary to return now to Deleuze? But not to his relation to Bergson. Does not Deleuze speak of the idea of God in Spinoza?<sup>47</sup> What does it mean when Deleuze (and Guattari) say that 'Spinoza is the Christ of philosophers' because he drew up the 'best' plane of immanence?<sup>48</sup> Does this claim amount to a different option for thinking about thinking, itself based on the idea of God? Even if we cannot now complete our investigation, we can certainly locate its starting point. Its starting point is a question raised by Heidegger: 'What is most thought-provoking? What is most thought-provoking is that we are still not thinking.'

# Notes

- 1 We must leave to the side analytic philosophy, which, as far as I can tell, remains embroiled in metaphysical dogmatism, despite its own appropriation of Heidegger's thinking.
- 2 I have tried to describe the options available in *Thinking Through French Philosophy: The Being of the Question* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004). I have not however discussed Levinas in this text. This essay extends the research and ideas formed in my *The Challenge of Bergsonism: Phenomenology, Ontology, Ethics* (Continuum Press, 2004).
- 3 Emmanuel Levinas, *Autrement qu'être ou au-delà de l'essence* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1974, le Livre de Poche, 13), p. 47; English translation by Alphonso Lingis as *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1981), p. 25. The emphasis is mine; the capitalization is that of Levinas. Hereafter cited as AE with reference first to this French edition and then to the English translation; I have frequently modified the English translation.
- 4 Gilles Deleuze, *Différence et répétition* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1968), p. 89; English translation by Paul Patton as *Difference and Repetition* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), p. 64. The emphasis is mine; the capitalization is that of Deleuze. Hereafter cited as DR with reference first to the French, then to the English translation. *Difference and Repetition* must be seen as the text that is contemporaneous with *Otherwise than Being*, since the central chapter of *Otherwise than Being* ('Substitution') was originally published as an essay in 1968, the same year during which *Difference and Repetition* was published.
- 5 The only text that takes Levinas's relation to Bergson seriously is Howard Caygill's recent *Levinas and the Political* (London: Routledge, 2002). Caygill's discussion in his first chapter is very illuminating; see in particular pages 23–5, where he discusses *The Theory of Intuition*. I also agree with Caygill's assessment (p. 206) of Pierre Trotignon's 'Autre voie, même voix' (in *Cahier de l'Herne: Emmanuel Levinas* [Paris: Edition de l'Herne, 1991]) as being a valuable study but not philosophical enough. Marie-Anne Lescourret, in her *Emmanuel Levinas* (Paris: Flammarion, 1994), reports that Jankélévitch opens Levinas's 'soutenance' in 1961 'par regretter l'absence de Bergson dans le travail de Levinas' (p. 218). Of course, Levinas looks to be a phenomenologist; yet, it is probably Jankélévitch's study of Bergson (*Bergson* [Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1959]) that led Levinas to praise Bergson's *The Two Sources* in his late essays. Aside from these three texts, most studies of Levinas hardly even mention Bergson. See, for example, Robert Bernasconi and Simon Critchley, *Re-Reading Levinas* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), where in this collection of new reading of Levinas Bergson's name appears only twice, on pp. 295 and 305. *Ethics as First Philosophy: The Significance of Emmanuel Levinas for Philosophy, Literature, and Religion*, ed. Adriaan T. Peperzak (New York: Routledge, 1995), mentions Bergson twice. Peperzak's own studies of Levinas contain no discussion of the relation between Levinas and Bergson (*To the Other* [West Lafayette, Ind.: Purdue University Press, 1993] and *Beyond the Philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas* [Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1997]). *Feminist Interpretations of Emmanuel Levinas*, ed. Tina Chanter (University Park, Pa.: Penn State University Press, 2001), mentions Bergson in passing, on p. 7. Similarly, Tina Chanter's own *Time, Death and the Feminine: Levinas with Heidegger* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2001) also mention Bergson in passing. Gary Gutting's *French Philosophy in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001) stresses Bergson's role in the development of French

philosophy during the twentieth century, but, when he turns to Levinas, he makes no mention of Bergson's influence. Similarly, Eric Matthews's *Twentieth Century French Philosophy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996) contains a chapter on Bergson but in his section on Levinas, he only notes Bergson's influence (p. 158). Finally see Catherine Chaliel's *La trace de l'infini: Emmanuel Levinas et la source hébraïque* (Paris: Cerf, 2002); here too there is no mention of Bergson.

- 6 AE, 21/8 (my emphasis, translation modified): 'The task is to think of the possibility of a break out of essence.' DR, 188/144: 'thought thinks only when it is constrained and forced, in the presence of what "gives thinking," in the presence of what is to be thought – and what is to be thought is really the unthinkable or the non-thought, that is, the perpetual *fact* that "we have not yet thought".'
- 7 In *Otherwise than Being*, for example, Levinas says, 'The gathering of being in the present, its synchronization by retention, memory and history, by reminiscence – representation – does not integrate the responsibility for the separated being. Representation does not integrate the responsibility for the other.' (AE, 220/140; my emphasis).
- 8 Deleuze, in *Difference and Repetition*, says, 'Representation fails to capture the affirmed world of difference. Representation has only a single center, a unique and receding perspective, and in consequence a false depth. It mediates everything, but mobilizes and moves nothing' (DR, 78/55–6).
- 9 This essay appears as an appendix to Deleuze, *Logique du sens*, pp. 292–307 ('Platon et le simulacre'); *The Logic of Sense*, pp. 253–66 ('Plato and the Simulacrum'). The original version, which was called 'Renverser le platonisme', appeared in *Revue de métaphysique et de morale* 71(4) (October–December 1966): 426–38. The citation for this article in *Logique du sens* (and therefore also in the English translation) is incorrect. Deleuze also substantially revised the article for its inclusion in *Logique du sens*. An English translation of the earlier version (by Heath Massey) appears in Lawlor, *Thinking Through French Philosophy*.
- 10 Emmanuel Levinas, 'La Signification et le sens', in *Humanisme de l'autre homme* (Paris: Fata Morgana, 1972), pp. 51–2; English translation by Alphonso Lingis, revised by Simon Critchley and Adrian Peperzak as 'Meaning and Sense', in *Basic Philosophical Writings*, ed. Adriaan T. Peperzak, Simon Critchley and Robert Bernasconi (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996), p. 56.
- 11 Levinas, 'La Signification et le sens', pp. 55–6; 'Meaning and Sense', p. 58.
- 12 Levinas, 'La Signification et le sens', p. 38; 'Meaning and Sense', p. 47. See also Emmanuel Levinas, *Totalité et infini* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1961), p. 23; English translation by Alphonso Lingis as *Totality and Infinity* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969), p. 52.
- 13 Levinas, 'La Signification et le sens', p. 57; 'Meaning and Sense', p. 59.
- 14 Emmanuel Levinas, *Transcendence et Intelligibilité* (Genève: Labor et Fides, 1984), p. 17; English translation by Simon Critchley and Tamra Wright as 'Transcendence and Intelligibility', in *Basic Philosophical Writings*, ed. Peperzak, Critchley and Bernasconi, p. 153. Hereafter cited as TRI, with reference first to the French, then to the English translation. See also AE, 23–4/10.
- 15 Emmanuel Levinas, 'Diachronie et représentation', in *Revue de L'Université d'Ottawa* 55(4): 96; English translation by Richard Cohen as 'Diachrony and Representation', in *Time and the Other and Additional Essays* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1987), p. 115.
- 16 Gille Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Qu'est-ce que la philosophie?* (Paris: Minuit, 1991), pp. 48–9; English translation by Hugh Tomlinson and Graham Burchell as *What is Philosophy?* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), p. 47.

- 17 Levinas, 'Diachronie et représentation', p. 98; 'Diachrony and Representation', in *Time and the Other*, p. 118.
- 18 Levinas, 'Diachronie et représentation', p. 97; 'Diachrony and Representation', in *Time and the Other*, p. 117.
- 19 Levinas, 'Diachronie et représentation', p. 98; 'Diachrony and Representation', in *Time and the Other*, p. 119.
- 20 Deleuze and Guattari, *Qu'est-ce que la philosophie?*, p. 23; *What is Philosophy?*, p. 18.
- 21 Deleuze and Guattari, *Qu'est-ce que la philosophie?*, p. 25 and p. 190; *What is Philosophy?*, p. 20 and p. 202.
- 22 Deleuze and Guattari, *Qu'est-ce que la philosophie?*, p. 16; *What is Philosophy?*, p. 11.
- 23 Deleuze and Guattari, *Qu'est-ce que la philosophie?*, p. 50; *What is Philosophy?*, pp. 48–9. See also Gilles Deleuze, 'Bergson, 1859–1941', in *L'Île déserte et autres textes* (Paris: Minuit, 2002), p. 41, where Deleuze says that Matter and Memory contains the 'secret' of Bergsonism.
- 24 Henri Bergson, *Mélanges* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1972), p. 503, 'discussion à discussion at La Société Française de Philosophie (23 mai 1901)'. Again see also Deleuze, 'Bergson, 1859–1941', p. 28, where he says that the great philosopher is the one who creates concepts.
- 25 Henri Bergson, *Les Deux sources de la morale et de la religion*, in *Œuvres*, Édition du Centenaire (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1959), p. 1019; English translation by R. Ashley Audra and Cloudsley Brereton, with the assistance of W. Horsfall Carter as *The Two Sources of Morality and Religion* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1977[1935]), p. 53.
- 26 See John Drabinski, *Sensibility and Singularity: The Problem of Phenomenology in Levinas* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2001), p. 15.
- 27 Emmanuel Levinas, *Théorie de l'intuition dans la phénoménologie de Husserl* (Paris: Vrin, 1984), pp. 221, 223; English translation by André Orianne as *The Theory of Intuition in Husserl's Phenomenology* (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1973), pp. 157, 158.
- 28 Levinas, *Théorie de l'intuition*, pp. 221, 192; *The Theory of Intuition*, pp. 157, 134.
- 29 Levinas, *Théorie de l'intuition*, pp. 173–4; *The Theory of Intuition*, pp. 118–19.
- 30 Levinas, *Théorie de l'intuition*, pp. 192, 213; *The Theory of Intuition*, pp. 134, 149.
- 31 Emmanuel Levinas, 'Technique phénoménologique', in *En Découvrant l'existence avec Husserl et Heidegger* (Paris: Vrin, 2001, troisième édition corrigée, 2001), p. 168.
- 32 See, for example, Emmanuel Levinas, 'De la Description à l'existence', in *En Découvrant*, pp. 130–1: 'Bergsonian intuition conserves a characteristics of being for the privileged, it retains something mystical, a possibility of transcending the human condition' (my translation). This essay dates from the 1940s.
- 33 Emmanuel Levinas, *Le Temps et l'autre* (Paris: Fata Morgana, 1979 [1946/47]), p. 86; English translation by Richard Cohen as *Time and the Other* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1987), pp. 91–2.
- 34 Levinas, *Totalité et infini*, p. 253; *Totality and Infinity*, p. 276. See also, *Totalité et infini*, pp. 255, 269; *Totality and Infinity*, pp. 278, 283.
- 35 Emmanuel Levinas, 'L'Ancien et le nouveau', in *L'Ancien et le nouveau* (Paris: Les Editions du CERF, 1982), p. 32; English translation by Richard Cohen as 'The Old and the New', in *Time and the Other and Additional Essays*, p. 132.
- 36 See also Levinas, 'L'Ancien et le nouveau', p. 34; 'The Old and the New', p. 134.
- 37 See also Levinas, 'L'Ancien et le nouveau', p. 36; 'The Old and the New', p. 136. Also, Levinas, 'Diachronie et représentation', p. 95; 'Diachrony and

- Representation', p. 114. This voice is the basis for Levinas's famous concept of the saying.
- 38 Jill Robbins (ed.) *Is it Righteous to be? Interviews with Emmanuel Levinas* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2001), p. 269.
- 39 Ibid., p. 201.
- 40 Bergson, *Les Deux sources de la religion et de la morale*, p. 1241; *The Two Sources of Morality and Religion*, pp. 312–13. Hereafter cited as MR, with reference first to the French, then to the English translation.
- 41 We are using the feminine pronoun because Bergson takes Joan of Arc as his central great mystic.
- 42 Cf. what Bergson says in his 1897 'Compte rendu des "Principes de Métaphysique et de psychologie" de Paul Janet'. There he quotes Ravaisson: 'Dieu nous est plus intérieur que notre intérieur. Il est plus près de nous que nous ne le sommes, sans cesse et à mille égards étrangers à nous-même' (*Mélanges* [Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1972], p. 391).
- 43 We must see Bergson's discussion of anxiety in *The Two Sources* as quite close to that of Heidegger in *Being and Time*. But see Jankélévitch for a different view on death in Bergson, *Bergson*, pp. 270–1. The anxiety of the mystic seems to contradict what Jankélévitch says: 'il n'aura donc plus d'insomnies ni d'angoisse' (p. 272).
- 44 This not feeling the deprivation is, according to Bergson, what Jesus means in the Sermon on the Mount when he speaks of the 'poor in spirit'.
- 45 Cf., however, Vladimir Jankélévitch, *Bergson*, p. 275. Also Noé Gottlieb, 'D'Une erreur fondamentale dans les "Deux Sources" de M. Bergson', *Revue des Études juives* 95(189) (1933).
- 46 Jankélévitch, *Bergson*, p. 276.
- 47 Gilles Deleuze, *Spinoza et le problème de l'expression* (Paris: Minuit, 1968), p. 103; English translation by Marin Joughin as *Expressionism in Philosophy: Spinoza* (New York: Zone Books, 1990), p. 118.
- 48 Deleuze and Guattari, *Qu'est-ce que la philosophie?*, p. 59; *What is Philosophy?*, p. 60.

## TRACEWORK

Myself and others in the moral phenomenology  
of Merleau-Ponty and Levinas*David Michael Levin**Source: International Journal of Philosophical Studies 6(3) (1998): 345–92.***Abstract**

In this study, I examine the significance of the trace and its legibility in the phenomenologies of Merleau-Ponty and Levinas, showing that this trope plays a more significant role in Merleau-Ponty's thinking than has been recognized heretofore and that it constitutes a crucial point of contact between Merleau-Ponty and Levinas. But this point of contact is also, in both their philosophies, a site where their thinking is compelled to confront its limits and the enigmas involved in the description of the topography of a hermeneutical flesh. It is argued that the significance of the trace consists in its alterity, its registering and inscribing in the very matter of the flesh an imperative spiritual assignment: the morally binding hold of the other person on my capacity to be responsive to the other's needs and bear responsibility for the other's welfare. The retrieval or recuperation of the trace, which, I argue, is inscribed as a certain predisposition in what, borrowing from Merleau-Ponty, we might call the prepersonal topology of the flesh, would thus constitute a task of the utmost importance for the formation of the moral self. However, given the paradoxical temporality of the trace and the hermeneutical nature of its legibility, the retrieval of the trace is not actually possible. Nevertheless, the attempt to retrieve it – one's commitment to retrieving it – is an absolutely imperative existential task, determining the character of the moral self. In both Merleau-Ponty and Levinas, however, the problematic nature of this recuperative project is manifested in the ambiguous, equivocal modality of their rhetoric, supposedly engaged in

the phenomenological description of the primordial 'inscription', but oscillating, in fact, undecidably between descriptive and prescriptive, constative and performative, literal and metaphorical modes of discourse. It is argued that this, far from being a fault, is necessitated by the hermeneutic nature of the trace, which requires that the description be invocative and evocative, provoking a deep transformation in experience that would make the description true. It accordingly becomes clear that and why the moral phenomenologies of Merleau-Ponty and Levinas, depending as they must on a metaphorical interaction between language and experience, cannot function within the framework of the traditional correspondence theory of truth.

... to recover contact with moral and spiritual sources through the exercise of the creative imagination.

(Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self*)<sup>1</sup>

## Part I Tracework

### *A Levinas*

As is well known, a principal concept or trope in Levinas's later phenomenology is the trace: the unrepresentable trace, namely, of an unrepresentable alterity. Both in his major work of 1961, *Totality and Infinity*, and also in his much later major work of 1974, *Otherwise than Being, or Beyond Essence*, it is in terms of the human face that Levinas formulates his moral phenomenology. This point is explicitly avowed in 'Diachrony and Representation', where he wrote:

I have attempted a 'phenomenology' of sociality starting from the face of the other person.<sup>2</sup>

(This is an odd statement, given that processes of socialization, processes with which one might expect a phenomenology of sociality to be concerned, are entirely ignored in his work. Moreover, it seems that Levinas's phenomenology does not take sufficient account of the individual's embeddedness in a 'form of life', or that, to the extent that it does, his not distinguishing the ethical from the moral and the good from the right with enough clarity suggests that he will not be able to acknowledge different forms of ethical life, different, but equally moral, conceptions of the good life. The statement becomes all the more puzzling, however, to the extent



that his work would seem to be calling for transformations in the social relations within which we play out our lives. But let us return to the statement's concern for the face.) It is only in *Otherwise than Being* that the face is figured, above all, as a trace. In *Totality and Infinity*, the face is described as an absolute singularity, infinitely transcendent, beyond essence, beyond being, beyond the positivity of presence: 'absence from the world'.<sup>3</sup> But in the later work, this absence, this radical alterity, is brought into language in the figure of the trace, emphasizing its withdrawal from being, its absolute, uncompromising irretrievability. And yet, of course, the articulation of the trace of the other in me – its invocation and evocation – continues to be the concern of his phenomenology. Thus, in effect, his phenomenology becomes what I shall call a 'tracework': an approach to the unapproachable, which withdraws itself from every approach; an attempt to describe the indescribable, the unrepresentable and unnarratable – or perhaps, rather, an attempt to describe the inevitability of failure in the very 'logic' of the attempt.<sup>4</sup> But how can there be a phenomenology of the indescribable, the inapparent? And how can we say anything at all about a trace that is supposed to be 'less than nothing', when anything we might say cannot avoid describing it? I am not convinced that Levinas ever answered these questions satisfactorily.

Apart from the immediately apparent problem of phenomenological descriptions of the undecidable, his phenomenological descriptions are problematic in at least two other ways. (1) If they are intended to be true, as we may presume, true not just of the experience through which Levinas himself has passed, but true *in general*, how can he avoid a universality that would do violence to the singularity, the uniqueness, of others – of all those whom he through his writing would address? In fact, the face itself, as Levinas wants to understand it, viz. as both absolutely singular and yet also an exemplar of a universal humanity, presents a doubleness for which even his extremely altered phenomenology cannot to my satisfaction account. (2) Moreover, thought of as phenomenological descriptions, what he has to say about the face-to-face ethical relation and the I's experience in relation to others is not obviously true, not *prima facie* true. Also, as we shall see, the rhetorical mode in which his descriptions are articulated is strangely altered in the context of his discourse – altered in a way that makes it impossible to read them as merely constative. What, then, is going on?

My experience of the face of the other is not that of a presence reducible to the present; it belongs, in truth, to a paradoxical temporality. In my face-to-face encounter with the other, my experience is subject to the moral law, which has left a trace of its primordial inscription in my flesh: Levinas writes of 'the trace of the utterly bygone, the utterly past absent',<sup>5</sup> 'before the present, older than the time of consciousness that is accessible to memory' (*OB* 93, 106; *AE* 118, 134–5). Describing the face of the neighbour, Levinas says:

he [*sic*] loses his face as a neighbor in narration. The relationship with him is indescribable in the literal sense of the term, unconvertible into a history, irreducible to the simultaneousness of writing, the eternal present of a writing that records or presents results.

(OB 166, AE 211)

Even before the time of my first 'actual' encounter with another – in an immemorial time before any order of time we can conventionally calculate – I have already been deeply touched and marked by, and prepared for, the encounter: there is, thus, before the encounter, the 'trace of a passage' (OB 91, AE 116) that is also the passage of a trace:

a trace lost in a trace, less than nothing in the trace of an excessive, but always ambiguous trace of itself . . . the face of the neighbor obsesses me with his [*sic*] destitution.

(OB 93, AE 118)

I would like to suggest that we might think of the trace that is in question here as virtually nothing – *unless we make something of it*. But the significance of this formulation will perhaps become intelligible only later, when it can be thought in terms of a reflexive process of moral development. For now, let us return to the reference to 'obsession'. This 'obsession' is to be recognized as a moral responsibility, a responsibility already inherent in my capacity to be responsive to the 'presence' of the other and already importuning me even before I am able to recognize its claim on my existence:

The face of the neighbor signifies for me an unexceptionable responsibility, preceding every free consent, every pact, every contract.

(OB 88, AE 112)

The responsibility to which Levinas is referring precedes consent, precedes every pact, every contract, and it must precede socialization; but in this precedence, it constitutes the condition of possibility for all socialization. (It is worth noting here that, in his *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty also wrote of a 'contract' preceding socialization: a 'primordial contract' between myself and the world that is sealed by the nature of embodiment.)<sup>6</sup> It is as if I were being touched and moved from afar by the categorical force of a moral imperative: a claim coming from 'an immemorial past, a past that was never present' (PPE 242, PPF 280). But this past is not entirely lost, for, as I shall argue, it haunts the moral sense, which imagines it as preserved in the intricate tracework of the flesh, in the intrigue of an *archi-writing*.

This is not mysticism; nor is it metaphor. What I think he means is that obligation takes hold of us bodily in a time – or rather a stage and time-level

– that is prior, at each and every moment, to thematizing consciousness, prior to reflective cognition, and therefore prior, in each and every moment, to the ego's construction of a worldly temporal order. Morality, for him, is not – or not first of all – an obligation mediated, as for Kant, by the formal and procedural universalization of maxims; nor is it grounded in appeals to the 'good conscience' constructed through processes of socialization. Instead, morality is first of all a *bodily felt sense* of obligation, an imperative sense of responsibility *immediately* (but not consciously) felt in the response of an elemental flesh that is (as I would put it, making use of the phenomenological terminology that Merleau-Ponty introduces) anonymous, pre-personal, pre-egological, and pre-conventional: a bodily responsiveness that, unless severely damaged by the brutality of early life experiences, the I cannot avoid undergoing – at least to some extent – when face to face with the other. Even *before* beholding the other, the I is already rendered beholden; thus, in the normal case, when the I actually beholds another face to face, the I's felt sense of beholdenness should be immediately awakened. And it is through this sense of beholdenness that the 'humanity' of the other, and eventually – we may hope – the universal claims of justice, are given.

In the epigraph quoted at the beginning of this paper, Charles Taylor formulates his work in the following terms: the task in *Sources of the Self* is, he says, 'to recover contact with moral and spiritual sources through the exercise of the imagination'. Perhaps this could also describe the work of Levinas – and perhaps even that of Merleau-Ponty. I would like to show how and why.

In a sense, Levinas's phenomenology undertakes a return to a 'premodern' or pre-Enlightenment moral theory: although it is not a question of some 'natural essence' or 'natural law', it is less a question of relying on one's inner capacities of representation to define one's moral identity than of getting somehow in touch with an ontological *logos* beyond human individuals. Levinasian phenomenology must become a tracework, an obsession-sustained meditation engaged in an admittedly hopeless search for the traces of this primordial responsiveness, a bodily felt (but initially not consciously felt) sense within which, in a time that precedes the ego and its temporal order, the I's responsibility in relation to the other has been deeply 'inscribed'. (As we shall see, Levinas actually uses 'inscription' as an important figure of thought.) Searching for traces of this responsiveness, affecting me and commanding me 'unbeknownst to myself, "slipping into me like a thief"', Levinas speaks of my 'pre-logical subjection'<sup>7</sup> to the other and my 'involuntary election' by 'the Good' (*OB* 11, 15, 18; *AE* 13, 19, 22). Although the search for traces is, as I said, hopeless, what Levinas says here shows that the search is nonetheless not futile, not entirely in vain, since the effort, the attempt itself, carries enormous moral merit.

A brief excursus is needed here, before we return to the question of tracework: is there a difference for Levinas between the Good and the Right?

Is 'the Good' (like) what Taylor would call the 'hypergood': a superordinate good that gives the standpoint for judging and evaluating all other 'life-goods'? Does Levinas countenance different, equally good, conceptions of 'the Good' – civic virtue, for example, or 'ecological attunement'?

Thus, in spite of the impossibility of thematizing, representing, or narrating the 'pre-history' of the traces of the other's claims on me, on my responsibility and obligation, Levinas nevertheless undertakes to *describe* the register of these traces. This provokes numerous questions. What is the status of Levinas's descriptions? Would Levinas subscribe to something like Taylor's 'Best Account' Principle? Presumably not. But if not, how can he avoid the violence of metaphysics, a discourse assuming the universality of his descriptions? How does he avoid – how can he avoid – the violence of metaphysical discourse? Are the 'traces' of the other that he declares to be registered as an infinite responsibility for the other in the depths of my flesh discoveries or fabrications? Are they nothing but the wishful projections of certain norms, values and ideals, cast onto 'human nature' in order to give them the force of nature? What kind of 'reality' is to be attributed to them? If neither discoveries nor inventions, could they be, ambiguously, paradoxically, and like everything that partakes of the hermeneutical, both and neither? (Hermeneutics works with an intricate rhetorical logic, a dialectic between languaging and experiencing in which there is an intricate interaction, by no means straightforward, between the implicit and the explicit, the virtual and the actual, the 'always already' and the 'not yet'. A certain work of imagination is always involved, of course; but it is not a matter of mere invention *ex nihilo*. In spite of the urgent need for reflections on this tracework, neither Merleau-Ponty nor Levinas gave enough attention to the intricately hermeneutical workings of this rhetorical logic.) Are these traces figures of the moral imagination schematizing an ideal of moral relationships in terms of a deep topography of the intersubjective body? Could it be said that the traces of the other's claims on me have no reality other than the role they play in my tracework – the tropological staging of my self-development as a moral subject, provocatively figured as a reflexive turn, or rather return, to retrieve, or attempt to retrieve, traces of motivation and guidance from the gift of a primordial incarnation, a body imagined as already graced with a moral predisposition? In this case, it is not that traces of the moral inscription are already there, present in the flesh, simply awaiting the time of a reading, but rather that the traces are a tropological production, markings on a fabulous topography of the body, legible, if at all, only in and as the very movement that would make the flesh reveal its moral assignment – legible, as it were, only by the heart that seeks them as signposts of encouragement along the stages of its moral journey. References to originary traces of the other, of the other's absolute claims on my ability to be responsive, would thus represent, in effect, a way of turning the goal of moral maturity into an origin and positing the origin as the goal. Or perhaps we

can say only that, in the philosopher's obsession with tracework, there is a response to the suffering of the other that would remind us, for the sake of this other, of the need to keep a terrible vigilance – that, namely, as Levinas testifies, of a certain inconsolable, irremediable insomnia.

### *B Merleau-Ponty*

Although one can easily overlook it, there is a certain tracework already organizing the construction of the *Phenomenology of Perception*. (There is unquestionably an astonishing difference between the *Phenomenology of Perception*, an early work, and the much later writings, such as 'The Chiasm – The Intertwining', assembled in *The Visible and the Invisible*. However, in my opinion, all the startling new concepts of the later texts – the concepts, for example, of 'flesh', 'chiasmic intertwining' and 'reversibility' – are already prefigured by Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological descriptions of the 'pre-personal' dimension of perception in the earlier work. In other words, the later concepts can be found already implicitly articulated in the early work; but it is also true that, without the later texts, the later concepts would not now be legible in the earlier ones: their implicitness is legible only now, only after the fact; they could not have been anticipated in any straightforward way. Thus, we must recognize the late texts as representing a major new development in Merleau-Ponty's thinking.) The figure of the trace – and that of the peculiar work it calls forth – are made explicit for the first time in the *Phenomenology*, in a passage where Merleau-Ponty says:

When I turn toward perception, and pass from direct perception to thinking about that perception, I re-enact it, and find [*je la ré-effectue, je retrouve*] at work in my organs of perception a thought older than myself of which those organs are merely a trace.

(*PPE* 351–2, *PPF* 404)<sup>8</sup>

(Note the French words. Should we assume that this word *retrouver* is used in opposition to 'invent' or 'project'? Is it meant to exclude the work of the 'creative imagination'? And what is this peculiar 'thought' that he 'finds'? Or is the matter more intricate than the assumption of such an opposition would imply? In this case, the meaning of the English word 'find', which translates a word marked with the prefix that indicates a certain repetition, would be more ambiguous than it seems, hovering with deliberate undecidability beyond the grasp of metaphysics, *between* the 'opposites' of finding and inventing.) A few pages later, the figure of the trace is once again invoked; here, however, he gives it some phenomenological specification. As we shall see, the traces for which he is searching are, for him as for Levinas, traces of the other, traces of alterity:

it is precisely my body which perceives the body of another person, and discovers in that other body a miraculous prolongation of my own intentions, a familiar way of dealing with the world. Henceforth, as the parts of my body together comprise a system, so my body and the body of the other are one whole . . . and the anonymous existence of which my body is the ever-renewed trace henceforth inhabits both bodies simultaneously.

(PPE 354, PPF 406)

But is this trace the trace of a merely phantom body? As the 'product' of a peculiar 'turn' of thought, a peculiar reflexivity, would not this tracework body be a tropological generation? How can he 'know', or claim to know, so much about a dimension of our bodily existence of which we can obtain only a trace? What is the significance for our moral life of this (trace of a) prolongation – what later will be described or represented as an intertwining – of bodily intentionalities? These are questions for which we shall at most find oblique answers in Merleau-Ponty's writings.

Be this as it may, we must give thought to the fact that, many years later, when Merleau-Ponty was writing the material posthumously assembled under the title *The Visible and the Invisible*, the figure of the trace briefly – but again significantly – recurs: here it is introduced in the context of a phenomenological meditation on vision, on the visible and the invisible, as a question, then, of the 'tracework nature' of the flesh, an elemental being 'of which my vision is a part, a visibility older than my operations or my acts',<sup>9</sup> a being that is 'eventually' to be thought, perhaps – and at this point he allows himself to speculate freely, wildly – *comme dentelles*: as if it were organically differentiated like 'laceworks' (VIE 270, VIF 324; see also VIE 101, VIF 137). (This thought, of tracework as in search of a lost lacework, is already in fact prefigured, first at PPE 130, PPF 151 in the *Phenomenology*, where he writes of the 'intentional threads' that run out from my body, from my arms and legs, projecting the trajectories of my motility in a vectorial field and composing a reality of intertwining identities (*entrelacs*); and it is later prefigured at PPE 235, PPF 272, where he says, continuing the same trope, that 'My body is the fabric into which all objects are woven.') These 'intentional threads' are the traces of an alterity that is implicated in the formation of my ego-logical body; consequently, it would be reasonable to expect that a reflexive return to retrieve them could significantly alter whatever identity emerged from the egological incorporation. (In other words, it might be a question of thinking the 'moral self' as a stage-level beyond the narcissistic ego. This would entail a transition from what Habermas would call a conventional, heteronomous appropriation of morality to what he would call a post-conventional, truly autonomous appropriation.)

Here, as also in the earlier text, Merleau-Ponty ascribes to the trace a peculiar temporality: it is 'a thought older than myself', 'a visibility older

than my operations or my acts'. The trace, however, is not merely older in relation to the linear temporality of my life; it is actually an 'origin', an 'arkhē', that precedes the temporal order as we know it: since we always inhabit a present that is not totally present to itself, it is the trace of 'an original past, a past which has never been present' (*PPE* 242, *PPF* 280). (But as not yet fulfilled, as still only latent, the *arkhē* can only come *after* the temporal order as we know it, altering the temporal order posited by the ego and laying down the radically other temporality constitutive of the moral self.) Thus, to be accurate, we must say that it is a question of a trace of a trace – and this means that it cannot function according to the metaphysical conception of an origin or *arkhē*. As trace, it traces that which can never be presented, nor can it itself ever be presented, i.e., appear or manifest itself as such. Merleau-Ponty's efforts at what he wants to think of as 'phenomenological description' can therefore achieve only re-presentations: better or worse according to considerations that he leaves in a somewhat ambiguous and problematic implicitness. And if what is being re-presented is a past that was never present, then in a certain sense, or to a certain extent, the re-presentation, the apparent repetition, is actually constitutive – but I would prefer to say 'performative' – of an originary experience. This is a thought which, in spite of its seeming paradoxicality, Merleau-Ponty certainly could acknowledge as congenial, since he holds that 'the body is solidified or generalized existence and existence is a perpetual incarnation' (*PPE* 166, *PPF* 194). We shall return to this point when we consider the methodological problematic of language and description.

Resuming the question of the trace in his own work of thought, Derrida points out that the trace 'erases itself in presenting itself, muffles itself in resonating, like the *a* writing itself, inscribing its pyramid in *différance*'.<sup>10</sup> The trace, he concludes, is not a presence, but only the 'simulacrum' of a presence. Erasure, self-erasure, belongs to its very structure. It is 'a text without voice'.<sup>11</sup> Supplementing Merleau-Ponty's words, for which, however, he shows insufficient gratitude, Derrida writes of 'a "past" that has never been present, and which never will be, whose future to come will never be a production or reproduction of the form of presence'. Therefore, he argues that 'the concept of trace is incompatible with the concept of retention, of the becoming-past of what has been present. One cannot think the trace – and therefore *différance* – on the basis of the present, or the presence of the present'.<sup>12</sup>

But does the peculiar status of the trace mean, then, as Derrida contends, that the language of phenomenology is 'inadequate'?<sup>13</sup> Perhaps so – but perhaps only if this language is committed to a metaphysics of presence. And it is not at all clear, and not beyond vigorous debate, that phenomenology – Merleau-Ponty's in particular – perpetuates such a commitment. Merleau-Ponty himself points to the uncanniness of the trace – the fact that we can no more retrieve it for an intention-fulfilling presence than we can

preserve the shadow when bringing it into the light (*PPE* 359, *PPF* 412). And yet, how are we to interpret the task of radical reflection, which in some way, some sense, is unquestionably committed to retrieving or recovering the traces inscribed in the flesh of our bodies by a certain secret *archi-writing*? How are we to read the tracework of his phenomenology – it is, in fact, a hermeneutical phenomenology, although he never calls it this – claiming, as it does, to retrieve or recover at least a trace of the traces, at least a trace of the encoded message that, without argument, he assumes has been inscribed in our flesh in a ‘prepersonal time’ beyond consciousness, beyond memory, beyond ego-logical time, time as we know it (*PPE* 84, *PPF* 100)?

If Derrida is right, all so-called phenomenological ‘descriptions’ are ‘mere’ representations, attempts that are bound in a certain sense to fail, to fall short, never quite reaching the design of the trace. This is a matter of some intricacy. We shall accordingly be returning to this point when we take up the problematic of language.

## Part II Merleau-Ponty’s retrieval of an extensive embodiment

Eager to pursue thoughts that Husserl began to articulate only in his late manuscripts, Merleau-Ponty proclaimed ‘a new conception of intentionality’ (*PPE* 243, *PPF* 281) and attempted, in his *Phenomenology of Perception*, to show the working of ‘an operative intentionality [*fungierende Intentionalität*] already at work before any positing or any judgement’ (*PPE* 429, *PPF* 490. Also see *PPE* 418, *PPF* 478). The retrieving of this intentionality, a radically ‘passive’ functioning of embodiment (‘radically passive’ because it is ‘deeper’ than the passivity posited by traditional systems of thought as in opposition to ‘activity’) that occurs without consciousness and apart from volition, should finally make it possible, he says, for phenomenology to ‘become a phenomenology of origins’ (*PPE* xviii, *PPF* xiii). As presented in the Preface, this would seem to confirm his fidelity to the programme of Husserl’s transcendental metaphysics; but the work does not in fact sustain the Husserlian conception of origins. Nor does it proceed to retrieve them, as the passages already quoted sufficiently demonstrate, in the way Husserl thought possible and necessary.

The intentionality that fascinates Merleau-Ponty and to which he wants to draw our attention, constitutes ‘all the latent knowledge of itself that my body possesses’ (*PPE* 232, *PPF* 269). There is a ‘deeper intentionality’ at work ‘beneath the intentionality of representations’ (*PPE* 121, *PPF* 141), and it is to the explication of this concealed intentionality, a functioning of the body the traces of which phenomenology must somehow retrieve, that Merleau-Ponty turns, thereby transforming the Husserlian inheritance without entirely realizing what he accomplished. It is not until, many years



later, he returned to the question of intentionality that he understood the radicality of his appropriation. (See *VIE* 35, 238–9, 244; *VIF* 57, 292, 297–8, where the world-opening characteristics of an intentionality preceding the subject–object structure are elaborated.) But already, in his *Phenomenology of Perception* (*PPE* 157, *PPF* 184), he will be calling attention to the generously ‘erotic’ character of this ‘originary intentionality’.

However, it is not just a question of retrieving traces of this primordial intentionality. Merleau-Ponty wants to *describe* in as much concrete detail as possible the intricacies of an originary dimension of our experience of embodiment of which we are for the most part unaware, and which moreover, as originary, we cannot possibly hope fully to retrieve in phenomenological description. There is, he claims, an ‘anonymous life’, an ‘amorphous existence’ which ‘preceded my own history’ (*PPE* 347, *PPF* 399): that is the deeper experience of embodiment whose traces he sets out to retrieve. Because I am an embodied being, I belong not only to the time of culture and its representative, the ego, but to another time, a time much older, older even than the a priori of metaphysics:

a time which pursues its own independent course, and which my personal life utilizes but does not entirely overlay. Because I am borne into personal existence by a time which I do not constitute, all my perceptions stand out against a background of nature.

(*PPE* 347, *PPF* 399)

‘My personal life’, he says (and one should note, here, the ambiguity in the next word),

must be the resumption [*reprise*] of a prepersonal tradition. There is, therefore, another subject beneath me, for whom the world exists before I am here, and who marks out my place in it. This captive or natural spirit is my body, not that momentary body which is the instrument of my personal choices and which fastens upon this or that world, but the system of anonymous ‘functions’ which draw every particular focus into a general project.

(*PPE* 254, *PPF* 293–4)

(For Levinas, this ‘other subject’ is the I, the one who is – or perhaps we should rather say, recognizing an ambiguity in Levinas’s phenomenological claims, ‘ought to be’ – subjected to, responsible to and for, the other.) There is, preceding the personal, ‘beneath the personal’ (as he explains it, using a certain metaphors), a pre-personal dimension of bodily existence, an anonymous and generalized existence (*PPE* 84, 330–1, 352–3; *PPF* 99–100, 381–2, 405–6), a bodily way of being in the world, being attuned to it, that is not yet structured according to the conditions of subject and object.

This primordial level, global, syncretic, bodily felt (*PPE* 215, 227; *PPF* 249, 262), is, he says,

on the horizon of all our perceptions, but it is a horizon [origin] which cannot in principle ever be reached and thematized in our express perception. Each of the levels in which we successively live makes its appearance when we cast anchor in some 'setting' which is offered us. This setting itself is spatially particularized only for a previously given level. Thus each of the whole succession of our experiences, including the first, passes on an already acquired [level of] spatiality.

(*PPE* 253, *PPF* 293)

The same may be said, *mutatis mutandis*, for the 'strata' of embodiment constituted by the pre-personal and personal forms of experience. According to Merleau-Ponty,

the stages passed through are not simply passed; they have called for or required the present stages. . . . The past stages continue therefore to be in the present stages – which also means that they are retroactively modified by them.

(*VIE* 90, *VIF* 123)

Notice how, in this passage, the stages become strata, levels or dimensions. To remind us of this point, I suggest that we think in terms of stage-dimensions': every stage of moral self-development therefore constitutes a vital dimension of embodiment. This passage, written late in his life, deserves to be treated as a point of the utmost importance – and we shall accordingly, in the context of our present reflections, do just this, proposing a story that continues and elaborates the one that I take Merleau-Ponty to have begun. In this story, then, the child's pre-personal experience, never fully present in the presence of awareness, is, however, soon sublated, *aufgehoben*, in the formation of a personal embodiment. This 'prepersonal existence' (*PPE* 330, *PPF* 381) is virtually lost to memory, buried in a past that was never present. As the elemental body of the child is increasingly subject to socialization and the civilizing forces of culture, it gradually becomes an ego-body, a body ruled by ego-logical processes. But the possibility of retrieving, or attempting to retrieve, a trace of this earlier, pre-personal sense of embodiment nevertheless persists: at least a trace of this sense can, according to Merleau-Ponty, be realized, brought to consciousness, at any moment. Thus: 'Rather than being a genuine history, perception ratifies and renews in us a "prehistory"' (*PPE* 240, *PPF* 277).

In 'Reflection and Interrogation' (*VIE* 32, *VIF* 53–4), Merleau-Ponty calls this pre-personal level of embodiment our 'natal bond' (*lien natal*) with the world. Thus, in perception – vision, for instance – we always enter into

a certain pre-personal engagement with the world, 'a kind of primordial contract' (*PPE* 208, 216; *PPF* 241, 251) that is prior to the Levinasian 'social contract', an initially 'sympathetic relation' (*PPE* 214, *PPF* 247), whatever trials and misfortunes our subsequent life-experience may heap upon us. There is in the gaze, he writes, a 'perceptual genius underlying the thinking subject which can give to things the precise reply that they are awaiting in order to exist' (*PPE* 264, *PPF* 305). A pre-personal 'Eros or Libido' is at the origin of perception, constituting an 'erotic "comprehension" not of the order of [conceptual] understanding' (*PPE* 157, *PPF* 183). At the pre-personal level, 'every perception is a communication or communion' (*PPE* 320, *PPF* 370. Also see *PPE* 212, *PPF* 246). As he says in 'Interrogation and Dialectic' (*VIE* 76, *VIF* 107), 'things attract my look, my gaze caresses things, it espouses their contours and their reliefs; between it and them we catch sight of a complicity'. (For a discussion of the erotic dimension that underlies the perception of colours, see, for example *PPE* 209, 227; *PPF* 242, 262.)

Such perception is 'a communication with the world more ancient than thought', prior to the structure of subject and object, and therefore to a certain extent 'impenetrable to reflection' (*PPE* 254, *PPF* 294). But the inherent impenetrability and irretrievability of the prepersonal dimension of perception does not entirely account for the neglect of this experience:

The fact that this may not have been realized earlier [by philosophers] is explained by the fact that any coming to awareness of the perceptual world was hampered by the prejudices arising from objective thinking. The function of the latter is to reduce all phenomena which bear witness to the union of subject and world, putting in their place the clear idea of the object as *in itself* and of the subject as pure consciousness. It thereby severs the links which unite the thing and the embodied subject, leaving only sensible qualities to make up our world.

(*PPE* 320, *PPF* 370)

This union of subject and world takes place not only in the pre-personal dimension of our perception; it also takes place in our gestures. Therefore:

we shall have to rediscover [*redécouvrir*], beneath the objective idea of movement, a pre-objective experience from which it borrows its significance, and in which movement, still linked to the person perceiving it, is a variation of the subject's hold on his world.

(*PPE* 267, *PPF* 309)

Notice again the prefix before *découvrir*, suggesting a hermeneutical engagement by and of phenomenological reflection.

Moreover,

The communication or comprehension of gestures comes about through the reciprocity of my intentions and the gestures of others, of my gestures and intentions discernible in the conduct of other people. It is as if the other person's intention inhabited my body and mine his.  
(PPE 185, PPF 215)

This passage shows, I believe, that the later concept of a chiasmic intertwining, an *entrelacs*, was already prefigured in the 'embodiment' articulated in the *Phenomenology of Perception*.

In other words, prior to reflection, to knowledge and the possibility of scepticism, there is between myself and the other a pre-personal (experience of) our interconnectedness. However, in the context of his early work, the *Phenomenology of Perception*, the significance of this experience for our moral life is not at all registered. In this work, the phenomenological hermeneutics that discloses the pre-personal primarily serves to deconstruct the metaphysical constructions of 'objective thought'. It is only later that this experience is articulated in a way that contributes to what I am calling a moral phenomenology.

In the *Phenomenology*, what consumes Merleau-Ponty is the daunting task – already by itself requiring the most extreme exertion – of breaking the spell of the 'projections' of metaphysics and attempting to articulate what the subject-object structure conceals and would consign to a certain oblivion, were it not for the possibility of an 'involuntary memory' or a difficult act of 'radical reflection':

Radical reflection is what takes hold of me as I am in the act of forming and formulating the ideas of subject and object, and brings to light the source of these two ideas. . . . We must rediscover [*retrouver*], as anterior to the ideas of subject and object, the fact of my subjectivity and the nascent object, that primordial layer at which both things and ideas come into being.

(PPE 219, PPF 253–4)

Consequential though this is for epistemology and metaphysics, what concerns us here are the implications for moral phenomenology. What would be the significance for moral phenomenology, 'if' as he supposes, 'I find [*trouve*] in myself, through reflection, along with the perceiving subject, a pre-personal subject' (PPE 352, PPF 405)? Would this redemption of pre-personal subjectivity, of an embodiment bearing the traces of the other that were involved in its very emergence as a subject, remind us of our shared, common humanity? In 'The Philosopher and His Shadow', Merleau-Ponty asserts, still using the Husserlian language of constitution but making with

it a point that Husserl would never have made, that 'The constitution of others does not come after that of the body; others and my body are born together from an original ecstasy.'<sup>14</sup> It is in the traces of this 'ecstasy' that the traces of alterity are to be retrieved.

What is to be retrieved for moral life, in so far as this be possible, is traces of an originary intercorporeality, because the ecstatic intercorporeality which is functioning in the pre-personal stage-dimension of our embodiment is already a form of communion, already a form of communication with the other. This, I think, gives a second, much deeper significance to Merleau-Ponty's assertion that even '[t]he refusal to communicate is still a form of communication' (*PPE* 361, *PPF* 414).

When, years later, Merleau-Ponty resumes his reflections on the body, he is equipped with some provocative new concepts. Now what his thought wants to elicit is the primordial dimension of what we might quite appropriately call 'moral experience': the structure of intersubjectivity – the subject's encounter with another subject. Penetrating the secrets of our being flesh, our 'être charnel, comme être des profondeurs' (*VIE* 136, *VIF* 179), he brings to light an 'intercorporeal being' for which our flesh is the elemental medium (*VIE* 143, 139–47; *VIF* 188, 183–94). Attempting to articulate further the nature of this intercorporeality, an intercorporeality already adumbrated, in fact, in the *Phenomenology*, but without the later emphasis that carries it forward into the proximity of a moral phenomenology, he suggests that the self and its other belong to and participate in an intertwining (*entrelacs*) of shared flesh, such that

there is here no problem of the *alter ego* because it is not I who sees, not *he* who sees, because an anonymous visibility inhabits both of us, a vision in general.

(*VIE* 142, *VIF* 187–8)

And there are 'motor echoes' that follow the gestures we make in the presence of others – echoes 'by which we pass into one another' (*VIE* 144, *VIF* 190). A related point appears in 'The Indirect Language', another late text, where he observes that, 'It is characteristic of cultural gestures to awaken in all others at least an echo, if not a consonance.'<sup>15</sup>

For the most sustained reflection on intercorporeality, wherein he begins explicitly to bring out the moral implications of his phenomenological tracework, we must, I think, turn to 'The Child's Relations with Others',<sup>16</sup> although, even here, what still very much concerns him is the possibility of a compelling phenomenological answer to solipsism, to a certain scepticism about the existence of other people. The term 'pre-personal' does not figure in this text – it seems, indeed, that after the *Phenomenology*, Merleau-Ponty no longer made use of it; but the absence of the term does not mean that the experience to which it referred is no longer at stake. It has already been

shown that, in his later thinking, he had other ways of referring to that same dimension of our embodied experience.

In 'The Child's Relations with Others', Merleau-Ponty carries forward Husserl's account of intersubjective intentionality, but without retaining his originary transcendental egology, arguing that the child is from the very beginning oriented towards others by a sociable predisposition. The child enters the world already inhabiting an 'anonymous collectivity, an undifferentiated group life' and an 'initial community' (CRO 119). Touched and moved by others according to a 'syncretic sociability' (CRO 135), the child is already responsive to others in a way that shows (to others) that she already, at the deepest level of bodily feeling, and thus prior to thematic consciousness, is enjoined by a rudimentary sense of her shared kinship with the others – a sense that, of course, can be and needs to be solicited and developed further. From the very beginning of life, the infant – as he argues, referring, for example, to the 'contagion of cries' in the nursery – is engaged by an 'initial form of sympathy'. This is a sympathy with others which comes, at that stage of psychosocial development, from the absence of a self, a boundaried identity, a certain fusion and confusion in relation to others. This initial sympathy is entirely different from the 'genuine sympathy' (CRO 120) of the mature adult, which is at least volitional and deliberate, if not also motivated by reflectively constituted moral principles, but which nevertheless provides something – call it an initial predisposition – upon which the mature form may eventually be constructed – if all the necessary conditions are sufficiently favourable.

Implicitly, Merleau-Ponty sets this phenomenology – a conjectural account of the child's experience as it is assumed to be from the position of the first person singular – into a dialectic of developmental sublations, such that the mature adult still in some way dwells within, and is capable of retrieving, or at least attempting to retrieve, if only in the figure of traces, the attunement of that early childhood 'precommunication' wherein, as he says, 'the other's intentions somehow play *across* my body while my intentions play across his' (CRO 119). Even the adult can therefore say – if appropriately self-reflective: 'I live in the facial expressions of the other as I feel him living in mine' (CRO 146). Here we see how a hermeneutical phenomenology can contribute to moral education and moral self-development, bringing out a proto-moral disposition of the flesh – what, in 'The Intertwining – The Chiasm', he will call 'an ideality not alien to the flesh' (VIE 152, VIF 199).

In 'The Concept of Nature', Merleau-Ponty extends the phenomenological articulation of intercorporeality even further, virtually drawing it into the realm of the political, evoking and invoking 'an ideal community of embodied subjects, of an intercorporeality'.<sup>17</sup> In the light of this thought, one might well project, therefore, a certain moral-political imaginary grounded in – or say born of – the reversibility and reciprocity of a shared flesh, the redeemed experience of intercorporeality and the intertwining it involves.

But the accounts that Merleau-Ponty gives in these texts are not without their perplexities: problems not sufficiently recognized, equivocations that seem difficult to resolve, apparent contradictions that frustrate efforts at reconciliation. Let me briefly indicate, here, some of the matters that call for further thought. (1) Is there not a certain contradiction between, on the one hand, the claim (CRO) regarding the child's intersubjective and (one might plausibly argue) proto-moral predisposition – her initial sociability, her primordial sympathy, and on the other hand, the claim (also CRO) that 'the experience of the other is necessarily an alienating one, in the sense that it tears me away from my lone self and creates instead a mixture of myself and the other'? If the child's encounters with others are from the very beginning manifestations of an inherent but originally latent sociability, why does Merleau-Ponty follow Husserl, Sartre and Lacan in holding (CRO 118) that 'my alienation of the other and his alienation of me' is what 'makes possible the perception of others' and describing in an essentializing way (CRO 154) the I's original experience of social encounters in terms of 'alienation', 'transgression' and 'encroachment'? How are these two accounts to be reconciled? (Below, we shall give thought to Levinas's terms for the experiencing of the other: 'trauma', 'wound', 'obsession', 'persecution', 'hostage', 'subjection', 'subordination'. And it will then be evident that Levinas's terms suggest a radically different configuration of meanings.)

(2) Is there not a certain problem with the phenomenology of intercorporeality as it is elaborated in 'The Intertwining – The Chiasm' and his 'Working Notes'? How are we to understand the assertion (again made after a reading of Lacan) that the intertwining of the flesh is 'a mirror phenomenon' (VIE 255, VIF 309) and therefore constitutes a certain 'fundamental narcissism' (VIE 139, VIF 183) in such a way that this claim is not incompatible with the double-crossing of narcissism in a chiasmic reversibility of intersubjective positions? On the one hand, he wants to say that the visual relationship between myself and an other is subject to the fate, the condition, of a chiasmic intertwining of flesh, radically reversing our positions, whilst on the other hand he wants to describe this reversal as the turning-back distinctive of narcissism. Why does he not see that the radical reversal of the mirroring ultimately effects a powerful double-crossing of the tendency towards narcissism? Indeed, one might even imagine that this mirroring by the other could effect the most extreme antithesis: a very frightening alienation from oneself, a terrifying transfer of one's identity to the other. Reflecting on a hand feeling itself touching itself when touching the hand of another and the mirroring whereby the gaze of the other is said to reflect and return my gaze to and upon myself, he says:

There is vision, touch, when a certain visible, a certain tangible, turns back upon the whole of the visible, the whole of the tangible, of which it is a part, or when suddenly it finds itself *surrounded* by them, or

when, between it and them, and through their commerce, is formed a Visibility, a Tangible in itself, which belong properly neither to the body as fact nor to the world as fact – as upon two mirrors facing one another.

He then follows this reflection with a conclusion the logic of which seems far from compelling: ‘Thus’, he says,

since the seer is caught up in what he sees it is still himself he sees: there is a *fundamental narcissism* of all vision [and all touching]. And thus, for the same reason, the vision he exercises, he also undergoes from the things, such that, as many painters have said, I feel myself looked at by the things, my activity is equally passivity – which is the second and more profound sense of the narcissism: not to see the outside, as the others see it . . . but especially to be seen by the outside, to exist within it, to emigrate into it, to be seduced, captivated, alienated by the phantom, so that the seer and the visible reciprocate one another and *we no longer know who sees and which is seen.*

(VIE 139, VIF 183. Also see VIE 141, VIF 185–6. My italic)

(This point about the deconstruction of ego-logical boundaries at the pre-personal level of our intercorporeal intertwining is repeated later, this time in reference to communication: ‘One no longer knows who speaks’, he says, ‘and who listens’ VIE 264–5, VIF 318). If reversibility ‘defines the flesh’ (VIE 144, VIF 189), why wouldn’t it ultimately deconstruct the narcissistic privileging of the ego-position? If I saw myself reflected in your eyes, would I not also see myself *responding* to you – to you in a way that recognizes you both as an absolutely irreducible other and as an other very much, in some morally crucial respects, like myself? And in seeing my response to you reflected back to me from you, would I not also, therefore, be indirectly seeing you *in myself*? ‘To touch’, he says, ‘is to touch oneself’ (VIE 255, VIF 308. See also VIE 254 and 256; VIF 307, 309, 310). To be sure! But just as surely this proprioceptive phenomenon does not prevent me from actually touching you and sensing your very being – how you are at this very moment: having vigorously repudiated theories of vision that posit a sense datum and then conclude that the sense datum eclipses my sighting of the object, he would not wish to maintain that my kinaesthetic sensations of being myself touched whilst shaking your hand somehow interfered with the alterity of the contact.

Merleau-Ponty himself throws into question the inscription of a narcissistic turn precisely in those numerous passages, including the one just cited, where he interprets the reversibility of the chiasmic intertwining more radically, deploying the most provocative tropes – a reference, for example, to *tourbillons ouverts*, opening vortices – to register its destabilization of the



boundaries constitutive of identity and its deconstruction of the egocentric position. When he declares that there is a point where, 'by a sort of *chiasm*, we become the others and we become world' (VIE 160, VIF 212), is this the deluded omnipotence of an arrogant narcissism? Or is it an expression of moral self-overcoming, moral transcendence – humility, recognition, sympathy and solicitude? Could it even be, perhaps, an expression of my moral subjection to the other that Levinas wants to evoke?

Could a developmental dialectic such as Merleau-Ponty formulates in *The Visible and the Invisible* (VIE 90, VIF 123, already quoted above) reconcile the narcissism of mirroring, of a certain kind of reflection, with the intertwinings and sympathies of subjectivities that take place in the stage or level of pre-personal bodily experience by showing how they are related according to a logic of developmental stages? Could the reversibility constitutive of a primitive sympathy be associated with the earliest, pre-personal phase of development, whilst the reflexive reversibility that encourages a certain narcissism (in touching you I touch myself, in seeing you I see myself) be associated with the formation of the personal ego? Could the radical reflection of hermeneutical phenomenology then come on the stage *after* the ego has formed, representing the maturity of an ego that is motivated to strive for moral perfection by attempting, as a 'practice of the self', to strengthen its moral character and retrieve for present living something of (what I shall call) the 'confluence of identities' peculiar to the pre-personal?

Is the moral concept of 'the human' a question of seeing 'the human' as the same – a certain intricately mirrored and reflected narcissism; or is it, as Adorno suggests, a question, 'instead, of reflecting back the human as precisely what is different'?<sup>18</sup> Will this require a decision to follow Merleau-Ponty, whose concepts of 'intercorporeality' and 'chiasmic intertwining' point in the direction of symmetry, equality, mutual recognition and reciprocity, or a decision to follow Levinas, whose concepts of 'flesh', of 'perception' and 'sensibility' point rather in the direction of a profoundly spiritualized metamorphosis of the flesh given to human beings? It is a question, for him, of our responsibility to strive for the moral rigours of saintliness, searching within ourselves for immemorial traces of the 'ideality' of the saintly deeply inscribed in the flesh: asymmetry, substitution, subjection and subordination.

If we were to elaborate, here, the logic of the developmental dialectic that these questions suggest, I think that it would explain Merleau-Ponty's use of terms such as 'alienation', 'transgression', and 'encroachment' to describe my experience of intertwining in relationship to the other. What these terms accurately describe is the experience of the ego-logical subject: they tell the phenomenological truth about the ego's experience of intertwining and intercorporeality. But this is not the whole truth, since the ego is capable of a higher, more mature existence – and indeed is *called upon* by society, if not

also by conscience, to overcome itself, to transform itself into a moral self. For such a moral self, however, the experience to which these terms refer would bear a different meaning. Crucial for the possibility of such a transformation is, I believe, the ego's deliberate attempt to retrieve through radical reflection the remaining traces of the pre-personal relationship with others, constructing for itself the normative ideality of a representation, a simulacrum, of the primordial sympathy and community it imagines itself to have enjoyed once upon a time.

(3) Another perplexing matter for thought likewise concerns the character of the intercorporeality claimed by Merleau-Ponty. In representing its character, he speaks of reversibility and even of a certain reciprocity, suggesting an equality or symmetry of substitution. And in representing the character of the pre-personal, predominant in the child but still always functioning 'beneath' the subsequently instituted ego, he will speak of a dimension of experience in which the boundaries that constitute my sense of myself in relation to the other are almost fluid – certainly weaker, looser, more permeable, less determinate and more open than they are when the culturally constructed ego has established its relatively fixed identity and is allowed to rule unchallenged. But in the light of Levinas's work, we are to understand it in terms of the most extreme subjection to the other: reversibility not as symmetry, not as reciprocity, not as equality, but as unilateral substitution, substitution in the sense of my responsibility for and my assumption of the suffering that falls on the other. Who is right: Merleau-Ponty or Levinas? Could they possibly both be right? Are we ultimately obliged to choose? Could the dilemma be another fiction invented by a way of thinking still spellbound by metaphysics? We shall consider answers to these questions after giving some thought to the writings of Levinas.

(4) In concluding for the time being our reading of Merleau-Ponty, I would also like to call attention, here, to the need to carry forward the phenomenology he began, articulating our experience of embodiment in such a way that the nature of the pre-personal, the corporeal intertwining of subjectivities and the reversibilities set in motion through the element of the flesh can be articulated in relation to the ideals of moral-political life – mutual recognition and respect, equality, reciprocity and justice. In 'The Intertwining – The Chiasm', Merleau-Ponty states that 'We will have to recognize an ideality that is not alien to the flesh, that gives it its axes, its depth, its dimensions' (*VIE* 152, *VIF* 199). But he does not attempt to investigate the moral-political significance of his hermeneutic explication of the nature of the flesh. How are the reversibilities that are set in motion through the intertwinings of the flesh in which I and the other participate eventually (to be) connected to the reversibilities necessary for the possibility of justice? How do the intertwinings of our intercorporeality set the stage – or how could they – for the possibility of mutual recognition and respect? How could this phenomenology assist moral education in recognizing and

realizing the latent normative 'ideality' already inscribed – as if it were a gift, as if by benevolent design – in the tenderness and vulnerability of the flesh? How could the *technē* of moral education work with and 'build' on this potential, this preliminary stage of development already set by the graceful if ultimately contingent order of nature?<sup>19</sup> If there is a 'proto-moral' predisposition already ordering the nature of the body, then the task of moral education, its 'civilizing' work, will not need to be impositional, forcing on the body an order that is entirely alien; it can afford to work hermeneutically, bringing forth and developing a potential intimated by the traces. The phenomenological retrieval of a proto-moral disposition of the flesh is therefore a project of the utmost significance.

### Part III Levinas's phenomenology of response and responsibility

Whereas Merleau-Ponty continued working with the concept of intentionality, but called attention to its engagement in the pre-personal dimension of embodiment, thereby making explicit a more primordial – and differently functioning – mode of intentionality than anything recognized by Husserl, Levinas rejected intentionality and attempted to practise phenomenology without it. For him, the concept of intentionality inevitably subverts the moral work of phenomenology, because it requires – so he thinks – an adequation, correspondence or correlational equivalence between a subject and its object (where, in the cases that concern him, the 'object' would be another subject) that can only deny the absolute transcendence or infinite height of the other. Intentionality is an appropriate concept for the task of 'disclosure' or 'representation', where it is a question of our objective knowledge in regard to things like houses, trees and musical instruments, and where to 'disclose a thing is', as he puts it, 'to clarify it by forms: to find for it a place in the totality' (*TaI* 74, *TeI* 47). But it becomes an instrument of violence when used to articulate the phenomenology of the intersubjective, the interpersonal, where moral recognition of the humanity of the other – and that, for him, means a recognition of the radical alterity of the other – is absolutely required of us:

The welcoming of the face and the work of justice – which condition the very birth of truth itself – are not interpretable in terms of disclosure.

(*TaI* 28, *TeI* xvi)

Here it must be a question, not of 'disclosure', but of 'revelation': a phenomenology that lets the other, that enables the other, to be beyond identity, beyond essence, beyond categorization, beyond being (*TaI* 46, 65–6; *TeI* 16, 37). In this regard, Levinas argues that,

Truth, which should reconcile persons, here exists anonymously. Universality presents itself as impersonal; and this is another inhumanity.

(*TaI* 46, *TeI* 16)

The phenomenology of moral experience must not only be descriptively faithful; it must also be itself a morally responsible, morally respectful mode of comportment, not causing injury to the other and serving the moral character of the intersubjective relations it describes. Thus he holds that

intentionality, where thought remains an adequation with the object, does not define consciousness at its most fundamental level.

(*TaI* 27, *TeI* xv)

Intentionality can constitute only a superficial intersubjectivity; the moral relation requires a deeper, higher register: the other's gaze, he claims, 'must come to me from a dimension of the ideal', and this means that I must learn to 'catch sight of the dimension of the height and the ideal in the gaze of him [*sic*] to whom justice is due'.<sup>20</sup>

Like Merleau-Ponty, Levinas is in search of a 'dimension' of our experience that is more 'fundamental', and indeed more primordial, than the level of ordinary, conventional experience, the thematic, ego-logical level he calls 'consciousness'. The imagined topography of this 'new dimension' is perhaps most explicitly articulated in *Totality and Infinity* (*TaI* 198, *TeI* 172), where he says that it 'opens forth from the human face' (*TaI* 78, *TeI* 50) and 'opens in the sensible appearance of the face' (*TaI* 198, *TeI* 172. Also see *TaI* 197). Said to be 'of the divine' (*TaI* 78, *TeI* 50), it is a dimension in which traces of the moral assignment, the archi-writing that constitutes the elemental level of the (intertwining) flesh, may be revealed. This level can be understood, however, only in terms of embodiment. The fact of 'incarnation', he says,

far from thickening and tumefying the soul . . . exposes it naked to the other, to the point of making the subject expose its very exposedness. . . . The concept of the incarnate subject is not a biological concept. The schema that corporeality outlines submits the biological itself to a higher structure.

(*OB* 109, *AE* 139)

This 'higher structure' is the moral law – and it lies *beneath* the biological as well as, in a different topological sense, above it, because what is called 'the biological' is a construct of objective thought, whereas the moral law is, for Levinas, constitutive of the very 'nature' of human embodiment – perception, sensibility, gesture. Thus, somewhat later, he explicitly introduces the question of the categorical imperative into our thought of embodiment:

The fact that immortality and theology could not determine the categorical imperative signifies the novelty of the Copernican revolution: a sense that is not measured by being or not being; but on the contrary, being is determined on the basis of sense.

(OB 129, AE 166)

'Sense', here, means the body's sense and sensibility, enjoined by the inherent directionality of the moral law, traces of which, he thinks, can still be discerned. We might think of this moral assignment that is registered in the flesh as a 'gift of nature'. But it can only be a question, here, of a gift that is not, that cannot possibly, be fully or totally received, fully or totally retrieved or recuperated – a gift, moreover, that does not in any way diminish the fact that the assignment is, as Levinas says (OB 197, AE 157), 'against nature': against nature in the sense that, whilst the obligation comes over us, is given to us, and takes hold of us only by grace of the very nature of the flesh, it nevertheless makes the most rigorous, most impossible demands on us.

Like Merleau-Ponty, Levinas is calling attention to 'a pre-original reason that does not proceed from any initiative of the subject, an an-archic reason' (OB 166, AE 211–12). It is, he says, 'a reason before the beginning, before any present, because my responsibility for the other commands me before any decision, before any deliberation' (ibid.). And it is constitutive of the very existence and formation of the subject as such. 'This recurrence' to an incarnate moral reason, he argues,

would be *the ultimate secret* of the incarnation of the subject; prior to all reflection, prior to every positing, an indebtedness before any loan, not assumed, anarchical, subjectivity of a bottomless passivity, made out of assignation, like the echo of a sound that would precede the resounding of this sound.

(OB 112, AE 142)

The peculiar 'presence' of this categorical imperative, taking hold of us, as he imagines it, 'beneath the level of prime matter' (OB 110, AE 140), transforms the very substance of our bodies from mere 'matter' into a spritualized 'flesh' – or what Merleau-Ponty (VIE 148, VIF 195) calls, in a context that reminds me of Spinoza, whose 'intellectual love of God' must surely be correlated to a glorious transfiguration of its embodiment, a 'glorified body':

The incarnation of the [moral] self [. . . must be understood as . . .] a passivity prior to all passivity at the bottom of matter becoming flesh [*la matière se faisant chair*].

(OB 196, AE 150)

Here, then, is the narrative that Levinas elaborates: as 'passivity incarnate' (OB 112, AE 142), the flesh of our bodies receives an assignation, 'an extremely urgent assignation' (OB 101, AE 127), an 'exigency' (OB 112-13, AE 143-4) that takes hold of our flesh and renders us beholden, facing the other in the condition of subjection, 'hostage' to the other, responsible to and for the other. If it has not suffered fatal trauma in the early years of its passage through the world, but on the contrary is recognized and appropriately nurtured, this categorical imperative, our incarnate moral assignment, can give crucial support and guidance to moral deliberation, moving and disposing us according to its commandment. Using some of the same tropes, the same figurative topography as Merleau-Ponty, Levinas says:

The *logos* that informs prime matter in calling it to order is an accusation, or a category. But [the] obsession [that takes hold of us in the form of a moral predisposition] is anarchical; it accuses me *beneath* the level of prime matter. . . . Western philosophy, which perhaps is reification itself, remains faithful to the order of things and does not know the absolute passivity, beneath the level [that traditional thought describes in terms of the dualism] of activity and passivity.

(OB 110, AE 140. Notice the perplexing 'or':  
'accusation or category')

The embodiment of the categorical imperative cannot be understood, therefore, until our way of thinking about the body undergoes a radical revision:

The body is neither an obstacle opposed to the soul, nor a tomb that imprisons it, but that by which the self is susceptibility itself. Incarnation is an extreme passivity . . . exposed to compassion, and, as a self, to the gift that costs.

(OB 195, AE 139)

This suggests that we should give some thought to Levinas's use of the word 'assignation', mentioned above, because it already assigns to the body, in the form of a certain 'sign', the *inscription* of a moral obligation, the urgent claims of the moral law. Thus it is not surprising to find a passage where this inscription in the flesh, this moral *logos* (OB 121, AE 156), is actually made explicit. In the ethical relation set in motion by the 'approach' or 'proximity' of the other,

there is inscribed or written [*s'inscrit ou s'écrit*] the trace of infinity, the trace of a departure, but trace of what is inordinate, does not enter into the present, and inverts the *arkhē* into an-archy, that there may be . . . responsibility and a [morally disposed] self.

(OB 117, AE 149)

This passage is fascinating and demands considerable time, but I will make just two brief comments about it. First of all, we are seeing the topology become a topography, since the flesh becomes a site, a *topos*, where the *logos* gets inscribed. Secondly, this passage implicitly weaves together three distinct functions. For the moment, let us call them description, inscription and prescription. The first two are obvious; the third, which I might prefer to call 'performative' or 'enactment', is less so, but in the final analysis, I think that it is quite indisputable. In the rhetoric of tropes, of 'turns' of speech, Levinas speaks of the inscription as nothing more than a 'trace', or rather a trace of a trace, because we cannot possibly return to the original moment of the inscription, and in any case, even if, *per impossibile*, we could, we still would not get at it, since it belongs to a past that never was fully present to itself, and because, in spite of this, it remains the responsibility of the philosopher to attempt the impossible 'return', the 'recollection' of the trace, and experience 'contact' with the moral assignment it is thought to register. But how can contacting this inscription – somehow managing to read it, despite its peculiar illegibility – alter our affective-conative disposition? How can such contacting or reading empower us to heed the command of 'the Good'?

Though its claim on the body is beyond our comprehension, the moral imperative nevertheless is always already predisposing us in certain ways prior to the ego-logical time in which we are able to become conscious of its functioning – this much, at least, Levinas thinks we know. He says:

Responsibility for my neighbor dates from before my freedom in an immemorial past . . . more ancient than consciousness.<sup>21</sup>

The sensibility of the human body is 'extended' or, to repeat Merleau-Ponty's word, 'prolonged', by the sense of alterity it bears within it. 'Sensibility is exposedness to the other' (*OB* 75, *AE* 94). In this sense, the flesh – as 'sympathetic' intercorporeality – may be said to bear the intertwining of myself and the other in its element. But, whereas for Merleau-Ponty, this intertwining generates the responsibility that correlates with reversibility, symmetry and reciprocity, for Levinas it generates the responsibility that constitutes substitution, self-sacrifice, subjection. In both cases, though, the responsibility comes from a primordial bodily responsiveness – an ability to be responsive that it is our responsibility to develop. For Levinas, however, this means something quite different from what it means for Merleau-Ponty:

The subjectivity of sensibility, taken as incarnation, is an abandon without return . . . a body suffering for another, the body as passivity and renouncement, a pure undergoing.

(*OB* 79, *AE* 100)

But why does Levinas use words such as 'persecution', 'accusation', 'wound', 'trauma', 'sacrifice', 'hostage' and 'obsession' to describe the experience of responsibility and obligation that one feels – or should be able to feel – in seeing another human being? I think that at least part of the answer is suggested by the distinction he makes between the ego and the moral self. These terms would be accurate phenomenological descriptions of the ego's point of view with regard to the moral experience of the other. But in fact, the moral self could also use these terms to describe its experience of the moral relation. However, the grounds for its use of these terms, and therefore what it would mean by them, would be the very opposite of the ego's. Something that Freud remarked in *Civilization and its Discontents* may clarify this point. He comments there that

The more virtuous a man is, the more severe and distrustful is his conscience, so that ultimately it is precisely those people who carried saintliness furthest who reproach themselves with the deepest sinfulness.<sup>22</sup>

So these extreme terms could also be used to describe the experience of the moral self, aware that its responsiveness to the other is always too late and always too little.

Perhaps invoking for the imagination the tracework of a rudimentary and preliminary moral disposition, illegible as such, but nevertheless intimating some initial moral direction and motivation, Levinas asserts that,

in the 'prehistory' of the ego posited for itself there [nevertheless] speaks a responsibility. The self is through and through a hostage, older than the ego, prior to principles.

(OB 117, AE 150)

This passage is exceptionally provocative, because it suggests that the moral 'self' appears in two distinct stages or faces: first, a stage or face – could we not call it pre-personal and anonymous? – which is earlier than the (personal) ego, and in which the flesh is already responsive to the alterity of the other, and second, a post-egological stage or phase which is only an existential or 'elective' possibility, and which always depends on the commitment of the (personal) ego for its realization – depends, that is, on the ego's personal assumption of responsibility for the development of our capacity to be responsive to the other. It is, thus, a question of the development of a moral self from the traces, or ruins, of a pre-personal responsiveness and attunement to the registers of alterity, a moral self rooted in, and in good contact with, a vital *sense* of this responsiveness. If this reading be admissible, even perhaps strongly implied, it would suggest that both Levinas and Merleau-Ponty were engaged in tracework, in a return to the primordial



body of experience, for the sake of a calling to attempt, in the tropological language of phenomenology, the articulation and retrieval, for present living, of the original assignment of 'motivations', making possible, beyond the ego-logical stage or face, our moral development.

Not many among us mortals have been or will be graced with the qualities of character necessary for sainthood. But, as I read them, both Merleau-Ponty and Levinas were encouraged in their tracework by the hope that their attempt to achieve, or bring before the imagination, a phenomenological 'recuperation' of the dimension of moral experience in which we are always already exposed to the other, responsive, moved to an acknowledgement of the other's humanity and absolute alterity, might somehow contribute to our understanding of moral development – and perhaps even encourage fitting affective-conative efforts to continue the incarnation of a singular moral assignment.

But neither philosopher forgot the paradox into which his thinking drew him. For Merleau-Ponty, the hermeneutic nature of reflection means that the attempt to bring the originary into language is an attempt at a repetition, a coincidence of thought and being, that can end only in failure. The originary lies forever beyond metaphysical recurrence, beyond the logic of identity and synchrony, withdrawn into a past that was never fully present. Similarly, for Levinas, contact with our moral sources, the retrieval of the trace, unthematizable, unrepresentable, withdrawn from the presence of ontology, is an absolutely impossible task. An absolutely impossible task – and yet, in spite of this, morally imperative. But this is not as paradoxical as it seems, because what matters, ultimately, is not mastery, not knowledge, but the moral character constitutive of the self. What matters, therefore, is the attempt, the effort, the undertaking of the recuperative process: accordingly, it will be only in virtue of the most rigorous exertion, the most binding commitment of our freedom to submit to this ultimately impossible task of self-examination, self-discovery and self-invention, that the moral self emerges and consummates the life of the ego.

## Part IV The problematic of language

### *A Merleau-Ponty*

In his Preface to the *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty follows Husserl, repeating the claim that phenomenology is a method for the *description* of our experience – that it is purely and strictly descriptive (*PPE* ix, *PPF* iii). The task, he declares, overlooking the complexities in the little phrase 'as it is' that he himself will elsewhere recognize, is 'to give a direct description of our experience as it is' (*PPE* vii, *PPF* i). 'It is a matter of describing, not explaining or analysing' (*PPE* viii, *PPF* ii). 'The real', he says, thinking, of course, of the egregious projections of intellectualism

and empiricism that betrayed the truth of experiencing in the very name of fidelity, 'has to be described, not constructed or formed' (*PPE* x, *PPF* iv).

I must argue, however, that our reflection on the phenomenological and hermeneutical character of experiencing, in particular, the hermeneutical relation between the explicit and the implicit, or latent dimensions of experiencing, and the hermeneutical interaction between experiencing and the languaging of experiencing renders this claim at once problematic and counterproductive – especially with regard to the phenomenology of moral development, i.e., the development of the pre-personal mode of experiencing into the embodiment of a mature, reflectively appropriated moral-political life in which respectful recognition of the other, concern for the well-being of others, and thoughtful commitment to principles of equality and justice have taken root.

Giving an existential twist to the foundationalism of Husserl's transcendentalism, Merleau-Ponty assigns to his work the task of 're-achieving a direct and primitive contact with the world' (*PPE* vii, *PPF* i). But he learns only very slowly, and never sufficiently, just what this really means, what it entails and requires of the phenomenological method – and also how this understanding makes of phenomenology a 'moral practice of the self', an instrument for the maieutic formation of the moral self.

To be sure, he knows that phenomenology is a mode of reflection 'altogether more radical than objective thought' (*PPE* 365, *PPF* 419), and that, '[T]o phenomenology understood as direct description needs to be added a phenomenology of phenomenology.' So that: 'We must return to the *cogito* in search of a more fundamental *logos* than that of objective thought' (*PPE* 365, *PPF* 419). But what can he tell us about this more fundamental *logos*? And how – with what modality, what tonality, what tropes and configurations of discourse? How would he read the marks, the traces, of this *logos* and articulate them in the light and visibility-conditions of phenomenological reflection? What form of reason and what embodiment of reason would sustain such a discourse? Would morality be essentially a matter of (intricately felt) attunement, of appropriation to and by the situation – whatever that might be – into which we happen to find ourselves intricately intricated? And how would that understanding of the moral affect the way phenomenology should approach the 'archaeology' and 'genealogy' of moral experience?

Merleau-Ponty asserts that,

The task of radical reflection . . . consists, paradoxically enough, in recovering [*retrouver*] the unreflective experience of the world, and subsequently reassigning to it the verificatory attitude and reflective operations.

(*PPE* 241, *PPF* 278–9)

We need to think, here, whether it is, or could be, a question of recovering or 'retrieving', rather than inventing. And if it be indeed a question of 'récupération', are we to assume that the endeavour is – or could ever be – truly successful? Does this not mean 'bringing' what is 'recovered' into our way of experiencing, our present way of living? But what, more exactly, would this involve? Here is the beginning, the merest sketch, of an answer:

The phenomenological world is not the bringing to explicit expression of a pre-existing being, but, like art, the laying-down of being, the act of bringing truth into being.

(PPE xx, PPF xv)

A point to which he anticipates a question that he proceeds to answer only in a very abstract way:

One may well ask how this creation-process is possible, and if it does not recapture in things a pre-existing Reason. The answer is that the only pre-existent *logos* is the world itself.

(PPE xx, PPF xv)

Deeper into the project of his *Phenomenology*, he begins to destabilize his initial, very Husserlian conception of the method, coming to the realization that even genuinely psychological reflection

can no longer be a question of describing the world of lived experience which it carries within itself like some opaque datum; it has to be constituted.

And he then remarks that,

The process of making explicit, which had laid bare the 'lived-through' world which is prior to the objective one, is put into operation upon the 'lived-through' world itself, thus revealing, prior to the phenomenal field, the transcendental field.

(PPE 60, PPF 73)

But this 'transcendental field' is no longer the Cartesian, the Kantian or the Husserlian: it has become, for him, the ontological structure that the radical reflection of a hermeneutical phenomenology can bring to articulation as it reads the traces of what is inscribed in the elemental depths of the flesh. Thus:

If we want reflection to maintain . . . its descriptive characteristics and thoroughly to understand the object, we must not consider it as a mere

return to a universal reason and see it as anticipated in unreflective experience; we must regard it as *a creative operation which itself participates in the facticity of that experience*. That is why . . . phenomenology is phenomenology, that is, the study of the *advent* of being into consciousness, instead of presuming its possibility as given in advance.

(PPE 61, PPF 74. My italic)

Elaborating this point, he says that we must achieve 'a more radical self-discovery' than earlier transcendental egologies could even imagine:

We must not only adopt a reflective attitude in an impregnable *Cogito*, but furthermore reflect on this reflection; not merely practise philosophy, but *realize the transformation which it brings with it* . . . in our existence.

(PPE 62, PPF 75. My italic)

We are, for better or worse, self-interpreting beings: the only ones, so far as we can tell, who cannot avoid being hermeneutical. The mode of reflection that Merleau-Ponty will later adopt for this purpose is, he says, a sort of 'hyper-reflection' (*sur-réflexion*) more fundamental than traditional forms of reflection, a form 'that would also take itself *and the changes it introduces* into account' (VIE 38, VIF 160–1. My italic). Unfortunately, however, he does not in his practice of phenomenology rigorously follow these theoretical, methodological principles enunciated with such lucidity and precision. Nor does he give sufficient attention to the hermeneutical intricacies of the interaction between his description and the experience in question. Just how does the languaging interact with the experiencing? The *Phenomenology* recognizes the need to address this question but actually gives it very little attention.

In a late text, however, there is a passage that deserves more attention than it has received so far: a passage in which Merleau-Ponty recognizes that, in the context of phenomenology, hermeneutical thinking must be a kind of tracework and in which he makes some very helpful remarks about the logic of the hermeneutical interaction:

It is a question here not of a thought that follows a pre-established route but of a thought that itself traces its own course, that finds itself by advancing, that makes its own way, and thus proves that this way is practicable. This thought wholly subjugated to its content, from which it receives its incitement, could not express itself as a reflection or copy of an exterior process; it is the engendering of a relation starting from the other. . . . In particular, it does not formulate itself in successive statements [*énoncés*] which would have to be taken as they stand; each statement, in order to be true, must be referred, throughout the

whole movement, to the stage from which it arises and has its full sense only if one takes into account not only what it says expressly but also its place within the whole which constitutes its latent content.

(*VIE* 90, *VIF* 123–4)

If 'description' works according to the correspondence theory of truth, presupposing a fixed relation, a static correspondence, between the constative discourse and our experiential reality, and if thought is to lay claim to truth all at once and once and for all, what becomes of phenomenological 'description' when we take these methodological points seriously? What happens when we actually adhere to the conviction that experience is not inert, not ready-made, and that it always 'talks back' to the philosopher's 'descriptions'? What happens when we recognize that 'existence is a perpetual incarnation' (*PPE* 166, *PPF* 194)? If phenomenological description is not the work of a 'universal thinker', then perhaps, as he boldly intimates, it may even be necessary to engage 'the hidden art of the imagination', and not merely undertake the 'categorical activity' of the transcendental tradition (*PPE* xvii, *PPF* xii). (Here he seems very close to Charles Taylor's thesis about the role of the imagination in guiding our moral life.) Returning, therefore, to an earlier question, we might now ask whether or not the pre-personal dimension of embodiment, the elemental dimension of the flesh, the dimension of intertwinings, reversibilities, destabilized boundaries and identities, deconstructed structures of subject and object, subject and subject, bearing traces of an 'ideality not alien to the flesh' (*VIE* 152, *VIF* 199), is in a very special sense a 'phantom body.' This would not, of course, be a merely or simply illusory body, a pure figment of the imagination, but rather a body ambiguously extended between the givenness of nature, a 'gift' (*PPE* 127, *PPF* 147) only partially penetrable, partially legible, and the constructive inventiveness of culture – extended in this way because the flesh that is given, the flesh with which we are graced, is not pure actuality, is instead an ultimately unfathomable juncture or chiasm of what we can only still call, for want, right now, of more appropriate, more phenomenologically faithful terminology, 'actuality' and 'potentiality', and because the flesh in its 'ideality' is both already and finally, as Santayana beautifully remarked in 'Platonism and the Spiritual Life', a spiritual being deeply desired by the incarnate spirit.<sup>23</sup>

To say that phenomenology is a method of pure description is tantamount to theorizing the relation between languaging and experiencing in the static terms of the correspondence theory of truth: it makes phenomenology into a strange version of positivism, an interrogation of experiencing that ends up freezing or reifying the process of articulation – a process which in fact involves a continuing *interaction* and a *mutual interrogation* between the conceptual meanings of discursive thought and the implicit, existential meaningfulness of our experience as lived (see *PPE* 182, *PPF* 212).

Unfortunately, in his early phenomenological work, Merleau-Ponty's *practice* is insufficiently attentive to the hermeneutical and dialectical character of the articulatory process – and insufficiently sensitive to register the intricacies of the interaction. Thus, in spite of his fine words about 'transformation' and 'creativity', and in spite of his skill and insight regarding how the commitment to conceptual structures in traditional philosophical systems betrayed the dynamic nature of experience, he continued to practise phenomenology by formulating descriptions of experience without examining and reflecting on the ongoing interaction between conceptual formations and experiencing, the explicit and the implicit, which these so-called 'descriptions' set in motion. In effect, this gives pride of place to the prevailing conceptual structures, subordinating, and consequently reifying, our living experience. Experiencing does have structure. But if phenomenology is to be faithful, true, to our experiencing, it must become a method that *liberates* it from exclusionary domination by conceptual structures. It must be a method of description – or say 'articulation', to register our present understanding by proposing this different word – that realizes how and why the phenomenological articulation of experiencing functions *performatively*, activating and performing the experience in the very process of 'describing' it. (Assigning such phenomenology to the constative mode of discourse thus misses how the language actually works. It also makes it difficult to see what makes phenomenology congenial to a moral engagement with our experience – for example, as a 'practice of the self'.) When our reflection is released from the domination of conceptual structures, then some of these very same structures, as well as some entirely novel ones, can serve to set in motion the opening up, the deepening and developing of our experience. But our conceptual structures cannot carry experiencing forward unless we let their meanings *interact* with our experiencing. We also need to attend to the intricate alterations this interaction provokes – both in the experiencing itself and in the concepts that figure in the originating 'description'.

We need to recognize and learn how to work with the *hermeneutical* character of phenomenological reflection and discourse. This is because the language of phenomenology is able to solicit the implicit, latent, potential meaningfulness of experience, bringing it forth in a way that lets ever new, or different, dimensions, features, traits, qualities emerge – but only in so far as it is hermeneutical. In this way, it avoids assuming or imposing a fixed, fully determinate experience; and in particular, it would avoid assuming that the implicit, latent, potential meaningfulness of our experience was from the beginning – and still is – undeiying the explicit as an inert stratum of meaning ready-made and fully formed. Thus the process of phenomenological representation cannot be articulated in a constative mode of discourse; it must be understood as – and must successfully function as – a performative mode, enacting and, in a sense, or to a certain extent, bringing into being that of which it speaks. It must therefore be evocative,

invocative, provocative. And also poetizing – metaphorical in the original Greek sense of the word, bringing forth the secrets still withheld within experiencing and carrying the experiencing forward.

Every reader of Merleau-Ponty's prose remarks on its poetic beauty and elegance. This is not adventitious. Any use of language that makes good contact with the deeper 'reality' of our experiencing, any language that sets in motion a certain vibration or resonance in its relation to experiencing, will be experienced as functioning in a poetizing mode. This quality will be discerned – bodily felt – all the more readily, to the extent that the articulatory process makes contact, or at least strives to make contact, not only with the pre-personal dimension of experience, but also with the pre-personal dimension of language – the echoes and resonances, undertones and overtones of 'existential meaning', the bodily felt meaning, that 'underlies' the conceptual structures we are accustomed to using (*PPE* 182, *PPF* 212. Also see *PPE* 178, 184, 187, 227; *PPF* 269, 214, 218, 262). What lies 'beneath' he later called 'the indirect language', the 'silent logos', *un langage opérant ou parlant*.<sup>24</sup>

Prior to, and always still 'underneath'. the subject-object structure of perception, there is what he describes as 'a primordial contract' (*PPE* 216, *PPF* 251), joining what at the level of perception are the two poles of the structure into the intertwining of a relatively undifferentiated unity. Thus there takes place, he says, a certain 'communion' or 'coition' (*PPE* 320, *PPF* 370): thus, prior to, and always still 'underneath', the subject-object structure, there is an 'erotic structure' (*PPE* 156, 212; *PPF* 182, 246) which, when it is a question of the perception of other people, takes the form of a primordial and generalized 'sympathy'. Similarly, prior to, and always still 'underneath', the practical structure of the gesture, there is a 'melodic arc', an intentionality that like a melody 'embraces' in advance the whole of the movement: a bodily felt sense of the end and trajectory of the gesture, bearing within it the immanent meaning that initiated the movement (*PPE* 105, 110, 116, 136, 140, 157; *PPF* 122, 128, 135, 158, 164, 184). And similarly again, there occurs, prior to, and always still 'underneath', the language of 'conceptual meaning', the different language of 'existential meaning', communicating more on the level of feeling, of sense as sensibility. This is 'song', the 'singing of the world'; it is the dimension of language upon which poetry draws for its inspiration, its imagination, its intricacies of feeling and tonality (*PPE* 182, 187; *PPF* 212, 218): 'the voice of things, the waves, the forests' (*VIE* 155, *VIF* 203–4).

But are these 'descriptions' readily recognized as 'true' of our experience? How many of us normally experience our perception as a 'communion' or 'coition'? How many of us have without Merleau-Ponty's tutoring experienced the 'melodic arc' of our gestures? How many of us have felt the 'song' of the earth reverberating through our speech and experienced it as our way of 'singing the world'? How many of us normally experience our body

as belonging to an elemental intercorporeality? After many years of reading these – and many other – representations, it finally struck me that, in what Merleau-Ponty claims to be ‘describing’, with these poetizing terms, as the phenomenological ‘truth’ of our experience, there is a problem that neither he nor his subsequent commentators seem to have noticed, namely: that in point of fact, the representations *fail* as accurate, faithful, true descriptions of our experience as it is normally and habitually lived – lived, that is to say, without deep awareness, without a reflectiveness that makes and sustains good contact with the deeper potentialities inherent in the experience. In other words, his descriptions are not actually true when measured by an experiencing lived rather superficially. But they are true when measured by an experiencing lived with considerably more depth of awareness, of feeling and reflectiveness. Descriptions that are false – and likely, therefore, to be construed as mere figures of speech – when measured by their correspondence to a superficially lived actuality *become* true, *make* themselves true, when what they articulate and how they articulate make good contact with the depths of our experience, and when they evoke and solicit the felt sense carried by the flesh at these depths in a way that retrieves that deeper experience (or some trace of their sense) for awareness and further experiencing, further living. The descriptions are false at one level – and must be false at this level – in order to be faithful and true at another.

Phenomenology thus requires a hermeneutical distinction between deep and superficial experiencing. But it must also understand why it is obliged to free itself from the correspondence theory of truth – and what this freedom entails. As long as it continues to think of its task in terms of ‘true’ (or ‘faithful’) descriptions, ‘true’ (or ‘faithful’) representations, validated, accredited, according to the adequacy of a static correspondence to a ready-made, immutable state of experience, it will betray the very experience it is called upon to serve.

If Merleau-Ponty’s poetizing ‘descriptions’ are true at all, they are deeply true: deeply true because they (attempt to) retrieve the traces of a virtual experience buried in the depths of the body of experience, and because this (attempt at) retrieval is transformative, drawing on the sense retrieved to perform or enact an experiential shift and carry present living forward. It is therefore regrettable that he never undertook the reflexive phenomenology that he recognized to be necessary, never circled back in a reflexive, hermeneutical manoeuvre, in order to examine how his own use of language actually works. What makes it work, and why does it work the way it does? How and why can certain ways of articulating experience affect and transform it? How does his phenomenological discourse weave itself into the intricacies of experience? By what logic does it redeem the lost traces?

The question of a phantom body continues to haunt our enquiry. It seems necessary to recognize that, in some sense, or to some extent, the tropological return to retrieve lost traces of our pre-personal interconnectedness with the



other is actually responsible for producing after the fact, *nachträglich*, the pre-personal topography that it appears to presuppose as already functioning. How would this affect the implication we have drawn from Merleau-Ponty's own words, that the pre-personal – this bodily interconnectedness with the other that is retrieved only 'belatedly' by the tracework of a reflexive turn, a turn that is also a radical return – is a tropological prefiguration of our moral responsibility and obligation in relation to the other? Are the traces a dialectically deferred fabulation – and, if they are, would this necessarily diminish their role in the staging of our moral development? Even if we must concede that the attempt to 'retrieve' the pre-personal is implicated in the 'production' of the pre-personal and that the attempt to 'read' the flesh is implicated in the very inscription that structures its possibility as a staging of moral development, why would this understanding of Merleau-Ponty's 'trace-work' in any way reduce its truth? This question suggests that we need to revise our conception of how truth figures in the relation between the discourse of phenomenology and the body of experience.

Merleau-Ponty seems not to realize that his own use of language works as it does – creatively, transformatively, metaphorically – because it draws on the pre-personal resonance-field preceding and underlying conceptual language, intertwining the sense it 'sings' into impersonal analysis and argument. And nowhere is there any reflection on what happens to our experience of other people – our moral experience of the other – when traces of the pre-personal dimension are retrieved and integrated into present living. He solicits and describes the pre-personal mode of experiencing; he carefully records the phenomenology of the personal, the ego-logical mode. But he says nothing about how the retrieval of the pre-personal – or of its traces – would, given its characteristics, markedly affect the personal mode of experiencing. If the traces in question are traces of alterity carried by our embodiment, would not the personal, ego-logical character and structure of my experience be likely to undergo alterations in keeping with the recognition of the other within oneself? And would not these alterations be of special significance for our moral relations with others? It is ultimately left for us to think, after Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological provocations, beyond the dialectical moment of retrieval, carrying the reflexiveness of the articulatory process forward and, in a crucial new moment, letting the experiential shifts, the experiential transformations, register their significance in the moral disposition of the flesh. Moral education requires that the hermeneutically intricate reflexive dialectic into which his radical phenomenology weaves us be thoughtfully continued. The next dialectical moment, after the (attempt at a) retrieval of the pre-personal intertwining, or of its traces, must be an interrogation of the personal mode. Taking the radical alterity of the other as our measure, we might accordingly ask: in what morally important ways, if any, has it been altered? What should we call that moral stage of development which is the product of a personal struggle to retrieve the

pre-personal experience of alterity, and which profoundly transforms the person's moral existence – our perceptions, our gestures, our sensibility, our very sense of who we are, and the character of all our relationships with others?

### B Levinas

Levinas's use of language – and the perplexities to which it gives rise – are in many respects fairly similar to Merleau-Ponty's. Like Merleau-Ponty, he seems to be giving us a phenomenological description of our (moral) experience. However, even a cursory reading of his work compels us to question this assumption – or rather, our understanding of what it means, or can mean, to describe our (moral) experience. When Levinas writes, for example, of 'the shimmer of infinity' in the face of the other (*TaI* 207, *TeI* 182), are we to understand this as 'only' a description of *his own* experience? Or is he presumptuously attempting to describe the way most people, normal people, typically or habitually experience the face of the other? If we reject the first alternative, what other alternatives are there? We cannot interpret his description as an eidetic intuition, a *Wesensschau*, because we know from repeated remarks that he rejected phenomenological essentialism as a form of violence. So if we take him to be attempting the second alternative, how are we to account for the discrepancy between his description and the way most people seem to experience the face of the other? What is going on here? And why does Levinas never show any recognition of this problem?

Similar perplexities emerge when we read descriptions of the 'listening eye' (*OB* 30, 37; *AE* 38, 48), the 'nudity' of the face (*TaI* 74–5, *TeI* 47), and statements such as this, lifted from 'The Rights of Man and the Rights of the Other':

the other 'looks at me' (*'me regarde'*), not in order to 'perceive' me, but in 'concerning me', in 'mattering to me as someone for whom I am answerable'.<sup>25</sup>

This is sharpened in his remark, equally perplexing if read straightforwardly as true phenomenological description, that, 'since the Other looks at me, I am responsible for him' (*EaI* 96). Or consider this: that the other 'summons my ancient responsibility' (*OB* 116, *AE* 147). Or this: 'the Other measures me with a gaze incomparable to the gaze by which I discover him' (*TaI* 86, *TeI* 59). Or this:

the human being is exposed to the point of losing the skin which protects him, a skin which has completely become a face, as if a being, centered about his core, experienced a removal of this core, and losing it, was 'for the other' before any dialogue.<sup>26</sup>

Or this, which is reminiscent of some descriptions we found in Merleau-Ponty:

the face of the other haunts and obsesses me, 'as if the face of this other, though invisible, continued in my own face'.<sup>27</sup>

Or this:

The face resists possession, resists my powers. In its epiphany, in expression, the sensible, still graspable, turns into total resistance to the grasp. This . . . can occur only by the opening up of a new dimension.  
(*TaI* 197, *TeI* 172)

Or this: 'the infinite comes in the signifyingness of the face. The face signifies the infinite' (*EaI* 105).

'I have attempted', he says, in 'Diachrony and Representation', 'a "phenomenology" of sociality starting from the face of the other person – from proximity – by understanding in its rectitude a voice that commands'.<sup>28</sup> (Compare this with what Merleau-Ponty says in his *Phenomenology of Perception* (*PPE* 362, *PPF* 415): 'Our relationship to the social is, like our relationship to the world, deeper than any express perception or any judgement. . . . We must return to the social with which we are in contact by the mere fact of existing, and which we carry about inseparably with us before any objectification.' In both cases, it seems that phenomenology is being employed as tracework, penetrating the depths of ordinary experience, making contact with some deeper dimension, normally unrecognized, and bringing it into awareness.) This statement about his phenomenology, a relatively late formulation of Levinas's project, reaffirming the phenomenological nature of his work, is certainly significant; but it only deepens the perplexity that is intriguing us here. More elucidatory is the following remark from *Otherwise than Being*:

The mode in which a face indicates its own absence in my responsibility requires a description that can be formed only in ethical language.  
(*OB* 93, *AE* 118)

But this certainly does not resolve our perplexities concerning the truth of his descriptions. How – in what way or sense – can his discourse be regarded as true phenomenological description when it manifestly fails to correspond to what most people would describe as their experience – even after it becomes clear that it is a question of the moral? Are what he calls 'descriptions' disguises for exhortations with normative and prescriptive force? Is he describing the experience of a saint or the deeper experience of *das Man*, the experience of anyone-and-everyone? And how can the description avoid

being prescriptive – how can it avoid the violence of a prescriptive force? Returning to a question broached earlier, we must also ask: can the phenomenological description be formed in any language other than that of the imagination?

What needs to be said here is that Levinas's use of certain philosophical words, and his intricate engagement with certain conceptual formations on the mediation of which his own discourse still to some extent draws and depends, are marked by the traces of an effort to contest and interrupt some of our words and concepts, and introduce for further thought some radically new ones, double-crossing familiar, long-standing meanings and leaving nothing but a trace of their former configurations. Every one of his crucial words, and every crucial word that we shall be using to elaborate what he is saying and carry it forward, must be read as if double-crossed, or written within scare-quotes. But this should not be regarded as an excuse to deny that, in some broad sense, his discourse is a phenomenologically sensitive thinking and questioning of (what we might still be able to call) our 'experience'.

Levinas's rhetorical mode seems to speak in two voices, to oscillate, to equivocate undecidably between the constative and the performative, between description and prescription, between the literal and the metaphorical, between a discourse that could be situated within a certain familiar hermeneutical phenomenology and a discourse that reads and sounds like moral exhortation, or sometimes like the inspirational invocations and evocations of deeply religious experience. There is even a certain incantatory quality in his writing: frequent repetitions of words, phrases, even entire sentences. This quality, this doubled tonality, is due neither to inattention nor to an arbitrary, capricious and self-indulgent will. Rather, it is meant to address us, his readers, in a powerfully affective modality, immediately making contact with our body of feeling and affecting the moral experience from which we draw our thinking. It is, for him, a question of addressing us in a way that might enable us to form, in response, what might be called a 'deep, bodily felt sense' of the experience he is trying to communicate. Such a 'felt sense' could not be more different from the conceptual formations with which we are accustomed to working: addressing us at the level of feeling, his words can communicate and set in motion dimensions of meaning that greatly exceed what could be imparted by the concepts of a strictly constative or descriptive mode of discourse. Levinas's rhetorical doubleness is what enables his saying to exceed what it says: it enables the saying to elude captivity by the said. Diachrony, not synchrony, is the temporality into which he releases his words, for it is only in diachrony that words remain alive, vibrant, resonant, creative.

I think that the impression of a certain rhetorical equivocation is true; but its truth makes understanding his thought extremely difficult, even treacherous. I think that his discourse does indeed make use, often simultaneously,

of rhetorical modes that philosophical thought, at least in modern times, has struggled to keep separate. But I also think that there is a discernible logic in the way he works with the equivocations, the dialectical ambiguities and tensions set in motion by the rhetorical modes. It is as if, for a while, we must let ourselves be exiled with him in the wilderness of meaning – there where all meaning is subjected to the most radical alterations, becoming virtually unrecognizable, certainly beyond the familiar forms of philosophical representation and appropriation. We are being asked, I think, to listen in to the equivocations and reverberations of sound and sense, to hear something that is coming to voice: something being said in, by and as the very event of saying. It is the saying (*le Dire*) that is, for him, most important, and not so much what is being said (*le Dit*).

The peculiarities of his rhetoric, however, are of such a nature that many philosophers have felt compelled to question whether his work can, or should, be regarded as (still) phenomenological. If we identify phenomenology with Husserl's transcendental version, we cannot read Levinas's work as phenomenological. Not only does Levinas refuse Husserl's transcendental reductions and the transcendental egology; but he rejects Husserl's conception of intentionality. Moreover, he is not at all disturbed by the 'inadequation' between our moral experience and what we may presume to be his 'description' of this experience. If instead, however, we think of phenomenology according to Heidegger's radical formulation at the beginning of *Being and Time*, where the phenomenological attitude is defined as an attitude of *Gelassenheit* that lets whatever in any way presences show itself from out of itself, and if we think of how Merleau-Ponty practised phenomenology, especially in his late writings, then it is not at all difficult to read Levinas as innovating with the phenomenological method. Although, for Levinas, whose concerns are deeply moral, rather than ontological it will be necessary to press Heidegger's conception of the method even beyond 'letting be': the phenomenological attitude must ultimately become the most radical, most extreme 'exposure' to alterity.

Briefly formulated, it is my contention that Levinas's discourse renounces the normally separate rhetorical modes, because what it states or describes is not ordinary, conventional experience, experience lived superficially, but rather the deeper structures of our moral experience – structures functioning in a dimension that is for the most part concealed from awareness, perhaps repressed or denied, and represented for centuries by schools of philosophical thinking that can only betray it. (Is it not threatening to our culture of egoism, this discourse that evokes our existential exposure, our moral subjection to the other?) As an approximation, we might say, in an older language, not ultimately fitting, and quite possibly a betrayal, that he is developing a method and vocabulary in hermeneutical phenomenology to articulate the a priori transcendental structures (the dispositional structures of pre-personal embodiment that precede processes of socialization) that are

the pre-conventional conditions of possibility for our ordinary, conventional and quite superficial moral experience. In order, however, for this work of articulation actually to make a difference in our lives, it must not only describe these deep, deeply repressed structures in constative form; it must also speak of them and directly to them in such a way that we are sensibly moved to make contact with them and to entrust and submit our moral experience, judgement and action to the authority, the commandment, of their more primordial disposition.

Only an evocative, invocative, exhortatory use of language, a metaphorical and poetizing use of language, a hermeneutical use of language, a rhetorical form that uses equivocation to speak on and to several different levels of experience at the same time, can function performatively, speaking with phenomenological fidelity of a deep truth that we have concealed from ourselves in a way that might radically interrupt and alter our conventional moral experience, our conventional moral sensibility and perception – perhaps even bringing about certain shifts without the mediation of deliberation and will. As happens with the constative mode of discourse in Merleau-Ponty's writing, the constative mode in Levinas's writings will also function performatively, altering our experience in such a way that what is said about it in the constative mode becomes true, is made true.

What Levinas says is accordingly meant to be phenomenologically true: not, however, of conventional and superficial moral experience, but rather in regard to the deeper, more primordial (and thus pre-conventional) dispositions of our moral nature, the realization of which would constitute a reflexively critical, 'post-conventional' moral experience, a sense of responsibility and obligation not only beyond the conventional, but even beyond the Kantian, since, in its extreme urgency and exigency, it takes hold of us at a primordial level of our embodiment, prior to reflective judgement and even prior to volition – and is infinitely more demanding. What Levinas says about our moral experience of the other is indeed, then, phenomenological; the way it works, however, is hermeneutical: hermeneutical in the sense of bringing-forth a latency, a suppressed or concealed potential, but not hermeneutical in the sense of 'disclosive', in so far as this term is taken to assume that the deeper dimension, consisting of these primordial dispositions, is an inert, already-made, fully formed implicit reality to which the truth of the phenomenological discourse needs only to be an adequately explicit correspondence, merely rendering descriptively explicit what was already there implicitly without in any way affecting and altering – or say performing – the implicit dispositions. In order to avoid this inertness, his discourse, his rhetoric, must be a saying the truth of which cannot be understood in terms of the correspondence theory of truth, because its truth-saying enactment exceeds the said. What the correspondence theory of truth misses, or rather conceals, is precisely the co-responding, the way certain descriptive language can engage with our experiencing, its evocative, affectively charged

character setting in motion resonances and reverberations that can bring forth new configurations of sense, of meaning.

This is what Levinas means, I believe, when he insists that his thinking cannot be understood in terms of 'disclosure' (*dévoilement*). As saying, the truth exceeds the said because it not only speaks descriptively about us to us, but also speaks diachronically in a way that invites us to make contact with the concealed moral dispositions towards which it directs our attention and assists us in taking up their endowment. The truth belongs to what happens in response to its being said. Therefore, the truth continues to speak about these dispositions whilst they are undergoing the transformative process, working through the immemorial 'always already' and the infinitely deferring 'not yet'. In this way, the saying diachronically exceeds the said by virtue of its being able still to communicate with us, still to function with descriptive, hermeneutical fidelity, even *after* our experience has undergone an alteration in response to the initial provocative invocation. The truth is in the saying because a solicitous and provocative saying can continue to speak, to resonate, to 'have' something to say across a diachronic temporality: not only before the experiential shift that, with infinite respect and infinite patience, it might provoke, but also during and after the shift. Thus, Levinas refers to the hermeneutical work of his phenomenological discourse as 'revelatory'. Another word for thinking about this languaging might be, as I have suggested, 'performative', enabling and enacting that of which it speaks. In any case, a crucial point for Levinas is that the way in which we think and say the sublimity of our moral experience must somehow avoid reifying and totalizing. And, very much like Kierkegaard's 'indirect communication', the saying must avoid coercion – must recognize and respect the infinite transcendence, the absolute alterity of the other. It must say what is in a way that suggests what could be otherwise – but in such a way that the experiential movement remains absolutely free of coercion. All the pressure must come, so to speak, from within, from our 'inwardness'.

But this is possible for him only in so far as we understand his words – words referring, for example, to the face, the body, the flesh and vision – as literal, rather than merely figurative, merely ornamental: 'metaphorical' in *that* sense. Or, if we want to read his words as metaphorical, then I think that we should take them to be used in accordance with the Greek etymology of the word 'metaphor', i.e., as used in a way that deeply moves us, carrying our experience forward into its transformation. But in *this* sense of the word 'metaphor', there is no incompatibility with the use termed 'literal' in the standard oppositional pairing of 'literal' and 'metaphorical': his words are being used literally, but in such a way that they may *alter* that to which they are referring in the very process of referring. In this way, we can understand his words as quite 'properly' phenomenological, albeit truthful only to that dimension of our experience that they bring out hermeneutically from their ordinary, conventional concealment. And therefore also as disturbing

and disruptive – or say affirmative and anarchic – in relation to the ordinary meanings we give to the words. Phenomenology can never be ‘proper.’

Levinas speaks of the face, of the I looking and seeing the face of the other; yet he denies that it is a question of ‘perception’ (*EaI* 85–7). How can this be? Should we take him to be withdrawing the face altogether from the realm of the visible? Then his words – ‘face’, ‘looking’, ‘seeing’ – could assume only a ‘merely metaphorical’ meaning, or rather, as I would prefer to say, a metaphorical use, where by ‘metaphorical use’ we would be compelled to admit that we could make no connections with, and draw no implications for, our moral experience of (the face of) the other. In answer, for example, to the question whether the face is something given in intuition (*Anschauung*), a ‘phenomenon’, Levinas replies in the negative. The face is not a phenomenon, not an appearance of a noumenal being-in-itself, because there is ‘nothing’ behind it. (Does this also signify a nothingness?) The face cannot be represented by any of the concepts of ‘phenomenon’ – be it the Cartesian, the Kantian or the Husserlian – that the historical discourse of philosophy has put at our disposal. Nor is the face ‘given’ to us in an intuition. That is because Levinas holds that, in what the philosophical tradition *represents* with the concept of ‘intuition’, *Anschauung*, and also in what it has always represented with the concept of ‘perception’, there is a strong, virtually irresistible tendency to possess and appropriate, to reify and totalize, reducing the other to the same, whereas the deeper experience of the face that he wants to solicit and elicit, or invoke and evoke, must constitute an *absolute* relation to the face, letting the other’s way of presenting herself to me exceed the idea of the other in me. It is, then, by the same logic, a logic that ‘respects’ (but this word, too, is misleading, because it belongs to the discourse of moral equality) the immeasurable and incomparable dimensionality, the withdrawal and absence of the face, that the face is not to be described as a ‘phenomenon’, since this word cannot easily be separated from the ontological discourse of disclosure in which it has figured since Kant. Levinas is attempting – using familiar words, but then taking them back in a double gesture the intricacies of which need to be more closely studied than can be done here – to articulate a radically different experience with the face of the other: one that can only be violated by the adequation, the measurement, that is necessarily implicit, he thinks, in the concept of disclosure. But it is also not a question of the ‘physical’ face, the face as (i.e., reduced to or totally identified with) its merely physical being. For the face can no more be reduced to the physical than can the meaning of our humanity. And yet, this must not be taken to mean a total withdrawal of the face from the physical – as if the face could somehow manifest without physical incarnation. Nor should we draw the conclusion that he must be using the words in a ‘merely metaphorical’ sense. This would only subtract from the introduction of the face-to-face relation the promise of a new way of thinking about our moral experience. Likewise, when he denies that



our relation to the face is 'perception', it would be perverse to conclude that the relation is instead to be conceived, or represented, as something absolutely 'ineffable', or purely 'spiritual', 'mental', 'cognitive' or 'linguistic'.

I read Levinas's denials as a forceful way of saying that we need radically to rethink 'perception' in the light of our experience of the other in the face-to-face relation. The deep, culturally concealed experience of the face-to-face ethical relation towards which he is pointing both is and is not faithfully rendered, both is and is not appropriately contacted, by the philosophical concept of 'perception'. This is what puts everything he tries to say in a double bind. Thus it is correct for readers to insist that, through this concept, we can at most glimpse only a trace of the dimensionality of the moral experience that Levinas wants to evoke. Nevertheless, attempting to retrieve such a trace is not a work without promise.

Similar comments must be made with regard to Levinas's invocations of the body, flesh and vision. They are all caught in a double bind, for they are all to be understood as pointing to an elemental experience which is beyond essence, beyond the ontology of our philosophical representations, 'merely' the traces – tracings – of the physical, of what is understood in conventional morality. But they are not 'mere' metaphors: he means to be referring to our embodiment, our flesh, our ways of touching others, our ways of looking at people and seeing – or failing to see – their humanity. But since his hope is to communicate in a way that might enable us to undergo profound alterations in our experience, his mode of discourse is compelled to assume a certain doubleness, addressing 'what is' in a way that solicits what could be otherwise, and yet, out of the deepest solicitude for our moral singularity and alterity, he lets us respond to the possibilities his discourse evokes according to our own rhythm, our own sense of the appropriate. With the same words, he addresses us simultaneously in terms of our present (presently recognized) conventional experience and also in terms of a (perhaps presently unrecognized) pre-conventional dimension of our experience, with which we could be moved to make some meaningful bodily felt contact, and in contactful relation to which our present conventional experience could (perhaps) undergo a major transformation. Only a diachronic rhetorical mode could work this way, double-crossing the double bind and exceeding the spellbinding logic of the ever-the-same.

Because we are hermeneutical, self-interpreting beings, phenomenological description can set in motion, can motivate, can enact a process of self-transformation, self-realization. Thus, when one wholeheartedly accepts as true a deep phenomenological description, one is already to some extent undergoing a co-responding process of self-transformation. For genuine self-understanding strongly motivates self-transformation. Both Merleau-Ponty and Levinas use the constative, descriptive mode of language in ways that enable it to touch and move us, enacting, bringing into being, that of which it speaks. But of the two, Levinas is, I think, the more reflexively aware

of this doubleness, this experiential intrigue. Thus, whereas Merleau-Ponty uses language poetizingly, without noticing the existence of a discrepancy between his phenomenological descriptions and ordinary experience, and therefore without recognizing the role his discourse can play in the enactment of moral development, Levinas knowingly uses language with impressive rhetorical skill in order to invoke – and also, presumably, to encourage – the heightening of our moral sense; although it must be noted that he never acknowledged such an intention and one could reasonably conceive of the grounds on which he might even have vehemently denied it. Could we say that what Levinas's descriptions failingly attempt to articulate are the primordial inscriptions of moral responsibility, the traces of our primordial subjection to moral obligation, that are registered in the depths of our flesh, and that it is in the struggle to make the impossible connection between description and inscription and bring it into our felt awareness that his descriptions assume their prescriptive force?

In suggesting the word 'prescriptive' here, I of course do not mean to imply that Levinas is trying to dictate or impose how we should live our lives, but rather, more literally, I want to suggest, emphasizing the prefix, that what he is saying refers, in a paradoxical, diachronic temporality, to an inscription of responsibility, of accusation, that takes hold of us bodily long before its moral assignment can be consciously realized and taken up by our freedom. The 'pre' in 'prescription' is accordingly meant to carry the sense of 'before', referring to an 'event' that preceded consciousness, preceded ego, and comes to heightened consciousness through its recuperation in phenomenological description. Something quite similar might be said in regard to Merleau-Ponty, whose so-called poetic 'descriptions' likewise function in this 'prescriptive' way, making resonant contact with our bodily experiencing and bringing to articulation its pre-personal dimension. The importance of this function cannot be exaggerated, since it means the encouragement of an affective and conative disposition crucial to ethical life.

The traces of a moral assignment inscribed in the flesh constitute, prior to the recognition of the moral law, a certain moral disposition or attunement; but these traces are indeed virtually nothing – unless, as I suggested before, we make something of them. Our 'moral sources' are thus before us – but only, it would seem, as the realization of a forever deferred future.<sup>29</sup>

## Notes

- 1 Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1990), p. 490.
- 2 Emmanuel Levinas, 'Diachrony and Representation', *Time and the Other* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1987), p. 109; 'Diachronie et représentation', *Entre Nous: essais sur le penser-à-l'autre* (Paris: Editions Grasset et Fasquelle, 1991), p. 175. Also, see n. 5 below on the social anthropology research reported by Adam Reed.

- 3 Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969), pp. 74–5; *Totalité et infini: essai sur extériorité* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1969), p. 47. Hereafter, the English translation will be cited as *TaI*, and the French original will be cited as *Tel*.
- 4 See, e.g., Levinas, *Otherwise than Being, or Beyond Essence* (Dordrecht, London and Boston: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1991), pp. 116, 166; *Autrement qu'être, ou au-delà de l'essence* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1974), pp. 149, 211. Hereafter, the English translation will be cited as *OB* and the French as *AE*.
- 5 Levinas, 'Meaning and Sense', *Collected Philosophical Papers* (Dordrecht: Martinus Nijhoff, 1987), p. 103.
- 6 Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1962) pp. 208, 216; *Phénoménologie de la perception* (Paris: Gallimond, 2nd ed, 1945), pp. 241, 251. Hereafter, the English translation will be cited as *PPE*, and the French original as *PPF*.
- 7 Levinas, 'Humanism and An-archy', *Collected Philosophical Papers*, pp. 135–6.
- 8 I first began to elaborate the significance of this trace of pre-personal experience for a phenomenology of moral development in *The Body's Recollection of Being* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1985), *The Opening of Vision* (London and New York: Routledge, 1988) and *The Listening Self* (New York: Routledge, 1989). Also see my essay 'Transpersonal Phenomenology and the Corporeal Schema' *The Humanistic Psychologist*, 16(2) (Autumn 1988), pp. 282–313.
- 9 Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1968), p. 123; *Le Visible et l'invisible* (Paris: Gallimard, 1964), pp. 164–5. Hereafter, the English will be cited as *VIE*, the French as *VIF*.
- 10 Jacques Derrida, 'Différance', in *Margins of Philosophy* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1982), p. 23.
- 11 *Ibid.*, p. 24.
- 12 *Ibid.*, p. 21.
- 13 *Ibid.*
- 14 Merleau-Ponty, 'The Philosopher and his Shadow', *Signs* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1964), p. 174.
- 15 Merleau-Ponty, 'The Indirect Language', *The Prose of the World* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973), p. 94; *La Prose du monde* (Paris: Gallimard, 1969), p. 132.
- 16 Merleau-Ponty, 'The Child's Relations with Others', *The Primacy of Perception* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1964), pp. 96–155. Hereafter, this text will be cited as *CRO*.
- 17 Merleau-Ponty, 'The Concept of Nature', Part I, *Themes from the Lectures at the Collège de France, 1952–1960* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1970), p. 82.
- 18 Theodor W. Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflections from a Damaged Life* (London: New Left Books, 1988), §68, p. 105; *Minima Moralia.. Reflexionen aus dem beschädigten Leben, Gesammelte Schriften* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1980), Vol. 4, p. 116. Also see my chapter, 'The Invisible Face of Humanity: Levinas on the Justice of the Gaze,' in David Michael Levin (ed.), *The Philosopher's Gaze*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, forthcoming).
- 19 See my discussion of these questions in 'Visions of Narcissism: Intersubjectivity and the Reversals of Reflection', in Martin Dillon (ed.) *Merleau-Ponty Vivant* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1990), pp. 47–90, and 'Justice in the Flesh', in Galen A. Johnson and Michael B. Smith (eds) *Ontology and Alterity in Merleau-Ponty* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1990), pp. 35–44.
- 20 Levinas, 'Philosophy and the Idea of Infinity', *Collected Philosophical Papers*, pp. 55–9.

- 21 Levinas, 'Ethics as First Philosophy', in Seán Hand (ed.), *The Levinas Reader* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1989), p. 84.
- 22 Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and its Discontents* (New York: Doubleday, 1965), ch. 7, p. 80. Translation modified.
- 23 George Santayana, in *Winds of Doctrine and Platonism and the Spiritual Life* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1957), p. 260: 'The difference between the life of the spirit and that of the flesh is itself a spiritual difference'.
- 24 Merleau-Ponty, 'The Indirect Language', *Prose of the World*, p. 87; 'Le Langage indirect', *La Prose du monde*, p. 123.
- 25 Levinas, 'The Rights of Man and the Rights of the Other', in *Outside the Subject* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994), p. 124.
- 26 Levinas, *Nine Talmudic Readings* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), p. 168.
- 27 Ibid.
- 28 Levinas, 'Diachrony and Representation', *Time and the Other*, p. 109; 'Diachronie et représentation', *Entre Nous*, p. 175.
- 29 For background, see Robert Bernasconi, 'Deconstruction and the Possibility of Ethics', in John Sallis (ed.) *Deconstruction and Philosophy* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1987), pp. 122–39; Bernasconi, 'The Trace of Levinas in Derrida', in David Wood and Robert Bernasconi (eds) *Derrida and Différance* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1988), pp. 13–29; Bernasconi and Wood (eds) *The Provocation of Levinas* (London: Routledge, 1988); Bernasconi and Simon Critchley (eds) *Re-Reading Levinas* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991); Critchley, *The Ethics of Deconstruction: Derrida and Levinas* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1992); Critchley, 'Eine Vertiefung der ethischen Sprache und Methode: Levinas' "Jenseits des Seins oder anders als Sein geschieht"', *Deutsche Zeitschrift für Philosophie*, 42(4) (1994), pp. 643–51; Richard Cohen, 'The Face of Truth in Rosenzweig, Levinas and Jewish Mysticism', in Daniel Gueriere (ed.) *Phenomenology of the Truth Proper to Religion* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1990); Paul Davies, 'The Face and the Caress: Levinas's Alterations of Sensibility', in David M. Levin (ed.) *Modernity and the Hegemony of Vision* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1994), pp. 252–72; Alphonso Lingis, 'Face to Face: A Phenomenological Meditation', *International Philosophical Quarterly*, 19(2), issue 74 (June 1979), pp. 151–63; and Adriaan Peperzak, 'From Intentionality to Responsibility: On Levinas's Philosophy of Language', in Arleen Dallery and Charles Scott (eds) *The Question of the Other in Contemporary Continental Philosophy* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989), pp. 3–22.

# HERMANN COHEN AND EMMANUEL LÉVINAS

*Ze'ev Levy*

Source: S. Moses and H. Wiedebach (eds), *Hermann Cohen's Philosophy of Religion*, Hildesheim: Georg Olms, 1997, pp. 133–43.

When I decided to compare certain notions of Hermann Cohen, one of the three great Jewish philosophers at the beginning of this century — the two others were Franz Rosenzweig and Martin Buber — with the philosophy of Emmanuel Lévinas, I had in mind the greatest *living* Jewish philosopher in the second half of the 20th century. Alas, Lévinas passed away half a year ago, on December 25, 1995, two weeks before his 90th birthday. So this paper will not only commemorate H. Cohen to whom this congress is dedicated, but also E. Lévinas. When Bar-Ilan University bestowed on Lévinas the title “*Doctor honoris causa*”, he was characterized, “together with Hermann Cohen and Franz Rosenzweig, as one of the rare important Jewish philosophers of this century.”<sup>1</sup>

Like Cohen, Lévinas was a rationalist philosopher. Both challenged the traditional distinction between the God of the philosophers and the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob which one encounters in Jewish thought for the first time in Judah Hallevi's *Kuzari*. In general philosophy the distinction became famous through B. Pascal's *Pensées*. Lévinas formulated this distinction still more stringently than Cohen; he proposed the term “atheism” as a condition for understanding the relation, or perhaps better the absence of a direct relation, between God and man. In a similar manner Cohen had already written that “God and man maintain their respective distinctiveness” although he added that “they are necessarily correlated”.<sup>2</sup> Lévinas, as we shall see, repudiates the concept of correlation. But what is of the essence to both is the ideal of reason as underlying their philosophy. Therefore they are very hostile to myth and mysticism.<sup>3</sup>

Cohen drew his inspiration from Kant the agnostic foundation of whose philosophy he exchanged by an idealistic one, eliminating the “thing in

itself". Lévinas drew his inspiration from the phenomenology of E. Husserl and M. Heidegger whose ontological preoccupations he replaced by the fundamentals of ethics. It is *ethics* which forms the main connecting link between Cohen and Lévinas. When Cohen, in his *Religion of Reason Out of the Sources of Judaism* refuted Spinoza's pantheism because it leaves allegedly no place for morality, he, nonetheless, quoted in Latin Spinoza's assertion: "*Praemium virtutis virtus*".<sup>4</sup> He translated it as "the reward of duty is duty." (In a paper of 1900 he translated it more correctly as "the reward of virtue is virtue".<sup>5</sup>) This idea of Cohen, namely that ethics consists in the duty of everyone towards one's fellow-being, became, 50 years later, the foundation of Lévinas' ethics, i.e. everyone's responsibility for the other. That is what he called "The humanism of the other man".<sup>6</sup> It is, however, rather surprising that Lévinas referred much less to his rationalist predecessor whose chair at Marburg was inherited by Heidegger (with whom he studied in 1928/29) than to the non-rationalist F. Rosenzweig. Of the latter he said in his first great book — *Totalité et Infini* — that the opposition to the idea of totality in the *Star of Redemption* had left more salient traces in his book than can be quoted.<sup>7</sup> He carried on a dialogue with Rosenzweig, about whom he wrote on several occasions, as well as on Buber, but almost nothing of the kind with regard to Cohen. One of his close friends was the Russian Jewish philosopher Jacob Gordin, a disciple of Kant who worked at the archives of the *Hermann Cohen Stiftung* in Berlin; but also in his paper on Gordin he did not mention H. Cohen.<sup>8</sup> Therefore Susan Handelman's assertion that Cohen was "another key-influence" on Lévinas looks exaggerated.<sup>9</sup> She herself admits that although "like Hermann Cohen, Lévinas took the legacy of Kant quite seriously. . . . Lévinas also had to contend with other new voices in German and French philosophy."<sup>10</sup> His language was that of contemporary phenomenology. Lévinas' acquaintance with Cohen's Neokantianism stemmed mainly from Husserl's and Heidegger's criticism of it. He assisted at the famous encounter at Davos where Heidegger and Ernst Cassirer, Cohen's most prominent pupil, discussed the philosophy of Kant. Like Rosenzweig who commented on this controversy in his short article "*Vertauschte Fronten*",<sup>11</sup> Lévinas shared Heidegger's outlook against Cassirer's. Also in his first book — *Théorie de l'intuition dans la phénoménologie de Husserl* — Lévinas noted that

the Marburg school (Hermann Cohen, Natorp) . . . tried to renew the Kantian critique by interpreting it as a theory of knowledge. Common to all these philosophers is the identification of philosophy and theory of knowledge, the latter being understood as a reflection of the sciences.<sup>12</sup>

This is one of the rare places where he mentioned H. Cohen by name. He regarded Cassirer's philosophy as about to be defeated while Heidegger's will renew philosophical thought. What is of utmost importance is not

knowledge but *proximity* to the other. If I may borrow Rosenzweig's terms, Cohen and Cassirer belong to the "Old Thinking", whereas Heidegger and he represent the "New Thinking" (*Das neue Denken*). Retrospectively, in his conversations with Francois Poirié, he regretted the stance which he had taken then.<sup>13</sup> One cannot ignore the crucial fact that Lévinas witnessed Nazism and World War II, including Heidegger's shameful behavior, i.e. the debacle of that German culture which Cohen tried to merge with the message of Judaism. The Holocaust put an end to the hopes of German-Jewish symbiosis of which Cohen had been one of the foremost spokesmen.

On another occasion Lévinas connects Cohen's famous assertion that one can love only ideas<sup>14</sup> because they embody the yearned-for perfection, with his assertion of transforming "the other into the Other".<sup>15</sup> It is, however, difficult to establish what exactly Lévinas meant there. Cohen defined, as Lévinas afterwards, love of the neighbor (*Ahavat ha-Re'a*) as "the greatest problem of ethics", but at the same time conceived of it, unlike Lévinas, as "the most difficult task of religion".<sup>16</sup> He was, however, inconsistent in this respect. On the one hand he claimed that religion(s) did not succeed in implanting true love of one's neighbor, and therefore it is incumbent upon ethics to establish this concept independently of religion; but at the same time, only a few lines later, he denied that ethics is independent of religion. Only "the science of ethics" ought to be independent of religion for methodological reasons,<sup>17</sup> but ethics itself draws "the great principle of love of the neighbor" from the Torah of Moses.<sup>18</sup> Thus, whereas Cohen deduces love of the neighbor as a basic concept of his ethics from the Jewish religion, from the Torah, Lévinas separates his concept of the other from Judaism *qua* religion. His point of departure is anthropocentric; he derives his ethics from general philosophy, and then also searches for its roots in the Holy Scriptures of Judaism.

This paper will stress the affinity, in the realm of ethics, between Cohen's concept of the "*neighbor*" (*Re'ah*) and Lévinas' concept of the *Other*, an affinity which cannot be overlooked. Yet I do not assert, unlike Handelman, that there exists any explicit influence of Cohen on Lévinas. On the contrary, on one of the few occasions again when he mentioned him by name, Lévinas insisted that God's glory can be apprehended only by the approach to the other. "There is not, as claims Hermann Cohen, any *correlation* between man and God."<sup>19</sup> Lévinas thus refutes the chief concept of Cohen's later philosophy. Therefore, what I intend to show is that certain ideas of Cohen and certain similar notions of Lévinas can be traced back to the same sources in Jewish thought as well as to some fundamental concepts of their philosophical upbringing. This may perhaps open up new vistas for a better understanding of the main ethical views of the two philosophers. This concerns first of all Cohen's and Lévinas' conceptions of the other man and the stranger as a mediating idea in their understanding of man. In a certain

way it was Lévinas' later critique of Heidegger whose philosophy had no place for ethics that brought him, inadvertently perhaps, closer again to Cohen's views. We can thus witness some kind of a dialectical process: Heidegger criticized the shortcomings of Kantian and Neokantian philosophy; Lévinas criticized the shortcomings of Heidegger's philosophy. This entailed also a reassessment of Cohen's later philosophy which emphasized more existential notions. One has to be, however, careful with such evaluations. It was not so much a reappraisal of Cohen's philosophy *per se*, but it highlighted the abovementioned proximity between their ethical views. They share some basic conceptions regarding the quiddity of the self and its relation to the other.

But, as Edith Wyschogrod, another Lévinas scholar, has pointed out, "while Cohen's view of the other person as fellowman is predicated upon the correlation between man and God",<sup>20</sup> Lévinas' knowledge of and relation to the other man is derived from phenomenological intuitions. Although he is a religious thinker too, unlike Cohen he is in no need of any theological premise, in order to elaborate his ethics of the other person. He does not employ the concept of "revelation" which occupied an important place in Cohen's *Religion of Reason*,<sup>21</sup> as well as in Rosenzweig's *Star of Redemption*,<sup>22</sup> but the concept of "epiphany". He referred, e.g., to the face of the other as the "epiphany of the ethical."<sup>23</sup> Therefore, according to religious tradition, sustained by Cohen, "Thou shalt do no murder" is a divine commandment; according to Lévinas it is "triggered off", if one may say so, by the encounter with the other's face.<sup>24</sup>

Before engaging in a further comparative analysis of Cohen's and Lévinas' ethical concepts, I want to mention still one more place where Lévinas also mentioned Cohen explicitly and approvingly. When he referred, in *Totalité et Infini*, to Plato's concept of rhetoric, he wrote:

Hermann Cohen (in this a Platonist) maintained that one can love only ideas; but the notion of an Idea is in the last analysis tantamount to the transmutation of the other into the Other (*de l'autre en Autrui*).<sup>25</sup>

I do not dwell here on the difference between Plato's and Cohen's concepts of idea; Cohen himself had already underscored that his love for ideas is not the same as Plato's love of forms as the only true reality. His concept of Idea signifies God, namely the God of monotheistic religions. As an idea, that is the embodiment of supreme perfection, God is transcendent and does not enter into any relationship with phenomenal existents. Although this view clashes with the concept of correlation which he developed in his late philosophy, it may remind one of Lévinas' speaking of God as "*illéité*" and his above-mentioned use of the term "atheism". He used this neologism in order to underscore God's absolute otherness and transcendence, as against Martin Buber's concept of "Eternal Thou" which implies a certain intimacy



between God and man. According to Lévinas one cannot speak about God in the second person but only in the third person. But his inference which identifies the Idea with the transmutation of the other into the Other appears, to say the least, rather questionable. Why did he ignore the difference between Cohen and Plato, alluded to by Cohen himself? Moreover, why did he mention Cohen at all in this context? Did he so, in order to buttress his quite unexpected identification of the Idea with "*autre*" becoming "*autrui*"? In order to elucidate his own view of the relation of the self to the other, the critique of Plato would have been sufficient, without any further support. By employing rhetoric one treats the other as an object; it is no genuine relation to the other as a subject, as an Other, as a person. That is possible only through intimate, non-rhetoric, conversation. So how does Cohen fit into this picture, if he does at all? He turns up in this context like a "*Deus ex machina*", perhaps because he was the only modern (Jewish) philosopher who stressed the notion of Idea. What certainly impressed Lévinas was that Cohen's concept of the Idea, identical with God, implied compassion for the "*Nebenmensch*". This corresponded to his concept of "the other man". This also conformed to Rosenzweig's assertion that man's response to God's love consists, or ought to consist, in turning His love towards the other, towards one's fellow-beings. This is what Rosenzweig called Redemption, namely to redeem the world of the others. This interpretation of redemption appealed very much to Lévinas and led him to his reappraisal of Cohen's concept of compassion for the other. However, in that precise context of *Totalité et Infini* it seems still doubtful whether Cohen's views fulfilled any substantial role in Lévinas' discussion of "rhetorics and injustice" (the title of the paragraph). So once again, it is not so much a question of searching for influences of Cohen on Lévinas, but a matter of association of ideas. Exactly as Cohen's concept "*Nebenmensch*" reminds one of Lévinas' "humanism of the other man", his concept "*Gegenmensch*" arouses associations to Lévinas' concept of violence to which J. Derrida has called attention in his famous first essay on Lévinas.<sup>26</sup> Both thinkers believed that this opposition or violence, prevailing in human society, will come to an end when human existence will be based on peace. This evidently brings to mind also Kant's famous essay "On eternal peace".<sup>27</sup> This longed-for existential situation Cohen and Lévinas both designate as Messianism.<sup>28</sup> They conceive of it, however, in divergent ways: Cohen considers it as a condition where all individuals become incorporated in an all-encompassing totality ("*Allheit*"); this is again diametrically opposed to Lévinas' view which condemns totality as suppressing individual self-accomplishment. It was Rosenzweig's opposition to totality that fascinated him.<sup>29</sup> One might detect here also some traces of Husserl's "*egology*" which Lévinas transforms in his philosophy into intersubjectivity. This highlights another similarity and *ex tempore* dissimilarity between their conceptions of the "moral self". Both Cohen and Lévinas indeed aim at transmuting

the other person, as encountered in social relations, from someone who is opposed to my self into a fellow-being. According to Cohen this requires as a precondition the relation to God (see above), while according to Lévinas it is achieved by the intersubjective encounter itself. This he interprets phenomenologically; the ethical is related to what appears, and its establishment does not presuppose any prior reality.

In the last part of this paper I wish to elucidate some of Cohen's concepts that turned up in the former section and which fulfill a significant role in Lévinas' ethics. All the following references will be to chapter 8 of Cohen's great posthumous work *Religion of Reason out of the sources of Judaism*. What Cohen calls "*Nebemensch*" ("the next man") has not yet an ethical connotation; man has not yet become a "*Mitmensch*" (רֵעַ).<sup>30</sup> This happens only as a consequence of the preceding religious correlation between God and man.<sup>31</sup> As long as I view another person merely as "the next man", he does not become a subject of either ethics or religion, because I do not feel yet any personal responsibility for him. This is exactly what Lévinas emphasized afterwards so strongly — my responsibility for the other.

Cohen underscores the biblical concept that mediates between Israel and the stranger (בְּנֹכַרִי), namely the concept *Ger* (גר) which he translates "*Fremdling*" (in most German translations of the Bible it is translated "*Beisatz*"); it was meant to overcome not only the animosity but also the indifference towards the stranger. Although he does so first of all in the context of the relations between Israel and the non-Jewish stranger (גר) and from the aspect of the sole monotheistic people as against polytheistic peoples, he ultimately strives towards what Lévinas has termed, in his humanist ethics, "*non-indifférence*" toward the other. The concept of *Ger* had its earliest origins in the behavior-pattern of ancient nomadic peoples where the visitor was treated as a welcome guest ("*Gastfreund*").<sup>32</sup> The most famous biblical example is evidently Abraham, entertaining the three angels.<sup>33</sup> This natural openness towards the visiting stranger — *Gastfreund* means "a guest who is a friend" — has unfortunately deteriorated in the course of human history into suspicion and hostility towards the stranger (Cohen writes "*Ausländer*" and adds the Hebrew word בְּנֹכַרִי in brackets)<sup>34</sup> who is different and sinister. Both Cohen and Lévinas strive to remove this deeply rooted prejudice towards the other. Both stress the biblical verse "Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself" which, as already Rabbi Aquiba and Ben-Azai had said in the Talmud, is not restricted to the Children of Israel but encompasses every human being. "As thyself" (כַּמֶּנֶּךָ) = "(s)he is like you". There were some commentators who interpreted Aquiba's presenting this verse as "a great rule of the Torah" as referring to fellow-Jews only while Ben-Azai's presenting it "as an even greater rule" as referring to all human beings. But the divergence between them was more a matter of emphasis than of different principles. Cohen and Lévinas, of course, stress the universal meaning of this biblical verse. Cohen mentions in this

connection also the concept "*Noachide*", as it was elaborated by the Talmudic Sages.<sup>35</sup> A person of Israel is first of all a descendant of Noah, the forefather of all human beings after the Deluge, and only after that a descendant of Abraham.<sup>36</sup>

It is not necessary to dwell in this paper on all the minute differentiations between the Hebrew concepts in the Bible and the Talmud which Cohen investigates in the chapter "The discovery of man as fellow-being", in order to draw from the Talmud the equation: *Ger* = *Noachide* = *Pious of the nations*.<sup>37</sup>

However, what distinguishes between Cohen and Lévinas with regard to the maxim "Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself" is the following: Cohen considers the relation between man and his fellow-being to represent an "inferior correlation" which is merely the "interior" part of the superior substantial correlation between God and man.<sup>38</sup> This religious precondition (or presupposition) is absent from Lévinas' ethical conception which is derived from a solely human point of departure — "the humanism of the other man". But both philosophers stress the importance of the social environment — Cohen mentions expressly the disaster of poverty<sup>39</sup> — that obstructs the realization of true interhuman relations in present society. He even emphasizes that "suffering only reaches ethical precision as social suffering."<sup>40</sup> Similarly, it is certainly not incidental that Lévinas' philosophy has exerted a strong influence on left revolutionary movements in South America who drew inspiration from it for their so-called "*philosophy of liberation*".<sup>41</sup>

Both Cohen and Lévinas condemn the Stoic concept of "*adiaphora*" which is obviously opposed to their ethical convictions. Cohen included in his critique of the Stoa an unjustified side-attack on his archenemy Spinoza: "As the Stoic which he ultimately is, Spinoza indeed fails to think about the social suffering of the human race."<sup>42</sup> Lévinas shared, to a certain extent, Cohen's dislike of Spinoza, but his critique never exhibited such extreme hostility towards him as Cohen's.<sup>43</sup> But what I wish to underscore here, Cohen explicitly asserts that it is inadmissible to remain *indifferent* to poverty because it manifests a state of cultural distress and puts into question true morality.<sup>44</sup> Such indifference is the main obstacle for addressing the "*Nebenmensch*" as a "*Mitmensch*" (מִיִּתְמֵשׁ). As we have seen, this is precisely, Lévinas' view when he advocates "non-indifférence".

Perhaps one may sum up the similarities and dissimilarities of Cohen's and Lévinas' conceptions of the other schematically as follows: Cohen distinguishes between two kinds of morality: 1. The relation between man as an individual and mankind as a totality ("*Allheit*") (see above). This is according to him the domain of ethics *per se*. It exhibits its definitional and abstract aspect. 2. The concrete relation between man and man, that is the correlation between the self and the other which he, as shown above, deduces from the correlation between man and God. It pertains to religion and cannot be conceived without or outside it. This second relation forms the

cornerstone of Lévinas' ethics, but without any direct influence from Cohen. It also has no religious basis as it had in Cohen's philosophy. Although Lévinas is a religious thinker and believes in God's existence (as a wholly transcendent being), his ethics is autonomous, while Cohen's ethics was, in its ultimate respect, heteronomous. My aim in this paper was to call attention, despite this difference, to many affinities in their ethical outlooks with regard to the other person.

## Notes

- 1 Marie-Anne Lescourret: *Emmanuel Lévinas*, Paris, Flammarion 1994, p. 331.
- 2 Richard A. Cohen: *Elevations. The Height of the Good in Rosenzweig and Levinas*, Chicago and London, The University of Chicago Press 1994, p. 181.
- 3 Cohen's critique of mythology I investigated in my papers "Demythologization or Remythologization", *Annual of Bar-Ilan University, Studies in Judaica and Humanities*, XXII–XXIII, 1987, pp. 205–228, and "Hermeneutik und Entmythologisierung", *TRUMAH, Hochschule für jüdische Studien*, I, Heidelberg 1987, pp. 175–198. Lévinas criticized myth and mythology on various occasions, among others in his lecture "Une religion d'adultes", *Difficile Liberté, Essais sur le Judaïsme*, Paris, Albin Michel 1963 et 1976, pp. 24–42.
- 4 RoR 321.
- 5 "Liebe und Gerechtigkeit in den Begriffen Gott und Mensch", JS III 85.
- 6 Emmanuel Lévinas: *Humanisme de l'autre homme*, Paris, Fata Morgana 1972.
- 7 Emmanuel Lévinas: *Totalité et Infini. Essai sur l'Exteriorité* [1961], Paris, Kluwer Academic, le Livre de Poche, p. 14.
- 8 E. Lévinas: "Jacob Gordin", *Difficile Liberté, op. cit.*, pp. 234–240.
- 9 Susan A. Handelman: *Fragments of Redemption. Jewish thought and literary theory in Benjamin, Scholem & Levinas*, Bloomington & Indianapolis, Indiana University Press, 1991, p. 358n.
- 10 Ibid., p. 271.
- 11 Franz Rosenzweig: "Vertauschte Fronten", *Kleinere Schriften*, Berlin, Schocken 1937, pp. 354/6.
- 12 Emmanuel Lévinas: *Théorie de l'intuition dans la phénoménologie de Husserl*, Paris, Vrin 1963 (Paris: Alcan 1930), p. XXXV. See also Edith Wyschogrod: "The moral self: Emmanuel Lévinas and Hermann Cohen", *DAAT* 4, Bar-Ilan University, 1980, p. 38.
- 13 François Poirié: *Emmanuel Lévinas, Qui êtes-vous?*, Lyon, La Manufacture 1987, p. 78.
- 14 RoR 160.
- 15 *Totality and Infinity*, 1969, p. 71.
- 16 Hermann Cohen: *Der Nächste. Vier Abhandlungen über das Verhalten von Mensch zu Mensch nach der Lehre des Judentums*, Berlin, Schocken Verlag 1935, p. 11.
- 17 Ibid.
- 18 Ibid., p. 12.
- 19 Emmanuel Lévinas: *Dieu, la mort le temps*, Paris, Grasset 1993, p. 229.
- 20 Wyschogrod, *op. cit.*, p. 48.
- 21 RoR, chapter 4 and many other places.
- 22 Franz Rosenzweig: *Stern der Erlösung*, Frankfurt a. M., Suhrkamp 1988, zweiter Teil, zweites Buch: "Offenbarung oder die allzeiterneuerte Geburt der Seele", pp. 174–228.

- 23 *Totalité et Infini*, *op. cit.*, p. 217. E. Wyschogrod describes Lévinas' view of the face as an "aniconic *imago dei*", (i.e. as symbolical); "The moral self", *op. cit.*, p. 50.
- 24 *Difficile Liberté*, *op. cit.*, p. 21.
- 25 *Totalité et Infini*, *op. cit.*, p. 68.
- 26 Jacques Derrida: "Violence et Métaphysique", *L'Écriture et la Différence*, Paris, Ed. du Seuil 1967, pp. 117–228.
- 27 Immanuel Kant: "Zum ewigen Frieden", *Sämtliche Werke*, Band 5, Leipzig, Insel 1922, pp. 657–711.
- 28 Cohen, RoR, chapters 12 and 13; E. Lévinas: "Textes messianiques", *Difficile Liberté*, *op. cit.*, pp. 89–139.
- 29 See above, note 7.
- 30 RoR 113–114.
- 31 *Ibid.*, p. 114.
- 32 "guest-friend", *ibid.*, p. 154.
- 33 It is certainly not incidental that the Hebrew words "traveller" (עֹבֵר אֶרֶץ) and "visitor, guest" (אֶרֶץ) are derived from the same etymological root.
- 34 *Ibid.*, p. 120.
- 35 *Ibid.*, p. 117.
- 36 *Ibid.*, p. 119.
- 37 *Ibid.*, p. 123.
- 38 *Ibid.*, p. 132 (see above).
- 39 *Ibid.*, p. 134.
- 40 *Ibid.*, p. 135.
- 41 Antonio Sidekum: "Die Levinassche Ethik im Lichte der Philosophie der Befreiung", *Parabel — Levinas*, Giessen, Focus 1990, pp. 17–191.
- 42 RoR 140.
- 43 On Cohen's fierce attacks on Spinoza see: Ze'ev Levy: "Über die Spinoza-Kritik Hermann Cohens", *Freiheit und Notwendigkeit. Ethische und politische Aspekte bei Spinoza und in der Geschichte des (Anti-) Spinozismus*, Würzburg, Königshausen & Neumann 1994, pp. 209–218.
- 44 RoR 136.

# LEVINAS, DERRIDA, AND OTHERS VIS-À-VIS

*John Llewelyn*

Source: J. Llewelyn, *Beyond Metaphysics?: The Hermeneutic Circle in Contemporary Continental Philosophy*, Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press, 1985, pp. 185–206.

*He is Greek, and speaks Greek, does he not?*  
—Socrates

*L'être n'arrive pas à être jusqu'au bout.*  
—Emmanuel Levinas

## 1. Ethical metaphysics

The physical, according to one notion of it, is that which has a natural origin and whose persistence toward its end is describable by natural laws. Heidegger frequently links this notion to a certain Greek conception of what it means to be. He also links it to the idea of emergence into the open and coming to light (*phos*). So the study of being, ontology, at the time of *Being and Time* is a phenomenology, a study of appearing (*phainesthai*) and dis-appearing. Husserl's phenomenology is no less an ontology, a study of essences, than Heidegger's fundamental ontology is a phenomenology. Both Heidegger and Husserl are describing what the Greeks called the physical, in the wide sense Heidegger finds this word to have had for them. If we understand the word in this wide sense we understand why Emmanuel Levinas says that the main topic of his thinking is metaphysical, though it is not metaphysical in either the determinate or the indeterminate sense of Heidegger explained in chapter 9, section 2. It is metaphysical because ethical. And it is ethical not because it is either a code of ethics or a metaphysics of ethics with which Levinas is concerned. Kant's groundwork of the metaphysics of ethics was appealed to above to allow an analogy to be drawn between Kantian respect and Heideggerian letting be. But it is being that is to be let be according to Heidegger, and it is the moral law that is to be respected

according to Kant. The other person is to be respected, according to Kant, only because the other person is a rational agent, and he is a rational agent only in so far as he personifies the moral law and is capable of exercising a freedom to refrain from following rules of behavior that could not be universally followed or willed. By the same standard the agent is entitled to respect himself. He respects the law which, without of course suspending them, transcends the laws of his physical nature. Kant's metaphysics of ethics describes the structures of interpersonalitv, a structure for which his analogy is that of the lawfulness of nature. It describes the foundation of justice.

The ethical, as Levinas describes it, is "older than" justice as conceived by Kant. It is a condition that is not a foundation of it; so it is more strictly speaking an un-condition which is pre-original and prior to the *interessement* that is not less a feature of Kantian deontological morality than it is of the teleological morality of self- and general interest. Both of these models of morality are styles of being and being-with, *Mitsein*, notwithstanding the criteria they provide for distinguishing the immoral from the moral and the inauthentic from the authentic. They are both ontological. The ethical as Levinas would have us understand it is de-ontological, dis-ontological, *ent-ontologisch*. It is prior to all structures of being-with. It is prior to all structures, whether these are the categories of Greek philosophy, of Kant, of Hegel, of Husserl, or the structures of structuralism and of linguistic or economic exchange. Prior to system, to symmetry, to correlation, to the will, to freedom, and to the opposition of activity and passivity, the ethical is far more passive than the opposite of activity. It is the superlaton of passivity. Because it is prior to the third person.

Without yet knowing what is, according to Levinas, prior to the third personal point of view, it is not difficult to see how he stands vis-à-vis certain of the authors whose work has been surveyed in previous chapters of this book. The surrationalistic structures of the natural sciences as conceived by Bachelard are third-personal objectivated systems. The disillusioning techniques prescribed in the critical theory of Habermas call for the same objectivation in the social sciences. This third-personal scientific objectivity is demanded by the theories and methods of interpretation advocated by Betti and Hirsch. As for the structuralist theories that Lévi-Strauss and others have developed from those of Saussure, they are predicated on a concept of language as a system of opposed terms regarded in isolation from the particular speech-acts performed by users of that system. *Langue*, as described by Saussure and his adaptors, fulfills the description Levinas gives of a system as a coexistence or agreement of different terms in the unity of a theme.<sup>1</sup>

Is Levinas, then, in the lineage of those who deny the primacy of *langue* over *parole*? And is he a champion of diachrony against synchrony? The answer to both of these questions is that he is, but in a way which sets him

apart from all the thinkers whose writings have been looked at so far in this book. When Merleau-Ponty and Ricoeur re-emphasize the dependence of instituted language upon *parole*, they are stressing the intentionality of creative sense-giving speech-acts. When, following Husserl, Merleau-Ponty underlines the importance of anonymous, centri-petal intentionality, he is proposing nothing that transcends the general sphere of significance to which the structuralists apply their theories. He, like they, is talking about the universe of discourse in which one thing stands for another, the system of signifier and signified.<sup>2</sup> When the system of one thing with another and one thing standing for another is supplemented by the significative intentionality of a speaker, we are still short of the nonintentional, preintentional *significance* which, according to Levinas, is presupposed by all signification. And the diachrony of the speech-act is but a difference in the same time compared with the more radically dia-chronic difference of times Levinas ascribes to my responsibility for the Other, *Autrui*, to whom I address my words—and myself. According to Husserlian essentialist phenomenology, utterance and all other signifying gestures are noetic-noematic, intentional projection of subjectivity toward an accusative. This holds for Husserl because “*all acts generally—even the acts of feeling and will—are ‘objectifying’ acts, original factors in the ‘constituting’ of objects,*” the necessary sources of different regions of being and of the ontologies that belong therewith.<sup>3</sup> For Husserl the prototype of even nontheoretical acts is perception and the co-relation of subjectivity and objectivity, of being with.

Levinas finds very much the same auto-affection at work in this prototype as is posited by the Kantians and neo-Kantians from whom Husserl was hoping to move away. These and Husserl are inheritors of the Cartesian tradition in which consciousness is egological. Another heir of this tradition is Sartre. Although in his existential phenomenology intentionality is interpreted as the for-itself's refusal of the in-itself with which it is correlated, a kind of “othering,” consciousness remains a free recuperation. Its ideal is that of assumption, consumption, digestion, though, in contrast with the conceptual phenomenology of Hegel, achievement of the ideal is condemned to remain unfulfilled. In Husserl's essentialist phenomenology the Other, although my alter ego and an analogue of myself, resists assimilation because he is only ever appresented; I have no adequate consciousness of his consciousness. Sartre, for different reasons, agrees with this, yet he continues to see the for-itself as consciousness projected toward assimilation.

Somewhat the same assimilative character is ascribed by Gadamer to our efforts to understand each other and the texts and works of art and artifice that others have produced. Understanding is at the same time self-understanding and an interfusion of horizons. It is true that with Sartre cognition is secondary to consciousness and that with Gadamer and Heidegger consciousness is secondary to understanding as a structure of being. However, the Husserlian notion of horizon persists in the accounts Sartre, Gadamer, and Heidegger



give of situation or environing world, *Umwelt*. This, Levinas maintains, is incommensurable with the for-the-other which, far from being the mere contingency that is Sartre's being-for-the-other, is an unavoidable and unvoidable human responsibility. Levinas would say that this ethical responsibility is also neglected in the hermeneutic co-responsibility of Gadamer's interpretation of understanding. He does say that it is beyond the reach of the ecstasis of *Verstehen* as described in *Being and Time*. It cannot be comprehended by comprehension. Like the infinite of Descartes's third Meditation, it cannot be comprehended. Levinas agrees with readers of the *Metaphysical Meditations* like Martial Gueroult, one of his teachers at Strasbourg, who take as provisional and artificial Descartes's distinction between the consciousness he has of his self and the consciousness he has of his finitude. "My nature is not only to be a thinking being, thinking itself as thought, but a being thinking itself as finite and consequently thinking the infinite."<sup>4</sup> The thought of the infinite is implicit in and logically prior to the thought of myself, to the *cogito*.

In thinking the infinite—the self at once *thinks more than it can think*. The infinite does not enter into the *idea* of the infinite; it is not grasped; this idea is not a concept. The infinite is the radically, absolutely other.<sup>5</sup>

Whereas Descartes employs causal and ontological arguments to demonstrate that there is a God, the descriptions Levinas gives purport not to be ontological. They take as their cue the axiological function Descartes attributes to the idea of God's perfection, although, as Gueroult observes, Descartes does not make as clear a distinction as Malebranche does between judgments of truth or reality and judgments of value or perfection.<sup>6</sup> What Levinas refers to as the most high (*altus*) is the radically other (*alter*). The Other, *Autrui*, is not simply an alter ego, an appresented analogue of myself. He and I are not equals, citizens in an intelligible kingdom of ends. We are not relatives. We are not different as chalk and cheese. There is between us, in the Hegelian phrase Levinas adapts, an absolute difference. The Other is he to whom and in virtue of whom I am sub-ject, with a subjectivity that is heteronomy, not autonomy, hetero-affection, not auto-affection. The Other is not the object of my concern and solicitude. Beyond what Heidegger means by *Sorge* and *Fürsorge* is my being con-cerned, *con-cerné*, ob-sessed by the Other. He is not the accusative of my theoretical, practical, or affective intentionality or ecstasis. He is the topic of my regard (*il me regarde*) only because I am the accusative of his look (*il me regarde*).<sup>7</sup> The subject is an accusative, *me*, which is not a declension from a nominative but an accusative absolute like the pronoun *se* for which, Levinas says, Latin grammars acknowledge no nominative.<sup>8</sup> This latter accusative is not a case of the I which accuses itself. The accusative in question is beholden to the Other, but not for any services rendered. He is subpoenaed by the other, pursued

and persecuted, but not on account of any crime or original sin.<sup>9</sup> The persecuted is himself responsible for the persecution to which he is subjected, but his responsibility is beyond free will; and the accusation is not one that he can answer or to which he can respond with an apology, for "persecution is the precise moment in which the subject is reached or touched without the mediation of the logos":<sup>10</sup> It is beyond the spoken word.

The accused self is categorized beyond free will and beyond the opposition of freedom and nonfreedom, where by freedom is understood freedom to choose and initiate. Original ontological freedom, according to Sartre, although prior to deliberation and will, is nonetheless an unreflective choice. It is also ontological because it is the choice of a way to be. The freedom Levinas attributes to ethical responsibility is preoriginal and beyond ontology. Sartrean fundamental choice founds the agent's situation. It is a descendent of Fichtean self-positing. Levinasian responsibility is nonfoundational and an-archic. It de-poses, ex-poses, and de-situates the self. This does not mean, however, that the self is alienated, "because the Other [*l'Autre*] in the Same is my substitution for the other [*l'autre*] through the *responsibility* for which I am summoned as the one who is *irreplaceable*."<sup>11</sup> This substitution is not a derivative of the intersubstitutability of *das Man*.

Through substitution for others, the oneself escapes *relation*. At the limit of passivity, the oneself escapes passivity or the inevitable limitation that the terms within relation undergo. In the incomparable relationship of responsibility, the other no longer limits the same, it is supported by what it limits. Here the overdetermination of the ontological categories is visible, which transforms them into ethical terms. In the most passive passivity, the self liberates itself ethically from every other and from itself. Its responsibility for the other, the proximity of the neighbour, does not signify a submission to the non-ego; it means an openness in which being's essence is surpassed in inspiration. It is an openness of which respiration is a modality or a foretaste, or, more exactly, of which it retains the aftertaste. Outside of any mysticism, in this respiration, the possibility of every sacrifice for the other, activity and passivity coincide.<sup>12</sup>

Since what Levinas here calls the most passive passivity and elsewhere the passivity of passivity is said to be a passivity that coincides with activity, it might be expected that he would refer to this also as a most active activity or the activity of activity. That he never does this marks off the superlative passivity Levinas does refer to not only from the Kantian rational will and Sartrean originary choice; it marks it off too from any respect and *Seinlassen* such as would lend itself to the middle voice. Levinas's beyond of passivity and activity is beyond being, whether being is that expressed by a noun, a verb, or by a verbal noun; in so far as it can be expressed by a word, it is

more correct to call it a passivity than an activity. It follows that this passivity must not be construed as the taking on of suffering, suffering to suffer either a useful passion or a *passion inutile*. It is a passivity that is presupposed by any such assumption or undertaking. Contract, engagement, and commitment, whether entered into altruistically or from egoistic motives, are still at the level of egoity, and egoity has absolute passivity as its un-condition. Entering into a commitment is subscribing to a project, not something to which the accused self is sub-jected.

For Sartre even the adversity of that which limits my freedom is a function of my freedom,<sup>13</sup> as for Fichte is the resistance, *Anstoss*, of the not-I. He devotes several paragraphs of *Being and Nothingness* to describing the paradoxes of passivity.<sup>14</sup> These paradoxes arise, he says, from the supposition that passivity is a mode of being-in-itself, whereas both passivity and activity presuppose human beings and the instruments they use: "Man is active and the means which he employs are called passive." So activity and passivity presuppose being-for-itself, hence non-being. The self-consistency of being-in-itself is beyond both the active and the passive. The absolute passivity of which Levinas writes is indeed sub-jectivity, but subjectivity of the for-others not of the for-itself. Absolute passivity is also beyond being and nothingness. Levinas agrees with Hegel that meontology is the mirror image of ontology. They occupy the same logical space, the space of the Same. So too does the neutral third value between being and nothingness for which Levinas employs the expression *il y a*, "the there is." In *De l'existence à l'existant* this expression carries some of the force carried by the notions of facticity and thrownness in *Being and Nothingness* and *Being and Time*. But this sheer anonymous fact of one's existence is prior to the notions of world or situation. And prior to both the *il y a* and world-hood, availing an exit from them and an exile, is the absolute passivity of passivity.<sup>15</sup>

## 2. Facial expression

The absoluteness of my passivity answers the infinitude of the absolutely other. It fills the place Descartes gives to the infinitude of the freedom of my will, "that above all in respect of which I bear the image and likeness of God." For both Levinas and Descartes infinitude is the positive notion in terms of which the notion of man's finitude is understood. For this positive notion of infinity Kant substitutes a regulative idea required to give sense to scientific research. This notion of infinity is an ideal "ought." It is what Kant has to say about human finitude that Heidegger applauds, though where Kant interprets this as man's limitedness by the given, Heidegger interprets it as man's being toward death. Hegel opposes a good infinite to the interminable bad infinite of the Kantian "ought." To the finitude of man's being toward his term he opposes the negation of this finitude, the infinity of the end of history. Against this, Levinas says:

We recognize in the finitude which the Hegelian infinite is opposed to and encompasses, the finitude of man before the elements, the infinitude of man invaded by the *there is*, at each instant traversed by faceless gods against whom labour is pursued in order to realize the security in which the "other" of the elements would be revealed as the same.<sup>16</sup>

That is to say, Hegel's good infinite is an infinite of goods. It is an economic infinity of need and the war of each in competition with all where my freedom is limited by the other. Levinas argues that room must be found also for an infinite of goodness, a peaceful infinite of desire which, instead of limiting my freedom and responsibility, extends and exalts it the more I respond to the Other's call: "The absolutely Other (*Autrui*) does not limit the freedom of the Same. In calling it to responsibility it renews and justifies it." The word Levinas uses for this renewal is *instauration*. This is the word one might use of the inauguration of a temple. It carries the idea that is conveyed by the word inspiration, which was met in sentences quoted above and which is the Levinasian hetero-affective counterpart to the Husserlian auto-affectively intentional animation of the body or the corporeal signifier. Husserl's egological sense-giving *Beseelung* is what Levinas doubtless has in view when he introduces his notion of heteronomous "psychism." In Levinas's account of Husserl's semiology, signs express meaning only within a horizon against which they are presented much after the manner of objects in a visual field. He gives a similar account of the ready to hand which is accorded priority over the present at hand in Heidegger's analysis of the everyday world as well as in the semiology of *Being and Time*. For Heidegger and Husserl, "To comprehend the particular being is to grasp it out of an illuminated site it does not fill."<sup>17</sup> For them there is no aspect of a being that is transcendently foreign to being and comprehension, even if it may be temporarily hidden.

For Levinas the face of the Other is beyond being and comprehension. Beyond Husserlian expressive meaning and presupposed by it is the expression introduced into the world by the Other's face. This expression is not the expression that is seen. It is heard expression that is the discourse of Saying (*Dire*) and is presupposed by the Said (*Dit*). The face is not the countenance. It cannot be contained. Like the infinitude of Descartes's God, it cannot be comprehended. Unlike the Look of Sartre's being-for-the-other, the other's face is not a threat to my freedom before which I shrivel. It increases my responsibility and is welcomed.

Under the eye of another, I remain an unattackable subject in respect. It is the obsession by the other, my neighbour, accusing me of a fault which I have not committed freely, that reduces the ego to a *self* on the hither side of my identity, *prior to* all self-consciousness, and denudes me absolutely. To revert to oneself is not to establish oneself at home,

even if stripped of all one's acquisitions. It is to be like a stranger, hunted down even in one's home, contested in one's identity. . . . It is always to empty oneself anew of oneself, and to absolve oneself, like in a haemophiliac's haemorrhage.<sup>18</sup>

The internal hemorrhage in my universe on Sartre's analysis results from my being seen by the other and is the foundation of my unreflective consciousness of myself.<sup>19</sup> The hemorrhage to which Levinas refers is not in the zone of self-consciousness, *Selbstbewusstsein*, or in any other region of consciousness, unconsciousness, or being, *Sein*. It is an emptying out of my self-consciousness commanded by the ethical word of the other which wounds, *blesse*, but is also a blessing, for it heals allergy.<sup>20</sup>

The first traumatic word that is the original expression of the face is "Thou shalt commit no murder."

The epiphany of the face is ethical. The struggle this face can threaten *presupposes* the transcendence of expression. The face threatens the eventuality of a struggle, but this threat does not exhaust the epiphany of infinity, does not formulate its first word. War presupposes peace, the antecedent and non-allergic presence of the Other; it does not represent the first event of the encounter.<sup>21</sup>

By war Levinas means a resistance and counterresistance of energies, an allergy that is an opposition of powers analogous to the reciprocity of forces in the system of Newtonian mechanics. The ethical resistance is "the resistance of what has no resistance," since it is the weakness of the other that commands me. The other is the poor, the widow, and the orphan mentioned in the Book of Job. Paradoxically, it is the vulnerability of the other, the nakedness of the face, that wounds me. The ethical "thou shalt not" dominates the economic and political "I can." The "I can" and the philosophies of "I can" are not less egocentric than the philosophies of "I think," notwithstanding that the ego is correlated with an other. Although Levinas recognizes that in his later writings Husserl explores the limits of the correlation of subject and object, he insists that Husserl never relinquishes the idea that the ego—which Levinas equates with the Same—always has its correlative *cogitatum*; that is to say, although, in the track of Brentano, Husserl holds that all intentionality, even nontheoretical intentionality, is the intending of a noematic Object, this other is assimilated into the Same. It is my concern. As with Heidegger, so with Husserl, on Levinas's reading of them, my ultimate concern is the unconcealment of the truth of being.<sup>22</sup> As with Hegel, so with Husserl, the Other is assimilated to the Same, to the identity of identity and difference. Hegel, Husserl, and Heidegger are all three philosophers of possibilities and powers. They are philosophers whose logics of *Aufhebung*, *Erinnerung*, and hermeneutic recycling recollect Plato's

recollection but forget the *epekeina tes ousias*—which for Levinas is the singular plural *Autrui* rather than the neutral Good of the *Republic*. They forget that ontology presupposes metaphysics.<sup>23</sup>

### 3. Paradoxical proximity

In “Violence and Metaphysics” Jacques Derrida contends that Levinas forgets the ontological difference. He maintains that Heidegger’s *Seinlassen* acknowledges the radical alterity that Levinas assigns to the ethical and metaphysical, and that this acknowledgement is already made in Husserl’s conception of phenomenology.

In *Speech and Phenomena* Derrida plots the interplay between two themes of Husserl’s phenomenology. On the one hand is the principle of all principles which demands that knowledge of any principle be based on “a primordial dator act,” which is an intuition of essence analogous to perception.<sup>24</sup> This theme would lead one to expect an adequation of the act and its object. It is this theme that Levinas has in mind when he says that the model with which Husserl’s phenomenological ontology works is that of satisfaction, hence of need rather than of desire as Levinas describes it.

On the other hand Husserl develops the theme that apodicticity of evidence is possible without its being adequate. Derrida cites Husserl’s allusions to the infinite number of profiles of physical objects that are not presented to me but that are appresented with those that are. Then there are my retentions and protentions, experiences I remember or expect. The consciousness of my past and future ego, Husserl says, is an analogue of my consciousness of other selves. Which, if either, of these is prior is a question on which Husserl seems to have held different views at different times. In the *Cartesian Meditations* he takes the view that the consciousness of my past self is presupposed by my consciousness of other selves. He also takes the view there that the latter presupposes consciousness of physical things, in particular the other’s body. But he insists that my consciousness of the other is different in principle from my consciousness of physical things in the sense that whereas I cannot have presentations of all of the profiles of the physical thing—although those that I do have will be presentations of profiles that the other person has or could have—I can have no presentations of his presentations. Is not this, Derrida asks, recognition of the infinite transcendence of the other, recognition of his positive infinitude, as against the negative infinitude involved in my inability to experience the totality of profiles of the physical thing? And is not this recognition of the infinite transcendence of the other possible only if, like Husserl, we conceive the other on analogy with the ego? If we do not, are not we conceiving the other on analogy with a stone? Does not the radical alterity of the other depend on his being another ego? And does not this otherness depend on this sameness, this dissymmetry on this symmetry? This dependence of his otherness

on his being another ego does not make the other's ego a dependency of mine. It does not make him part of my real economy, because Husserl is describing a transcendental, not a real, economy.

Derrida is here saying about Levinas what was found necessary to say above in chapter 2 about those who contend that the author of the *Cartesian Meditations* espouses metaphysical realism and those who say he espouses metaphysical idealism. Transcendental phenomenological idealism is neutral in the debate between these contenders. The transcendental phenomenological reduction aims to suspend matters of empirical and metaphysical factuality. That is why it would be naive to equate Husserl's appeal to analogical appresentation with the argument from analogy to the existence of other minds. This would be a naivety comparable with the naivety of the supposition that there could be an ontological argument that proves the existence of God. This would be, in Husserl's sense, the naivety of the natural attitude in favor of the world the successful reduction suspends.

Now Levinas is no more intent than Husserl on producing ratiocinative proof of the existence of other minds or of God. We have noticed, however, that his parlance about others is at the same time parlance about God. It draws less on Descartes's fifth Meditation than on the third, but it abstracts from the causal terminology of the latter and from the *theologicality* of both. It abstracts from causality because a cause and an effect are terms within a system. Their causal relation is their way of being together. But the proximity of the face to face is a "relation" of speaking (*langage*). This is why it can be neither theological nor analogical, hence not a topic of a theology of *analogia entis* or a *theologia negativa*. It is not logical. It is paralogical and paradoxical. That is to say, this strange speech-act is beyond the possibility Husserl ascribes to all theoretical and nontheoretical acts of being made the topic of doxic posting.<sup>25</sup> It cannot be named or nominalized. It cannot be said. It would seem, therefore, that it cannot be the topic of a phenomenology of the Husserlian kind, despite the indebtedness Levinas acknowledges to Husserl. This is the source of one of the difficulties Derrida warns us we shall find facing Levinas. Difficulties of which Levinas himself warns us, for example in his title *Difficult Freedom*.<sup>26</sup>

What sort of discourse can this be which is somehow beyond the scope of logic, exterior to what Derrida calls the logical and phenomenological *clôture*? How can there be any saying where what is said is not said within the framework of a language as systematic as that of cause and effect? And would not the description of the structures of that language be a science or a *logos* of the appearance of meaning: a semiology, to use Saussure's word, a phenomenology, to use Husserl's? Now, although part of the subject matter of phenomenology is the essence of facthood or facticity, empirical and any other factuality is excluded by reduction. Yet Levinas, Derrida suggests, seems to want to combine phenomenology with empiricism. A

comparison with Descartes is again relevant. The idea of infinity for Descartes is not adventitious. It is not based on a sensible impression. Nor is it something I make; it is not my fiction, not inventitious. It is innate. But the innateness Descartes attributes to this idea goes along with a sort of adventitiousness in that it comes to me from my Maker—and in so far as Descartes and Malebranche allow that the idea is made by Him, it is to that degree also a fiction. Levinas's account of my idea of the Other draws upon Descartes's account of his idea of the infinite. Hence it is not surprising that on Levinas's account the idea of the Other is also a hybrid, an unstable amalgam of the phenomenological and the empirical. It is somewhat as though Aristotle, having told us that there is no science of the singular, nevertheless proceeded to present one. But somewhat as though only, because, according to Levinas,

The neighbour concerns me with his exclusive singularity without appearing, not even as a *tode ti*. His extreme singularity is precisely his assignation: he assigns me before I designate him as *tode ti*.<sup>27</sup>

Levinas himself frequently says that by the standards of formal logic the instability and difficulty of his account would amount to contradiction.

As when "the Lord spake unto Moses face to face" (Ex. 33 : 11), and as when the Lord called Samuel and the latter replied, "Speak, Master, for thy servant heareth," so does the Other command *me*, and I am ethically and religiously bound to answer, "Here am I," "Lo, here am I," "*me voici*," "*hineni*" (Ex. 3 : 4, Sam. 1, 3 : 4, 6, 8; cf. Gen. 22 : 1, 7, 11). I am beholden. I am the One, as Levinas puts it, using the language of Parmenides. I am (On) It, as children say when playing hide-and-seek. I am uniquely responsible.<sup>28</sup> Levinas thinks that this empirical or, as he would prefer to say, ethical lopsidedness is in conflict with the symmetry Husserl ascribes to the relationship of the ego and the alter ego in the *Cartesian Meditations*. We have seen that Derrida denies there is conflict here. On the contrary, according to him the so-called empirical dissymmetry is possible only because of the transcendental symmetry. Levinas forgets that the ego described in the *Cartesian Meditations* is the transcendental ego, the ego in general. Levinas, though, *qua* philosopher wants to say something about the essence of the face to face. Perhaps there is little to be said about this, and what one says about it seems to leave out what is important. What is important in the discourse of the face to face either does not enter or slips through the net of the said, the *dit*. What is important is the *Dire*, the infinitive calling which is never said. Whatever is said about it calls to be unsaid or, better, dis-said, *dédit*. What is significant in the discourse of the face to face is not what is signified. It is not the meaning or the referent of a sign. Nor is it a sign. It is not and never was present and cannot be represented. To call it a trace is to give it not a name but a pro-name.



Maybe a trace of this pronominal trace can be picked up in the signature, and in the call sign a signaler transmits before his message begins. The call sign and the prefatory "I say" which beckons the person with whom one wants to speak are no more part of the message than is the autograph with which the author signs himself off. Even so, call signs and signatures can be faked, and no single one of them is indubitably authentic. The same applies to them as applies to any pronoun.

The absolutely other (*Autre*) is the Other (*Autrui*). He and I do not form a number. The collectivity in which I say "you" or "we" is not a plural of the "I." I, you—these are not individuals of a common concept. . . . Alterity is possible only starting from *me*.<sup>29</sup>

That the most idiosyncratic of token reflexives is essentially imitable is something that has been maintained by philosophers as different as Hegel and Russell. "I" and "this" and "you" and "that," though not common names, are universal in their use. This is what Derrida demonstrates in his meditation on the various moments in *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence* when Levinas refers to what he is doing in that book "at this very moment".

#### 4. The back of beyond

In his very philosophizing about what is beyond being the author is responding to an ethical call in the face to face with his reader. His reader is therefore, ethically speaking, his *magister*: his teacher and master. One reader, Derrida, comments on the difficulty of philosophizing about what is otherwise than being and beyond essence. Levinas himself comments on this difficulty. Is it a difficulty that amounts to paradox or incoherence? There is nothing paradoxical or incoherent in the idea of philosophical discourse about, say, incoherence or the illogical. The metalanguage may be perfectly coherent and logical. However, Levinas's predicament is different. His philosophical discourse purports to be about all discourse. So there is a self-referentiality that Levinas compares with that of the arguments for scepticism regarding reason which depend on that very reason regarding which it is sceptical. Levinas's predicament is comparable too with Heidegger's embarrassment at having to assert propositions in order to distinguish the assertoric propounding of thoughts from monstrative saying. Heidegger needs to make this distinction in order to bring into the open the difference between the beingness of beings and the truth of being, in order, that is, to reveal that traditional metaphysics conceals the ontological difference. He sees that this difference is concealed again by its name and by his stating that his aim is to return metaphysics to fundamental ontology. Levinas states that his aim is to return so-called fundamental ontology to ethical

metaphysics. It is to penetrate beyond the *logos*, beyond the propositional comprehension of metaphysical ontology, beyond the hermeneutic understanding of Heidegger's fundamental ontology, and beyond the coherent discourse of reason. Nonetheless, in seeking to achieve this aim

one must refer—I am convinced—to the medium of all comprehension and of all understanding in which all truth is reflected—precisely to Greek civilization, and to what it produced: to the *logos*, to the coherent discourse of reason. . . . One could not possibly . . . arrest philosophical discourse without philosophizing.<sup>30</sup>

Levinas's discourse illustrates this. Whereas Heidegger, without denying that being is always being of a being, believes there is need to remind ourselves of the priority of being, Levinas aims to show "The philosophical priority of the existent [*étant*] over being."<sup>31</sup> Levinas's discourse is ontic, discourse about beings. It has that much in common with traditional metaphysical discourse on the being of beings and, despite their declared intentions, with the essentialist ontology of Husserl and the existentialist ontology of Sartre.

However, Levinas's metaphysics is ethical. The ethical would be a mode or region of the ontic as Heidegger uses this term, other modes being the psychological, the biological, and so on. But the ethical in Levinas's sense is not even remotely comparable with any natural or human science. And it is "more original" than fundamental ontology. Yet because the ethical "dimension" in which man ceases to be the measure of all things is a dimension of a being, albeit a dimension in which he transcends himself, one cannot help thinking of this as an ontological mode, as, in a phrase to which Levinas often has recourse, a way (*manière*) of being, a *Seinsweise*, to use Heidegger's word. Hence, notwithstanding Levinas's declared intention to convince his reader that "to exist has meaning in another dimension than that of the perduration of the totality; it can go beyond being,"<sup>32</sup> his rhetoric employs statements like "Being is exteriority."<sup>33</sup> That is, not only does Levinas, as Derrida points out, appear to confirm Heidegger's assertion that one tends to forget the ontological difference, it appears to confirm Heidegger's assertion that language is the house of being. Levinas does not wait for Derrida to tell him that the discourse of the face to face is inscribed within what they both call, following Bataille, the "general economy" of being. Of the many other examples of statements one could cite that, like "Being is exteriority," show that Levinas assumes a fore-understanding of being,<sup>34</sup> here is but one:

A relation whose terms do not form a totality can hence be produced within the general economy of being only as proceeding from the I to the other, as a *face to face*, as delineating a distance in depth—that

of conversation (*discours*), of goodness, of Desire—irreducible to the distance the synthetic activity of the understanding establishes between the diverse terms, other with respect to one another, that lend themselves to its synoptic operation.<sup>35</sup>

This is not a Levinasian version of what among English-speaking philosophers is known as the question whether “ought” can be derived from “is.” Rather, is it a denial that the *being* of alterity is the being of a *thought*. It is a further contribution toward Heidegger’s destruction of the epistemological and perceptual tradition of metaphysics to which those Greek-speaking philosophers Parmenides, Plato, Aristotle, Descartes, Kant, Hegel, and Husserl belong. It does not make the step beyond being and beyond Heidegger announced in the title of the book Levinas published in 1978 and already in a title of a section near the end of *Totality and Infinity*. If the words just cited can be taken at their face value, these titles cannot be taken at theirs. Levinas’s project must then be interpreted in terms of the title of the essay that asks “Is Ontology Fundamental?” He may go some distance toward showing, contrary to Heidegger’s earlier thoughts, that ontology is not fundamental. To this extent he would be in agreement with Heidegger’s later thinking. Indeed, Heidegger’s reflections on the *Ab-grund* are foreshadowed in his earlier reflections on the principle of sufficient reason. True, Levinas stresses a different, ethical, kind of an-archy. But it is difficult to see how this anarchy escapes being an anarchy in being rather than exterior to it, *epekeina tes ousias*, or how this exteriority escapes being an exteriority interior to being.

Derrida’s estimate of Levinas’s predicament is that his statements are symptomatic of a general condition of all statement and thought. They rest on or, rather, restlessly move between an exteriority that is an interiority and an interiority that is an exteriority. The trace of the other is a trace of the trace of the general economy of being for which Derrida also employs the pseudonyms spacing, differance, writing, and so on. Levinas’s predicament is our predicament. In contrasting exteriority with a totalitarian system in which the past is resumed in the future Levinas is forgetting that the time of that Hegelian and Husserlian recuperative history is itself violated by the spacing of a nonphenomenological history which infinitely defers the achievement of absolute knowing and self-identity in the living present of the “at this very moment.” *Totality is Infinity*. Because the “is” is always already erased, just as the said is always already dis-said, intrinsically extrinsic, as though all words were in scare quotes, in that unsteady state in which they are not obviously used or obviously mentioned, but neither and both. The idea that if a word can be mentioned, not used, it must be possible for it to be used and not mentioned is in order. But there is no way of telling of a particular word whether it is being mentioned or used. However clear a speaker may be about his intentions, neither he nor anyone else can state

criteria sufficient to enable one to determine definitely what constitutes a use and what a mention. Derrida, no more than Wittgenstein, believes that this is "ordinarily" or "normally" necessary. But, no less than Wittgenstein, he believes that it is philosophically often thought to be so. And under pressure the most ordinary of us is liable to become a philosopher, to posit foundations, origins, and hidden roots. Preontologically, that is, pretheoretically, ontological as we are, endowed with the Gift of precomprehension of being, we are under the transcendental illusion that being is a metaphor behind which is a literal truth to which the philosopher would have us return. But the literal is a *pharmakon*, both poison and cure. Although the literal truth announces an Apocalypse Now in which the sign and its sense coincide, this coincidence is perpetually postponed.<sup>36</sup> The literal inside story turns out to be a figurative remark in the insecure space-time of nonphenomenological history: a figure of a figure of a face that has never shown itself and will only appear to appear. Literality is metaphor, not the place where metaphor, by backtranslation, comes to a stop, or where its *Bewegung* begins. Therefore not "the face to face . . . where, absolutely present, in his face, the Other—without any metaphor—faces me."<sup>37</sup>

If we think, as we do, that metaphors have a natural home to which they can go back, like letters "returned to sender,"<sup>38</sup> we will be inclined to think that being is a metaphor whose origin it is the philosopher's duty to trace. We have seen that Levinas resists this idea of philosophy as homecoming. His Ulysses remains in exile. Yet even he indulges in the "etymological empiricism" that Derrida calls, with studied irony, the hidden root of all empiricism.<sup>39</sup> Space, exteriority, respiration, inspiration. These are well-worn metaphors for being. Levinas uses them as metaphors for alterity. We have now seen, however, that in spite of his declared intentions his rhetorical practice admits them at the same time as metaphors for and of being. Ontic metaphors too, as ontic as those that have led philosophers to overlook the ontological difference, including, in Derrida's view, the philosopher Emmanuel Levinas:

Because Being is nothing outside the existent, and because the opening amounts to the ontico-ontological difference, it is impossible to avoid the ontic metaphor in order to articulate Being in language, in order to let Being circulate in language.<sup>40</sup>

This ontic metaphorization

explains everything except that at a given moment the metaphor has been thought *as* metaphor, that is, has been ripped apart as the veil of Being. This moment is the emergence of the thought of Being itself, the very movement of metaphoricity. For this emergence still, and always, occurs beneath an *other* metaphor.<sup>41</sup>

Put bluntly, space (and time), exteriority (and interiority), respiration (and nonrespiration), inspiration (and expiration) *are*. To acknowledge this is to let being be. At a given moment in the history of thought, which is the history of being, this letting be of being may call for the thinking of new metaphors—whether they are “poetic” or “scientific” makes no difference (see chapter 9, section 1, above)—while thinking the metaphor *as such*.

Derrida’s way of letting being be and thinking the metaphor as such is to play one against the other and the other against the one. This conrariness is exemplified in the difference between the treatment a writer receives from him in one place and the treatment he receives in another. We have already seen how in *Speech and Phenomena* Derrida questions the compatibility of the principle of all principles, Husserl’s “empiricism,” and Husserl’s admission of fundamental alterity. But faced with Levinas’s questioning of Husserl, Derrida springs to the latter’s defense. This is an illustration of the peaceful violence he asks Levinas to acknowledge when the only violence the latter seems to see is the bellicose violence of totality.

Similarly, when faced with Levinas’s charge that Heideggerian ontology is one of totalitarian violence, Derrida contends that Heidegger shows respect to radical alterity. Being can be oppressive and domineering only if being is a category. But as early as the introduction to *Being and Time*, notes Derrida, Heidegger begins to “destroy” the traditional idea that being is a transcendental concept and to show that it is as “refractory to the category” as is Levinas’s Other.

If to understand Being is to be able to let be (that is, to respect Being in essence and existence, and to be responsible for one’s respect), then the understanding of Being always concerns alterity, and par excellence the alterity of the Other in all its originality: one can have to let be only that which one is not. If Being is always to be let be, and if to think is to let Being be, then Being is indeed the other of thought. But since it is what it is only by the letting be of thought, and since the latter is thought only by virtue of the presence of the Being which it lets be, then thought and Being, thought and the other, are the same: which, let us recall, does not mean identical, or one, or equal.<sup>42</sup>

If Levinas were to reply that respect for radical alterity is accorded only when it is acknowledged that I am ethically responsible to the Other, Derrida could say that this acknowledgment is perhaps implicit in Heidegger’s inclusion of conscience in his table of existentials. Yet in “The Ends of Man” Derrida himself emphasizes the degree to which Heidegger is a philosopher of total presence, of nostalgia for uninterrupted proximity, a philosopher of *hiraeth* for one’s ownmost home.<sup>43</sup> This countersuggestibility on Derrida’s part is not a childish whim to be different. It is a levity with serious intent:

that of showing respect for the texts he faces, for instance for both the *Heimlichkeit* and the *Unheimlichkeit* that are in Heidegger's text at one and the same place and time—and for the sameness and difference that are in the texts of Levinas *en ce moment même*. Where one is inclined to see only sameness, an effort must be made to show that difference is ubiquitous too; and vice versa. Derrida's apparently *ad hominem* polemics are, he would say, excused, if not justified, by the *polemos* of sameness and difference which is the disconcerting condition of thought about either. *Logos* is already outside itself, like being.

And like the book. In *Of Grammatology* Derrida says of Hegel that although, like Plato and Husserl, he is par excellence a philosopher of *Erinnerung* and the living self-presence of speech, he is “also the thinker of irreducible difference”; and that although he is “the last philosopher of the book,” he is also “the first thinker of writing.”<sup>44</sup> Derrida says this in a chapter headed “The End of the Book and the Beginning of Writing.” However, as he makes clear elsewhere, the Book, whether this is Hegel's *Encyclopaedia* or *Science of Logic* or a metaphor for any volume that closes on itself, has no end; and writing does not begin.<sup>45</sup> The *viva voce* is less safe and sound than Socrates believes when, because of that belief, he accords it priority over writing in the *Phaedrus*, a book that both Derrida and Levinas draw on and draw out. The conceptual grip of speech is less securely maintained than he thinks. Its apparently self-enclosed now is at a distance from itself, doubly *ent(-)fernt*, like the spacing of phonetic script. There is no *nunc stans*.

Nor is there the totality. This is one of the lessons Derrida reads in and into the professions of *Totality and Infinity*. What does Levinas find when the roles of professor and reader are reversed?

What stays constructed after de-construction is surely the severe architecture of the discourse which deconstructs and which employs in predicative propositions the present tense of the verb “to be.” Discourse in the course of which, at the very moment when it is shaking the foundations of truth, in face of the evidence of a lived present which appears to offer a last refuge to presence, Derrida still has the strength to say “Is that certain?”, as if anything could be certain at that moment, and as if certainty and uncertainty should still matter.

It would be tempting to appeal to this use of logocentric language against that very language as an objection to the resulting de-construction. An approach often made in the refutation of scepticism which, nevertheless, having been knocked down and trampled under foot, gets up again to become once more the legitimate child of philosophy. An approach which perhaps Derrida himself has not always disdained to follow in his polemics.

But in following this approach there is a risk of failing to recognize the signification effected by the very inconsistency of this procedure; of failing to recognize the incompressible non-simultaneity of the Said and the Saying, the dislocation of their correlation: a minimal dislocation, but wide enough for the words of the sceptic to pass through without being strangled by the contradiction between what is signified by what is *said* in them and what is signified by the very fact of uttering something *said*. As if the two significations lacked the simultaneity needed for contradiction to be able to break the knot in which they are tied. As if the correlation of the *Saying* and the *Said* were a diachrony of what cannot be united; as if the situation of the *Saying* were already a "memory of retention" for the *Said*, but without the *lapsed* moments of *Saying* allowing themselves to be retrieved in this memory.<sup>46</sup>

Otherwise said: Derrida has a keen eye for the diachrony of the said. He locates that diachrony in the dead time of writing with which the living present of the spoken word is engraved. But beyond this diachrony and/or supplementary to it is a radical diachrony which Derrida runs the risk of failing to recognize: a diachrony that is due to the paradoxical tie between the said and the fact of someone's saying something. The paradoxicality, as explained earlier, is the recalcitrance of the uttering to formulation as a proposition that is said. It is because the saying and the said are in this way "refractory to the category" that it and the said are *inassemblable*; they are so incomparable that they resist every attempt to bring them together. They resist *Ereignis*. They resist even the togetherness of logical contradictories. Statements that contradict each other logically are *mutually* contradictory. They are contradictory only because they are posited together at the same time. The contradiction is resolved by asserting them at different times. But the saying and the said are neither at the same time nor at different times. They are *in* different times. So the saying cannot be retrieved in the said.

How does this bode for beyondness and the hermeneutic circle?

The hermeneutic circle, as announced in the Foreword, is "the ontological condition of understanding." More precisely, it is the priority of the existential over the apophantic, the recalcitrance of the existential to the category. Assuming that saying is existential and the said categorial, Heidegger, Gadamer, and Levinas agree that the categorial cannot retrieve the existential without a residual existential trace—and they would agree with Merleau-Ponty's judgment that the lesson the reduction teaches us is the impossibility of a complete reduction. But the Heideggerian existentials are ontological conditions of understanding, whereas saying, Levinas alleges, is beyond ontology and beyond understanding. Further, the Heideggerian existentials constitute time, and although existential temporality is not the same kind of time as the time of the categorized objects about which we assert propositions, the latter is in the former, which is somehow prior.

Admittedly, there remains the difficulty of giving an account of this inclusive priority, the difficulty with which Heidegger is occupied in his extrapolation of Kant's doctrine of schematism. This difficulty has not been resolved. It is not resolved by Heidegger, nor has it been resolved in the deconstructions of Heidegger's doctrines undertaken by Derrida and Levinas. Indicative of this difficulty is Levinas's need to have it both ways: to affirm the radical alterity of the time of the other's saying while granting that irretrievable moments of saying are nonetheless, *as it were*, immemorial memories retained in the same memory with the said. Metaphorically speaking, so to speak.

The difficulty is the difficulty with metaphor. If, as Derrida says, all metaphors are ontic, they will present a difficulty for anyone, like Heidegger, trying to get beyond ontic metaphysics to fundamental ontology, and for anyone, like Levinas, trying to get beyond ontology to ethical metaphysics. "The extraordinary word *beyond*" transmits an ontic metaphor.<sup>47</sup> So too does the word "prior."<sup>48</sup> Therefore, when Derrida and Levinas have begun deconstructing these metaphors we can expect to have difficulty deciding what is prior to what. The apparently secure notion of logical priority will begin to quake, and we may consequently fail to find our feet with Levinas when he says, "The neighbour concerns me outside every *a priori*—but perhaps *prior to every a priori*"<sup>49</sup> When faced with the question whether ontology is beyond metaphysics or metaphysics is beyond being, we may be at a loss for words.

## Notes

- 1 Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*, trans. A. Lingis (The Hague: Nijhoff, 1981), p. 165 [*Autrement qu'être ou au-delà de l'essence* (The Hague: Nijhoff, 1978), p. 210].
- 2 Ibid., and p. 148 [p. 188].
- 3 Edmund Husserl, *Ideas*, I (London: Allen and Unwin, 1931), sec. 117.
- 4 Martial Gueroult, *Descartes selon l'ordre des raisons* (Paris: Aubier, 1953), I, L'Ame et Dieu, p. 229.
- 5 Emmanuel Levinas, *En découvrant l'existence avec Husserl et Heidegger* (Paris: Vrin, 1974), p. 172.
- 6 Gueroult, *Descartes selon l'ordre des raisons*, p. 224.
- 7 Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, p. 116 [p. 147].
- 8 Ibid., p. 112 [p. 143].
- 9 Ibid., p. 121 [p. 156].
- 10 Ibid., (the translation has "with").
- 11 Ibid., p. 114 [p. 146].
- 12 Ibid., p. 115 [p. 146].
- 13 J.-P. Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, trans. Hazel Barnes (London: Methuen, 1969), pp. 83, 92 [*L'Être et le néant* (Paris: Gallimard, 1943), pp. 125–26, 135–36].
- 14 Ibid., pp. xxxivf., xl–xli [pp. 24f., 31–32].
- 15 Emmanuel Levinas, *Existence and Existents*, trans. A. Lingis (The Hague: Nijhoff, 1978), p. 21 [*De l'existence à l'existant* (Paris: Vrin, 1981), p. 26], Levinas, *Ethique et Infini* (Paris: Fayard, 1982) pp. 45ff.



- 16 Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, trans. A. Lingis (The Hague: Nijhoff, 1969), p. 197 [*Totalité et Infini* (The Hague: Nijhoff, 1961), p. 171].
- 17 *Ibid.*, p. 190 [p. 164].
- 18 Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, p. 92 [p. 117].
- 19 Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, pp. 257–60 [pp. 315–18].
- 20 Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, p. 197 [p. 171].
- 21 *Ibid.*, p. 199 [pp. 173–74].
- 22 Emmanuel Levinas, *De Dieu qui vient à l'être* (Paris: Vrin, 1982), p. 239.
- 23 Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, p. 48 [p. 18].
- 24 Husserl, *Ideas*, 1, sec. 24.
- 25 *Ibid.*, sec. 117.
- 26 Emmanuel Levinas, *Difficile liberté: Essais sur le Judaïsme* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1963 and 1976).
- 27 Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, p. 86 [p. 109].
- 28 *Ibid.*, pp. 159, 161 [pp. 124, 126].
- 29 Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, pp. 39–40 [pp. 9–10]; *Otherwise than Being*, p. 159 [p. 202].
- 30 Levinas, *Difficile liberté*, cited at Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference* trans. Alan Bass (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1978), p. 152 [*L'Écriture et la différence* (Paris: Seuil, 1967), p. 226].
- 31 Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, p. 51 [p. 52].
- 32 *Ibid.*, p. 301 [p. 278].
- 33 *Ibid.*, p. 290 [p. 266].
- 34 Some of these are cited by Derrida in *Writing and Difference*, p. 141 [p. 208].
- 35 Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, p. 39 [p. 9].
- 36 See Jacques Derrida, "D'un ton apocalyptique adopté naguère en philosophie," in *Les Fins de l'homme*, ed. Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy (Paris: Galilée, 1981).
- 37 Levinas, *En découvrant l'existence avec Husserl et Heidegger*, p. 196; Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, p. 100 [p. 149].
- 38 Jacques Derrida, *La Carte postale de Socrate à Freud et au-delà* (Paris: Flammarion, 1980).
- 39 Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, p. 139 [p. 203].
- 40 *Ibid.*, p. 138 [p. 203].
- 41 *Ibid.*, p. 139 [p. 204].
- 42 *Ibid.*, p. 141 [p. 207]. See also Heidegger, *Identity and Difference*, and chapter 1, section 3, above.
- 43 Jacques Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), pp. 129ff. [*Marges de la philosophie* (Paris: Minuit, 1972), pp. 155ff.].
- 44 Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1974), p. 41 [*De la grammatologie* (Paris: Minuit, 1967), p. 26].
- 45 Jacques Derrida, *Positions*, trans. Alan Bass (London: Athlone, 1981), p. 14 [*Positions* (Paris: Minuit, 1972), p. 23].
- 46 Emmanuel Levinas, "Tout autrement," *L'Arc: Jacques Derrida*, 54, 1973, p. 35 [*Noms propres* (Montpellier: Fata Morgana, 1976), pp. 85–86].
- 47 Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, p. 19 [p. 16].
- 48 Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, p. 141 [p. 208].
- 49 Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, p. 192, note 20 [p. 109, note 20]. See John Llewelyn, *Derrida on the Threshold of Sense* (London: The Macmillan Press, forthcoming).

## THE LISTENING EYE

Nietzsche and Levinas

*Brian Schroeder*Source: *Research in Phenomenology* 31 (2001): 188–202.**Abstract**

Nietzsche's recognition of existence as an ever-shifting play of surface appearances presages his "revaluation of all values," his response to those who would stabilize becoming by metaphysically reifying it as being. Nietzsche arguably provides Levinas with his deepest ethical challenge. Consequently, Levinas himself undertakes a similar revaluation of the ground of traditional values and of the subject. Both put forth heterodox notions of subjectivity insofar as the subject is constituted by a radical exteriority that is paradoxically realized as such interiorly. However, Levinas repudiates the postmodern conception of the subject as an empty, fragmented phantasm (a position often attributed to Nietzsche), the hollow legacy of a now debunked and defunct modernist project, characterizing his ethical philosophy as a "defense of subjectivity." Nietzsche and Levinas simultaneously invert and intertwine the traditional hierarchical relation between seeing and hearing. In doing so, they reveal essential dimensions of the ethical relationship that would appear to be contradictory, self-negating, or at least incompatible. However, they also have their sights set on a similar site—that of the "eye that listens." This essay interrogates the role that the metaphor of the "listening eye" plays in determining their respective conceptions of subjectivity and ethics. Both employ this provocative and necessarily ambiguous metaphor to emphasize the radical role that teaching plays in their philosophies.

New ears for new music. New eyes for what is most distant. A new conscience for truths that have so far remained mute.

—Friedrich Nietzsche<sup>1</sup>

If, however, sound can appear as a phenomenon, as *here*, it is because its function of transcendence only asserts itself in the verbal sound. To really hear a sound is to hear a word. Pure sound is the word.

—Emmanuel Levinas<sup>2</sup>

An important aspect of so-called postmodernity is its preoccupation with looking, producing a veritable "society of the spectacle."<sup>3</sup> While sight is generally considered the primary empirical sense, the Western hegemony of vision has long included thought as part of its domain. With the notable exception of music, contemporary society's increasing fascination with the image has generated a corresponding alienation from the faculty of hearing. The primacy of the ocular over the auricular is perhaps most apparent in the loss of power afforded the word, both spoken and written, as the principal conveyor of ideas and values, resulting in, among other things, the erosion of any firm valiative ground.

Friedrich Nietzsche's recognition of existence as an ever-shifting play of surface appearances presages his "revaluation of all values," his response to those who would stabilize becoming by metaphysically reifying it as being. The latter-day Hyperborean arguably provides Emmanuel Levinas, perhaps the most original ethical thinker in recent history, with his—and our—deepest ethical challenge.<sup>4</sup> Taking up the thrown glove, Levinas himself undertakes a similar revaluation of the ground of traditional values and of the subject. He postulates ethics as "first philosophy," founded on the visible face to face encounter between the self and the Other (*l'Autrui*),<sup>5</sup> while appealing to a *pre*originary invisible relation. Like Nietzsche's, his philosophy resists being grounded on any traditionally conceived authority such as particular laws and scriptural texts. Much in the sense that Nietzsche invokes the notion of a Dionysian "common faith,"<sup>6</sup> Levinas' unique interpretation of ethics also lays claim to ubiquity. Both put forth heterodox notions of subjectivity insofar as the subject is constituted by a radical exteriority that is paradoxically realized as such interiorly. Whereas the Nietzschean "subject" is a decentered, linguistic construct that is unified and given meaning to by the will to power, the Levinasian subject is founded on the relationship with radical alterity. However, Levinas repudiates the postmodern conception of the subject as an empty, fragmented phantasm (a position often attributed to Nietzsche), as the hollow legacy of a now debunked and defunct modernist project, characterizing his ethical philosophy as a "defense of subjectivity."<sup>7</sup>

The present essay takes this last point as its own site of departure, namely, that the subject is merely an image without substantive identity.

Certainly, the status of the image in philosophy has long been debated. Ever since Plato, philosophy has tried to see, or at least glimpse, the image—often confused with the concept—of truth in thinking. Much of contemporary theory's break with the tradition lies in its effort to eradicate truth and all other transcendental signs and referents in the name of the image, which is to say, in the repetitive, self-referential image of the image.

Nietzsche and Levinas are both nomadic thinkers.<sup>8</sup> But even wanderers move and dwell within a context or region. In addressing the question of where and how to situate Levinas' desert philosophy with regard to his German predecessor's alpine thought, particularly with regard to the notion of subjectivity, I will take recourse to the strange and fertile image of the *listening eye*, a deconstructed trope of simultaneous affirmation and negation evoked by Nietzsche and later by Levinas.

Invoking the climate of Merleau-Ponty's late philosophy,<sup>9</sup> the intertwining, or chiasm, of visibility and aurality will be interrogated from an essentially phenomenological perspective. Nietzsche and Levinas simultaneously invert and intertwine the traditional hierarchical relation between seeing and hearing. In doing so, they reveal essential dimensions of the ethical relationship that would appear to be contradictory, self-negating, or at least incompatible. However, they also have their sights set on a similar site—that of the "eye that listens." Both employ this provocative and necessarily ambiguous metaphor to emphasize the radical role that *teaching* plays in their philosophies.<sup>10</sup>

## I

In *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, Nietzsche's prophetic alter ego commences his "going down" (*Untergehen*) with a solar address, imploring a blessing from the great "quiet eye" (*ruhiges Auge*)<sup>11</sup> on his quest to teach others about self-overcoming (*Selbst-Überwindung*) and the future vision of the overhuman (*Übermensch*). Ironically, it is precisely education (*Bildung*) that prevents Zarathustra's initial audience from truly hearing his message, a learning that often reifies truth, paradoxically internalizing and insulating it by externalizing it, thereby obfuscating or preventing the reception of the revelatory, the new, the different, the other. In frustration and anguish, the teacher of eternal recurrence laments: "Must one smash [*zerschlagen*] their ears before they learn to listen with their eyes [*mit den Augen hören*]?" (*KSA* 4: 18/124).

Taken on its surface level, the expression "to listen with one's eyes" appears nonsensical, as does the madman's lamplit noontime proclamation that God is dead and that we are his murderers. But perhaps the clue to its meaning lies in Nietzsche's early writings. For instance, in the *Nachlaß* (1870–71), he characterizes his philosophy as an "inverted [*umgedrehter*] Platonism" (*KSA* 7: 199) and arguably continues this line of thinking through his final writings.<sup>12</sup> Platonism here is synonymous with truth. In Nietzsche's

protopostmodern eyes, truth is merely a sempiternal flow of “mere” appearances, metaphors, illusions, images without forms, as well as forms without images, like “coins which have lost their picture [*Bild*].”<sup>13</sup> Reversing the Platonic move of situating the source of the interior life (ψυχή) in the exterior beyond (ἐπέκειννα), then following and surpassing Hegel’s lead, Nietzsche is the first in the history of philosophy to effect fully the inwardizing of the purely external as *will*. This inversion both shatters the unity of the totality and leaves in shards the ghostly shell of the greatest of idols, Truth, the monstrous majesty of “monotono-theism” (*KSA* 6: 185/586). Small wonder that Levinas refers to truth as “persecuted!”<sup>14</sup>

Yet, despite his shift from a truth-based to a valuative paradigm, from a scientific to an artistic modality of imaging and interpreting the world, Nietzsche remains bound to the hegemonic tradition of light and vision, and perhaps so at the point where he is most distant from it. “Like the sun, Zarathustra too wants to go under; now he sits here and waits, surrounded by broken old tablets and new tablets half covered with writing” (*KSA* 4: 249/310).<sup>15</sup> The partially inscribed stones bearing the message of redemption (*Erlösung*)—the teaching of eternal recurrence and will to power—necessitate that this is so (*KSA* 4: 177–82/249–54). In the section entitled “On the Vision [*Gesicht*] and the Riddle,” Zarathustra himself is grimly reminded of this by the dwarf, who deftly recasts what was previously imageless into images: “All truth is crooked, time itself is a circle” (*KSA* 4: 200/270). Truth and time are now imaged, *spatialized*, because they are bound to the totality, and not transcendent of it. So while Zarathustra does not, because he cannot, eradicate truth, he does transvalue and *transfigure* it, as does earlier, in a very different way, Plato, and especially his interpreters.

## II

Nietzsche’s reversal is in turn echoed and reversed by Levinas: not as will to power is the subject constituted, but as subjection to the absolutely other that refuses effability, idolization, imaging. Despite his clear attempts to distance himself from it, the shades of (Platonist?) transcendence haunt Levinas’ thinking, in the imageless form of the trace, paradoxically present in the image of the face. Certainly, for Levinas, the status of the image remains problematic given his if not iconoclastic, then certainly aniconic, heritage.<sup>16</sup> The problem is exacerbated by his stance regarding the face of the Other as the simultaneous locus of ethical signification and trace of the (w)hol(l)y other, and by his assertion of the optical nature of ethics, going so far as to qualify it as “the spiritual optics [*l’optique spirituelle*]” (*TI*, 76/78).

The precondition of all vision, perceptual and conceptual, is, as Plato notes, light, which is itself not seen but allows all objects and images to be seen and thus known. However, Plato recognizes something that his interpreters often seem to overlook, namely, that the image and the concept are

not the same, despite their close resemblance. This is not only the basis of the famous ancient quarrel in the *Republic* between the philosophers and the poets, but a cornerstone of Nietzsche's and Heidegger's respective critiques of Platonism and ontotheology. This distinction is also fundamental for Levinas:

The most elementary procedure of art consists in substituting for the object its image. Its image, and not its concept. A concept is the object *grasped*, the intelligible object. Already by action we maintain a living relationship with a real object; we grasp it, we conceive it. The image neutralizes this real relationship, this primary conceiving through action.<sup>17</sup>

However, the issue of the relation between the image and the concept becomes more complicated. On the one hand, Levinas shares the Platonic criticism of art, of the image, as intrinsically removed from truth; yet on the other, he exposes theory, or the hegemony of the concept, as an "imperialism of the same" (*TI*, 9/39). This ambiguous stance serves as the backdrop for the present inquiry. The concern here is not to oppose Nietzsche and Levinas so as to defend one or the other's position, but to reveal the fundamental *tension*, the economy of violence, that is opened in the proximity of their relationship.

In the preface to his first major work *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas calls into question the long association between vision and truth. Vision is introduced in conjunction with the decidedly nonphilosophical phenomenon of prophetic eschatology, which ruptures the totality and results in a meontological reversal of the traditionally construed relation between being and ethics. "The experience of morality does not proceed from this vision—it *consummates* this vision; ethics is an optics. But it is a 'vision' without image, bereft of the synoptic and totalizing objectifying virtues of vision, a relationship or an intentionality of a wholly different type" (*TI*, 8/23). Repeatedly, Levinas employs quotation marks around the term "vision" as if to suggest that this sight is of a different modality than that associated with the eyes. He reinforces the point of an imageless vision, offering a vital clue as to its makeup: "The 'vision' of the face is inseparable from this offering language is. To see the face is to speak of the world. Transcendence is not an optics, but the first ethical gesture" (*TI*, 190/174). And still later in the text, he further darkens the traditional epistemological primacy of vision and the image, rooted in the deep recesses of interiority, while preserving its metaphysical luster: "Vision is therefore a relation with a 'something' established within a relation with what is not a 'something'" (*TI*, 206/189).

Levinas is making several contiguous points. First, the "vision" of the absolutely other, or the Good, is not the phenomenal taking in of an object with eyesight. Second, this apprehending "vision" is not to be construed in

the manner of the comprehending panoramic seeing/knowing of theory. Third, ethics is not synonymous with the light of truth, but is that which brings it to completion. And fourth, this consummation—that is, transcendence as the movement (not telos) of Desire (*Désir*) for the absolutely other, or the Infinite—reveals the “‘vision’ of the face” as originary speech, which is also to say, as an *originary hearing* of the first teaching or instruction, which is *ethics*.

In short, the approach of the face is the moment when theoretical vision is invertedly revealed to consciousness as discourse, as aurality. Emphasizing these words, Levinas avers that “*thought consists in speaking*” (TI, 30/40). Whether he means explicitly to exclude writing here is undetermined, but clearly Levinas privileges the spoken word over the written word. *Pace* Derrida, writing is but an image of thought/speech, potentially neutralizing the ethical command present in the face, even to the point of reifying it as law, thereby stripping away its passive, differential aspect—that is, the very aspect that makes it ethical. Vision is problematized as a ground for ethics since it tends to overshadow and command other mediums of intersubjective exchange such as speech and listening.

### III

Besides the parallels already indicated with Nietzsche, Levinas draws on several other sources worth mentioning. Depending on the reader's perspective, a strength or deficiency of his work is that he engages both the philosophical and scriptural traditions, though he generally, but not always, separates the two discourses.<sup>18</sup> With respect to the latter tradition, numerous references are made throughout his writings to words uttered by the patriarch Abraham and the prophet Isaiah—“Here I am”<sup>19</sup>—as denoting the proper response to the ethical command of the On High, of *Adonai* who hides his countenance. Though the visage of the *En Sof* remains invisible (who can look upon the face of God and live?), the word is still heard, in the silence of memory, as trace. How is this possible? Levinas succinctly spells it out in the opening section of *Totality and Infinity* in what is perhaps his most significant and audacious proposition, one that is fundamentally religious in scope and indicates his break with Western ontology: “The absolutely other is the Other [*L'absolument autre, c'est l'autrui*]” (TI, 28/39). He elaborates this thought toward the end of the book:

Language, source of all signification, is born in the vertigo of infinity, which takes hold before the straightforwardness of the face, making murder possible and impossible . . . In the face, the Other expresses his eminence, the dimension of height and divinity from which he descends. In his gentleness dawns his strength and right.

(TI, 293/262)

Levinas intertwines, without conflating, divinity and humanity, ascent and descent, power and passivity, vision and speech, effectively in(ter)verting their relationship and further signifying the possibility *and* impossibility of ethical responsibility.

Philosophically, Levinas follows suit with Heidegger's and especially Bergson's suspicion of the primacy afforded to vision as the modality by which being (*Sein*; *être*) is understood, also stressing *temporality* as the means for displacing the spatial metaphors predominant in ontotheological metaphysics and science. Both Bergson and Levinas effect a realization of Nietzsche's avowal of the need for a "new 'infinite'" (*KSA* 6: 626/336), one that allows for the plurality of herme-neutic activity, without closure. Vision presupposes the totality as a field of objects. Aurality, on the other hand, perpetually defers and disrupts the totality. "Sound," writes Levinas, "is all repercussion, outburst, scandal" (*OS*, 219/147). Aurality allows a means of encountering, that is, not representing in a totalizing way, becoming and alterity.

Nietzsche's first major published work, *The Birth of Tragedy*, centers on the difference between the Apollinian and Dionysian *Weltanschauungen*, between the rigidity of forms and the fluidity of the formless, the conscious and the unconscious drives, the visual and aural organization and rendering of existence. Nietzsche articulates this difference with reference to the "spirit of music," a theme persistent throughout the course of his writing. "This is what happens to us in music: First one has to *learn to hear* [hören lernen] a figure and melody at all, to detect and distinguish it, to isolate it and delimit it as a separate life."<sup>20</sup> In other words, music is not merely another form of representation immediately present to consciousness. Music is self-revealing, but requires the mediation of education.

Similarly, in what amounts to an address of Nietzsche's concern regarding the possible representation of becoming, Bergson takes recourse to the tonal:

Let us listen to a melody . . . do we not have the clear perception of a movement which is not attached to a mobile, of a *change without anything changing*? This change is enough, it is the thing itself. And even if it takes time, it is still indivisible; if the melody stopped sooner it would no longer be the same sonorous whole, it would be another, equally indivisible. . . . [Without] spatial images, *pure change remains*, sufficient unto itself, in no way divided, in no way attached to a "thing" which changes.<sup>21</sup>

Music, it appears, best approximates the unchanging change of eternal recurrence, the ceaseless differentiating flow of existence, whose terror lies in its refusal to be reduced into an image, whether phenomenal or conceptual. As such, eternal recurrence is pure change itself. Devoid of any stabilizing presence, the eternal recurrence forces one to will a ground, either affirmatively



or nihilistically. But the affirming will is also a nihilistic will insofar as it affirms the transience of all things and the absence of all metaphysical grounds. Conversely, the purely nihilistic will refuses the relentless rhythmic sonority of eternal recurrence, opting instead for the secure, illusory world of imaginary presence. Given that, for Nietzsche, everything is a will, the "best music of the future" is the *active* will.

Though his references to music are few and scattered throughout the corpus of his writing, Bergson's linking of musicality with temporality is not lost on Levinas:

In listening to a melody we are also following its entire duration. . . . the different instants of a melody only exist to the extent that they immolate themselves in a duration, which in a melody is essentially a continuity. Insofar as a melody is being lived through musically, and is not being scrutinized by a professor listening to his [or her] pupil, that is, is not work and effort, there are no instants in the melody. And a melody was, in fact, the ideal model from which Bergson conceived pure duration.<sup>22</sup>

However, despite the inclusion of *durée* into his own conception of time, Levinas is unable to follow either Nietzsche's or Bergson's affirmation of music as what best reveals the essential modality of the self's relation to the other. The problem with music, for Levinas, has to do with its connection to the image.

The image marks a hold over us rather than our initiative, a fundamental passivity. Possessed, inspired, an artist, we say, hearkens to a muse. An image is musical. Its passivity is directly visible in magic, song, music, and poetry.

(CPP, 3)

Though it may initially appear to be the case, Levinas avoids correlating the passivity invoked in the above passage and the passivity attending the comportment of the ethical relationship. In fact, this is a precise moment in which Levinas' Judaism informs his otherwise Greek philosophy. While one can rightly say that the Other exercises a sway, "marks a hold," over the self, it does not result in any qualified annihilation or dissolution of subjectivity, but rather arouses the self to assert itself as subject in the vigilance of responsibility. Levinas castigates music along with magic, song, and poetry because of their fundamentally pagan nature. In other words, because they enchant. This renders the ego-self susceptible to manipulation. Conversely, a subject able of being so dominated is a subject capable of domination. Thus the time that demarcates the ethical relationship can be identified neither with the image (form) nor with music (movement). Perhaps Levinas'

construal of the listening eye refers to that which ascertains this threat—if indeed it is—to realizing ethics in the deeper sense to which his philosophy is committed.

#### IV

Inverting the traditional primacy of the ocular over the auricular signals a similar inversion of theory over praxis, objectivity over subjectivity, truth over actuality. As does Nietzsche in his formulation of eternal recurrence, Levinas also affirms the postmodern (dis)placement of time and space, whose historical beginnings lie with Kant and Hegel, and which are mapped in twentieth century physics.

The truth of being is not the *image* of being, the *idea* of its nature; it is the being situated in a subjective field which *deforms* vision, but precisely thus allows exteriority to state itself, entirely command and authority: entirely superiority. This curvature of the intersubjective space inflects distance into elevation; it does not falsify being, but makes its truth first possible . . . This surplus of truth over being and over its idea, which we suggest by the metaphor of the “curvature of intersubjective space,” signifies the divine intention of all truth. This “curvature of space” is, perhaps, the very presence of God.

(*TI*, 323–24/291)

However, “the infinity of space, like that of the signified to which the sign refers, is nonetheless of this world” (*OS*, 219/147). The revelation of the face is thus a temporal as well as a spatial phenomenon, though what is revealed is prior to temporality, namely, the anarchic trace of the infinitely other, of God *without* image, invisibly present in the oblique camber of exteriority, or alterity.

In the second of his two masterworks, *Otherwise Than Being or beyond Essence*, Levinas claims:

Temporality, in the divergence of the identical from itself, is *essence* and original light, that which Plato distinguished from the visibility of the visible and the clairvoyance of the eye. . . . [Temporality] resounds [*résonne*] for the “eye that listens” [*l’œil qui l’écoute*], with a resonance unique in its kind, a resonance of silence. Expressions such as the eye that listens to the resonance of silence are not monstrosities, for they speak of the way one approaches the temporality of the true, and in temporality being deploys its essence.<sup>23</sup>

In the above passage, three points stand out. First, the phrase “the ‘eye that listens’” (cf. *OB*, 66, 67/37, 38) is placed within quotation marks, presumably

to either indicate a borrowing of the idiom or a desire to emphasize its idiosyncrasy, or both. One can only speculate whence Levinas derives this strange turn of phrase. Consciously or not, perhaps he borrows it from Nietzsche, whom he always reads with an attentive eye (though not necessarily with an attuned ear), retaining the potent mixed metaphor to reveal the paradoxical absolute passive force of the ethical command and demand, the justification of the nudity or exposure of being or essence. For Levinas, the metaphor of the listening eye indicates the approach to move *beyond* the hegemonic image, paradoxically dehierarchizing the relation between the terms visual/aural, sight/sound, seeing/hearing, while maintaining the ethical superiority of the Other. Clearly, or better put, opaquely, the status of Western oculocentrism is rendered problematic by Levinas, as it is by Nietzsche, and arguably in an even more radical way.

Second, Levinas identifies temporality with "essence," his synonym for being, and perhaps more significantly, with "original light." Time is a perennial problem for philosophy. Unlike spatiality, where change is seen and permanence imaged, or at least imagined (the bliss of Apollo, ironically also the cruelest of the Greek gods), temporality's terror (death) and comfort ("this too shall pass") lies both in its seeming elusive emptiness, its nonphenomenality, and endless repetition. Continually frustrated, philosophy vainly attempts to capture temporality in thought, that is, reduce it to an image, a concept, but at the same time maintain that it is more than a mere sign.

Finally, Levinas refers to temporality as that paradoxical silent sound heard/seen by the listening eye. Even Nietzsche's "greatest thought," that of the eternal recurrence, as its very teacher, Zarathustra, must be reminded, is unable to be fully imag(in)ed.<sup>24</sup> The cycles of Dionysus remain forever bound to mysteries despite the best efforts of modernity to demystify them. Zarathustra's exasperation stems from his listeners' failure to *intuit* the content of his teachings. Similarly, Bergson stresses intuition as the primary means by which one apprehends process, as does Levinas: "sound, in turn, offers itself to intuition, can be given" (*OS*, 219/147). However, the ethical teaching here is not intuited, but *produced* in the subject as a "psychism" (*TI*, 46/54). For Levinas, the diapasonic echo of the listening eye is the infinite reverberation of the "already said" (*OB*, 280/183), the trace of a remote, never present, immemorial past.<sup>25</sup> "It is thus that the sound is symbol *par excellence*—a reaching beyond the given" (*OS*, 219/148).

## V

But Nietzsche's greatest thought is also his "most terrible." Similarly, for Levinas, that which produces the ethical sensibility is inextricably linked to, though not the same as, that which produces the deepest horror of existence. Resonating Nietzsche's asseveration that "there is nothing more terrifying [*Furchtbarereres*]<sup>26</sup> than infinity" (*KSA* 3: 480), Levinas writes, "the

silence of infinite spaces is terrifying" (*TI*, 208/190–91). It is altogether significant that Levinas does not say infinite time, but rather spaces. Nietzschean chaos is the endless layering of masks, of Apollinian images covering Dionysian depths. The "there is" (*il y a*) is the totality's sonorous silence, likened to a relentless "buzzing [*bourdonnement*]" (*OB*, 254/163)<sup>27</sup> or "bustling [*remue-ménage*]" (*OB*, 271, 280/176, 183). This distinctive *nonimage* permeates Levinas' writings, and signifies the anonymous, frightening aspect of the sheer indefiniteness of being (not absolute alterity) that sub-tends the existential experiences of the *nil* and the nocturnal.

But as the tie, and so the feud, is forever between the brothers Apollo and Dionysus (and, it would seem, between Nietzsche and Levinas), so too is it the case that the face is never completely successful in warding off the imageless void.

In driving out darkness the light does not arrest the incessant play of the *there is*. . . . But vision in the light is precisely the possibility of forgetting the horror of this interminable return, this *apeiron*, maintaining oneself before this semblance of nothingness which is the void, and approaching objects as though at their origin, out of nothingness. This deliverance from the horror of the *there is* is evinced in the contentment of enjoyment. . . . Vision is not a transcendence.

(*TI*, 208/190–91)

Still, only the face, for Levinas the consummate image, arrests the indeterminate horror of the *il y a*, deeper than the *Angst* provoked by nothingness, which is barely distinguishable from it. While there is also a troubling vagueness to the Infinite, one that comprises its not to be ignored dimension as *mysterium tremendum*, unlike this wholly other (*tout autre*), the *il y a* is *without* image contact. In other words, there is no face (*visage*) to the *il y a*;<sup>28</sup> it is the nameless, maskless, inescapable potential violence of sheer existence that remains even after the nothing (*das Nichts*; *le néant*) has dissipated.

It is difficult not to think of the will to power when considering a persistently looming violence such as the *il y a*, and this is not lost on Levinas. Apart from the listening eye, both Nietzsche and Levinas invoke another metaphoric image that crosses the blurred boundaries of sight and sound, that of the *hammer*. Nietzsche's often hyperbolic metaphors (for example, war, destruction, smashing, breaking) have led many readers to construe his thinking in excessively violent terms. In this regard, Levinas is no exception, eyeing "a new tone in philosophy, which Nietzsche took up when he began to philosophize 'with the blows of a hammer'" (*NP*, 84/72). But perhaps here Levinas fails to tune in to his own listening eye: he seemingly overlooks Nietzsche's preference for "*sounding out idols*" (*Götzen aushorchen*)—and tin ears!—rather than merely pulverizing them: "With a creative [*schöpferischer*] hand [*genuine philosophers*]" reach for the future,

and all that is and has been becomes a means for them, an instrument, a hammer."<sup>29</sup> Acknowledging in the preface to one of his last essays, *Twilight of the Idols*, that besides being "a recreation, a spot of sunshine," the work is also "a great declaration of war," Nietzsche writes, summoning yet again the intertwined relation between the visual and the aural:

There are more idols than realities in the world: that is *my* "evil eye" for this world: that is also my "evil ear." For once to pose questions here with a *hammer*, and, perhaps, to hear as a reply that famous hollow sound which speaks of bloated entrails—what a delight for one who has ears even behind his ears . . . before whom that which would remain silent must become outspoken. . . . and regarding the sounding of idols, this time they are not just idols of the age, but eternal idols, which are here touched with a hammer as with a tuning fork.<sup>30</sup>

Nietzsche acknowledges the necessity of a certain violence in intersubjective relationships that is not only unavoidable, but also unhealthy if not indulged. He does not offer a typology of this violence, since every action, event, becoming can only be valued from the standpoint or perspective of that happening. In actuality, it is more a question of the *degree* of violence necessitated by any given moment. For Nietzsche, quality is inseparable from quantity and locked in the economy of activity and reactivity.

Despite his rejection of a pure exteriority on the grounds that it would result in the possibility of an absolute violence, Nietzsche agrees with Levinas that the totality is the primordial scene of violence. Both are thinkers of the totality (though not necessarily affirmers) inasmuch as the totality is the "gateway Moment [*Torwege Augenblick*]" (*KSA* 4: 200/270), "the entry [*d'entrée*]" (*TI*, 25/36) wherein exteriority and interiority meet but do not coalesce. The totality is always fragile, fragmented, and violent. For Nietzsche, the totality (re)sounds the herald call of the will to power. For Levinas, it is the meeting ground for the concrete face to face encounter between the self and the Other, the moment when the ethical relationship is established. Nietzsche's freely admitted violence, however, is carried out by the spirit of music, by a tonal purity that shatters all that is poorly cast. The violence of the Yes-sayer is that of the lightest touch, the glancing blow that frees the interior life from the tyranny of exteriority, from truth conceived as image or form. Levinas' eye also sees and listens neither to this truth, but to the formless commanding difference of the absolutely other in the face of the all too human Other.

## VI

The profound question that Levinas raises, and that separates him from Nietzsche, is whether the power of the listening eye extends *beyond* being,

beyond the mere play of surface appearances: not to a deeper image, but perhaps to another, *higher* site/sight, an opening away from the visibly perceived to the invisibly attuned. Goethe's words in *Faust*, cited by Nietzsche—"Here the vision [*Aussicht*] is free, the spirit exalted"—are certainly apropos. However, Nietzsche continues, mindful of the need for another form of vigilance other than that of responsibility for the other: "But there is an opposite type of man that is also on a height and also has free vision—but looks *down*" (*KSA* 5: 232/227).

"A new conscience for truths that have so far remained mute." Thus teaches Nietzsche. "Pure sound is the word." Thus teaches Levinas. Can this word be this new conscience? Or are Nietzsche and Levinas estranged at this point? The issue revolves around the status of the trace and the silence that attends it. Nietzsche's listening eye zeroes in on the pure silence, the void, left by the death of God. For him, this means learning that everything is will to power, that self-overcoming, reaching its pinnacle in the *Übermensch*, is the "meaning of the earth" (*KSA* 4: 14/125). Unfortunately, left only to intuition to ascertain its meaning, this is a learning too often dissociated or divorced from ethics. Hence Zarathustra's distress. Levinas' listening eye, on the other hand, can only maintain that the word is ethical if it *affirms* the silent absence as the trace of the absolutely other in the face of the Other: "To see a face is already to hear: You shall not kill."<sup>31</sup> But despite their differences—and in celebration of them—for both, what fills out the "word" is *teaching*.

## Notes

- 1 Friedrich Nietzsche, *Der Antichrist*, vol. 6 of *Sämtlich Werke. Kritische Studienausgabe*, ed. G. Colli and M. Montanari (Berlin and München: Walter de Gruyter and Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag, 1980), 167; translated and edited by W. Kaufmann under the title *The Antichrist*, in *The Portable Nietzsche*, trans. and ed. W. Kaufmann (New York: Viking, 1954), 568. Henceforth cited as *KSA*.

A slash mark will be employed to distinguish between all following original text paginations and those of the English translation cited parenthetically in the text.

- 2 Emmanuel Levinas, *Hors Sujet* (Montpellier: Fata Morgana, 1987), 219; translated by M. B. Smith under the title *Outside the Subject* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994), 148. Henceforth cited as *OS*.
- 3 Cf. Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, trans. D. Nicholson-Smith (New York: Zone Books, 1994).
- 4 On the possibility of establishing a Levinasian conception of ethics after Nietzsche, see Silvia Benso, "Levinas: Another Ascetic Priest?" *Journal of the British Society for Phenomenology* 2 (1996): 137–56. For an affirmative interpretation of the relation between Nietzsche and Levinas, see Brian Schroeder, *Altared Ground: Levinas, History, and Violence* (New York: Routledge, 1996), 129–47. For a negative interpretation, see Richard A. Cohen, *Elevations: The Height of the Good in Rosenzweig and Levinas* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1994).

- 5 The convention established, with Levinas' approval, in translating *autrui*/ *Autrui* (the other person/s) as "Other" with a capitalized "O" and *autrelAutre* (otherness in general; alterity) as "other" will be followed.
- 6 Cf. Paul Valadier, "Dionysus Versus the Crucified," trans. K. Wallace, in *The New Nietzsche*, ed. D. B. Allison (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1985), 258 n. 1: "We know Nietzsche's reluctance to speak of 'religion,' although, by way of Dionysus, he introduces the term 'common faith,' and in many texts he asserts that believers are not necessarily religious."
- 7 Emmanuel Levinas, *Totalité et Infini. Essai sur l'extériorité*. Le livre de poche (La Haye: Martinus Nijhoff, 1971), 11; translated by A. Lingis under the title *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969), 26. Henceforth cited as *TI*.
- 8 Cf. Gilles Deleuze, "Nomad Thought," trans. D. B. Allison, in *The New Nietzsche*, 142–49.
- 9 Cf. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, trans. A. Lingis (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1969).
- 10 On the dimension of pedagogy in Levinas, particularly with regard to the relationship between vision and hearing, cf. Brian Schroeder, "Breaking the Closed Circle: Levinas and Platonic *Paideia*," *Dialogue and Universalism* 8, no. 10 (1998): 97–106.
- 11 *KSA* 4: 12; *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* in *The Portable Nietzsche*, 122.  
Krell translates *ruhiges* as "tranquil." Cf. David Farrell Krell and Donald L. Bates, *The Good European: Nietzsche's Work Sites in Word and Image* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), 172. The word can be rendered either in terms of sound (quiet, silent, still) or movement (tranquil, still, restful); and given Nietzsche's textual context, either sense is applicable. However, for the purposes of the present essay, I will retain Kaufmann's translation.
- 12 Cf. John Sallis, *Crossings: Nietzsche and the Space of Tragedy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), esp. 2–4. Sallis notes that Heidegger determines Nietzsche's early "inversion" as a "only a preview" to a later (1888), significantly different "twisting free" (*Heraudrehung*) from Platonism, in which "the boundless" (*das Masslose*) emerges coextensively with Nietzsche's madness. Sallis frames his study within this critical difference between Nietzsche's attempts to articulate the overturning of Platonism.
- 13 *KSA* 1: 881; "On Truth and Lie in an Extra-Moral Sense," in *The Portable Nietzsche*, 47.
- 14 Emmanuel Levinas, *Nom Propres* (Montpellier: Fata Morgana, 1976), 84; translated by M. B. Smith under the title *Proper Names* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996), 77. Henceforth cited as *NP*.
- 15 Levinas echoes Zarathustra's predicament: "Clearly, in its written form, critique always attracts further critique. Books call for more books, but that proliferation of writing stops or culminates the moment the *living word* enters in, the moment critique flowers into *teaching*" (*OS*, 220/149; emphasis added).
- 16 Levinas addresses the question of prohibiting the representation of "certain images in the Jewish tradition" in *Altérité et transcendance* (Montpellier: Fata Morgana, 1995); translated by M. B. Smith under the title *Alterity and Transcendence*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 121–30.
- 17 Emmanuel Levinas, "Reality and Its Shadow," in *Collected Philosophical Papers*, trans. and ed. A. Lingis (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1987), 3. Henceforth cited as *CPP*.
- 18 This has led to the charge that he is still enmeshed within the very metaphysics or ontology that he seeks to displace, an issue that this essay will leave untouched.

- 19 Cf. Genesis 22:1, 7, 11; RSV.
- 20 *KSA* 5: 559; *The Gay Science*, trans. W. Kaufmann (New York: Vintage, 1974), 262.
- 21 Henri Bergson, *The Creative Mind*, trans. M. A. Anderson (New York: Philosophical Library, 1946), 174; emphasis added.
- 22 Emmanuel Levinas, *De l'existence à l'existant* (Paris: Fontaine: 1947; reprint, Paris: J. Vrin, 1984), 46; translated by A. Lingis under the title *Existence and Existents* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1978), 32. Henceforth cited as *EE*.
- 23 Emmanuel Levinas, *Autrement qu'être ou au-delà de l'essence*. Le livre de poche (La Haye: Martinus Nijhoff, 1974), 54; translated by A. Lingis under the title *Otherwise Than Being or beyond Essence* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1978), 30. Henceforth cited as *OB*.
- 24 In the context of a discussion on the contributions of Nietzsche, Heidegger and Levinas to the question of religion, Vattimo writes: "Philosophy might do better to think of itself as a critical listening—and thus as recollecting the *Ge-Schick* of Being, its *Schikungen*—to the call that only becomes audible in the condition of inauthenticity itself, which for its part is no longer conceived as structural, but as linked to the event of Being, and in this case to the giving of Being in the final moment of metaphysics" (Gianni Vattimo, "The Trace of the Trace," in *Religion*, ed. J. Derrida and G. Vattimo [Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998], 84).
- 25 Cf. Emmanuel Levinas, "Diachrony and Representation," in *Time and the Other*, trans. R. A. Cohen (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1987), 111–14.  
Put differently, the "subordination" of the ethical Saying (*le Dire*) to the ontological Said (*le Dit*) is a reduction whereby the Saying goes beyond the Said, being prior to the Said, and is yet paradoxically "absorbed and died in the Said [*s'absorbait et mourait dans le Dit*]" (*OB*, 64/36).
- 26 Walter Kaufmann translates this term as "awesome"; R. J. Hollingdale, as "frightful."
- 27 Elsewhere, the term *bruissement* is used. Cf. Emmanuel Levinas, *Éthique et infini* (Paris: Librairie Arthème Fayard et Radio-France, 1982), 51; translated by R. A. Cohen under the title *Ethics and Infinity* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1985), 52. Henceforth cited as *EI*.
- 28 It is interesting to note that Heidegger writes that one is brought "face to face" with nothingness in the fundamental mood of *Angst*. Cf. Martin Heidegger, "What is Metaphysics?" in *Basic Writings*, trans. and ed. D. F. Krell (New York: Harper & Row, 1977), 102.
- 29 *KSA* 5: 145; *Beyond Good and Evil*, trans. W. Kaufmann (New York: Vintage, 1966), 136.
- 30 *KSA* 6: 57–58; *Twilight of the Idols*, in *The Portable Nietzsche*, 465–66.
- 31 Emmanuel Levinas, *Difficile liberté. Essais sur le judaïsme*, 3rd ed. (Paris: Albin Michel, 1976), 21; translated by S. Hand under the title *Difficult Freedom: Essays on Judaism* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990), 8.



# BREAKING THE CLOSED CIRCLE

Levinas and Platonic *paideia*

*Brian Schroeder*

Source: *Dialogue and Universalism* 8(10) (1998): 97–106.

The Place of the Good above every essence is the most profound teaching, the definitive teaching, not of theology, but of philosophy.

—Emmanuel Levinas<sup>1</sup>

## Abstract

Levinas' philosophy is in part predicated on a retrieval or recasting of select Platonic motifs, yet his relationship to such thinking is frequently, and necessarily, ambiguous. While refraining from the often hyperbolic language of Nietzsche's reversal or inversion of "Platonism," Levinas' more sober approach effects both a radical turn away from and toward, Plato's teaching on *paideia*. Echoing Nietzsche's injunction that the teacher is sometimes a "necessary evil," and calling into question the visual luminescence of the so-called Platonist "doctrine" of forms (*eidē*), and the closed interiority of the subject in which they are instilled, I propose a Levinasian-oriented metapaideiac model based on the primacy of the exteriority of hearing, and thus of dialogue, as that which comes from a height, from a nondominating "mastery." I reconsider Plato's image of *paideia*, the essence of which is "turning around" and Levinas' rejection of the Socratic maieutic method of elenchus in an effort to advance the question of whether a universal conception of ethics can be taught, and if so, how teaching produces ethics.

Since the days of its Greek inception, the guiding paradigm of Western education (*paideia*) has been the pursuit of truth (*alētheia*), though in late modern thinking perhaps no notion has been more assaulted than this and rendered problematic. Following the groundbreaking leads of Friedrich Nietzsche and Ludwig Wittgenstein, contemporary philosophy has reoriented itself, in large measure, toward language analysis (for example, phenomenology, hermeneutics, analytic philosophy, semiotics/semiology, and deconstruction), calling into question the ancient construal of truth as *adaequatio rei et intellectus*. But there is yet another critique of the privileged hegemony long enjoyed by truth that has increasingly gained momentum of late, that from the perspective of *ethics*, which has steadily eroded, in many thinkers' minds, the seeming impregnable epistemological moorings of philosophical thought. Arguably, the philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas stands at the forefront of this radical reassessment, and, ironically, develops much of its impetus from the figure in philosophy associated with founding the transcendent conception of truth, namely, Plato.

Philosophy since Plato has been an endeavor to catch sight of the *image* of truth in thinking. Levinas branches off Martin Heidegger, who locates the origin of ontotheological metaphysics in Plato's shifting of the meaning of *alētheia* from its pre-Socratic meaning as unhiddenness to *orthotēs* (correctness of apprehension; seeing as intellection), thereby setting into play Western scopophilia. Charging philosophy (including Heidegger's) not only with overemphasizing the roles that light and vision have played in determining the ground (or grounds) of truth, meaning, and teaching, but with advancing a *neutral* conception of being that ultimately either negates or glosses over the difference of alterity, Levinas avers: "We find this schema of vision from Aristotle to Heidegger. In the light of generality which does not exist is established the relation with the individual" (*TeI* 206; *TI* 189). Propounding in turn "the teaching quality of all speech" (*TeI* 98; *TI* 96), he proffers a radically different model of education (*metapaideia*), based not on the primacy of vision and the image, but on the exteriority of hearing, and consequently of dialogue, as that which comes from a height (*hauteur*), from beyond (*au-delà*), from a nondominating Mastery (*Maîtrise*).

Levinas' philosophy is predicated, to some extent, upon a retrieval or recasting of select Platonic motifs, prompting a turning that, arguably, both overcomes and returns to the ground of Western philosophy:

Platonism is overcome with the very means which the *universal thought* issued from Plato supplied. . . . to catch sight, in meaning, of a situation that precedes culture . . . is to return to Platonism *in a new way*. It is also to find oneself able to judge civilizations on the basis of ethics.<sup>2</sup>

Refraining from the often hyperbolic language of Friedrich Nietzsche's critique of Platonism, Levinas' more sober approach effects both a radical

move away from and toward the Platonic teaching on *paideia*, as well as transcendence, a critical notion since "it places us beyond the categories of being. We thus encounter," he says, "in our own way, the Platonic idea of the Good beyond being" (*TeI* 326; *TI* 293).

In its own way, the present study reconsiders the Platonic conception of *paideia*, and takes up Levinas' rejection of Socratic maieutics as espoused in *Theaetetus*, in an effort to advance the question of whether a *universal* conception of ethics can be taught, and if so, then how teaching (*enseignement*) produces it.

1

Certainly one of philosophy's more memorable images is that of the cave in *Republic* 7. Its opening sentence<sup>3</sup> not only introduces this image (*eikon*), it is vital for grounding the appraisal of *paideia* that follows. Depending on the translation, the sentence can either emphasize "our nature" (*phusin*) or the essence of education (*paideia*) and its lack (*apaideusia*).<sup>4</sup> Generally, the sentence is rendered (to use two familiar and respected translations) as either, "compare our nature in respect of education and its lack to such an experience as this . . ."<sup>5</sup> or, "compare the effect of our education and the lack of it on our nature to an experience like this . . ."<sup>6</sup> A literal translation would support the former example, but rarely, if ever, are translations straightforward. The point is that Plato is often a deliberately ambiguous writer, and it is precisely this aspect of his thinking that preserves an operative sense of difference in an otherwise aspired to context of universality. In other words, Plato is a fundamentally *hermeneutical* thinker.<sup>7</sup>

Arguably, *Republic* is the centerpiece of Plato's corpus of writing, and has often been read as his eminent contribution (along with *Statesman*, *Laws*, and *Seventh Letter*) to political discourse. The *Republic* is less widely interpreted as a treatise primarily focused on the essence of *paideia*, and it is from this standpoint that I proceed. Clearly, education and politics are linked in *Republic*, though emphasizing one aspect over the other renders a significantly different text. Contrary to the anti-Platonism that permeates contemporary philosophy,<sup>8</sup> Levinas' construal of transcendence as immanent ethics functions as a corrective of sorts to interpretations of Plato that emphasize a near dogmatic conception of transcendental universalism.

Plato's narrative of the cave, besides being an ontological explanation of the preceding so-called divided line analogy, is readily interpreted, and with good reason, in terms of the numerous prevalent thematics of light and darkness, represented in the ascent and the descent of the prisoner, of coming to know the truth for him or herself, and of assisting others to turn around to begin the journey out of the cavern of ignorance. This sojourn is marked by intervals of increasing understanding or enlightenment, alternating with intervals of relative darkness accompanying the temporary blindness

of visual/cognitive adjustment. It is the cycle of emergence and return, the “turning around [*periagōgēs*]” (*Republic*, 518d) of the sojourner, which constitutes the essence of *paideia*, and only then leads to the political establishment of justice or social order (*dikē*) in the *polis*.

What is Plato’s primary agenda in relating the cave allegory? Is it to demonstrate that, or how, the essence of *paideia* affects human nature in general? Or does he intend, in line with his earlier exposition of the tripartite composition of the soul (*psuchē*) (*Republic*, 435c–441c), to unveil or bring to light (*alētheia*) something forgotten, hidden, concealed—our nature (*phusin*)? Perhaps Plato deliberately leaves his intention unclear in order to signify that there is no essential fixed human nature, and that *phusin* is determined dialectically, thereby joining the insights rendered through the observation of natural being (*phusis*), the examination of our own interior ideas and actions, and by the exterior influence of alterity, visible and invisible. It is certainly debatable whether Plato intended *phusin* to refer to human beings in general, or to the Athenians in particular. In any case, it is generally accepted that the cycle of ascent and descent functions as an analogy for the epistemic process of the soul’s recollection (*anamnēsis*) of previously acquired knowledge. And on most interpretations, Platonic *paideia* corresponds to the maieutic method of *elenchus* demonstrated by Socrates in the dialogues, that is, the calling forth of what is already possessed through judicious question and answer.

## 2

Regarding the status of *paideia*, particularly in relation to that most exalted of images, that of the Good, the philosophies of both Plato and Levinas are paradoxical and ambivalent. Outside the reaches of rational comprehension, Plato stipulates that “the Good itself is not being but beyond being,”<sup>9</sup> and Levinas, who draws much inspiration from this formulation, seems, at least initially, to offer little in terms of explicating this enigmatic proposal. On the one hand, Levinas affords vision, and especially that of the Good, a paramount “place” in his philosophy as it is precisely the face-to-face relationship that opens up the possibility of ethics. Yet on the other, he ardently criticizes the privileged and near hegemonic role assigned vision by an “ontological”<sup>10</sup> tradition—philosophical, theological, and scientific—that has intertwined the sensible and the intelligible image.

The provocation of Levinas’ reformulation of Platonic transcendence lies in its connection to the idea of infinity ventured by René Descartes, as the idea “put in me,”<sup>11</sup> which “breaks with the prejudice of maieutics without breaking with rationalism, since the idea of infinity, far from violating the mind, conditions nonviolence itself, that is, establishes ethics. To think is to have the idea of infinity, or to be taught. *Rational thought refers to this teaching*” (*TeI* 224; *TI* 204; emphasis added). Despite recent attempts to cast

him into the camp of so-called "postmodernity," Levinas neither abandons transcendence to the critiques of incoherency (Aristotle), irrationality (Immanuel Kant), or nihilism (Nietzsche) levied against it, nor gives it over to the naïve celebration of postmodern unknowability. Though he affirms difference as primary, Levinas is decidedly non-postmodern in his affirmation of metaphysical transcendence, and perhaps above all, in his indebtedness to the Platonic insight that the Good lies beyond being or essence, and therefore truth. But how does one arrive at this "most profound teaching?" Where it first takes on meaning, says Levinas—in the order of society (*TeI* 106; *TI* 103). However, he qualifies: "*Society does not proceed from the contemplation of the true*; truth is made possible by the relation with the Other our Master. Truth is thus bound up with the social relation, which is justice . . . [and] coincides with the overcoming of rhetoric" (*TeI* 68–69; *TI* 72; emphasis added). Sophistry, in its myriad forms over the centuries, represents a continual threat not only to the educational process but also to society at large, and here Levinas stands on the same ground as his Greek predecessors.

Yet Levinas' relation to Socratic-Platonic thinking is also double-edged. Acknowledging that "Socratic maieutics prevailed over a pedagogy that introduced ideas into a mind by violating or seducing (which amounts to the same thing) that mind" (*TeI* 185–86; *TI* 171), he nevertheless breaks with that tradition on the issue of the teacher-student relationship: "Teaching is a discourse in which the Master can bring to the student what the student does not yet know. It does not operate as maieutics, but continues the placing in me of the idea of infinity" (*TeI* 196; *TI* 180). Levinas' own teaching on *paideia* is metapaideiic in that its point of departure and, ultimately, its orientation is beyond the one who receives it: "Teaching is a way for truth to be produced such that it is not my work, such that I could not derive it from my own interiority" (*TeI* 328; *TI* 295). Only thus is the justice of society established and sustained.

True to the paradox of the ethical relation to which his thinking unwaveringly testifies, what is most disturbing about Levinas is also that which is most compelling, namely, the claim that meaning, truth itself, is founded first of all in ethics: "Ethics is first philosophy" (*TeI* 340; *TI* 304).<sup>12</sup> This succinct statement is nothing less than a veritable challenge to the entire legacy of Western philosophy at its core, and most manifestly to Aristotle's proclamation that *protē philosophia* is *theōria*:<sup>13</sup> "A philosophy of power, ontology is, as first philosophy which does not call into question the same, a philosophy of injustice" (*TeI* 38; *TI* 46). However, this is not to effect a mere dialectical reversal of the terms "ethics" and "theory"; rather, Levinas puts forth the extraordinary claim that philosophy, reason itself, is the product of a signification that is preconceptual and prelinguistic. The revelation (not to be confused with Heideggerian *Unverborgenheit*) of the face in its very nudity and defenselessness is the appeal of the Other (*l'Autrui*)<sup>14</sup> to the

self to respond, to assume responsibility not only for itself, but for all others (*autres*) as well. This is the primordial teaching, this impossible infinite demand, which “in its nonviolent transitivity the very epiphany of the face is produced” (*TeI* 43; *TI* 51), opening the possibility of discourse, enabling not only the self to respond, but also making theorizing itself possible, thereby *producing* truth.<sup>15</sup>

Prior to speech or discourse, “the first teaching of the teacher,” says Levinas, “is his [or her] very presence as teacher from which representation comes” (*TeI* 102; *TI* 100). The irreversible asymmetry of this relation is the locus of truth, the exercise of egological freedom, but made possible only when “challenged by a Master who can invest it” (*TeI* 104; *TI* 101). Truth is fundamentally social; only between free beings does sociality thrive. The veracity of truth, hid by the reciprocity of dialogue, is its subordination to goodness: *justice* precedes individual freedom.

### 3

Let us return to the themes with which this meditation commenced, namely, light and vision. For most of its history, philosophy has taken recourse to the visible image of light to signify both the domain and power of truth. This is demonstrated in the trajectory of thinking from Socrates/Plato to Heidegger himself, as witness the central role afforded to the concept of the *Lichtung* by Heidegger. However, qualifies Levinas,

the image immediately welcomed without undergoing modifications is a sensible image. But the divergency between the image and the whole prevents the image from remaining in its fixity; it must stand at the confines of itself or beyond itself, so that truth can not be incomplete or one-sided. The image has to signify the whole. Truth consists in a being whose images are its reflection, but also its symbol, being identified through new images.<sup>16</sup>

The connections between vision and knowing, light and truth, are well known, and there is no need to elaborate further on these. Suffice it to say that ontology, in Levinas’ particular, and somewhat peculiar, sense of the term, is aligned with theory, “imperialistic” in and through its complicity with light metaphysics. To the archparadigm of truth is opposed the Platonic inspired vision of the Good. But goodness itself is the Invisible. How then does one “see” the source, this paradoxical groundless ground, of ethical valuation?

Recall again the parable of the cave. The unfettered prisoner (or student), in the depths of the cavern, turns around, not through his or her own initiative, but in response to the voice of the master (or teacher), who urges the student to begin the arduous ascent toward individual freedom and

enlightenment. Able to see only in the nether shadow light, the master's full countenance is initially hidden from the prisoner, though present in its absence. But "[s]peech cuts across [*tranche*] vision" (*TeI* 212; *TI* 195). The master's voice is heard, as from a height, commanding the freed one to command him or herself,<sup>17</sup> to overcome the apprehensions and fears surrounding the unknown lights now faced. Among "truths that are transmissible and necessary," society must "teach the new generations the strength necessary to be strong in isolation, and all that a fragile consciousness is called upon to contain at such times."<sup>18</sup> Only after receiving this initial teaching, which instills in the student the realization that s/he is not alone and thus secure, causing a deeper anxiety and discomfort than that produced by the firelight in the eyes, does the journey toward selfhood and knowing truly begin.

The above explication of the cave allegory does not purport to be either the true or correct interpretation, or to represent Levinas' own reading of it; but in the spirit of Platonic speculative hermeneutics, he does proffer the means for yet another way of explaining this parable. Levinas undermines the privileged role afforded to vision and light as metaphors for knowledge and truth in thinking. The first teaching—*ethics*—is the teaching that *opens the possibility of all subsequent teaching*. Its modality of expression, elicited by and through the visual *face-to-face* encounter, prior to speech or discourse, does not reveal truth as an image, model, representation, form, or idea. However,

[t]his absolute experience of the face to face . . . would for Plato be inconceivable without the interposition of the Ideas . . . [and] the notion of an Idea is in the last analysis tantamount to the transmutation of the other into the Other. . . . Thought, for Plato, is not reducible to an impersonal concatenation of true relations, but implies persons and interpersonal relations.

(*TeI* 68; *TI* 71)

What is produced (not awakened, disclosed, or uncovered) in the primordial teaching of the face of the Other (*l'autrui*) is the idea of infinity, which, for Levinas, denotes the primordial separation or disjuncture between the self and other.

Envision a child glancing up at the stem gaze of the adult who, in the child's eyes, literally towers above him or her, perhaps shaking the accusing finger, or equally, affectionately stroking their head, and lifting them up so as reduce the spatial distance between them. In the Montessori school, for example, a frequent strategy is for adult educators to reduce the spatial distance between themselves and their young charges by going down to the child's level, on their very hands and knees, and meeting them face to face.<sup>19</sup> This promotes a quickening or heightening of the sense of responsibility for learning and coexisting with others, both peers and authority figures. This strategy resonates with Levinas' asseveration that

“[e]quality is produced where the other commands the same and reveals himself to the same in responsibility; otherwise it is but an abstract idea and a word. It can not be detached from the welcoming of the face, of which it is a moment”.

(*TeI* 236; *TI* 214)

And while the children do not confuse the difference between themselves and their teachers, this undoubtedly often helps them to overcome various inhibitions and fears, and assert themselves more readily as individuals.

The Platonic overtones here are evident. The philosopher descends to the level of the prisoners, helping them to turn around to see the light source outside the cavern. However, this is only possible with the philosopher-teacher's *own* turning around under the sun/Good, remembering, out of a sense of responsibility and not as *anamnēsis*, not the forms (*eidē*), but those left in the cave: the invisible third party (*le tiers*)<sup>20</sup> who instantiates the moment of social justice beyond the purely ethical face-to-face encounter between the self and the Other, and invokes the liturgical relation with *illeity*, with the absolutely other, or God.<sup>21</sup> What is essential then is the *process* of *paideia*, the turning around. The aspect of *metapaideia* in the cave allegory is found in the *re*-education of the philosophers, that which Plato surmises is perhaps the most challenging task of all, namely, to get them to “go down again [*katabainein*] to the prisoners in the cave and share their labors and honors, whether they are of little or greater worth.”<sup>22</sup>

Levinas' own *metapaideia* consists in turning around the cognitive *image* of truth determined by a luminescent ontological tradition, substituting instead the radically passive, preconceptual ethical command that attends the visible interfacial awakening. At first glance, it appears that the employment of the term “height” in relation to the Master (*Maître*) suggests that Levinas' interpretation of vision is essentially a seeing with the eyes; but since the metaphysical, which is to say *ethical*, height that is invoked is of such irrecoverable distance, the eyes fail in their vain attempt to see the hidden face of the Master. But the Master's voice *resounds*, and this is where the ethical teaching is encountered. Therefore,

“[t]he question Who? caught sight of earlier in the Who is looking? will arise out of the original, or preoriginal, saying of responsibility. The question Who is looking? has to be reduced to Who is speaking?”.

(*AE* 80n2; *OB* 189n33)

#### 4

The conviction that permeates all of Levinas' work is that “[u]niversality presents itself as impersonal; and this is another inhumanity” (*TeI* 37; *TI* 46). But the universality or totality he contests has become so entangled



with the visible, that is, with the image or idea of theoretical light, as to be virtually identified with it, thus blinding itself in its panoptic quest. The result is that the visible disclosure of difference is reduced to the invisible leveling of homogeneous truth. Levinas, despite recent erroneous assertions, is not postmodern in the sense of refusing all possible layouts of universality and sameness. The danger he locates is the tendency to prioritize universality or identity over multiplicity and difference, reducing heterogeneity to homogeneity. Resounding in distant proximity to Nietzsche's often misunderstood "revaluation," Levinas' *metapaideia* reveals the possibility of a different universalism grounded, but not as *Grund*, on the relationship with exteriority or otherness.

The question of the form of justice subtends Plato's *Republic* and conditions its reading throughout. Socrates only ever arrives at a *working* definition. The locus of justice—community—is possible, on Levinas' reading, only by admitting the rupture of the Same (*tauton*; *le Même*) by the alterity of the face as the operative model for society. But he asks, fully aware of the extraordinary claim that his philosophy makes: "Does a face abide in representation and in proximity; is it community and difference? What meaning can community take on in difference without reducing difference?" (*AE* 240; *OB* 154). Perhaps the answer to Levinas' queries lies not in the determination of meaning itself—ultimately a question bound to the status of truth—but in the determination of the locus of ethical signification: the formation of community. Levinas seems to infer that ethics is bound to a sense of community that neither affirms nor opposes the dialectic of universality and difference, neither collapses the terms into an ontologically graspable unity nor dissimulates them as irremediable difference, yielding a universal community founded upon a common conception of ethical responsibility predicated on the primacy of hearing, listening, and dialogue—on the exteriority of infinite alterity. The Other (*l'autrui*)

"is manifested in a Mastery that does not conquer, but teaches. Teaching is not a species of a genus called domination, a hegemony at work within a totality, but is the presence of infinity breaking the closed circle of totality".

(*TeI* 186; *TI* 171)

### Notes

- 1 Emmanuel Levinas. *Totalité et Infini. Essai sur l'extériorité*. La Haye: Martinus Nijhoff, 1971, p. 106. Henceforth cited as *TeI*; *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*. Translated by A. Lingis. Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969, p. 103. Henceforth cited as *TI*.
- 2 Emmanuel Levinas, "La signification et la sens." In *Humanisme de l'autre homme*. Montpellier: Fata Morgana, 1972, pp. 55–56. Henceforth cited as *HH*; *Collected Philosophical Papers*. Translated by A. Lingis. The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1987, p. 101. Henceforth cited as *CPP*; *Basic Philosophical Writings*. Edited by

- A. Peperzak, R. Bernasconi, and S. Critchley. Translated by A. Peperzak and S. Critchley. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996, p. 58. Henceforth cited as *BPW*. Emphasis added.
- 3 Plato. *Republic*, 514a: "*Meta tauta dē, eipon, apeikason toiotōū pathei tēn hēmetepan phusin paideias te peri kai apaideusias.*"
- 4 Adriaan Theodoor Peperzak. *Platonic Transformations: With and After Hegel, Heidegger, and Levinas*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1997, p. 85.
- 5 Plato. *The Republic*. Translated by Paul Shorey. 2 vols. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1935, p. 119.
- 6 Plato. *Republic*. Translated by G. M. A. Grube, revised C. D. C. Reeve. Indianapolis: Hackett, 1992, p. 186.
- 7 See: Brian Schroeder. *Altared Ground: Levinas, History, and Violence*. New York: Routledge., 1996, pp. 30–31.
- 8 For Levinas' views on contemporary anti-Platonism, see *HH* 30–33; *CPP* 83–86; *BPW* 42–44.
- 9 Plato. *Republic*, 509b: "*ouk ousias ontos tou agathou, all eti epekeina tēs ousias. . . .*"
- 10 Levinas characterizes traditional forms of metaphysics as "ontology," due to their totalizing account of alterity and being. He reserves the term "metaphysics" (or "religion") to signify the inter-subjective ethical relation. Even though Levinas does not retain the term "metaphysics" in his later work, it will continue to be used here in reference to his philosophy. Depending upon the context, it will be distinguished from classic or traditional metaphysics.
- 11 "The *cogito* in Descartes rests on the other who is God and who has put the idea of infinity in the soul, who taught it, and has not, like the Platonic master, simply aroused the reminiscence of former visions" (*TeI* 85; *TI* 86). Also see *CPP* 160–61; *BPW* 136–37.
- 12 Also see Emmanuel Levinas, "Ethics as First Philosophy." In *The Levinas Reader*, edited by S. Hand, translated by S. Hand and M. Temple. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1989, pp. 75–87.
- 13 Levinas' relation to Aristotle is also double-edged. Though critical of Aristotle's prioritizing of theory over ethics, he employs Aristotle's modification of Plato's philosophy: "The other with which the metaphysician is in relationship and *which he recognizes as other* is not simply in another locality; this other recalls Plato's Ideas which, according to Aristotle's formula, are not in a site" (*TeI* 27–28; *TI* 38).
- 14 I follow the convention established, with Levinas' approval, in translating *autrui* *Autrui* (the personal other/s) as "Other" with a capitalized "O" and *autre*/*Autre* (otherness in general; alterity) as "other."
- 15 But, says Levinas, "[i]n affirming such a production of truth [via teaching] we modify the original meaning of truth and the noesis-noema structure, taken as the meaning of intentionality" (*TeI* 328; *TI* 295). Thus is the subject constituted as an identity, as a self, in a move reversing the Husserlian intentional constitution of the object-other. See the "Fifth Meditation," pp. 89–151. In Edmund Husserl, *Cartesian Meditations*. Translated by D. Cairns. Dordrecht: Kluwer, 1988. Levinas also includes Husserl in the late modern return to Platonism, but states that "we are not obliged to follow him" since "we think that we have found the straightforwardness of meaning by another method" (*HH* 56; *CPP* 101; *BPW* 58). Cf. *TeI* 96; *TI* 95.
- 16 Levinas. *Autrement qu'être ou au-delà de l'essence*. La Haye: Martinus Nijhoff, 1974, p. 100. Henceforth cited as *AE*; *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*. Translated by A. Lingis. The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1978, p. 61. Henceforth cited as *OB*.
- 17 See Levinas "Liberté et commandement," *Revue de Métaphysique et de Morale* (Chatenay-Malabry) 58 (3) (1953): pp. 236–41; *CPP* 15–23 for a discussion on command in Plato's *Republic*. Also see *TeI* 235; *TI* 213; *AE* 230; *OB* 147; and

- Levinas. *Éthique et infini*. Paris: Librairie Arthème Fayard et Radio-France, 1982, p. 117; *Ethics and Infinity*. Translated by R. Cohen. Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1985, p. 110.
- 18 Levinas. *Nom Propres*. Montpellier: Fata Morgana, 1976, p. 144; *Proper Names*. Translated by M. B. Smith. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996, p. 121.
- 19 This was pointed out to me by Professor Ron Scapp.
- 20 *AE* 245; *OB* 157: "The third party is other than the neighbor, but also another neighbor, and also a neighbor of the other, and not simply his fellow."
- 21 Says Levinas: "[A]s a work without remuneration, whose result is not allowed for in the time of the Agent and is assured only for patience, a work that is effected in the complete domination of and surpassing of my time, liturgy is not to be ranked alongside of 'works' and ethics. It is ethics itself" (*HH* 43; *CPP* 92–93; *BPW* 50).
- 22 Plato. *Republic*, 1992, p. 519d.

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# KANT, LEVINAS, AND THE THOUGHT OF THE "OTHER"

*Jere Paul Surber*

Source: *Philosophy Today* 38(3) (Fall 1994): 294–316.

Kant is on the way to thinking the being of reflection in the transcendental, that is, in the ontological sense. This occurs in the form of a hardly noticeable side remark in the *Critique of Pure Reason* under the title "On the Amphiboly of the Concepts of Reflection." The section is a supplement, but it is filled with essential insight and critical dialogue with Leibniz, and thus with all previous metaphysics, as Kant himself sees it and as it is grounded in its ontological constitution of egoity.

Martin Heidegger, "Overcoming Metaphysics"  
(section XVII), *Vorträge und Aufsätze*

To think the infinite, the transcendent, the Stranger, is hence not to think an object. . . . The "intentionality" of transcendence is unique in its kind; *the difference between objectivity and transcendence will serve as a general guideline for all the analyses of this work.*

Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*  
(trans. Alphonso Lingis), p. 49

## Introduction

No one has more persistently and passionately confronted us with the ethical responsibility of thinking the human Other in its otherness than Emmanuel Levinas. The mere quantity of articles, anthologies, books, and conferences devoted to various aspects of his thought in the span of less than a decade clearly attests to the fact that his writings and ideas have tapped into a reservoir of widespread and deep-seated concerns. In particular, it seems that, for a number of contemporary philosophers rooted in the Continental tradition, Levinas' thought has come to represent a potentially viable alternative, on the one hand, to the later Heidegger's politically

suspect "resignation" to the Siren-song of Being and, on the other, to the infinitely redoubling and finally nihilistic play of "differences" of Derridean post-structuralism.

Still, we cannot discount the serious reservations expressed by some of those who have flown close to the flame of Levinas' passionate discourse. David Klemm, for example, has pointed to the tendency of Levinas to shift among a philosophical, religious, and prophetic "voice" in his writings, often (I would add) at precisely those points where we most wish to follow him further along the trajectory which he had just been following.<sup>1</sup> Lodging a more radical charge, Paul Ricoeur describes the writings of Levinas as employing "hyperbole, to the point of paroxysm."<sup>2</sup> Indeed, Ricoeur argues that Levinas' reliance upon the rhetorical excesses of hyperbole in expressing what might otherwise be valuable philosophical insights ultimately vitiates his entire project. Both themes are echoed in a recent work of John Caputo. On the one hand, he writes:

Levinas is a great prophetic voice and I love him, as I love father Abraham and all the prophets. But I have always allowed myself to think that it is not necessary to believe the stories the prophets tell, not literally.<sup>3</sup>

On the other hand, he flatly declares that "Levinas goes to excess." He continues:

That is exactly what I believe this is: an excess, an excessive statement, a bit of hyperbole, which is an operation of *difference*, a story—but a fabulous and important story that I love, a piece of powerful, impressive poetics.<sup>4</sup>

Attracted by the passionate insights that Levinas' discourse expresses, repelled by the discourse's own overpowering excess: this is not an altogether unfair or ill-conceived response to the Levinasian text.

I have no intention in this essay of either defending Levinas' "excesses" against such critical reactions or of eviscerating his most profound insights by watering them down to some more palatable discursive formulation. Rather, I will follow Heidegger's lead that the "tradition of metaphysics" (which in some important ways approximates what Levinas would call "ontology") can only be "overcome" by creatively reappropriating the devices that the tradition itself makes available to us—but never by some "step out of it,"<sup>5</sup> rhetorical or otherwise.

In this essay, I want to explore an approach to the question of the Other in which Kant and Levinas might be brought into productive dialogue with one another. This approach involves a bi-directional reading. On the one hand, I want to develop out of Kant a framework for articulating the

Otherness of the other and employ it to bring into sharper focus some of the Levinasian themes that most tend to provoke accusations of "excess." On the other hand, I want to use certain features of Levinas' thought<sup>6</sup> to develop these Kantian insights in directions which admittedly go beyond what Kant himself might have sanctioned.<sup>7</sup>

More specifically, I will adopt the following approach.

(1) I begin with the "Amphiboly of Concepts of Reflection," the *Anmerkung* appended to the "Transcendental Analytic" of the *Critique of Pure Reason* (henceforth, *KdrV*). In my discussion, I want specifically to explore the notion of *Reflexion* that Kant introduces there and to employ his categorial schematization of *Nichts* as a further articulation of *Reflexionsbegriffe*. On my interpretation, this section indicates a direction in which one might begin to articulate the "otherness of the Other," the irreducible asymmetry between consciousness and that which transcends it.

(2) I then briefly suggest certain areas of philosophical concern that Kant and Levinas share, areas broader, perhaps, than many of the figures whom Levinas cites with greater frequency.

(3) In connection with this, I briefly consider one possible source for the major objection to the rapprochement between Kant and Levinas which I am here proposing, the originally Kantian distinction between "autonomy" and "heteronomy," but as reformulated by Levinas.

(4) I then attempt to reformulate Kant's "transcendental problem" along lines suggested by Levinas. That is, I want to claim that the relevant "other" of Kantian transcendentalism can be fruitfully viewed neither as the epistemological "thing-in-itself" nor the metaphysical "noumenal," but rather as the Other, understood as a concretely existing human being or person presented in an irreducible face-to-face, ethical relation.

(5) Bringing these themes together, I want briefly to sketch how the categorial schema of *Nichts* which Kant proposes at the end of the "Transcendental Analytic" provides a determinate framework that can, in turn, be fleshed out, concretized, and extended using the most important of Levinas' own modalities of articulating the transcendence or "otherness" of the Other.

### "The structure of otherness": Kant

Kant's basic idea of a "Critical Philosophy," and in particular of a "Critique of Pure Reason," involved establishing a limit, a *Grenze*, to the field of that which could be asserted as knowable. This "difference" that Kant sought to think appears in his philosophy under numerous inflections—the knowable versus the merely thinkable, the "object" of possible experience versus the *Ding-an-sich*, the phenomenal versus the noumenal, the sensible versus the supersensible, and so forth. But, as most of his readers from Reinhold to Hegel agreed, such a project could be carried off only at the expense of a fatal inconsistency. The very establishing of such a *Grenze* between a

knowable "here" and an unknowable "there" already presupposed the sort of knowledge of the transcendent "there" that the Critical Philosophy itself explicitly excluded.

Put more specifically, if the categories, the most fundamental concepts operative in providing unity to our experience, were held to be meaningful only in application to possible objects of experience, then they must a fortiori be empty or meaningless if applied beyond this limit. All rational discourse concerning an "other" of experience should therefore be regarded as impossible, at least if construed in any epistemic sense. On the other hand, the critical project of establishing such a limit implied, of itself, a discursive stance which would be capable of sufficiently articulating the "parts" of the realm being divided in order to establish a meaningful and non-arbitrary division between them.<sup>8</sup>

Hegel, in his *Differenzschrift*, formulates the problem facing a critical philosophy in a way which is, for all its pointed criticism, true to Kant's own concerns. There Hegel distinguishes between a philosophical approach based upon *Reflexion*, associated with the understanding, and one oriented by *Vernunft*.<sup>9</sup> A fair gloss of Hegel's critique might be that, whereas Kant had set out to provide a "critique of pure reason" from the standpoint of pure reason itself, he had really only succeeded in producing an arbitrary delimitation or division of pure reason from the more limited standpoint of the understanding and its "reflexive" procedures.

When Hegel accuses Kant of being mired in the limited standpoint of a *Reflexionsphilosophie*, he means to indicate that Kant's philosophical procedure consists in positing conceptual distinctions which presuppose a broader field that they divide without, however, "reconstituting" or bringing that field to articulation in some higher concept or discursive structure. I say that this is, in an important way, true to Kant precisely because Kant himself had already developed a response to another earlier *Reflexionsphilosophie*, that of Leibniz.

The "Appendix" to the "Transcendental Analytic" of the *KdV* entitled "The Amphiboly of the Concepts of Reflection [*Reflexionsbegriffe*]" occupies what one might well expect to be a significant, even pivotal place in the work's argument. In this section, Kant turns his attention to "the consciousness of the relation of given representations to our different sources of knowledge."<sup>10</sup> Clearly, the major focus of this "Appendix" is to show how Leibniz (and his Wolffian followers) went astray in failing to keep the understanding and sensibility distinct, especially in their treatment of percepts as a merely "confused" forms of concepts. This, of course, serves the overall argument of the *KdV* in that it allows Kant to underscore the fundamental and irreducible distinction between the understanding and intuition, upon which he had been insisting all along. Heidegger, however, was quite right to refer to this "Appendix" as a "supplement," since Kant returned to the same issues in the "Transcendental Dialectic," although from a rather

different angle. The question thus naturally arises: Why include this section at all? It was, on any account, a quite uncharacteristic departure from his otherwise spartan architectonic discipline.

### Articulating "the difference of identity and difference": Kant's notion of *Reflexion*

I want to argue that, in the "Amphiboly" section of the *KdrV*, Kant broached an issue, always lurking in the shadows of his critical procedures, to which he would later return in the *Kritik der Urteilkraft*<sup>11</sup> and which he tended to think of in terms of the problem of *Reflexion*.<sup>12</sup> For Kant, reflection referred to the process by which the consciousness of the asymmetry between the conceptual and sensible orders is determined and articulated. As Kant developed the notion of reflection, it concerned the assignment of representations to their proper "transcendental locations," which depended upon the recognition of irreducible asymmetries between universal concepts and particular intuitions (and, of course, the judgments in which they are expressed). Reflection was thus a process of thinking and articulating a set of irreducible differences, hence of maintaining a position or attitude which steadfastly refused the reduction of one side to the other without introducing some further concept or intuition within which they would be united.<sup>13</sup>

Read from Hegel's later perspective, I am inclined to claim that, in his notion of reflection (and despite Hegel's invectives in the *Differenzschrift* and later writings), Kant, at this point, formulated the problem of the "difference of identity and difference," the "suppressed moment" of Hegel's own dialectical energetics based upon the "identity of identity and difference." This may help us explain the pivotal position of Kant's unusual "Appendix" and, perhaps, the somewhat "uncritical" character of the trajectory of his thought there.

In the "Transcendental Analytic," to which the "Appendix" (Kant calls it *Anmerkung*) is attached, Kant's procedure had been to establish a difference between the conceptual and the sensible, or between spontaneity and receptivity, from the standpoint of the understanding, that is, of a differentiation out of a presupposed identity or sameness. In other words, he had laid out the difference between understanding and sensibility (as Hegel, I think, correctly claimed in the *Differenzschrift*) from the standpoint of understanding viewed as a self-limitation of reason. In the "Transcendental Dialectic," the standpoint alters in the sense that the transcendental philosopher now occupies the position of logical ratiocination (*Vernunft*), which was, by his own admission, merely that of the understanding freed of its limitation to possible objects of experience. However, in both cases, that of the "analysis" of the conditions for experience and that of the "dialectical critique" of transcendent assumptions, Kant's standpoint remained firmly rooted in identity or sameness.



Reflection, however, cannot be equated with the standpoint of either *Verstand* or *Vernunft*.<sup>14</sup> As Kant himself presents it, reflection must be something beyond *Verstand*, inasmuch as *Verstand* is one of the terms in the difference which it is the task of reflection to articulate from "beyond" *Verstand* itself. But neither can reflection be identified with *Vernunft*, since *Vernunft* is always, for Kant, purely formal and operates in abstraction from all particular determinations (unless, of course, it becomes self-canceling and hence "dialectical.")<sup>15</sup> However, Kant's contention in the "Amphiboly" is precisely that reflection deals with a difference which cannot be purely formal or logical; if it were, Kant's critique of Leibniz there would entirely lose its force.

On these grounds, I am suggesting that it is fair to view Kant's notion of reflection as the articulation of the consciousness of difference from the standpoint of difference. Reflection may thus be interpreted as a thinking and articulation of the "difference of identity and difference" which does not constitute another (higher?) identity as its outcome nor immediately resolve itself into an "understanding" of the "already limited" or a "rationation" involving concepts freed of all critical restrictions.

### The categorial schema of otherness: Kant's account of "*Nichts*"

Now we must turn to what can only be considered "the Appendix to the Appendix" (or perhaps "a remark about a remark"), that is, Kant's "categorial sketch" of a treatment of "*Nichts*" which concludes his discussion of "The Amphiboly of the Concepts of Reflection."

Kant, while several times touting the philosophical interest and utility of his "Amphiboly" discussion, sounds downright apologetic about his brief discussion of "nothing."<sup>16</sup> On the present reading, however, no apologies were necessary, since, for my purposes, this is perhaps the most interesting part of this section, if not the entire first Critique. I say this because it seems to me that, given how Kant has situated reflection between *Verstand* and *Vernunft* as the "thinking of difference from the standpoint of difference," he has posed the possibility of a rather different sort of "critique" than the epistemological one that he had been pursuing, namely, a path toward articulating the limitations of our knowledge, discourse, experience, and practice otherwise and yet more concretely than the merely logical conundra developed in the "Transcendental Dialectic."

What Kant has sketched, in effect, is a framework that brings some specificity and determinateness to that which must necessarily elude and defy us, a sort of rudimentary "logic of the Other." I want to claim that Kant provides us here with a schema for reflecting on the Other in its otherness which, on the one hand, does not abandon the Other as an indeterminate and radically incommensurable surd nor, on the other, reinstitute

a regime of the Same or of identity in which the Other is assimilated, eviscerated, into the sameness of the Self or thought. Put in somewhat different terms, Kant, in this brief section, provides a framework for reflectively orienting ourselves within an asymmetrical relation to the Other which at once requires us to acknowledge, examine, and articulate our own finitude and limitations in the face of the Other without casting us into the paralysis of utter abjection or misology.

In this brief section, Kant deliberately and graphically maps his discussion of *Nichts* onto his previous fourfold division of the Categories. We must pay careful attention, however, to how he does this. In no case does Kant conceive *Nichts* as the absence, obliteration, or erasure of one of the categorial divisions. Rather, *Nichts* has a fourfold inflection, generated in each case by a *specific asymmetry* between concept and putative object.<sup>17</sup> Kant's fourfold articulation of *Nichts* might be developed in the following manner.<sup>18</sup>

### *Quantity*

"Empty concept without object." Kant calls this the *ens rationis*. He also specifically refers to this as the "noumenon" properly speaking, that is, a concept lacking any possible object. It is important to notice, however, that, from the standpoint of reflection, quantitative *Nichts* signifies not a mere absence of a correlative "possible object of experience" (as it would for the understanding) nor an ultimately "dialectical" concept (as it would for reason) but rather an asymmetrical relation between an actual, thinkable concept for which no "intentional fulfilment" (as Husserl might have put it) is or can be forthcoming.

Extending this idea, we might say that Kant's notion of "quantitative *Nichts*," described from the standpoint of reflection, serves to indicate a modality of transcendence (or an awareness of the "otherness of what is other") whereby certain concepts that we might form will ultimately be inadequate to their putative intentional correlates. For reflection, such concepts will be "empty" not because there simply *is* no object that they intend, but because they will be inadequate to any object that might be proposed as their "counterpart." The logic of reflection thus depends not upon the "either/or" of *Verstand* and *Vernunft* but upon the always only partial adequation of a given concept to its intentional correlate; "quantitative *Nichts*" serves to mark the place of this asymmetry or "reflective difference."<sup>19</sup> It is important to see, however, that the emphasis in "quantitative asymmetry" is upon a concept being "empty" not because it has no object at all, but because the relevant "object," however we might adjust our concept, will always overflow and exceed the concept by which we attempt to grasp it.

### Quality

"Empty object of a concept." Here, the asymmetry involves not that of the inescapable inadequacy of concept to the excess of the transcendent other, but that relation of what otherwise is, of itself, fully conceivable and articulable but reduced to "zero-degree." Kant calls this inflection of *Nichts nihil privativum* and invokes things "such as shadow, cold" as illustrations of his meaning. From the standpoint of reflection, therefore, "qualitative asymmetry" concerns not excess on the side of the intentional correlate but on the side of conceptualization itself. "Qualitative *Nichts*" serves to mark the place, in reflection, whereby we come to recognize that conceptualization has itself exceeded and overpowered its object, thus reducing it to the status of "nothing." Again, the point is not that there simply is no "object" for the concept nor that the concept itself is incoherent, but rather that conceptual thought, in attempting to grasp an object, has reduced its object to utter inconsequentiality. It has overpowered its object and reduced it to a "something" in which there is no longer anything left to grasp.

### Relation

"Empty intuition without object." The *Nichts* of "relational reflection" Kant calls *ens imaginarium*. Here, he explicitly points to the pure forms of intuition which, while they "are indeed something, as forms of intuition," are nevertheless "not themselves objects which are intuited."<sup>20</sup> However, it must immediately be added that they are not concepts either, so the issue cannot concern any asymmetry of concept to object.

What sort of reflective asymmetry is at stake here?<sup>21</sup> I will take Kant's lead in his use of the term *ens imaginarium*. An "imagined being" would be one of which we could form a determinate representation without its actually becoming present within the given spatiality and temporality of our experience. The emphasis, however, must fall not upon the representation (or its "object") but upon the difference between our dynamic preconceptual intentionality within the conditions of the lived space and time of our concrete existence and the inability of any bringing to completion of this intentionality in the form of a determinate concept or representation. Our spatio-temporal existence is certainly "not nothing," but neither can any concept, representation, or object succeed in converting it to a determinate "something." It is, rather, a continual "transcendence" or "going out toward" an other at which it will never, nonetheless, finally arrive. The asymmetry of "relational reflection," then, is a movement "away" and "into the future" toward an "imagined" destination which must remain ever elusive.

### Modality

"Empty object without concept." Kant calls this inflection of *Nichts nihil negativum* and describes it as "the object of a concept which contradicts itself . . . because the concept is nothing, is the impossible."<sup>22</sup> While Kant's treatment here might seem relatively unproblematic from the point of view of *Vernunft*, it leaves obscure what this inflection of *Nichts* might mean from the standpoint of "modal reflection." The problem is that if both concept and object are contradictory, they are equally "self-cancelling"; in such a case, there would be no "difference" otherwise required by reflection to assign such concepts or objects to their "proper transcendental locations."<sup>23</sup>

It might help here to recall that modality reenters Kant's discussion under the heading "The Ideal of Pure Reason" in the "Transcendental Dialectic." There, Kant takes up the arguments of "natural theology" in order to show why it is impossible to demonstrate the existence of a "supreme being" or *ens realissimum* logically, even though the concept of such a being is not, of itself, contradictory. The key, of course, is that "existence" does not enter into judgments as a predicate but indicates a particular (modal) relation between thought and its object. Rather than being a self-contradictory concept, that of an *ens realissimum* turns out to be consistent and thinkable, but only so long as the modal category of "existence" is excluded from its concept. On Kant's view, the illicit employment of "existence" as a predicate destroys this consistency and renders both the concept and its putative object logically impossible (if not self-contradictory).<sup>24</sup>

Following this lead, though admittedly not in full accordance with Kant's own expressed view in the section under discussion, I want to formulate the asymmetry involved in "modal reflection" as, in fact, a dual relation: on the one hand, between the finite representation of an infinite Other and, on the other, the thought of an infinite other on the basis of finite appearance. On this interpretation, "modal reflection" is the problematic recognition of the incommensurability between our resources to articulate the infinite in finite terms *and* the implicit infinity of our discourse in the face of always finite appearances.<sup>25</sup>

To conclude this part of my discussion by returning briefly to the beginning of this essay, I am departing from Heidegger's statement quoted earlier in one important sense. I do not mean to claim that my interpretation of Kant amounts to an "ontology" of the Other, for, on my reading of this section, that would make no sense at all. Rather, I mean to suggest that, in thinking the difference between identity and difference from the standpoint of difference, Kant's notion of reflection provides us, not with an "ontology" of the Other, but with a schema that specifies the various dimensions of experience and thought in which the Other eludes us. It is, in a sense, Kant's way of fleshing out Socrates' practice of "systematic ignorance," of coming to know what and in what respects we ultimately cannot know.

## Proximities of Kant and Levinas

Although Levinas mentions Kant on several occasions as one of his major intellectual influences,<sup>26</sup> references to him are otherwise surprisingly sparse in his writings, especially when compared with the frequent citations of Plato, Descartes, Husserl, and Heidegger. With a few scattered exceptions,<sup>27</sup> commentators on Levinas' philosophical views have also tended to avoid pursuing such connections. On one count, it is easy to understand why this might be so, since Kant's invocation of an overarching, universal Reason in both the theoretical and practical spheres would seem to exemplify exactly the sort of "reduction of Difference to Identity" or "of the Other to the Same" against which the entire thrust of Levinasian thought is directed. Another more *ad hominem* factor might also be a certain tendency on the part of Levinas to accept as valid Heidegger's interpretation of what is most significant in Kant in such works as *Kant and the Problem of Metaphysics*, thus, in effect, allowing Kant subsequently to be tarred with the same brush as Heidegger.

However, at a deeper level (and leaving aside certain post-Heideggerian ways of reading Kant), there are some important convergences between basic Kantian and Levinasian concerns. I especially want to call attention to those points at which Kant would appear to be a much more natural interlocutor for Levinas than the figures he usually invokes, especially Descartes and Husserl and, in some respects, Plato as well.

(1) Both Kant and Levinas view ethics as the focal point of the philosophical enterprise.

In the Preface to the second edition of the *KdrV*, Kant adopts the rhetoric of "negative" and "positive" in describing the relation between the Critiques of "Theoretical" and "Practical Reason." In response to the question, "What sort of a treasure is this that we propose to bequeath posterity?," Kant's uncompromising answer is that, while the "theoretical" critique "negatively" establishes the *possibility* of freedom, this constitutes the starting-point of a "positive" account of morality.<sup>28</sup> That is, by Kant's own admission, the *KdrV* may fairly be regarded as the "propadeutic" to ethics as presented in the *Critique of Practical Reason*, which has often been regarded as the lynchpin of Kant's philosophical system.

In his essay, "Ethics as First Philosophy," Levinas presents a radicalized version of the same claim. He concludes this essay with the statement, "The question *par excellence* or the question of philosophy. Not 'Why being rather than nothing?', but how being justifies itself."<sup>29</sup> Of course, Levinas *does* want to privilege "the ethical" over "the theoretical" in a much stronger sense than is generally in evidence in Kant, but there can be little doubt that, on this score, Levinas is decidedly closer to Kant than to Descartes or Husserl, both of whom he mentions far more frequently.

(2) Both thinkers regard "subjectivity" as a sphere circumscribed by limits, the elucidation of which is a major philosophical concern.

Although Levinas clearly wants to indicate the priority of the "Other" or "Difference" over the "Same" or "Identity" implied by subjectivity, and in a way which is admittedly rather different than in Kant, he at the same time wants to emphasize that transcendence nonetheless requires, perhaps even presupposes, subjectivity. In *Totality and Infinity* (p. 26), Levinas writes:

This book then does present itself as a defense of subjectivity, but it will apprehend the subjectivity not at the level of its purely egoist protestation against totality, nor in its anguish before death, but as founded in the idea of infinity.

Although caution is required, one could equally well say of Kant that subjectivity can neither be regarded as "egoist protestation" nor "anguish before death," but as delineated and articulable only on the assumption of differences marked, among other devices, by the asymmetries articulated by "amphibolic reflection" which I discussed above. Another way in which Kant delimits the sphere of subjectivity is through the distinction between the "phenomenal" or finite and the "noumenal" or infinite realms.<sup>30</sup> Again, on this issue, it seems that Levinas is actually closer to Kant than to Descartes, who seems to regard both the idea of the *Cogito* and that of infinity (or God) as somehow "co-innate" in consciousness rather than as a difference which erupts out of subjectivity's own reflexive processes.

(3) Both regard "metaphysics" (at least in one of the senses that they share) as involving the transgression of the limits of subjectivity toward a "transcendent other" and both undertake a revision of the classical project of "metaphysics" in a way that would highlight the contours of this transgression.

Kant, in the course of his thought, begins by criticizing traditional notions of metaphysics and ends by affirming the systematic projects of a "metaphysic of nature" and of "morals," thereby validating the "natural metaphysical impulse" while rejecting the traditional forms that it had previously taken. The result, as he presents it in the Preface to the second edition of *KdrV*, is a new "system of metaphysics," but one purged of the "dogmatism" implicit in "pre-critical" procedures.

It can be argued that Levinas makes a remarkably parallel gesture in his employment of the term "metaphysics." Unlike Kant, Levinas views the relevant contrast to be between "ontology" and "metaphysics," where Kant would have viewed "ontology" as one of the branches of (especially Wolffian versions of) "metaphysics." Still, in speaking of "metaphysics" in the strict sense, Levinas does not wish to indicate all that has gone on under that title in the tradition (much of which would have to fall under "ontology," the reduction of the "Other" to the "Same"); rather, he wants to highlight those points in the tradition where the characteristic directionality or impetus toward the transcendence of the sphere of subjectivity manifests itself.

As in Kant, this more determinate and restricted notion of "metaphysics" is implicated in what both would acknowledge as a natural, fundamental, and pervasive movement of finite existence.

There are, of course, other convergences that one might cite, and one would doubtless also have to reiterate that Kant and Levinas remain different, even opposed, in many respects. My point here is only to indicate that there are enough concerns and attitudes shared by Kant and Levinas to warrant the attempt to bring them into proximity with one another in ways that have not yet been explored. More specifically, I am suggesting that Kant's philosophy might well present a more fruitful opportunity for this than any of the figures whom Levinas himself invokes in articulating his own position.

### Autonomy, heteronomy, and alterity

I now wish to confront head-on the major obstacle that might be invoked regarding the line of thought I am developing. Levinas himself suggests the most forceful objection to such a project in his "programmatic essay" for *Totality and Infinity* entitled "Philosophy and the Idea of the Infinite."<sup>31</sup> In the first section of this essay, he begins by posing an opposition which has very distinctive Kantian resonances, that between "autonomy" and "heteronomy." For Levinas, this distinction concerns nothing less than the contrast between two opposed views of truth and thus of the *telos* as well as the *praxis* of philosophy. "Heteronomy," as Levinas employs it here, involves a basic attitude or orientation in which "truth implies experience." "In the truth, a thinker maintains a relationship with a reality distinct from him, other than him—'absolutely other.'" The essential element in Levinas' exposition is a *directionality* of the thoughtful development of experience whereby "truth implies more than exteriority: transcendence." From the point of view of "heteronomy," "philosophy means metaphysics, and metaphysics inquires about the divine."

By contrast, "autonomy" signifies "the free adherence to a proposition, the outcome of a free research." From this orientation, "philosophy would be engaged in reducing to the Same all that is opposed to it as *other*." Levinas notes that this involves "a stage in which nothing irreducible would limit thought any longer, in which, consequently, thought, nonlimited, would be free." Rather than the metaphysical transcendence of heteronomy, the final outcome of philosophical autonomy "would thus be tantamount to the conquest of being by man over the course of history." In this sense, the directionality of autonomy would be the reverse of that of heteronomy: the assimilation by the Ego or subjectivity of all that is other into its own order and discipline. He concludes that "Western thought very often seemed to exclude the transcendent, encompass every Other in the Same, and proclaim the philosophical birthright of autonomy."

Now, one might, given Levinas' choice of terms, immediately think of Kant as one of the cardinal advocates of precisely the "autonomous" orientation that Levinas is condemning. After all, it might be urged, did not the "autonomy/heteronomy" distinction serve in Kant's moral philosophy to mark the difference between a genuinely "moral imperative" and a merely "instrumental" or "technical" one?<sup>32</sup> Did he not claim that the very "goodness" of the "good will" consisted of the determination of the "will" by a universal law categorically enjoined by our own immanent nature as "rational beings"? The point, of course, is that, if autonomy is such an explicit and emphatic element of Kant's thought, would he not be diametrically opposed to the entire trajectory of Levinas' project, thus vitiating from the beginning any attempt to bring them into proximity?

Without denying that this will remain a concern, I want to suggest that, despite their Kantian resonances, autonomy and heteronomy, as Levinas employs them, may after all be more consistent with their Kantian counterparts than might be suspected on a first reading. Although Levinas initially introduces these terms as presenting a rather dramatic contrast, his subsequent discussion makes clear that the real issue is not a choice of one orientation to the exclusion of the other, but rather of two different ways of understanding their relative priority. It is not a matter of deliberately choosing between autonomy and heteronomy (since that would, in any event, amount to a purely "autonomous" gesture), but rather of coming to recognize that, while autonomy and the freedom that it implies always maintains its sway over subjectivity and is inextricable from it, the very condition and presupposition of subjective autonomy is precisely the absolute limit posed by the encounter with that which is Other, heteronomous, which is, for Levinas, the notion of infinity concretely presented by the face of another human being. The force of Levinas' point is that the egological or narcissistic "monologue" in which we come forcefully to assert our freedom is first set in motion only by the challenge by which the mere appearance of an other demands that we justify our freedom to begin with. It is only upon the condition of the disturbance of self-complacency by genuine alterity that, on the one hand, autonomy arises as a possibility and, simultaneously as it were, that heteronomy is confirmed as "always already" prior to autonomy. As Levinas puts it, "A new situation is created; consciousness's presence to itself acquires a different modality (with the encounter with the Other); its positions collapse." Thus, while autonomy and its freedom can be asserted and maintained by a *Machtspruch*, this itself will always still bear testimony to the precedence of the heteronomous encounter with the alterity that provoked it. The crucial issue for Levinas, then, is this realization of the centrality of alterity, the breaking into subjectivity of the Other, which serves to subordinate autonomy to heteronomy as conditioned to condition.<sup>33</sup>

To return to Kant, one can rather clearly trace the outlines of a similar movement if we leave aside for a moment his own more restricted usage of



the terms "autonomy" and "heteronomy." With regard to the general project of a Critical Philosophy, Kant's thought inscribes a similar path not once but (at least) three times. In the *KdrV*, he claims to "deny *knowledge*, in order to make room for *faith*," that is, to circumscribe the sphere of autonomy by delimiting it in relation to the infinity of transcendence or heteronomy, only within which knowledge can be meaningful as one restricted and finite mode of human orientation among others. In the *KdpV*,<sup>34</sup> the *Grundlegung*, and *Religion within the Bounds of Reason Alone*, Kant argues that, while reason can "autonomously" (in the Levinasian sense) determine the formal structure of the "moral law" and hence the conditions of freedom, its concrete implementation within the broader spheres of society and history requires the "heteronomous" dimensions of human community and religious tradition.<sup>35</sup> Finally, in the *KdU*, where Kant explicitly reintroduces the notion of *Reflexion* under the title "reflective judgment," he is concerned to show how the structures of aesthetic and teleological judgment, though thoroughly rooted in the realm of subjectivity, nonetheless are possible only on the "heteronomous" appearance of beautiful and sublime objects and of nature viewed as a living organism.

It is within the second of these movements, that of his ethical thought, that Kant's own use of the terms "autonomy" and "heteronomy" appears. Of course, in this limited context, Kant *does* privilege the "autonomy" of the will and its freedom over its "heteronomous" determination by inclination, but it should be clear by this point that neither is the "autonomy" in question here that of ontology, which is criticized by Levinas, nor is the "heteronomy" that of metaphysics, which, in Levinas' sense, both would defend. At this "egological" level, Levinas would certainly agree with Kant that genuinely ethical obligation requires and presupposes the freedom of the subject to respond to that which commands categorically. For both, it is alterity, an "other" of thought or subjectivity, in the first instance another human being, that provokes the vindication of subjectivity's own freedom or "autonomy." For neither can a genuinely ethical discourse be regarded as a monologue, as a reduction of Other to Same.

### Reformulating Kant's "transcendental object"<sup>36</sup>

If this proximity of Kant to Levinas is granted in a broad sense, then only one major adjustment in Kant's view is required in order to begin considering them as parties to a common discourse. It is what Kant variously calls the *Ding-an-sich*, the "noumenal," or the "transcendental object" must be reformulated as the Levinasian Other, presented in the first instance in the face-to-face encounter with another human being. While this adjustment clearly and dramatically diverges from Kant's own philosophical intentions, I want to suggest that it is not so extreme as it might first appear when considered in relation to some of the most fundamental tenets of the Critical Philosophy.

In the sections dealing with "the Face" in *Totality and Infinity*,<sup>37</sup> Levinas calls explicit attention to several crucial features of his use of this expression, which go a considerable way toward answering some of the more predictable Kantian objections.

(1) Although the face of the Other has a "sensible appearance," the manner of its appearance is entirely different than that of any other phenomenal object. According to Levinas, "the face is present in its refusal to be contained."<sup>38</sup> Although Levinas does not wish to deny that the face of the Other does have a visual aspect within the realm of "sensibility," its mode of presentation is unique in its "overflowing the sphere of the same." The mode of infinity that it presents cannot be assimilated to the phenomenological doctrine of an "infinity of possible perspectives," the partial synthesis of which by egological intentionality constitutes the noema of the "sensible (or physical) object." Rather, "it opens the very dimension of the infinite, of what puts a stop to the irresistible imperialism of the Same and the I. We call a *face* the epiphany of what can thus present itself directly, and therefore also exteriorly, to an I."<sup>39</sup>

It follows from this that the face can neither be the object of knowledge nor can it be regarded as, strictly speaking, knowable. While we are, of course, able to "recognize" the face of another, our recognition of it is essentially bound up with its announcement of an incomprehensible infinity confronting me; otherwise, it would not be recognized as a *human* face. Since it is the givenness of infinity itself, any attempt to bring it under concepts or categories is rendered impossible in principle. While Kant would object to the notion of a phenomenal presentation of infinity,<sup>40</sup> as Levinas himself admits in *Totality and Infinity* (p. 196), Levinas' account of the face would at least not require that the Kantian strictures upon knowledge be violated since, for Levinas, "knowledge" of the face is not ever in question.

(2) Levinas wants equally to emphasize that the primary mode in which the face presents itself is not visual but *linguistic*. "The incomprehensible nature of the presence of the Other, which we spoke of above, is not to be described negatively. Better than comprehension, *discourse* relates with what remains essentially transcendent. . . . Speech cuts across vision."<sup>41</sup> Just as Kant comes to view the *Ding-an-sich* as a "limit concept" and hence as, in this specific sense, discursive, so Levinas emphasizes that the face presents itself as addressing me, as speaking, and hence as demanding my own discursive response. The face thus appears not as the mute intentional correlate of my vision, but rather as verbal address, as a speaking which demands my own response, in a way parallel to which Kant's own critical speech was provoked by the philosophical assumption of alleged knowledge of "things-in-themselves."

(3) Levinas tends to move from the face as the presentation of infinity demanding my "response," to the face-to-face relation as one of "responsibility" in an ethical sense.

The ethical relationship which subtends discourse is not a species of consciousness whose ray emanates from the I; it puts the I in question. This putting in question emanates from the other. . . . The facing position, opposition par excellence, can be only as a moral summons.<sup>42</sup>

In viewing the face of the Other as the privileged locus of subjectivity's transcendence, Levinas, in a manner harmonious with the spirit if not the letter of Kant's philosophy, unites at the most fundamental level, the theoretical and practical projects of the Critical Philosophy. For, in a sense, Kant also sees theoretical philosophy as "ethical" inasmuch as it is an attempt to "say the truth," to disclose truthfully to others that which is true, and to prepare the ground for the more specific ethical responsibility to the Other which is the *Sache* of the moral philosophy. As Levinas puts it, "If the essence of philosophy consists in going back from all certainties toward a principle, if it lives from critique, the face of the Other would be the starting point of philosophy."<sup>43</sup>

(4) Levinas wishes to emphasize the initial and ineradicable "asymmetry," the "difference of identity and difference" or of "same and other" implicit in the infinity presented in the face of the Other.

The Other does not only *appear* in his face, as a phenomenon subject to the action and domination of a freedom; infinitely distant from the very relation he enters, he presents himself there from the first as an absolute. The I disengages itself from the relationship, but does so within relationship with a being absolutely separated. The face with which the Other turns to me is not reabsorbed in a representation of the face.<sup>44</sup>

Like the "noumenal," the face is never exhausted merely by the fact that it can be represented in thought. Rather, just as the "noumenal," even when represented in the form of "regulative ideas," overflows the very concept with which we attempt to determine it, so the encounter with the face has, according to Levinas, "a structure analogous to the ontological argument" whereby "the exteriority of a being is inscribed in its essence."<sup>45</sup> But, as he later points out, "The idea of infinity is not for me an object. The ontological argument lies in the mutation of this 'object' into being, into independence with regard to me,"<sup>46</sup> a claim perhaps echoing Kant's own critique of the ontological argument. Again, Levinas' insistence on the essentially "asymmetrical" character of the relation between the I and the Other closely parallels the manner in which Kant distinguishes the delimited "phenomenal" comprehension of finite objects of experience from the infinity present in the thought of the "noumenal." Parallel to Levinas, Kant would hold that the "transcendental object," while we are not lacking a concept or (in the *KdU* and *Religion within the Bounds of Reason Alone*) perhaps even a "symbolic representation" of it, nonetheless must always

transcend and render inadequate, incomplete, and incompletable any finite attempt to comprehend or grasp it within the sphere of subjectivity.

(5) One final aspect of the face of the Other as Levinas discusses it must be noted. For Levinas, every face and every face-to-face relationship is irreducibly unique.

The Other is not other with a relative alterity as are, in a comparison, even ultimate species, which mutually exclude one another but still have their place within the community of a genus—excluding one another by their definition, but calling for one another by this exclusion, across the community of their genus. The alterity of the other does not depend on any quality that would distinguish him from me, for a distinction of this nature would precisely imply between us that community of genus which already nullifies alterity.<sup>47</sup>

If the infinity presented by the face of the Other *transcends* all of subjectivity's concepts and finite representations, it must equally be insisted that it *subtends* them as well. Every face presents an absolutely and irreducibly unique epiphany of the infinite, and its ethical pro-vocation, its calling forth to responsibility can be directed only to me as its unique "accusative." Thus, in a sense, the infinity of alterity is both, at the same time, too much "beyond," too "overflowing" of the finitude of subjectivity to be comprehended by any "universal" and too specific, too uniquely personal to attain the threshold of even description in spatio-temporal terms. Put in a Kantian mode, the appearance of the Other involves an irreducible receptivity" (what Levinas will in later works call a "passivity") prior to any "spontaneity" or "syntheses" of the perceptual or conceptual orders. Indeed, it is the epiphany of the Other in opening the domain of discourse that first makes possible or meaningful a critique which could only "subsequently" distinguish a "sensible" from an "intelligible" order. If, for Kant, the "judgment" (which Levinas would regard as a "Said") is the morphemic unit of all logical/discursive analysis, then "the apriori of the apriori" would have to be the original opening of the linguistic field in the "pre-judgmental" encounter with a "Saying" which comes in the irreducibly unique encounter with the Other.

### "The otherness of the other": Levinas

In the last three sections, I have tried to establish the plausibility and potential fruitfulness of a constructive project involving a "bi-directional reading" of Kant and Levinas. I want now to return to my earlier discussion of Kant's "Amphiboly of Concepts of Reflection" in light of some of these themes. Where I have, thus far, been suggesting how some of the crucial insights of Levinas might be mobilized to enrich Kant's philosophical project, I now want to show how the Kantian schema discussed earlier might be

employed to make more determinate and, in a sense, less "excessive" some of Levinas' central ideas.

In this final section, I will discuss some of the central insights of Levinas under four headings, suggested by the fourfold Kantian distinctions suggested above. I will formulate them as (1) the epistemological transcendence of the Other, (2) the abjection of the "subject" in the face of the Other's absolute command, (3) the transcendence of desire, and (4) the incursion of the "infinite" into the finitude of the asymmetrical relation with the Other. My overriding concern here will be with the more concrete implications of each of these themes for an ethical standpoint which would combine a Kantian sense of structured reflection upon articulable moral principles and their conditions with the Levinasian emphasis upon the transcendent priority of the Other and its irreducibly linguistic and communicative dimensions. However, it is not my intention here to articulate any specific ethical principles, which might be inappropriate in any event. Rather, I offer the discussion in each case as elucidating a necessary dimension of any further discourse that could legitimately claim to be "ethical." Perhaps, taken together, they might fairly be regarded as the outline of a new *Grundlegung*.

(1) In our earlier discussion, "quantitative reflection" served to mark an irreducible and asymmetrical difference between certain of our concepts and an implied "object" that can never be adequately presented in or by them. Following Levinas, the infinity sensibly presented to me in the face of the Other, addressing me in demanding my response and thus provoking my responsibility, is the paradigmatic case of an "object" which necessarily transcends its concept. The "emptiness" of this "quantitative" concept, however, is not a nullity or void, but rather an enduring incommensurability between the "too little" of the concept and the "always more" of its "object."

Any concrete ethical relation necessarily involves a certain "epistemic" lack or indeterminacy from my own side as "addressee." This is true in at least three respects. First, from an ethical standpoint, the Other cannot constitute in any ordinary sense merely an "object of knowledge" to begin with, as we have seen above. This could be the case only if the Other were regarded, as Kant says, "as a means only." To regard the Other as an object of knowledge is to have reduced the infinity which the Other presents to a finite set of "qualities" which I can "calculate" and use for my own ends. Such an attitude would be "the reduction of the Other to the Same," the obliteration of the "difference of identity and difference" and hence of the ethical relation entirely. From the present standpoint, such a view (whether, for example, in the form of "ethical egoism," utilitarianism, or a theory of justice involving some "balancing of interests") could not be regarded as genuinely ethical, since it would violate the very "epistemic" condition in which genuine ethical discourse first becomes possible.

Second, "quantitative reflection" maintains that any general concept of "human being" or "human nature" under which all "Others" might be comprehended must remain inadequate as a basis for genuinely ethical discourse. The epiphany of the Other cannot be measured by any a priori or naturalistic conception of the "human." The truth of all the notorious "anti-humanist" postures, from Nietzsche's *Zarathustra* through Heidegger's "Letter on Humanism," Derrida's "The Ends of Man," and beyond, lies in the fact that the concrete epiphany of the face of the "saying" Other is presupposed by any subsequent discursive fixation of "humanity" and, in its infinity, transcends any attempt so to limit it. In Levinasian terms, "quantitative reflection" marks the topos where that which is "beyond Being," that which cannot be subjected to intentional thematization, first opens up the possibility of raising the *Seinsfrage* itself. It goes without saying that no more determinate "naturalistic" conceptions of "humanity" will fare any better.

Third, in a very concrete sense, "quantitative reflection" warns us that we can never merely *assume* that what we regard as "goods" or "ends" will form part of "the good for the Other." However, since the face of the Other is to be primarily understood as a "saying," we *can* attend to what is "said" after we have responded to the ethical command that the "saying" represents. From the standpoint of the ethical relation, "the Said" of the Other can legitimately be taken as a starting-point for framing a concept of "the good of the Other," though it will remain valid only so long as we continue to be responsible to the continued renewal of the Other's "Sayings." Clearly, however, the "Said" of the Other will never be couched in terms of a general concept of "human nature," but rather in determinate commands, requests, entreaties, and narratives. In more traditional terms, "quantitative reflection" enjoins an attitude toward our ethical constructs which is focused upon the Other's conception of its own "good," which is open and responsive to further "Sayings" of the Other, and which regards its constructs as, for the "addressee," always "defeasible" though no less "categorical" for that reason.<sup>48</sup>

(2) "Qualitative reflection" was seen to mark a difference or asymmetry between a determinate concept and an object "reduced to zero-degree." Here, it is not that the "object" always overflows or transcends any determinate concept which we might construct for it, but that the concept intends an "object" which is reduced to nothingness. While other alternatives suggest themselves, I will employ "qualitative reflection" as a way of elucidating what might well be regarded as one of the most excessive or overstated claims of Levinas' texts: the assertion that the originary and primary ethical imperative is "You shall not kill" or "Do not murder me."<sup>49</sup>

While many grounds and arguments might be invoked for the almost universally recognized prohibitions against the murder of another person (with the usual qualifications, of course), even the notion of tragedy fails to

capture what is at stake here. It is not just that murder is an immoral or unethical act, an "exceptional" violation of a "moral order" that itself remains, intact, to judge it. Rather, it is that the murder of an Other annuls the very grounds upon which there can be a "moral order" to begin with. As Levinas points out in *Totality and Infinity* (pp. 198–99), the actual termination of the "life-processes" of another organism is as banal an act as choosing what tie to wear on Thursday, and, if one can successfully avoid the face of the Other, need be no more unsettling. The absoluteness of murder does not even reside in the fact that something totally unique and irreplaceable has been lost. Its ethical force lies, rather, in the fact that the murder of another is the absolute negation of that which itself makes possible any ethical standpoint or moral order to begin with. "You shall not kill" is the first ethical command because the ethical dimension opens for subjectivity only by the interruption of self-complacency by the Other. Murder is thus the ultimate reduction of the Other to the Same, the absolute bringing to identification of identity and difference. It is thus misleading to call murder "immoral." Rather, it is "amoral," not in the sense of being indifferent to morality but of destroying the entire asymmetrical structure from which the distinction between what is moral and immoral emerges in the first place. Murder is the very establishment of the reign of silence, the emptiness of which will necessarily provoke monologous chatter to fill its void.

In this sense, "Do not kill me" is the primal ethical command, not as if ethics were already established as a discourse and had "rationally" decided that this is the first principle that should be adopted, but rather that its recognition as an absolute command issuing from the Other first opens the field of ethics as a possibility. Even the Categorical Imperative itself can function as an imperative, a command, only if there is an Other who can provoke me to respond from duty to the moral law, whether or not I subsequently regard that law as arising from myself or from elsewhere. Even the extremity of autonomy, the apex of my self-legislation, bears the trace of the Other as the heteronomous source of a unique ethical demand which is left to me, to *Willkur*, to "universalize" or not.

As an absolute command, "Do not kill me" does signify an extremity. But, as Kant explains in the "Anticipations of Perception" with regard to "quality,"<sup>50</sup> these categorical determinations presuppose a continuum of "intensity." Concerned with "mathematical" (as opposed to "dynamical") notions, "qualitative reflection" (like "quantitative") is articulable in terms of a "more or less." While the extremity, the ethical *nihil privativum*, can be expressed as "Do not kill me," "qualitative reflection" implies that the murder of the Other can, in fact, be regarded as a matter of degree. Actual physical murder of the Other is the extreme terminus of a process (or range of "stages") by which the Other is murdered "little by little," or "by degrees." I need not physically murder the Other in order to tread a "murderous path." Rather, beginning with a simple turn away from the face of the

Other, I may come, "by degrees," simply to ignore the appellations of the Other, later to discredit the Other's discourse, then to deprive the Other of any "right" to discourse, and finally to regard the Other as unworthy of its very existence since, deprived of discourse, "it" can no longer appear to me as an "ethically relevant" Other.<sup>51</sup>

(3) "Relational reflection" marks an asymmetrical difference between "intuition" and its "object," the result of which Kant expresses as an *ens imaginarium*. In a sense, this bears an analogy with "quantitative reflection," in that it concerns a "fixed" determination of subjectivity which is infinitely transcended by that which it, always deficiently, intends. However, here it is not the case of my *concept or representation* of the Other being overrun and defied by the infinity presented by the face of the Other, something amenable to discursive exchange provoked by the "Saying" of the Other, but an "Other-directed" intentionality on my part that forever remains unfulfilled.

Levinas remains insistent, throughout his writings, upon the difference between "desire," "need," and "love." Need is sporadic and satiable, measuring its "time" by the interval between its onset and its satisfaction. Need is self-directed: emanating from the self, it refers to the Other only as the circuit which returns it to the sameness of satisfaction. The circuit completed, the need is satisfied and the Other "is" no longer. If "need" falls short of the Other by reducing it to the Same, thus terminating itself, "love" overshoots the Other by supposing that it can reach and dwell with the Other on the Other's terms. If need sporadically cancels the "difference of identity and difference" in favor of identity, then "love" does likewise, but in favor of the original "difference." But no more can the Other be reduced to the Same, to me, than can I be reduced (or reduce myself to) the Other, to difference. Subjectivity remains: between need and love there is *desire*.

The time of need is always *its* time: begun with its onset, ended with its satisfaction. The time of love is always eternal: the infinite transcendence of the Other, identified with, participated in, *your* time as including, annihilating, and raising mine to an infinite present. Ultimately, for need and love there is no time. If, like animals, we had only need, or as angelic spirits, we knew only love, we would be atemporal, ahistorical, timeless. But, the *presupposition of both need and love is desire*. Need is desire intending its own termination in its self; love is desire that affectively cancels itself in identification with an Other.<sup>52</sup>

"Relational reflection" thus concerns desire, the true "difference of identity and difference," the recognition of the Other which knows that it can neither abandon the Same nor complacently abide within it. As such, desire plays a crucial role in Levinas' overall argument. Sometimes likening it to Spinoza's *conatus*, Levinas claims that our dynamic movement toward the infinite cannot be one of cognition, since (as we have already seen) the infinite cannot be known. As he puts it,



The idea of the infinite is a thought which at every *moment thinks more than it thinks*. A thought that thinks more than it thinks is Desire. Desire "measures" the infinity of the infinite.<sup>53</sup>

While Levinas does not wish to make desire a form of cognition, neither does he want to characterize it as a simple "urge," "instinct," or "inclination," all of which would be comprised under "need." Three features stand out in Levinas' various discussions of desire.

(a) Desire, as it were, "spatializes" and "temporalizes" our relation to the Other as infinite. Levinas seems to view the two "primordial" notions of spatiality as "beyond" and "height":

To manifest oneself as a face is to *impose oneself* above and beyond the manifested and purely phenomenal form, to present oneself in a mode irreducible to manifestation . . . without the intermediary of any image. . . . In *Desire* are conjoined the movements unto the Height and unto the Humility of the Other.<sup>54</sup>

Further, "prior to" and "beyond" the "temporalizing" of self-consciousness:

time can designate a "not yet" that nevertheless would not be a "lesser being" . . . only as the inexhaustible future of infinity, that is, as what is produced in the very relationship of language.

This signification of time more fundamental than "temporality" ultimately stems from "the Desire which does not arise from a lack or a limitation but from a surplus, from the idea of Infinity."<sup>55</sup>

(b) The "spatiality" and "temporality" arising from Desire precede any theoretical or cognitive senses of space and time: they are both bound up with what Levinas calls the "investiture of freedom." For Levinas, freedom is at best an empty reflex or potency of subjectivity which is activated only with the encounter with the Other.

Existence is not condemned to freedom, but judged and invested as a freedom. Freedom could not present itself all naked. The investiture of freedom constitutes moral life itself, which is through and through a heteronomy.<sup>56</sup>

In this process of "investiture," freedom is not established as some *factum*, but exists in the very mode of "an infinite movement . . . putting itself ever more into question," precisely because the Other calls into question the *justice* of one's own subjective claims to freedom.

(c) It follows from the infinity of Desire that I can never rest satisfied with having "fulfilled my duty" or "manifested my freedom." Rather, the

infinite responsibility to the Other implied by Desire intensifies its own sense of injustice, of never having done enough.

*The infinity of responsibility denotes not its actual immensity, but a responsibility increasing in the measure that it is assumed; duties become greater in the measure that they are accomplished.*<sup>57</sup>

To “fulfil” one’s duty is to assume others that follow from it in an infinite chain of responsibility. Freedom can therefore not be conceived as a particulate “breaking of the ‘noumenal’ into the ‘phenomenal,’” but of a continual, infinite, and expanding process of questioning whether, in my freedom, I have ever done enough. Doing my “moral duty” thus makes sense, not in itself, but only in the context of a whole interrelated series of ethical acts, each of which implies yet more: in the context, that is, of a life oriented toward the ethical service of the Other.<sup>58</sup>

(4) As I developed it in the first section, “modal reflection” must articulate a “double-asymmetry” which plays over the other three dimensions of reflection discussed above. On the one hand, any given finite discourse will always be incommensurate with the infinity presented by the face of the Other and the ethical task which this poses; on the other, however, the resources of discourse are such that a further “saying” is always possible which is able to overturn or “unsay” the “said” of all prior discourse, thus once more clearing the way for a new responsiveness to the absolutely Other. As Levinas writes in “God and philosophy”:

Language then has over signification only the hold a form has, clothing matter. . . . An alternating rhythm of the said and the unsaid, and the unsaid being unsaid in its turn, will have to be substituted for the unity of discourse.<sup>59</sup>

Reminiscent of Kant’s famous invocation of “the moral law within and the starry skies without,” Levinas, in such later writings as that just cited, adds an “immanent” dimension to his strong emphasis on the “transcendence” of infinity:

It is as though the psyche in subjectivity were equivalent to the negation of the finite by the Infinite, as though—without wanting to play on words—the *in* of the Infinite were to signify both the *non* and the *within*.<sup>60</sup>

That is, Levinas wants to call attention not just to the “transcendence” of the finitude of subjectivity by the infinite manifested by the Other, but also to its indwelling at the heart of subjectivity. Infinity is thus not just “beyond” but also “within.” And just as the “transcendence” of the Other is disclosed first and foremost in the linguistic “saying” addressed to me by the

Other, so is the "immanence" of infinity connected with my own abilities to "respond" and signify to the Other. This, I think, is the key to any attempt to develop the theological implications of Levinas' view as well as to ascertain the relations between theology and ethics.

(a) Despite some of his statements which might, especially if taken out of context, seem to imply something different, Levinas, in an interview in 1984, provided an unambiguous and uncompromising answer to the following question put to him: "But how can one be for God or go toward God as the absolutely other? Is it by going toward the human other?" His reply:

Yes, and it is essential to point out that the relation implied in the preposition *towards* (*à*) is ultimately a relation derived from time. Time fashions man's relation to the other, and to the absolutely other or God, as a diachronic relation irreducible to correlation. . . . "Going towards God" is meaningless unless seen in terms of my primary going towards the other person. I can only go towards God by being ethically concerned by and for the other person.<sup>61</sup>

Thus, like Kant, Levinas views any legitimate theological reflection, any theology that is not merely "onto-theo-logy," as essentially ethical in significance. A theology that is not founded in the ethical relation would be "ontological," another expression of the Other in terms of the Same: ultimately, it would literally be "a-theism."

(b) However, as Kant also argues in *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone*, theology is a legitimate mode of discourse, but only to the degree to which it remains in the service of the ethical relation as its articulation. Kant's attempt to sanction a sort of "post-critical" religious discourse as a "symbolics" of a fundamentally ethical view of the world mediating human finitude and infinity is echoed by Levinas in *Totality and Infinity*:

For the relation between the being here below and the transcendent being that results in no community of concept or totality—a relation without relation—we reserve the term religion. . . . Religion, where relationship subsists between the same and the other despite the impossibility of the Whole—the idea of infinity—is the ultimate structure. . . . *Religion* subtends this formal totality.<sup>62</sup>

It should be noted that implied in both Kant and Levinas is a distinction between theology and religion. For both, religion continues to carry with it its etymological significance of "being bound" (*religare*) and in both cases this is not a matter of doctrinal adherence but of ethical responsibility to the Other. Theology thus appears as the constructed and systematized "Said" of a more fundamental religious "Saying" which binds us to the infinity presented in the face of the Other. Despite Kant's commitment to Christianity

and Levinas' to Judaism as religious stances, they would agree that, contrary to many current views, it is not so much religions that divide us as it is the theological doctrines in which the ethical impulse at the heart of religion is expressed. However, theology can nonetheless not be regarded as a mere "supplement" to religion, but as a particular congealing of the ethical "Saying" of religion into a structure of "Said."

(c) In this sense, just as Kant demythologizes traditional theology in favor of its rehabilitation in the service of an ethically based interpretation of religion, so Levinas, in "God and Philosophy," grants to deconstructive projects directed against all "transcendent signifiers" a legitimate function. But, as he tries to show in that essay, there must first be something to deconstruct, and that is precisely the congealed "Said" which arise only on the recognition of an ethico-religious "Saying" as a response to the infinity of the Other, which itself defies all demythologizing or deconstructive strategies.

### Conclusion

This discussion admittedly leaves many issues unresolved. In particular, in emphasizing the places where Kant and Levinas most converge, I have suppressed certain crucial differences between them. I do hope to have shown three things, however. First, many problems raised against Kant's critical project, especially with regard to ethical questions, can be suggestively answered by employing some of Levinas' central ideas to enrich Kant's own ubiquitous sense for the transcendent without violating his equally strong sense of limits. Second, the oft-cited "excessiveness" of Levinas' way of presenting his own views can be considerably reduced by ordering them along the lines of Kant's notion of reflection without losing their characteristic force. Finally, as Levinas himself is acutely aware, there are still important resources in the philosophical tradition which can be brought together with the concerns of our "post-modern" era in ways which can move philosophical discourse toward a broader view of both its past accomplishments and its present responsibilities.

### Notes

- 1 David E. Klemm, "Levinas' Phenomenology of the Other and Language as the Other of Phenomenology," *Man and World* 22 (1989): 403-26.
- 2 Paul Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another*, trans. Kathleen Blamey (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), pp. 335 ff.
- 3 John Caputo, *Against Ethics* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993), p. 80.
- 4 Ibid., p. 82.
- 5 Cf. Heidegger's essay "Overcoming Metaphysics," in *The End of Philosophy*, trans. Joan Stambaugh (New York: Harper & Row, 1973), p. 85.

- 6 In this essay, I will remain within the general scope of Levinas' philosophical and ethical thought as expressed in *Totality and Infinity* and several of the essays closely related to it. While not dismissing their importance, I will leave aside his further development in *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence* as well as his more religious or "prophetic" writings, since what I am seeking is a starting-point for dialogue, not a full reading of the Levinasian corpus.
- 7 As with any such project, I realize that I run the risk of offending more doctrinaire followers of both parties to the discussion. More traditional Kantians will undoubtedly find the directions in which I want to take Kant somewhat unusual, if not far-fetched, and I am aware that my reading runs the risk of violating some of Kant's own critical strictures. To them, I can only respond that, while my reading of Kant does exceed the "letter" of the Critical Philosophy, it nonetheless remains true to its "spirit" (though not in the same ways that Fichte intended when he first used this distinction). To some more doctrinaire Levinasians, my interpretation will probably appear to reabsorb Levinas into the very tradition of "ontology" which he so deeply opposes. My apology to them is that the real force and profundity of his position will continue to be buried under charges of "excess" unless his views can be articulated or reformulated in ways which bring them into some proximity with more familiar forms of ethical and philosophical discourse. Finally, to both I would say that, if I am on the right track, there already is more proximity between Kant's and Levinas' concerns than has yet been recognized.
- 8 Of course, this fundamental problem posed by the project of a critical philosophy tended to create its own historical division. On the one side were those who, beginning with Kant himself in the second edition of the *KdrV*, believed that the problem could be successfully addressed without discarding either the general project of a critical philosophy or the notion of limit operative within it. On the other were those who, like Fichte and Hegel, held that either Kant's notion of philosophical system or his notion of limit (or both) would have to be given up. In this essay, I am in effect agreeing with both sides: on the one hand, I want to affirm Kant's original insight which sought to preserve an "other" of experience as not only valid but necessary; on the other hand, I want to claim that Kant's notions of philosophical method and of limit must be violated precisely in order to preserve his original insight about the "other" of experience.
- 9 I leave aside in this paper whether Fichte, who is the main object of Hegel's invective, could fairly be tarried with the same brush, though, for the record, I think not. See, e.g., my essay, "German Idealism under Fire: Fichte, Hegel, and Metacriticism," forthcoming in *Hegel on the Modern World*, (Albany: SUNY Press, 1994).
- 10 *AA* A260/B316, p. 276. [In this and subsequently, I will follow the convention of citing the page numbers of the A and B versions of the *Kritik der reinen Vernunft* (*KdrV*) as contained in the *Akademische Ausgabe* of the Prussian Academy of Sciences, followed by the page number of the English translation by Norman Kemp Smith (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1933).
- 11 Cf. *AA* V, pp. 180 ff.
- 12 I will henceforth use the English equivalent "reflection" for Kant's *Reflexion*; the reader should understand that I intend this equivalent to be taken in the narrower technical sense of Kant's term, not in the much broader (and generally vaguer) sense that it ordinarily carries in English.
- 13 One can conjecture that it was exactly this "abiding within the nexus of difference" implied in Kant's notion of reflection that attracted Heidegger's attention as expressed in the first quotation at the beginning of my essay.

- 14 This, perhaps, is where Hegel went wrong in the *Differenzschrift*, for he tended to view *Reflexion* merely as the activity of *Verstand* in assuming a conceptual unity or identity and then making its distinctions on that basis. I do not think this Hegelian reading can easily be squared with Kant's discussion of *Reflexion* in the "Amphiboly" section of the *KdrV*.
- 15 Cf. *AA* A298/B355 ff., pp. 300 ff.
- 16 "We must add some remarks which, although in themselves not of special importance, might nevertheless be regarded as requisite for the completeness of the system." *AA* A290/B346, p. 294.
- 17 It is important to note that, on Kant's analysis, *Nichts* is never univocal in meaning, but neither is it unrestrictedly equivocal. Rather, Kant's view is that it is equivocal *but only within a given range of meanings*, which are determinable by reference to the general structure of our human abilities to think and experience. Kant's view thus avoids the indeterminacy of existential "nothingness" as well as the logicist reduction to the "tilde" of modern formal-logical methodology.
- 18 I think there are some very interesting "asymmetries" among the four inflections of *Nichts* when compared to the "Table of Categories" from which they are derived, but I will leave this point aside in the present discussion.
- 19 Here and elsewhere in what follows, I am trying to insist upon remaining true to the notion of *Reflexion* presented in the "Amphiboly." That I do not think Kant always did so, especially in his schematization of *Nichts*, should be clear from my discussion.
- 20 *AA* A291/B347, p. 295.
- 21 One is tempted at this point to resort to Heidegger's notion of temporality (and, correspondingly, spatiality), but, for reasons which I hope will become clear, I want to resist such a reading.
- 22 *AA* A291/B348, p. 295.
- 23 Indeed, Kant himself seems aware of problems with modal categories when he writes: "The *modality* of judgments is a quite peculiar function" (*AA* A74/B99–100, p. 109). As he presents it, the problem concerns the fact that modality is at the same time both a category and a "meta-category," in that it applies to judgments in which other categories are themselves "nested," i.e. it ranges over all other categorial determinations within judgments. I mention this to, in a sense, excuse my speculations on this point, since I don't think that Kant himself satisfactorily worked out the problems that the modal categories raise. My reading here may seem "un-Kantian" but, on the basis of Kant's own texts, I'm not entirely sure what a "Kantian" view on this point might amount to.
- 24 I realize there are long-standing problems here, but I will not pursue them in this essay.
- 25 Note that this is not the same as either the "quantitative," "qualitative," or "relational" dimensions of reflection, since none of them require that a concept or representation of the infinite be involved. They do not exclude this (hence the "iterability" of the modal categories), but, by the same token, they also do not require it.
- 26 See, for example, his interview with Philippe Nemo, published under the title *Ethics and Infinity* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1985). Kant also appears to have become more central to Levinas' thinking in *Otherwise than Being, or Beyond Essence* than he was in *Totality and Infinity*, although some of Kant's most potentially fruitful views tend to get assimilated to Husserl's rather different project. Levinas is hardly alone in this, however.
- 27 Adriaan Peperzak occasionally discusses Kant in relation to Levinas. See, e.g., the essay entitled "Presentation" in *Re-Reading Levinas*, ed. R. Bernascone and

- S. Critchley (Bloomington: Indiana U. Press, 1991), pp. 56–57; also *To the Other: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas* (West Lafayette: Purdue University Press, 1993), pp. 173–74. In his earlier essay, "Some Remarks on Hegel, Kant, and Levinas," in *Face to Face with Levinas*, ed. Richard Cohen (Albany: SUNY Press, 1986), especially pp. 211–13, Peperzak seems, with some qualifications, to agree with the general lines I am exploring in this section and the next. John Llewelyn develops an interesting perspective on the relation between Kant and Levinas in "Am I obsessed by Bobby? (Humanism of the Other Animal)," in *Re-Reading Levinas*.
- 28 *AA Bxxivff*, p. 26.
- 29 Cf. *The Levinas Reader*, ed. Sean Hand (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1989), p. 86.
- 30 Kant, of course, would not claim that subjectivity was "founded in the idea of the infinite," but he would claim, I think, that the concept of the trans-subjective infinite or noumenal cannot be dispensed with in articulating his version of Idealism, as he makes clear in his final repudiation of Fichte's version of this view.
- 31 This essay appears in English in *Collected Philosophical Papers*, tr. A. Lingis, and in both French and English in *To The Other*, ed. A. Peperzak. It was originally published in *Revue de Metaphysique et de Morale* 62 (1957): 241–53. Levinas does tend to cease formulating the problem taken up there in terms of "autonomy" and "heteronomy" in his later works, even in *Totality and Infinity*. However, they remain helpful as a means of very graphically portraying what might be regarded as the most radical point of opposition between Kant and Levinas, so I will retain them here.
- 32 Cf. Chapter II of Kant's *Groundwork of the Metaphysic of Morals*.
- 33 It is, I think, a credit to Levinas' way of reading the philosophical tradition that he refuses to amalgamate its many complex strands into a universal narrative, whether of "forgetting" or of "deferment," but instead sees the possibilities of autonomy and heteronomy always alive and vying with one another for precedence throughout.
- 34 *KdpV = Kritik der praktischen Vernunft; KdU = Kritik der Urteilstkraft*.
- 35 Peperzak offers some important insights about this in his earlier essay cited above.
- 36 While I realize the interpretive issues surrounding the term "transcendental object," I use it here as a son of "generic term" comprising all of the various ways in which Kant signifies that which lies "beyond" the critically delimited realm of experience ("Ding-an-sich," "noumenon," "God," "Ideal of Pure Reason," etc.)
- 37 Cf. Section III. Exteriority and the Face, especially subsections A and B (pp. 187–219 of the English translation). For a more detailed discussion of these sections, see Peperzak, *To the Other: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas*, pp. 161–92.
- 38 *Totality and Infinity*, p. 194.
- 39 "Philosophy and the Idea of the Infinite," in *To The Other*, p. 110.
- 40 Or would he? I suppose one's answer here depends upon how one reads, in particular, the *KdU*.
- 41 *Totality and Infinity*, p. 194.
- 42 *Ibid.*, pp. 195–96.
- 43 "Philosophy and the Idea of the Infinite," p. 119.
- 44 *Totality and Infinity*, p. 215.
- 45 *Ibid.*, p. 196.
- 46 *Ibid.*, p. 211.
- 47 *Ibid.*, p. 194.
- 48 This development of the notion of "quantitative reflection" allows a difficult problem in Kant's "end-in-itself" formulation of the Categorical Imperative to

be addressed. Although this version was supposed to provide a more “affirmative” or “material” determination of the originally “purely formal” statement, it will not succeed so long as some more determinate conception of what an “end-in-itself” is can be framed. However, to provide this would seem to amount to falling back into the very “naturalism” or “eudaimonism” that Kant has rejected from the beginning of the *Grundlegung*. Here, the freedom of the Other is respected in allowing the meaning of being an “end-in-itself” first to be determined by the discourse of the Other.

49 Cf. *Totality and Infinity*, pp. 197–201; “Philosophy and the Idea of the Infinite,” pp. 108–12.

50 AA A166/B207, pp. 201ff.

51 The histories of the legal devices mobilized by “dominant societies” to condemn various groups first to “irrelevance,” then to “marginality,” and ultimately to death bears solemn testimony to this.

Again, this resolves a certain sort of casuistic ratiocination to which Kantian ethical theory has been susceptible. Clearly for “imperfect duties,” but even for such “perfect duties” as truth-telling or keeping promises, casuistic objections can be generated regarding “how much” truth I am required to tell or “how far” I must go in keeping my promises. On the present view, while it would make no sense to admit certain duties as *prima facie* on the basis of which such deviations might be justified (or not), we should be able to respond that, if truth-telling or promise-keeping is demanded by the Other, then complying “in degrees” is merely a stage on the way to ultimate violation of the Other and is, in fact, part of its “intentional trajectory.”

52 This, at least, is one possible reading of Levinas’ treatment of these issues. Cf. “Philosophy and the Idea of the Infinite” (pp. 113–14): “The term we have chosen to mark the propulsion, the inflation, of this going beyond is opposed to the affectivity of love and the indigence of need.” Also, *Totality and Infinity*, “The Ambiguity of Love,” pp. 254–55.

53 “Philosophy and the Idea of the Infinite,” p. 113.

54 *Totality and Infinity*, p. 200.

55 Ibid., p. 210.

56 “Philosophy and the Idea of the Infinite,” p. 117.

57 *Totality and Infinity*, p. 244.

58 Once again, a consideration of Levinas allows us to begin to link Kant’s *Sittenlehre* with his *Tugendlehre* and *Rechtslehre*, his moral theory with his theories of “virtue” and of “right.” As Levinas develops the notion of Desire, moral action, founded in Desire of the infinity of the Other, entails both the “subjective virtue” of a life responsible throughout to the just claims of others and the “objective” justice that commands us to maintain conditions in which responsible action can, everywhere and at all times, remain possible.

59 “God and Philosophy,” in *The Levinas Reader*, ed. Sean Hand (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1989), p. 186.

60 “God and Philosophy,” p. 174.

61 “Dialogue with Emmanuel Levinas,” in *Face to Face with Levinas*, ed. Richard Cohen (Albany: SUNY Press, 1986), p. 23.

62 *Totality and Infinity*, pp. 80–81.



# LEVINAS, KIERKEGAARD, AND THE THEOLOGICAL TASK

*Merold Westphal*

Source: *Modern Theology* 8(3) (1992): 241–61.

## I

For one who comes to *Totality and Infinity* after more than two decades of reading, teaching, and writing on Kierkegaard, the result is a sense of serendipitous homecoming. The affinities between Levinas and Kierkegaard are deeper and more extensive than one had any reason to suspect.

Both are concerned to identify genuine alterity, total otherness.

Both suspect philosophical thought—speculative, theoretical, totalizing thought, as developed by their most powerful immediate predecessors, Hegel in the one case, Husserl and Heidegger in the other—of the violence that violates real difference.

Both are eager to expose the pretensions of philosophical thought as pretentious by confronting it with its ownmost other.

Both deny that the object of such thought is the true other of its subject.

Both affirm that the wholly other has the character of subject rather than object, and, more specifically, that it is in the subject encountered as a will that challenges the autonomy of my own will that I encounter the wholly other.

Both thereby link transcendence to self-transcendence, difference to decentering, enriching their Augustinian heritage with the claim that pride is more nearly solipsistic than hegemonic.

Both affirm that self-transcendence in relation to the Other presupposes both an inwardness and an exteriority to which the systematic totalizing of ontological theory represents an allergic reaction.

Both seek to move beyond epistemology's normal separation of intellectual from moral virtue, linking the question of truth to the question of courage by stressing the risk involved in knowing the Other as genuinely other.

Both deny that knowledge is recollection, that the truth is within us, and that teaching is a maieutic relationship.

Both are willing to talk of absurdity and paradox, recognizing that philosophical thought is normally predicated on the exclusion of what they find to be essential, thus rendering Reason irrational.

Both view the Society legitimized by such Reason to be equally irrational and sharply distinguish genuine encounter with the Other from history and politics as typically understood and practiced.

Both link the ethical and the religious very tightly together and set them off as a region of self-transcending subjectivity thoroughly different from the violent objectivity of both speculation and politics.

No doubt there are many important implications for the practice of theology to be developed from this striking body of agreements. I want to mention only three.

First, *theology should have a confessional form*. This does not mean that it should primarily orient itself to creedal explication. What it does mean, most simply, can be stated negatively. Theology should not be conceived as science. Neither the Greek ideal of *episteme* nor the German ideal of *Wissenschaft* can be its model. It is not a report of the subject's incursion into objectivity, a triumphal procession in which the booty of victory is placed on display. It is rather an expression of the subject's encounter with a subject who is sufficiently other to be neither the I nor the We of the theologian but the You or Thou who evokes fear and trembling from both that I and that We.

That the Other transcends the We as well as the I is important for both writers. Thus Kierkegaard writes, in protest against the 'self-deified establishment', that 'there is no established order which can do without fear and trembling . . . And fear and trembling signifies that a God exists—a fact which no man and no established order dare for an instant forget' (1944: 89). In doing so he sharply distinguishes his account of the divine-human relation from Hegel's account of Spirit, which is defined as 'this absolute substance which is the unity of the different independent self-consciousnesses which, in their opposition, enjoy perfect freedom and independence: "I" that is "We" and "We" that is "I"' (1977: 110).

In much the same spirit, Levinas finds the Heideggerian *Mitsein* inadequate to his understanding of the face to face. Under the dominance of the Greek metaphor of light, 'the social ideal will be sought in an ideal of fusion . . . the subject . . . losing himself in a collective representation, in a common ideal. . . . It is the collectivity which says "us", and which, turned toward the intelligible sun, toward the truth, experience, *the other at his side and not face to face with him*. . . . *Miteinandersein* also remains the collectivity of the with, and its authentic form is revealed around the truth.' By contrast, 'we hope to show, for our part, that it is not the preposition *mit* which must describe the original relation with the other' (quoted from *Le temps et l'autre* by Derrida, 1978: 90; his ellipses, my italics).

Both Levinas and Kierkegaard repudiate the Platonic model of recollection for interpreting our awareness of so radically transcendent an Other, and both speak instead of revelation. Barth's account of revelation is entirely in their spirit. What we learn in such an encounter 'becomes the object of our knowledge by its own power and not by ours . . . In this bit of knowing we are not the masters but the mastered . . . Knowledge in this case means acknowledgment. And the utterance or expression of this knowledge is termed confession' (Barth, 1956: 172-73).

To call it confession is to use the term in its Augustinian sense, one that has little to do with what is usually connoted by confessionalism. Theology as confession is acknowledgment to God and before human hearers or readers of what I (or we) have learned in revelatory experience. As addressed to God, theology, so far from being science, has the character of grateful praise. Here we encounter the notion of theology as doxology (Wainwright, 1980). As addressed to human hearers or readers, theology, so far from being science, has the character of bearing witness or giving testimony. Marcel's development of the notion of testimony, with its emphasis on receptivity and gratitude, fits the theological context to a tee (1968: 91-103; cf. 1960: II, 140-62).

Second, *all theology should be mystical theology, a guide to the practice of spiritual formation*. I am using the term 'mystical theology' here in its classical sense to refer, not narrowly to a special (exotic) set of religious phenomena, but broadly to the entire intercourse of the soul with God.<sup>1</sup> Theology must return to the far side of the split between mystical theology, so construed, and dogmatic theology (Louth, 1983: Introduction). For that split represents the separation of devotion from doctrine, of self-transcendence from transcendence in a way both Levinas and Kierkegaard reject. The criterion of genuine otherness or transcendence is self-transcendence, the journey from the false self that wills to be the center to the true self that welcomes the Other. As the analyses of welcoming and hospitality by Marcel and Nouwen show, we are speaking here of a gesture that by its very nature removes me from the center (Marcel, 1964: 27-28, 88-91; cf. 1968: 98-99; Nouwen, 1975: 45-78). Hence the true self is a decentered self, not merely an orthodox self.

In this context there can be no isolation of dogmas about the living Spirit from the disciplines of the spiritual life. Needless to say, a theology that is intended to culminate in prayer and worship must have its origin there as well. The relation between the formation of dogma and the disciplines of formation will have to be circular.

Finally, *theology will have to develop a self-critical hermeneutics of suspicion*. The advice of Paul Ricoeur will become normative. 'In our time we have not finished doing away with *idols* and we have barely begun to listen to *symbols*. It may be that this situation, in its apparent distress, is instructive: it may be that extreme iconoclasm belongs to the restoration of meaning' (1970: 27).

Theology as listening to symbols embodies the assumption that meaning can be given to us from beyond ourselves, that we need not be, so far as meaning and truth are concerned, a *causa sui* project. But if our immediate self is the pride that wills to be the center, and the self-transcendence in which we become detached from ourselves in that mode is the criterion of genuine transcendence, any self-deception about self-transcendence will mean that putative transcendence is pseudo-transcendence. In short, to false consciousness belong false gods.

That self-deception about self-transcendence is no abstract possibility is a thesis that Levinas and Kierkegaard develop in company with the three secular masters of the school of suspicion, Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud (Ricoeur, 1970: 32). What Derrida says about Levinas is just what I have tried to show about Kierkegaard, namely that they provide 'the premises for a non-Marxist reading of philosophy [and theology] as ideology' (Derrida, 1978: 97; cf. Westphal, 1987: especially ch. 7, but also 2–3 and 6).

Precisely because of the link between transcendence and self-transcendence, theology is especially vulnerable to self-deception and thus to idolatry. In other words, if God-talk (transcendence) is self-involving (Evans, 1963) in a decentering mode (self-transcendence), and if my fundamental spiritual instinct is to be the center myself—or, to put it in Augustinian language, if faith is humility and my natural (fallen) self is pride—then my God talk may be phony. It may well embody more self-deception than self-transcendence. This is why an 'extreme iconoclasm' in the form of a self-critical hermeneutics of suspicion needs to be incorporated into every theology.

In the perspective of Levinas and Kierkegaard, this is a war that has to be fought on two fronts simultaneously. On the practical front are the seductions of the social order, enticing us to make our collective self absolute and reduce self-transcendence to socialization. Those who have the decency not to say 'I am God' are invited not to notice the indecency of saying 'We are God' by making, for example, *our* need for economic growth or the requirements of *our* national security absolute ends that justify any means. It is as a protest against such idolatry that Kierkegaard speaks of the 'teleological suspension of the ethical' and Levinas distinguishes so sharply between ethics/metaphysics and politics/ontology.

On the theoretical front are the seductions of speculative theory, enticing us to make our cognitive self absolute and reduce revelation to recollection. These twin, totalizing seductions are allied to each other. The totality of institutions that make up the established order and the totality of semantic values in which it is mirrored, by which it is legitimized, and within which recollection operates are but two sides of the same human, all too human, coin that would be God.

Thus, in the very opening pages of his Preface, Levinas links philosophical reason not only to 'the ontology of totality issued from war' but also to the violence that 'does not consist so much in injuring and annihilating

persons as in interrupting their continuity, making them play roles in which they no longer recognize themselves, making them betray not only commitments but their own substance, making them carry out actions that will destroy every possibility for action'. Of course, if this is the domain of reason, then 'the eschatology of messianic peace . . . a subjective and arbitrary divination of the future, the result of a revelation without evidences, tributary of faith—belongs naturally to Opinion' (1969: 21–22).

If we are puzzled by the link Levinas draws between ontology on the one hand and war and domination on the other (22, 42–48, 55, 80), we might start, with Hannah Arendt, at the other end. 'Total domination,' she writes, 'which strives to organize the infinite plurality and differentiation of human beings as if all of humanity were just one individual, is possible only if each and every person can be reduced to a never-changing identity of reactions, so that each of these bundles of reactions can be exchanged at random for any other' (1966: 438). If total domination requires the reduction of infinite plurality and diversity to the unity in which totality dominates plurality, then ontology, just to the degree that it 'reduces the other to the same' (Levinas, 1969: 42) is the ideology of domination.<sup>2</sup> To the degree that theology orients itself to ontology, and thereby to the 'comprehension of being' rather than the 'presence of the Other' (43), it also replaces revelation with ideology.

The linkage of the ontology of war to reason and the eschatology of peace to opinion finds its parallel in Kierkegaard's distinction between Reason and the Paradox in the *Philosophical Fragments*. The speculative instinct that seeks to reduce revelation to recollection has co-opted the honorific title of Reason, leaving biblical faith no option but to define itself as the Paradox relative to that rationality. To Reason's proud discovery of this relation (whether as Enlightenment or as Romanticism), the Paradox responds, 'It is exactly as you say, and the amazing thing is that you think that it is an objection' (1985: 52). It is only through an acoustic illusion that Reason, when it echoes what the Paradox has been saying about their relation for nearly two millennia, should think it has made a discovery. That this is ideology critique and not ordinary religious epistemology is clear when it is read in conjunction with the critique of Hegelian, bourgeois ethics in *Fear and Trembling*, a reading clearly required by the *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* and *Training in Christianity*.

To put Levinas' point about the ontology of war in Kierkegaardian language, we can say that the political problem with Hegel is not his alleged 'Prussianism' (see Kaufmann, 1970), but his speculative sacrifice of otherness in a dialectic of *self*-mediation that is, in the final analysis, monological (see Desmond, 1987; Habermas, 1987). Hegel's inability to understand Abraham and the 'teleological suspension of the ethical' has its roots, not in the *Philosophy of Right*, but in the *Phenomenology of Spirit* and the *Science of Logic*. If those who ran the death camps for Hitler were thoroughly

*bourgeois*, typically a respectable *paterfamilias* reduced to putty through unemployment (Arendt, 1945: 263–65), this is all too compatible with an Hegelian overcoming of ‘positivity’ and ‘unhappy consciousness’ in a reconciliation of the human and divine that blurs the distinction between *Sittlichkeit* and the sacred (see Donagan, 1977: 15–18 and Westphal, 1979; 1987, ch. 5).<sup>3</sup>

A theology that incorporates within itself the kind of hermeneutics of suspicion just described, directed against both the irrationality of Society and the irrationality of the Reason that is its ideology, can appropriately be described as a liberation theology. For while liberation theologies have their own distinctive hermeneutics of recovery, of listening to symbols, focusing on the Exodus motif and other biblical expressions of God’s concern for the poor and powerless, they also systematically combine this with a hermeneutics of suspicion directed against both the institutions and the ideologies of oppression.<sup>4</sup> While this often has a Marxist flavor, and while we have already noted that Levinas and Kierkegaard provide the premises for a non-Marxist ideology critique, this need not be the either/or it seems. For ideology critique as it emerges in Levinas and Kierkegaard is not anti-Marxist; it is rather more general than the Marxist versions, capable of incorporating them but not limited to their distinctive themes. Capitalism may very well be a serious source of oppression, the violence that compels people to ‘play roles in which they no longer recognize themselves’, but it is not the only one. So we might formulate a fourth implication for the theological task rooted in the agreements between Levinas and Kierkegaard: *all theology should be liberation theology, a guide to the practice of overcoming oppression in all its forms.*

## II

The liberation motif, however, though rooted in the extensive common ground between Levinas and Kierkegaard, brings even more forcefully to our attention the major difference between them. For Levinas the Other is, in the first instance, the human Other, and the first commandment is ‘You shall not commit murder’, while for Kierkegaard the Other is, in the first instance, the divine Other, and the first commandment is ‘You shall have no other gods before me’. What makes this difference especially interesting is Levinas’ emphasis on the face to face character of our meeting with the human Other, while for Kierkegaard we most definitely do not encounter the divine Other face to face. He entertains the biblical hope that when our present imperfection passes away we will see God not merely ‘in a mirror dimly’ but ‘face to face’ (1 Cor 13: 10–12; cf. Matt. 18:10). For the present, however, we are at best in the situation of Moses. In response to his request to see the divine glory, God arranges to give him a glimpse from behind, but ‘you cannot see my face; for man shall not see me and live . . . my face shall not be seen’ (Ex. 33: 20, 23).<sup>5</sup>

There is something divine about Levinas' Other. In contrast to the horizontalism he finds in the personalism of Buber and Marcel, he radically verticalizes the face to face (1969: 68–69; cf. 53, 64). Thus he borrows theological language to describe the transcendence of the Other (33–52) as the Infinite (25, 41, 48–52, 62), Invisible (33–35), Absolutely Other (33–35, 39), Most-High (34), Master (72, 75, 86). The domain of intercourse with the Other he identifies not only as ethics, but also as metaphysics (33f.), religion (40), and revelation (28, 62–66, 73).<sup>6</sup>

For all of this Levinas is quite emphatic about the fact that 'it is only man who could be absolutely foreign to me' (73). While the designation of the Other as the Stranger could be used to suggest divine transcendence (cf. Tillich, 1964), Levinas assimilates it to the biblical notion of the sojourner, the human outsider, by linking it to the widow, the orphan, and the poor (1969: 77–78). The encounter with this human Other presupposes an atheism that is 'prior to both the negation and the affirmation of the divine' (58) and in turn the presupposition of any 'faith purged of myths, the monotheist faith' (77). In other words, the ethical/metaphysical encounter with the human Other is antithetical to mythological religion and antecedent to monotheistic religion. 'To relate to the absolute as an atheist is to welcome the absolute purified of the violence of the sacred. In the dimension of height in which his sanctity, that is, his separation, is presented, the infinite does not burn the eyes that are lifted unto him . . . He is not numinous . . . Transcendence is to be distinguished from a union with the transcendent by participation. The metaphysical relation, the idea of infinity, connects with the noumenon which is not a numen' (77).

Conversely, there is something human about Kierkegaard's Other, and yet he is quite emphatic about the fact that only the divine Other is wholly other. The humanness comes from his emphasis on the incarnation, on God become human in Jesus of Nazareth. Thus his quest for the other that thought cannot think focuses not on the *Deus absconditus* but on the God-Man, the god in time. But precisely those works in which this focus is sharpest (1941, 1944, 1985) are the ones which insist most strongly that while Jesus as human is immediately present to his contemporaries, Jesus as divine is not. The faith which apprehends him as such is as much a leap for his contemporaries as for subsequent generations of disciples. The incarnation does not represent the moment when it becomes possible to see God face to face, and, ironically but by no means incidentally, the God-Man remains the *Deus absconditus*.

What are the implications of this difference for the task of theology? In pursuing this question we must avoid certain misunderstandings. In the first place, it is no more the concern of Levinas to deny encounter with a divine Other than that of Kierkegaard to deny that human others confront us as a claim to decentering self-transcendence. The issue revolves around the phrase, carefully used above in formulating their disagreement, 'in the first instance'. Is the Other human or divine 'in the first instance'?

Secondly, the primacy indicated by the term 'first' is not a temporal primacy. It would no doubt have been possible to say 'in the final analysis' instead of 'in the first instance'. Priorities that are not temporal are usually said to be logical, and that is what I want to say here. For Levinas the human Other is logically prior, while for Kierkegaard the divine other is logically prior. But what does that mean? Here is a third misunderstanding to be avoided. We are not talking about a deductive system in which what is prior is a premise that entails whatever is subsequent. What is logically prior, as I am using the phrase here, is presupposition rather than premise. It is that which must be operatively in place if what is subsequent is not to be misunderstood.

Because the Levinasian priority whose theological import we seek can be described as the priority of ethics to religion we can turn to Kant for a way of formulating the issue. Kant says that 'morality does not need religion at all', and that 'morality leads inevitably to religion' (1960: 3, 7n.) If we see how Levinas would reformulate such claims we will have discovered the first theological ramification of his primary difference from Kierkegaard.

We have already noted that Levinas begins his Preface with the sharp distinction between the ontology of war and the eschatology of messianic peace. Since the former has fairly well preempted the concept of philosophical evidence, the latter is relegated to the 'subjective and arbitrary' domain of 'opinion', of 'faith' as distinct from 'knowledge' (1969: 22-24). But while he thinks we must say yes to the question, 'But does not the experience of war and totality coincide, for the philosopher, with experience and evidence as such?' he wants to say no to the related question, 'Does not the eschatology of peace outside of this evidence, live on subjective opinions and illusions?' (24).

This obviously means challenging the ultimacy of the philosophical concept of evidence which finds its 'natural locus' in 'representation' and its telos in 'totality'. 'Unless philosophical evidence refers from itself to a situation that can no longer be stated in terms of "totality"' this would not be possible. The external way of doing this consists in 'substituting eschatology for philosophy . . . philosophically "demonstrating" eschatological "truths".' The internal alternative is to 'proceed from the experience of totality back to a situation where totality breaks up, a situation that conditions the totality itself. Such a situation is the gleam of exteriority or of transcendence in the face of the Other' (24).

In other words, Levinas seeks to mediate the antithesis of the philosophical and the religious with the help of the ethical. Rather than simply impose the eschatological upon the ontological, he seeks to deconstruct the latter by finding within it something that points beyond it. He seeks for the point in which the 'beyond', the 'breach of the totality', is 'reflected *within* the totality and history, *within* experience' (23).



If it is objected that Levinas has defined the totality as the exclusion of the ethical, which in that case could hardly be found *within* it (cf. Kierkegaard's complaint that the System has no ethics, 1941: 108–110), we will have to reformulate the point in terms of the phrase '*within* experience' instead of the phrase '*within* the totality'. Levinas would then be appealing to a moment of experience prior to both the ontological and the eschatological interpretations that resists the former but welcomes the latter. 'Without substituting eschatology for philosophy, without philosophically "demonstrating" eschatological "truths"',—in short, without dogmatically imposing eschatology upon ontology or dogmatically confining eschatology to the philosophical concept of evidence—'we can proceed from the experience of totality back to a situation where totality breaks up' (24)—that is, we can find a level of experience prior to any totalizing interpretation thereof which, if attended to with care, precludes all such interpretations.

Since the experience of the ethical cannot be said, strictly speaking, to be found '*within* the totality', we cannot call Levinas' procedure a deconstructive one. But since the ethical can be said, strictly speaking, to be found '*within* experience', we can call his procedure a phenomenological one. But we must be careful here, for Levinas is careful to distinguish his phenomenological, experiential attempt to get back *zu den Sachen selbst* prior to either philosophical or theological interpretation from the specific phenomenological theories of Husserl and Heidegger. Thus Derrida is right in noting that Levinas uses phenomenology in his critique of phenomenology. But it does not follow that the Greek *logos* can be attacked only from within (Derrida, 1978: 118–53). Derrida is able to draw this conclusion only because, unlike Levinas, he fails sufficiently to distinguish the Greek inspired phenomenologies of Husserl and Heidegger from that of Levinas, whose Hebrew inspiration comes, as he himself reminds us, from a 'more ancient volcano' (82).

Matthew Arnold has said that between Hebraism and Hellenism our world 'ought to be, though it never is, evenly and happily balanced'.<sup>7</sup> The first implication of Levinas' priority of the ethical for theology is that this is not true. Theology will inevitably give priority either to a Greek inspired ontology of war and violence or to a Hebrew inspired eschatology of messianic peace. It ought to orient itself to the latter, and it will find sufficient rational motivation to do so if, and only if, it pays sufficient attention to the ethical encounter with the Other that presupposes neither of the two.<sup>8</sup> This is the meaning Levinas gives to the Kantian claims that morality does not need religion but leads inevitably to it.<sup>9</sup>

For Levinas the face to face encounter with the human Other is logically prior to any meeting or discourse with the divine Other. The former is not a premise from which the latter can be deduced, but the presupposition that must be operatively in place if the latter is not to be misunderstood. The first implication of all this for theology has been stated negatively: if theology would be a theology of liberation rather than of domination, it must

not orient itself to the philosophical framework inherited from the Greeks and expressed in our own time most powerfully by Husserl and Heidegger. For Levinas, as for Derrida, Heidegger's attempt to recover the ontological dimension of the tradition over and against the primacy of epistemology in Husserl and the neo-Kantian reading of Kant is an intramural quarrel within Greek logocentrism, not a radical challenge to it.

The second implication of the priority of the human face says the same thing positively. If theology is not to seek its ground in ontology, it is to seek it in the Other. In turning away from Athens, Jerusalem needs to listen to the voice of Amos, or rather, to see the faces of the poor painted by his words. Epiphany must be interpreted in the light of ethics if it is not itself to be misunderstood as ideology. The God who says 'You shall have no other gods before me' must be the defender of the human face's claim, 'You shall not commit murder'. All other gods are idols, the fabrications of those who worship them, whose function is to justify sinners by legitimizing their will to power. The 'invisible but personal God is not approached outside of all human presence.' Rather, to encounter the Other first as the stranger, the widow, the orphan, the poor, in short as the neighbor in the pentateuchal—prophetic sense of the term, is 'to prohibit the metaphysical relation with God from being accomplished in the ignorance of men and things. The dimension of the divine opens forth from the human face . . . God rises to his supreme and ultimate presence as correlative to the justice rendered unto men . . . There can be no "knowledge" of God separated from the relationship with men. The Other is the very locus of metaphysical truth, and is indispensable for my relation with God' (1969: 78).

From this wisdom Levinas draws two conclusions that cannot go unchallenged. The first is that it is 'our relations with men . . . that give to theological concepts the sole signification they admit of' (79). Taken at literal face value this claim has a reductionist, Feuerbachian meaning for which Levinas has offered no support. So construed it is surely a *non sequitur* from the argument that culminates in the claim that the Other is, 'indispensable for my relation with God'. It is perhaps best read as a hyperbolic restatement of the claim that those who do not love their neighbor cannot truly love God (1 John 4:20). But this hyperbole is misleading, for from this claim it surely does not follow that loving God means nothing but loving my neighbor.

The other conclusion is the following: 'Without the signification they draw from ethics theological concepts remain empty and formal frameworks. The role Kant attributed to sensible experience in the domain of the understanding belongs in metaphysics to interhuman relations' (79). Levinas has in mind the following passage from Kant, especially the parts I have italicized. '*Without sensibility no object would be given to us, without understanding no object would be thought. Thoughts without content are empty, intuitions without concepts are blind. It is, therefore, just as necessary to*

make our concepts sensible, that is, to add the object to them in intuition, as to make our intuitions intelligible, that is, to bring them under concepts. These two powers or capacities cannot exchange their functions. The understanding can intuit nothing, the senses can think nothing. Only through their union can knowledge arise. But that is no reason for confounding the contribution of either with that of the other' (Kant, 1961: A51 = B75–76).

Would that it were so, that theological affirmation cut off from the ethical experience of welcoming the human Other were harmlessly empty and formal. But it is not true. Such theology is the street walker that prostitutes itself to whatever master is willing to employ it in the service of its will to power. It becomes *ancilla dominatus*.

We can distinguish at least three ways by which theology becomes ideology in the service of idolatry.<sup>10</sup> The first we might call Overt Espousal. In this instance theology explicitly justifies such practices as slavery, apartheid, anti-Semitism, colonialism, and male chauvinism by putting God on the side of power. It is this kind of theology that leads Joan Baez to sing, 'If God is on our side, we'll start the next war'.

The second mode of theology as ideology we can call Vague Generality. 'The student whose paper began, "On balance, Plato believed good was better than evil," provides an example, admittedly extreme, of the problem here' ('Challenge', 369). It is easy to be for good and against evil in the abstract, much harder in the concrete. In the abstract good and evil are totally different, while in the concrete they usually appear in those mixtures we call 'gray'. Moreover, it is cheap to be for liberty and justice in the abstract, as the American pledge of allegiance regularly reminds us, but there is a cost to opposing oppression and tyranny in the concrete. For example, a theology that is capable of calling racism a sin, but incapable of identifying apartheid as racism, is a comfortable theology, a bargain at almost any price to those who would rather not be challenged to rise up and live out the meaning of their creed.

A third path from God-talk to the support of evil can be called Dualistic Hermeneutics. Theologies in this tradition divide the world into spirit and matter, soul and body, personal and social, sacred and secular, vertical and horizontal, and so forth. Then, by opposing evil on one side of the great divide created by such categories, perhaps very concretely, they permit themselves to remain totally silent about the evils of the other side. It is precisely this silence that plays the ideological function. Whereas theologies of Overt Espousal are ideological by virtue of what they say, those of Dualistic Hermeneutics and its first cousin, Vague Generality, legitimize domination of one sort or another by what they do not say. They justify practices of oppression, along with the accompanying beliefs and attitudes, through the silence which makes it quite possible to be, for example, a 'good Christian' while engaging in those practices, holding to those beliefs, and dwelling in those attitudes.

I think it is safe to conclude that if there is any sense in which 'knowledge' of God separated from justice toward the human Other is 'empty and formal' it involves the temporary emptiness of which Jesus speaks when he describes the unclean spirit who is restless outside the man in whom he used to dwell and who says to himself, "I will return to my house from which I came." And when he comes he finds it empty, swept, and put in order. Then he goes and brings with him seven other spirits more evil than himself, and they enter and dwell there; and the last state of that man becomes worse than the first' (Matt. 12:44-45). Theology can only be neutral in appearance. It will end up either as *ancilla justitiae* or *ancilla injustitiae*.

### III

As we turn to explore Kierkegaard's priority of the divine to the human Other, we will be asking two questions, not seriatim but simultaneously. First, what are the implications for theology, and second, is it possible to see Levinas and Kierkegaard as complementary rather than antithetical (cf. note 9)?

The first thing to notice is that Kierkegaard is not the individualist he has often been taken to be.<sup>11</sup> He has a dialectical concept of the self as essentially relational (Westphal, 1987: 29-33). The self, according to his famous definition, is 'a relation that relates itself to itself and in relating itself to itself to another' (1980: 13-14). None of his attempts to dissolve the bonds that tie the self to human others are in the service of a classically liberal concept of the self as self-contained. Rather, they seek to free the self for its essential relation to human others by freeing it first for its superessential relation to the Divine Other. The possibility of this double freedom for another presupposes freedom from the idolatrous claims of the established order whose habit is to confuse itself with the Divine Other.

Kierkegaard's appeal to subjectivity in the assault on the tyrannical Society that finds its legitimation in the totalizing System<sup>12</sup> is better known than the intersubjectivity he wants to affirm in their place. It is, most simply put, the view of Jesus the Jew, grounded in the more ancient volcanic soil in which he grew, that what matters first is to love God, and what matters next is to love our neighbor (Mark 12:28-34). But the God relation comes first.

Nowhere does Kierkegaard affirm this more eloquently than in *Works of Love*, his most eloquent account of neighbor love as welcoming the stranger, the widow, the orphan, and the poor. There he speaks of the hidden origin and source of the commanded *agape* that is not reducible to or derivable from the celebrated *eros*, much less bourgeois prudence. 'As the flow of a spring lures by the murmuring persuasion of its rippling, yes, almost begs one to go along the path and not curiously wish to penetrate in to discover its source and reveal its secret . . . so also is the desire and prayer of love

that its concealed source and its hidden life in the most inward depths may remain a secret' (1964: 26–27).

But Kierkegaard insists on revealing this secret. 'As the quiet lake is fed deep down by the flow of hidden springs, which no eye sees, so a human being's love is grounded, still more deeply, in God's love. If there were no spring at the bottom, if God were not love, then there would be neither a little lake nor a man's love. As the still waters begin obscurely in the deep spring, so a man's love mysteriously begins in God's love' (27).

The first implication of this priority of the God relation to the human relation is, unlike the God relation itself, anything but hidden. It takes us back from the liberation motif to the theme of spirituality. Kierkegaard says to us, in effect, if by virtue of its hermeneutics of suspicion and its taking seriously the face of the poor and the powerless your theology would be a liberation theology, make sure that it is first a mystical theology, rising from and returning to that communion of God and the soul that takes place 'in a human being's most inward depths' (26). If you do not first learn the meaning of self-transcendence in relation to the God whom we do not meet face to face, your theory and practice of justice and even of love vis-à-vis the stranger is likely to involve more self-deception than self-transcendence.

If we ask why this is so, the answer is not far to seek. At the bottom of that lake is a spring that Kierkegaard identifies not with the knowledge of God but with the love of God. Here the subjective genitive, God's love of us, is prior to the objective genitive, our love of God. Love can be evoked only by love. Since human love, left to itself, turns out to be the demand to be loved (Sartre, 1956: 375; cf. 368), only a God who is love itself could initiate a love that would be genuine self-transcendence rather than a disguised form of self-assertion. Hence, 'We love, because [God] first loved us' (1 John 4:19). It is in response to God's love that we learn to love both God and neighbor.

If, according to Levinas and 1 John 4:20, we cannot love God when we do not love our neighbor, it is just as true, according to Kierkegaard and 1 John 4:19, that we cannot love our neighbor when we do not love God, when we have not yet allowed the love of God (subjective genitive) to evoke within us the love of God (objective genitive). We have here a dialectical situation, one in which we must make both of two conflicting claims at once. We must affirm both priorities, for love of God and love of neighbor are each the necessary condition of the other. For linear, atomistic thinking, the circular relation here is vicious. But for holistic thinking it is vital, both in the sense of being life giving and of being a matter of life and death. If the common ground between Levinas and Kierkegaard earlier generated both the spirituality and the liberation motifs, their most basic difference now leads us to the inseparability of these moments.<sup>13</sup>

We can formulate two further possibilities for complementarity from Kantian texts already before us. In the first place, it might be that while

Levinas gives us a distinctive interpretation of the Kantian claim that although ethics does not need religion it leads inevitably to it, Kierkegaard will give us a distinctive reading of the Kantian claim, 'Religion is (subjectively regarded) the recognition of all duties as divine commands' (Kant, 1960: 142).

The other formulation would be the suggestion that if ethics plays the role Kant attributes to sensibility, religion plays the role he attributes to the understanding. We might say, 'Religion without ethics is empty (in the temporary sense, specified above), while ethics without religion is blind.' We would then be looking for a Kierkegaardian overcoming of this blindness. Any such making the face intelligible by bringing it 'under concepts' will involve qualifying the immediacy Levinas attributes to the face (1969: 51–52; cf. note 8 *supra*). Surprisingly, at least to Kant, these two possibilities are really the same. It will turn out on a Kierkegaardian reading that we make the face intelligible by bringing it 'under concepts' precisely by viewing duties as divine commands.

By describing the face to face with the Other as a revelation of that which expresses itself *kath'auto*, Levinas explicitly excludes any interpretation which would bring it 'under concepts' that could be spelled out in terms of Husserl's concept of horizon or Heidegger's closely related concept of disclosure. Since Kierkegaard wants as badly as Levinas to preserve the *kath'auto* of a revelation that is irreducible to recollection, there is no conflict here except for this: for Kierkegaard the *kath'auto* of revelation primarily concerns the God whom we do not meet face to face.

This difference generates a difference concerning the universality of the ethical. There is a kind of almost nominalistic particularism about Levinas' phenomenology of the face, so much so that the formulation, 'You shall not commit murder', never sounds quite right. It would be more accurate to say, 'You shall not kill me', Derrida finds in Levinas an 'immediate respect for the other himself—one might say, although without following any literal indication by Levinas—because it does not pass through the neutral element of the universal, and through respect—in the Kantian sense—for the law' (1978: 96).

Derrida is right to find this sort of nominalistic immediacy in Levinas, leaving the matter of iterability or universality problematic. But he is wrong in suggesting that Levinas is not himself explicit about the matter. The polemic against universality is quite overt. 'A universal thought dispenses with communication. A reason cannot be other for a reason. How can a reason be an I or an other, since its very being consists in renouncing singularity. . . . Reason speaking in the first person is not addressed to the other, conducts a monologue. . . . Separated thinkers become rational only in the measure that their personal and particular acts of thinking figure as moments of this unique and universal discourse. . . . But to make of the thinker a moment of thought is to limit the revealing function of language to its coherence, conveying the coherence of concepts. In this coherence the

unique I of the thinker volatilizes. The function of language would amount to suppressing "the other," who breaks this coherence and is hence essentially irrational. A curious result: language would consist in suppressing the other, in making the other agree with the same! (1969: 72–73). The reason for this link between the universal and monologue is that the universal represents the impersonality of 'the Neuter' (87–88).

Kierkegaard, too, often sounds like a nominalist, not least when he polemicizes against the ultimacy of the Hegelian universal (Westphal, 1987: ch. 5–6). But just as he does not think that Hegel has the only social concept of selfhood, so he does not think that Hegel and Kant have the only notions of ethical universality. The priority of the God relation provides him with a universality that is compatible with revelation and the *kath'auto*. It is the universality, not of the concept, philosophically understood, but of the command, theologically understood.

Martin Buber has spelled out this implication of Kierkegaard's thought (without reference to Kierkegaard) in his anti-Kantian, anti-Hegelian interpretation of the Decalogue. He takes seriously the fact that God's speech does not begin with a categorical imperative, 'You shall have no other gods before me', but with a covenantal reminder 'I am YHWH thy God, Who brought thee out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage'. This means that in the first commandment, which follows immediately, monotheism itself becomes a categorical imperative. 'What is said here to Israel as a whole, and so to each individual amongst the people, is not that there *are* no other gods: to say this would be to contradict the intentional sense and the connection of the passage; Israel is told, that it is *forbidden* for other gods to exist. Forbidden that *they* should have other gods: but it only concerns *them*, who are addressed, and the whole reality of the subject under discussion is that of the relationship between YHWH and Israel' (Buber, 1960: 22–23).

The *particularism* of the relationship which grounds the commandments means that they cannot be understood as expressing the abstract universality of a Kantian reason whose *telos* is self-consistency. But the particularism of the *relationship* which grounds the commandments also precludes interpreting them in terms of the concrete universality of an Hegelian reason whose *arche* is the *Sittlichkeit* of a people. For YHWH as the creator of Israel and the judge of its *Sittlichkeit* is Israel's most significant Other.

Still, and this is the point that concerns us, there is a universality about the commandments. 'You shall not commit murder' is now the proper form of the sixth commandment. While it is not addressed to everyone, it protects everyone. It places upon all human persons that mark that YHWH had once placed upon Cain, 'lest any who came upon him should kill him' (Gen. 4:15).

We can call this universality Kierkegaardian, in contrast to Kantian and Hegelian universality. For it is implied by his description of neighbor love as '*commanded* love' (1964: 35). As a duty, such love cannot be conditional,

and as oriented to the neighbor, as distinct from the beloved, it cannot be preferential. Conditionality violates the universality of commanded love by saying, I will welcome you into my life if you serve me, while preferential love violates that universality by saying, I will welcome you into my life if you please me. In both forms Kierkegaard finds the love that is the demand to be loved, the triumph of self-love over self-transcendence (34–98). The Other that I welcome into my life only when I find her useful or pleasant is, to paraphrase William James, other but not so very damn other. I have pretty well reduced other to same, making her a function of my own existence, a tool I use, an element of my enjoyment, but not an Other who puts my own freedom in question (Levinas, 1969: 85; cf. 51, 43). Blending the language of Levinas with that of Kierkegaard we can say that when love fails to rise above self-love I render the other faceless.

The ethical impossibility of killing the Other is written in the Other's face. William Faulkner's account of the murder of Christmas at the end of *Light in August* is a powerful confirmation of this. So is Erich Maria Remarque's account of a killing on the western front during World War I. On a foray between the trenches, I have become separated from my comrades and have found refuge in a crater filled with water and mud. Suddenly a question occurs to me. 'What will you do if someone jumps into your shell-hole? Swiftly I pull out my little dagger, grasp it fast and bury it in my hand once again under the mud. If anyone jumps in here I will go for him . . . stab him clean through the throat, so that he cannot call out; that's the only way; he will be just as frightened as I am; when in terror we fall upon one another, then I must be first' (Remarque 1929: 184).

As suddenly as the question arises, a body falls on top of me. 'I do not think at all, I make no decision—I strike madly home, and feel only how the body suddenly convulses, then becomes limp and collapses. When I recover myself, my hand is sticky and wet. The man gurgles . . . It sounds to me as though he bellows . . . I want to stop his mouth, stuff it with earth, stab him again, he must be quiet . . . but [I] have suddenly become so feeble that I cannot any more lift my hand against him' (185).

Overcome by the desire to get away, I move as far away as possible in the shell-hole, watching and listening. Morning comes, and the gurgling continues, drawing first my unwilling gaze and then my whole body in a crawling journey to the side of the dying man. 'At last I am beside him. Then he opens his eyes. He must have heard me, for he gazes at me with a look of utter terror. The body lies still, but in the eyes there is such an extraordinary expression of fright that for a moment I think they have power enough to carry the body off with them . . . the gurgle has ceased, but the eyes cry out, yell, all the life is gathered together in them . . . The eyes follow me. I am powerless to move so long as they are there' (187).

When I am finally able to move, I strain some muddy water from the bottom of the crater, give it to my dying enemy, and then dress his wounds



as best I can. The gurgling resumes. After the passing of an eternity, the young Frenchman passes into eternity at about three in the afternoon. 'I prop the dead man up again so that he lies comfortably . . . I close his eyes. They are brown, his hair is black and a bit curly at the sides. The mouth is full and soft beneath his moustache; the nose is slightly arched, the skin brownish; it is now not so pale as it was before, when he was still alive. For a moment the face seems almost healthy;—then it collapses suddenly into the strange face of the dead that I have so often seen, strange faces, all alike' (190).

Just as the compulsion to help had followed the compulsion to flee, now the compulsion to speak takes over. 'Comrade, I did not want to kill you. If you jumped in here again, I would not do it, if you would be sensible too. But you were only an idea to me before, an abstraction that lived in my mind and called forth its appropriate response. It was that abstraction I stabbed. But now, for the first time, I see you are a man like me. I thought of your hand-grenades, of your bayonet, of your rifle; now I see your wife and your face and our fellowship. Forgive me, comrade. We always see it too late . . . I will write to your wife' (191).

As we read this remarkable account we become the German soldier and experience the 'ethical impossibility' of killing another face to face. But we also realize the ethical ease of killing Gérard Duval, compositor, once he has been reduced to an idea, an abstraction designed to play stimulus to our responses of fear and resentment. This is why the German soldier had been able to kill any number of Frenchmen before, without feeling any need to write to their wives.

If the former experience is best experienced in the intimate encounter between two men, the latter calls for efficiencies of scale. Adolf Eichmann's participation in the 'administrative mass murder' (Arendt, 1945: 261) we know as the Final Solution is a case in point. Eichmann was never allowed into a shell-hole with any of his victims, but always kept at a safe distance. 'The fact is that Eichmann did not see much. It is true, he repeatedly visited Auschwitz, the largest and most famous of the death camps, but Auschwitz, covering an area of eighteen square miles, in Upper Silesia, was by no means only an extermination camp . . . It was easy to avoid the killing installations, and Höss, with whom he had a very friendly relationship, spared him the gruesome sights. He never actually attended a mass execution by shooting, he never actually watched the gassing process. . . . He saw just enough to be fully informed of how the destruction machinery worked: that there were two different methods of killing, shooting and gassing; that the shooting was done by the *Einsatzgruppen* and the gassing at the camps, either in chambers or in the mobile vans; and in the camps elaborate precautions were taken to fool the victims right up to the end' (Arendt, 1965: 89–90). But 'with the use of gas Eichmann had nothing whatever to do. The "details" that he went to discuss with Höss at regular intervals concerned

the killing capacity of the camp—how many shipments per week it could absorb—’ (86). In other words, he was kept at a sufficient distance so that Jewish faces were replaced by numbers.

There was linguistic distance as well as physical distance. Faces were effaced by the ‘rigid “language rules”’ that replaced ‘killing’ with ‘final solution’, ‘evacuation’, or ‘special treatment’ and that transformed ‘deportation’ into either ‘change of residence’, ‘resettlement’, or ‘labor in the East’. ‘The net effect of this language system was not to keep these people ignorant of what they were doing, but to prevent them from equating it with their old, “normal” knowledge of murder and lies. Eichmann’s great susceptibility to catch words and stock phrases, combined with his incapacity for ordinary speech, made him, of course, an ideal subject for “language rules”’ (85–66). These two modes of defacing at a distance are the background for the answer Arendt gives to Judge Landau’s question whether Eichmann had a conscience: ‘yes, he had a conscience, and his conscience functioned in the expected way for about four weeks, whereupon it began to function the other way around’ (95).

The title question of C. S. Lewis’ novel, *Till We Have Faces*, is asked by its protagonist, Queen Orual. ‘How can [the gods] meet us face to face till we have faces?’ (Lewis, 1966: 294). This religious question, we now discover, has an ethical counterpart. How can I meet the Other face to face when she has been defaced? If I am the bombardier on the ‘Enola Gay’ I have the most sophisticated equipment of my time for spotting my target, but it will not permit me to see the faces of any of the ‘Japs’ I am about to obliterate. The efficiencies of scale and the distances of space and language have seen to that. Where there are no faces in which to read the ‘ethical impossibility’ of killing the Other, who ends up just as dead when killed from a distance, the ethics of Levinas will not be of much help. Before we get to this point we need the divine command which forbids the erasure of faces. The language of this command restores to those whom the distances of space and human language have defaced their faces. Or, to speak more accurately, it restores their faces to our vision, for the Jews and the Japs had faces all along. By rendering present what is otherwise absent, it plays the role of the concept. This element of universality comes from viewing our duty to the Other as a divine command.

Of course duty can be a grim virtue, which is perhaps what Buber is thinking when he suggests that ‘there is nothing that can so hide the face of our fellow-man as morality can’ (1929: 18). Duty by itself, even divinely commanded duty, does not necessarily evoke sympathy, compassion, and respect (which keeps sympathy and compassion from degenerating into the pity of superiority that Nietzsche so despised). Here again, to use the Kantian metaphor, sense and understanding must work together. We need the perceptual particularity of Levinas and the commanded universality of Kierkegaard in tandem. Only through their union does the Other get welcomed.

# Notes

- 1 If Bonaventure's *Itinerarium mentis in Deum* (1978) is the classic of mystical theology for the high middle ages, its Augustinian origins are to be found in the dialogue between Augustine and Reason in the former's *Soliloquies* (1953: 26–27): 'Augustine.—I desire to know God and the soul. R.—Nothing more? A.—Nothing whatever'.
- 2 Cf. Kant (1961: B111), 'Thus *allness* or *totality* is just plurality considered as unity.' Although Arendt argues that total domination shatters the framework of utilitarian calculation (1966: 440, 458), she also finds a disturbing affinity between the two when she writes that 'masses of people are continuously rendered superfluous if we continue to think of our world in utilitarian terms. Political, social, and economic events everywhere are in a silent conspiracy with totalitarian instruments devised for making men superfluous. The implied temptation is well understood by the utilitarian common sense of the masses, who in most countries are too desperate to retain much fear of death' (459). Or fear of killing, we might add. Is this the frame of reference in which the questions of nuclear arms and abortion should be debated? In any case, Arendt helps us to see the radical nature of Rawls' critique when he writes, 'Utilitarianism does not take seriously the distinction between persons' (1971: 27). In Kantian language, it sees plurality as unity.
- 3 Camus' concept of 'metaphysical rebellion' in *The Rebel* (1956) points in a similar way to the speculative roots of terror. Of course, he is using the term 'metaphysical' as a synonym for what Levinas calls ontology as distinct from metaphysics. The Kierkegaardian terms are 'speculation' and 'the System'.
- 4 The similarity between the Protestant liberation theologies of South Africa and the mostly Catholic versions from Latin America is striking. See 'The Challenge of Liberation Theology' for an overview. The sections entitled 'The Mixing of Religion and Politics' and 'Who Is the God of the Bible? Ask the Pharaoh!' develop the hermeneutics of recovery, while the sections entitled 'The Capacity of Orthodoxy for Idolatry and Ideology' and 'Three Paths by which Theology Becomes Idolatry and Ideology' develop the hermeneutics of suspicion.
- 5 Cf. Gen. 32:30, Judges 6:22–23. It is puzzling that in the very same chapter we are told that 'the Lord used to speak to Moses face to face, as a man speaks to his friend' (Exodus 33: 11; cf. 24:9–11, Num. 14:14, Deut. 5:4–5, 34:10).
- 6 Because of his emphasis on difference and because Derrida both devotes a long and important essay to him (1978: 'Violence and Metaphysics') and incorporates the notion of the trace into his own thought, it is easy to think of Levinas and Derrida together. But as a Jewish thinker Levinas is clearly closer to Buber than to Derrida. Both Levinas and Derrida wish to challenge Hellenistic logocentrism, but making the world safe for the Other and making it safe for *différance* are quite different projects, only the former of which has its roots in the Hebrew experience that Derrida calls a 'more ancient volcano' (1978: 82) and Levinas 'a primordial and original relation with being' (1969: 22). One indication of this difference is their respective relations to rhetoric. While Derrida seeks to rehabilitate rhetoric vis-à-vis logic (see Garver, Preface to Derrida, 1973), Levinas, entirely in the spirit of the *Gorgias*, presents rhetoric as a threat to genuine discourse, the language of transcendence (1969: 70–72).
- 7 Derrida places this quotation from *Culture and Anarchy* at the beginning of 'Violence and Metaphysics' (1978: 79).
- 8 Levinas' repeated emphasis on the Other's ability for self-expression *kath'auto* is probably the most important way in which Levinas speaks of this 'pre-suppositionless' character of ethical experience (1969: 51–52, 64–67, 74–77, 262; cf. 23, where he speaks of 'the possibility of *signification without a context*').

- 9 It is also the meaning he gives to the Kierkegaardian claim that the ethical stage on life's way is prior to the religious. If this theme, which links Kierkegaard to Levinas, is compatible with the priority of the divine to the human encounter that sets him apart from Levinas, the two thinkers may turn out to be complementary rather than antithetical.
- 10 I first developed these three modes of ideological service in 'The Challenge of Liberation Theology', which I drafted for the Theology Commission of the Reformed Church in America.
- 11 For a classic expression of this misunderstanding, see Buber, 1936. It is because he essentially shares this reading of Kierkegaard that Derrida seeks to drive a wedge between him and Levinas (1969: 110; cf. 96).
- 12 In his opposition to the self-deifying totality Kierkegaard appeals, not to the subjectivity of the autonomous individual, but to the inwardness of the intersubjective individual. This is in full harmony with Levinas, who repudiates subjectivism but appeals to an interiority open to intersubjectivity against politics and history (1969: 25, 54–58).
- 13 From the growing literature that seeks to explore this inseparability, I mention only Avila (1981), Balasuriya (1979), Boff (1982, 1983), Brown (1988), Crosby (1977), Galilea (1981, 1988), Gutiérrez (1984), O'Connor (1975), Wallis (1981), and Wolterstorff (1983).

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## THE MORAL SELF

Emmanuel Levinas and Hermann Cohen

*Edith Wyschogrod*Source: *Daat: A Journal of Jewish Philosophy* 4 (1980): 35–58.

The work of Emmanuel Levinas attempts to give an account of the uniqueness of the human person starting from what he believes to be peculiar to persons, the recognition of others as the source of moral obligation. But this criterion had already been proposed in the literature of neo-Kantianism and the formulation it received there found wanting. According to Heidegger, the neo-Kantians see in the ethical a means for transcending human finitude: "There is something in the categorical imperative which exceeds the finite being"<sup>1</sup>. But for Heidegger the concept of the ethical can only display itself in relation to a finite being. Levinas is familiar with the theory of the moral self in neo-Kantianism, particularly in the work of Hermann Cohen and with Heidegger's criticism of its deficiencies<sup>2</sup>. Nevertheless, I shall argue that Levinas is in significant conversation with Cohen's thinking, that his own construing of the human person reflects a correction of Cohen's view in accordance with lessons learned from Heidegger's phenomenological approach and that, conversely, a Cohen-like view is put forward in order to overcome the deficiencies of Heidegger's account. I shall not attempt to give a systematic exposition of Cohen's theory of the self but shall confine my remarks to what is pertinent in Cohen's thought to Levinas' account of the self. For this reason I propose to emphasize the last work of Cohen, for only after Cohen had completed his "existential turn"<sup>3</sup> could his work enter into dialogue with what is germane to that of Levinas: Cohen's conception of the human person as a unique individual, an "I".

This is not to say that Levinas' view of the human person is derived from Cohen, a merely corrected version of Cohen's moral subject. Rather he shares with Cohen the basic assumption that an awareness of the other as a moral datum, as imperative or command, is constitutive of the self<sup>4</sup>.

### Herman Cohen and transcending ontology

Levinas' work is characterized by a remarkable paucity of reference to Cohen. Two remarks however provide clues to the role that Cohen's view of the self plays in his own formulation of the problem and, on interpretation, are singularly revealing. Both remarks are brief, cryptic, and made in the context of broader discussion in which Cohen's work seems merely to exemplify a larger issue<sup>5</sup>. I shall treat each remark separately. In his early thesis on Husserl's theory of intuition, Levinas distinguishes Husserl's work from that of certain German thinkers of the latter half of the nineteenth century<sup>6</sup>. Believing that the sciences exhaust the totality of what can be known about being, these thinkers leave to philosophy the task of investigating the process of knowing itself; philosophy is interpreted as "knowledge about knowledge", as epistemology. Hermann Cohen (although not, of course, Husserl) is seen as belonging to this class of thinkers. Levinas' first remark on Cohen reads:

The naturalist and psychologistic philosophers were identifying philosophy and experimental psychology (Wundt, Erdmann, Sigwart), while the Marburg school (Hermann Cohen, Natorp), Alois Riehl, the school of Windelband, etc., were trying to renew the Kantian critique by interpreting it as a theory of knowledge. *Common to all these philosophers is the identification of philosophy and theory of knowledge, the latter being understood as a reflection on the sciences*<sup>7</sup>.

[my emphasis]

Here Levinas' view is strictly in accord with Heidegger's interpretation of Cohen: Heidegger thinks that the knowledge of being is relegated to science whereas to philosophy is assigned the residual task of reflecting upon the character of knowledge. For the neo-Kantian, "there appeared to remain only the knowledge about science, not of that-which-is"<sup>8</sup>.

But Levinas' remark also shows that among those who identify philosophy with theory of knowledge, there are not only some who, like Cohen, wish to renew the Kantian critique but also others who fail to distinguish empirical psychology from philosophy. They (Wundt, et al) assume that an adequate view of the nature of knowledge could be derived by investigating the experiences of mental life. But psychology itself is interpreted by them as a science of nature whose methods are no different from those of physics and chemistry. This standpoint distinguishes them from Cohen for whom no theory of knowledge can be based upon induction since induction can never yield the necessary universal elements of experience. For Cohen, a rationally derived theory of knowledge can be applied to the science of nature but never deduced from it<sup>9</sup>. This difference between Cohen and the psychologizers is non-trivial: while both identify philosophy with



epistemology, Cohen does not attribute a psychological origin to the laws of logic nor to the ethical law. The last is especially significant. Although important differences between Cohen and Levinas remain, Levinas is free to enter into conversation with Cohen's work on the shared assumption that the moral law (whatever the conditions of its discovery) is not psychological in origin and thus that the self of responsibility cannot be explained in accordance with psychological laws.

Levinas' second remark on Cohen serves a positive function. It is inserted in a context in which the issue is a distinction between rhetoric and genuine conversation. Levinas argues that despite their difference in purpose and content, both are language and all language reverts to the interlocutor of dialogue. This holds even for Plato, for whom the theory of ideas seems to intervene between the content of a discourse and the persons actually engaging in conversation. Against this background Levinas remarks: "Hermann Cohen (in this a Platonist) maintained that one can love only ideas; but the notion of an Idea is in the last analysis tantamount to the transmutation of the other into the Other [person]"<sup>10</sup>. What does this mean? Does the love of the Idea represent a false start if a genuine understanding of language is to be attained? And does Cohen also fall into this difficulty?

If we examine the antecedent passage closely we find (as we have already noted) that Levinas distinguishes between two kinds of conversation illumined by Plato. This distinction is based not upon the content of discourse but upon the way in which the discoursing persons present themselves: either in terms of social role or as exposed to the interlocutor. Does one approach one's neighbor with ruse (as the sophist in the Platonic dialogues) or does one speak directly to the other? Is the conversation "rhetoric" or is it "philosophical discourse"? Does it attempt to corrupt the freedom of the other or does it appeal to this freedom?<sup>11</sup> If the former, discourse has become violence since violence first occurs as false discourse. Taking a stand in conversation with the other is aimed not only at bringing to light the theme of the discourse but is a constitutive act: it enables the self to emerge either as a being of violence who intends to corrupt the freedom of the other person or as a self who recognizes the other as an ethically significant being<sup>12</sup>. In the first type the other is reduced to the being of objects; in the second the other, "beyond all *emprise*", is grasped as an ethical datum. This disengagement from all objectivity means positively that the other is presented as a face, as expression, as language. An other has become the Other, the interlocutor. This face to face approach is justice.

But is this absolute experience of the "face to face" in Plato one which Levinas believes can be found in Cohen? Is it not enough to say then, since Levinas speaks of Cohen as a Platonist and a lover of ideas, that Levinas' account of Plato is sufficient for understanding the affinity for Cohen? We do so only at the risk of ignoring Cohen's own remarks on Plato for Cohen specifically dissociates his view of the love for ideas from the

Platoni eros for the forms<sup>13</sup>. In fact, Platonic love is, for Cohen, the pivotal point around which an understanding of the difference between Platonic ideality and his own ethical idealism and monotheism turns. It might seem that Plato, by recognizing the true eros as directed towards beauty, truth and justice transcended the view of eros as sexual in character and there — by grounded ethical existence in an erotically grasped apprehension of value. But Cohen specifically denies this, arguing instead that Plato has only shown the “comprehensive significance of eros for culture in general”<sup>14</sup>. According to Cohen Plato fails to give full ideality to the forms: Platonic ideality is compromised through the participation of culture in the forms. Thus, when Levinas characterizes Cohen’s love for the ideas as Platonic he means only to show that their convergence consists in the view that the true eros must be directed towards ideality but Levinas knows that the character and function of this ideality differ.

For Cohen ideality derives its source from logical necessity: the highest expression of this necessity is the God of monotheism. At no point, however, does the concept of God acquire actuality, for were God to become actual, he would take on the ontological structure appropriate only to phenomenal existents. The *concept* of actuality for Cohen means the relating of thought to sensation and must be excluded from the *concept* of God. God can, in that sense, have no actuality<sup>15</sup>.

Still, for Cohen, the idea of the unique God whose mode of being differs from that of the universe, has a positive content: while the idea is not itself something actual, it is able to achieve something for actuality by functioning as an ethical ideal which becomes fruitful in man’s love for God. Thus the power of the idea to actualize itself comes about through love. When asked how it is possible to love an idea, Cohen replied: “How is it possible to love anything but an idea?”<sup>16</sup> Since one can love only ideas it would appear that Cohen means by love some form of knowledge but this is, strictly speaking, not the case. For Cohen pity, originating in the relations between man and man, in the experience of the poor, the economically deprived, is the primal form of human love. But is not ideality incompatible with pity? For Cohen, ideality is retained as an aspect of pity: poverty is given not only through sense as an item of cognition but as an axiological datum. Once the necessity of God is perceived the poor man and the stranger are apprehended in their universality as fellowmen. Levinas’ position converges in this regard with that of Cohen: all men are poor since all men are subjected to the contingencies of economy. Furthermore, the stranger, one who is different from oneself, is included in this circle of compassion. What for Cohen is an inequity in economy becomes for Levinas a constitutive inequity between self and other<sup>17</sup>. The asymmetry of social space founds a self of responsibility constituted as a difference in “height” between the commanding presence of the other and the percipient. Levinas’ affinity for Cohen can now be understood in the light of Cohen’s use of the idea: transcending the Platonic

doctrine of forms, the unique God of monotheism is the content of the idea and gives rise to the compassion for the other.

### Totality and the loss of the I

Despite its primacy, a relational self based only on a moral intuiting of the other ignores the evidence of non-moral experiences, those based on embodiment, perception, etc. which are integrated into human existence together with the apprehension of other persons. While for Cohen little account is taken of an infra-rational self, for Levinas (borrowing from Heidegger) nothing can be taken for granted. Even bare individuality, the sheer existence of the existent, must be derived phenomenologically<sup>18</sup>. The emergence of the existent is attested by examining the irreducible experiences of the already constituted self. The advent of this self is adduced proleptically through the history of culture as a splitting off from a more primordial oneness, from mere being without any appearances, from the apeiron or unboundedness. The moment of separation is also exhibited in the life of the individual (both as a primordial condition and as a permanent possibility of human existence) in such experiences as need and satiety, dwelling, work, etc.

Once the separated individual has been constituted as the self which dwells and works, it is possible to consider the self from a quite different point of view. Levinas has brought to light the meaning of the act of separation itself and the various intentional structures which constitute it. But the self can be interpreted not only as a system of meaningful intentional structures, but as the sum of the observed behaviors which constitute its cultural acts. This aspect of the life of the self is open to investigation, to third person description. This is the self of totality<sup>19</sup>. But far from constituting the moral self, the ascription of selfhood to a sum of behaviors distorts the moral self by identifying it with manifest acts. Constituted as a unity *after the fact* by the historian, the self of totality is its completed series of behaviors<sup>20</sup>. Levinas means that the perspective of the historian confers unity upon a given sequence so that the string of behaviors expresses in relation to a specifiable set of spatial coordinates a single if highly ramified meaning.

But does not an observer-constituted self presume (falsely) that an account of the self can be given which attributes to it the ontological structure of what Heidegger calls objects present-at-hand, that it has the character of something that constantly remains, the extended thing as it is found in nature?<sup>21</sup> Levinas recognizes this difficulty:

Works have a destiny independent of the I, are integrated in an ensemble of works . . . Integration in an economic world does not commit the interiority from which works proceed. This inner life does not die away like a straw fire, but does not recognize itself in the existence

attributed to it within economy . . . From the work I am only deduced and am already ill-understood, betrayed rather than expressed<sup>22</sup>.

Despite this acknowledgement, Levinas legitimizes this "falsification" as long as one admits its partiality. It reflects a single aspect of the self in formation, a necessary mode of givenness which cannot be bypassed. There is no eliminating the self that is the sum total of one's works. Thus, one's works are a sign and this signifying character serves a necessary function; it conceals and thus protects the privacy of an interiority never expressed in activity:

The *who* involved in activity is not *expressed* in the activity, is not present, does not attend his own manifestation, but is simply signified in it by a sign in a system of signs, that is as a being who is manifested precisely as absent from his manifestation: a manifestation in the absence of being — a phenomenon . . . Here phenomenality does not simply designate a relativity of knowledge, but a mode of being where nothing is ultimate, where everything is a sign . . .<sup>23</sup>

The self of totality derives from a positivistic interpretation of human existence, but this does not reflect an aberrant understanding of existence, a falling away into a "they-self" constituted by society in terms of what "people do". It represents a possibility of the self at an infra-ethical level. The individual is integrated into a historical order, but in the manner of an object of nature subject to natural laws, into a totality whose creation is the function of history.

Levinas' view of man as a member of totality is not without its antecedents in Cohen's thought: Cohen considers the infra-ethical individual as part of the "dark blind mass of state and society"<sup>24</sup>, the homogenous unit which does not yet recognize the social constitution of the self through compassion or pity. Man in his social groupings shows the opposing tendencies of singularity and plurality but neither of these forms in itself gives rise to the absolute self. Just as for Levinas the separated individual is not yet the moral individual but incorporable into the totality for Cohen singularity presupposes membership in an infra-ethical plurality (*Mehrheit*); the very recognition of individuality implies the existence of other individuals whose likenesses entail unity as a principle. Plurality too, as a logical class forming a unity of its own, requires something beyond itself. But prior to its merger into a still more inclusive whole, its form of unity must be understood as extending over every member of the group although the form of this unity is still infra-ethical. The individual is a unit in a series: one man next to other men, *just the next man* (*Nebensmensch*)<sup>25</sup>.

But is not the next man already the fellow man? Cohen argues that conceptual knowledge is required to achieve the transformation of the next man into the fellowman since "experience refutes" their identity. By "experience"

Cohen means the violence that is inflicted by individuals and states upon one another. This relationship of violence is attested in Cohen's conception of the "opposing man" (*Gegenmensch*) who comes into being as a consequence of the social differentiation that prevails in the plurality, "for the social differentiation does not appear to be organized according to rank and order of coexistence but according to subordination and subjugation"<sup>26</sup>. Levinas shares with Cohen the view that prior to the recognition of other persons as moral data, social existence is violence. But the end of social existence is peace, not as a mere cessation of violence but as a new existential condition which both Cohen and Levinas refer to as Messianism. For Cohen this altered condition of society results in a collectivity of moral individuals which he designates as "totality" (*Allheit*). The meaning given to the term by Cohen runs directly counter to Levinas' usage: for Levinas, "totality" is the sum of observed and comprehensible behaviors constituting the social universe. But for Cohen totality designates the highest human goal, an ideal endpoint of the human spirit achieved through the ethical development of man. The full force of the difference in the understanding of the term "totality" is brought out in Cohen's description of the individual as a member of the Messianic society:

The moral individual is *the individual of totality*, and therefore not only does he not vanish, but he achieves completion only in historical development, as prescribed by Messianism. The moral concept of the individual could not be realized apart from this development. *The idea of the historical development of the individual represents the total value, the high point of the moral person*<sup>27</sup>.

It must be remembered that what Levinas calls "totality" corresponds to Cohen's society of the next man prior to constitution of the individual as an ethical being.

### Interiority and the loss of the world

The self of totality for Levinas ultimately falls under criticism, through the emergence of the moral self, but penultimately the existence of the totalized self is disrupted by the resistance of interiority to incorporation into a totality. As a historical being, the individual is integrated into a continuum whose ongoingness is irreversible. But the separated individual as interiority breaks into this order, the order of totality.

The structural condition of the disruption of totality depends upon the intentional character of consciousness, a character which comes to the fore in cognition. Intending acts of consciousness remain impervious to detection and thus cannot be totalized. But while the self that cognizes effects a break with the hypostatized third person self constituted in totality, it fails

to provide the required conditions for genuine individuality. This failure is the result of the structure of cognition itself which yields the object through a movement of prior disclosure. That is to say, objects come to fulfill antecedent indications of them, come into plenary presence as objects intended. Consciousness is dynamic thrusting towards objects rather than remaining inert before a transcendent content which comes to it from the "outside". Furthermore, consciousness is meaning bestowing: an object is apprehended as something, as a "this" or a "that". For Levinas consciousness is the power of consciousness: cognizing entails a foredisclosure of the object thus forcing the otherness of the object to become (in Levinas' term) the Same<sup>28</sup>. What was *at first* felt to be different from consciousness so that cognizing act and content appeared to be discrete is revealed as a false bifurcation. The fore-disclosing character of consciousness destroys the independence of its objects and thus reveals cognition itself as a form of violence. The cognitive self is constituted as *homo homini lupus*; there are no bounds to its voracious appetites: the world is swallowed up by the self-aggrandizing acts of cognition. Still the intentional structure of consciousness is not a monolithic egology without self-differentiation. The reduction of otherness by the self is not produced as a tautology, "I am I", but is articulated as the lived structures of this identity. "The I is not being that remains always the same, but is the being whose existing consists in identifying itself, in recovering its identity throughout all that happens to it"<sup>29</sup>. This "becoming other" and yet "remaining the same" can only be transcended by uncovering the primordial structure of the intersubjective self which allows the meaning of the "I" to become manifest.

### The face and the moral self

Levinas' view of the social self as arising in intersubjective encounter relies upon two unrelated modes of inquiry: the first an interrogation of the phenomenological data, the second a destructuring of language<sup>30</sup>. While the modes of access may differ, they are made to converge upon the object of inquiry which gives itself in a variety of ways. Thus, for example, the other person reveals himself both linguistically as the speaker of words and in the *Leibhaftigkeit* of flesh, that is, as the face. Attentiveness to multiple modes of self-presentation yields not a truer picture in the sense of one which corresponds more adequately to the object given but a richer more complex account of what the given means.

The difficulty of rendering such an account is particularly acute for Levinas since the object in question, the other person, remains refractory to usual modes of apprehension. I have already suggested that a cognitive grasp of the other reduces the other's alterity; the boundary between cognizing consciousness and its intended object disappears. Heidegger's understanding of the mode in which other persons are apprehended avoids the distortions

of this naturalistic perspective as Levinas concedes but, in the long run, only evades the issue of the other's alterity at a deeper level. For Heidegger, being-in-the-world presumes Being-with-others as existentially constitutive for Dasein emphasizing that Being-with is not a mere being alongside of in an indifferent relation to the other. Indeed relation with another is lived as concerned solicitude, "a leap ahead of the other so that the other can become transparent to himself"<sup>31</sup>. Nonetheless, Levinas argues, Being-with fails to free Dasein from its monadic solitude because Being-with exhausts itself in its initial impulse: once the other has been shown his existence as a being-towards-death, responsibility for the other ceases. Even if Being-with is constitutive of Dasein's existence as concerned solicitude, *the* other remains merely *an* other, an aperture through which the meaning of being can become manifest. The value of the other person is secondary to the primacy of being.

For Levinas, Cohen's account is in one sense "truer" than Heidegger's since Cohen concludes that the other person is known through pity and compassion (*Mitleid*):

This is the turning point at which religion, as it were, emerges from ethics. The observation of another man's suffering is not an inert affect to which I surrender myself, particularly not when I observe it not as a natural or empirical phenomenon, but when I make of it a question mark for my whole orientation in the world . . . In suffering a dazzling light suddenly makes me see the dark spots in the sun of life. It is through the discovery of the thou that the I is liberated<sup>32</sup>.

But for Levinas Cohen's analysis is methodologically misguided from the start since conceptual necessity rather than phenomenological "eliciting" determines the character of the moral self. Cohen's view of the other person as fellowman is predicated upon the correlation between man and God, the mutually conditioning divine-human relation from which he deduces that man, God's partner in dialogue, cannot be infra-ethical. The possibility of the dialogue depends upon what can be shared by the participants: *ratio* as ethical reason<sup>33</sup>. Man in relation to God is a morally rational being only insofar as he has become the fellowman. But, for Levinas, the knowledge of the other as a moral datum thus founding the ethical self can never be derived from more fundamental premises such as the correlation between man and God but must be the object of a phenomenological intuition.

The apprehension of the face for Levinas provides one such mode of access to the other. The face is not merely perceived although it is always possible to *limit* one's apprehension of it so that it is grasped as an object in the world among others. But this requires a distortion of a more primordial apprehension of the face given to moral intuition *as* value-laden. The face is not arbitrarily assigned axiological significance, but instead, this significance

derives from the meaning of the face as expressing the body's vulnerability. As such it appears in the form of a demand to respect this vulnerability by resisting the impulses of violence that inhere in egoity. Thus the face is given, not to cognitive intentionality, but to an affective aim: desire. The desire for the other can never be filled; it challenges the contentment and sovereignty of egoity. The mode of access to the face is borrowed from the structure of lived intentionality in infra-cognitive experience to account for the mode in which the other is apprehended as an "epiphany of the ethical"<sup>34</sup>. The specific phenomenality of the face precludes any interpretation of it either as a visible object or as a concept: grasped as beyond being, it cannot appear within the limits of a horizon. On the other hand, the face is not a symbol bearing a meaning apart from itself which it brings into discursive clarity. "The face is abstract": by this Levinas means the face is not an object of sense in the usual way even though it may misleadingly appear to be such an object. The illusion of concreteness that results from its appearance as an object of sense gives rise to an ambiguity which disrupts the expected order of the world<sup>35</sup>.

While the face is given as if it were a spatial object, it is actually a spatialized presentation of temporality. The other is in the "trace" not of a noumenal dimension which operates causally within phenomenality but of an immemorial past impervious to memory. This past cannot be recollected or repeated; it lies beyond historical process, beyond being. The trace opens into a personal order given in the form of the third person: "The profile that the irreversible past takes on through the trace is the profile of the 'He' "<sup>36</sup>, and again, "The face is the unique opening where the meaning of the Transcendent . . . is maintained as transcendence"<sup>37</sup>. It is not difficult to see that for Levinas the face has become an aniconic *imago dei*.

What are the consequences of this peculiar mode of givenness? We have already seen that Levinas presumes access routes to the presented which bypass cognitive intentionality since the other is apprehended in desire. The self which results from this mode of apprehension resembles the separated self of need at a higher level. Unlike need, no content can fill desire; the desiring self remains a perpetual lack. It can never be conceived as a "something" since it has the being of lack, of a non-originary emptiness. The other edges up to or "presses" against this emptiness revealing itself as proximate<sup>38</sup>. Since the face is only incidentally apprehended as a visual object, this impingement in proximity is experienced as a touching of the self by an other, a tactile incursion upon egoistic individuality through which the other becomes an ethical datum.

### The moral self: emergence and formation

Nowhere are the parallels between Levinas and Cohen more striking than in the understanding of the relational character of the moral self and the



process of its formation. For both, the emergence of the moral self transforms lower level functions. Although it is conceptually grasped only after these lower levels are laid down, it acts teleologically and proleptically in relation to infraethical egoity. Once the moral self emerges through the apprehension of the other as one who suffers, egoity is on the way to becoming full individuality.

I have spoken of the face and its meaning in Levinas, particularly its power to transcend visibility and to express a "thou-ought". Apprehended as an axiological datum, the face summons a self that lies beyond egoity. The self that emerges in the wake of the encounter with an other bears no hallmark. It is not the substratum of qualities nor the functional unity attributed to a succession of experiences. Still, like the self of need it can be "cornered"; it exists as obsession. The moral self it obsessed with the other in an etymological sense: the other is experienced as a nearness of being<sup>39</sup>.

Obsession in the sense acquired through destructuring not only reveals the other as "nearness of being" but is also the most primordial manifestation of meaning<sup>40</sup>. Language is founded in obsession. Levinas implies that meaning is a phenomenon that requires explanation but explanation itself already presumes the possibility of meaning. Therefore, accounting for meaning must be given in terms of an infra-cognitive encounter with alterity. This precognitive awareness of the "I" is also reflected in the grammatical accusative (the French *se*) of reflexive pronouns. The form is passive, pointing to an experience of the self as guilty prior to all activity, guilt through which the self becomes an "I". Levinas uses the term ownmost self (*soi-même*) to distinguish the self of obsession and proximity from egoistic individuality. This self is beyond ontology, empty of being. Since it cannot become the source or origin of anything (it is *pré-originnaire*)<sup>41</sup>, it can only deploy the ego-self for its own purposes. With no interests to defend, it "is" only through the impingement of the other; the interest of the other becomes its interest. The pre-originary self places egoity at the service of the other, substituting for him, etc. Since to formulate this idea as an imperative would subordinate morality either to an inductively derived general principle or a self-evident moral law, Levinas speaks of obsession as an-archic, without principle<sup>42</sup>.

Is the moral self arising from obsession then nothing? Or, at best, if it is something, must it be negatively defined. Just as in the case of the separated self Levinas resorted to the lived experiences of the already constituted self as indicative of a more primordial level, Levinas turns to the elementary modes of being of the lived body for his account of the moral self. This self is a living unity which, unlike egoity, knows no moments of respite and is attested in such "experiences"<sup>43</sup> as insomnia, pure wakefulness without consciousness of specific objects, the sense of "living in one's own skin", the dead time between heartbeats, the time between inhalation and exhalation. Each of these "experiences" conveys a sense of contraction in which the fullness of the body's being-present slackens.

The mode of temporalization of these "experiences" reflects this contracted mode of existence. The other intrudes upon the time of egoity so that the sequential structure of time, its irreversibility and apparent seamlessness is broken. For egoity memory brings the past into the present but retains its character as past but, intersubjective time effects the unmaking of the past. This mode of temporalization is lived as pardon. Functioning retroactively, pardon alters the character of the past giving the past a new meaning, treating it as though it had not occurred: time is now seen as a "spreading" from the other to the self. Pardon affords the possibility of breaking with the ultimacy of continuous time while retaining a connection with what had been broken<sup>44</sup>.

For Cohen, the emergence of the moral self involves a two-stage process: the transformation of the opposing man into the fellowman and of the fellowman into the unique individual. The establishment of the fellowman does not yet bestow individuality upon the self since in the context of morality the self as fellowman is merely an abstract individual (an individual only insofar as he is an autonomous source of willing). The relation to God is required to transform man into a "living and individual human creature", an "I". Man is not yet "alone", cannot yet "stand up for himself". For Levinas this distinction is artificial: the relation to God is already established in intersubjective encounter. This follows from Levinas' commitment to phenomenological method: the ethical cannot be separated from what appears. Since there is no reality behind the scenes apart from the world, the ethical is apprehended within the world as the result of a special set of intentions which bestow a unique meaning upon the given: the ethical meaning that belongs to the face and to language which function as clues opening up a moral dimension. Since values are not found for Levinas as instantiations within the given, they can only be awakened by privileged data. This takes place in a single step: as soon as the face is seen or language experienced as bearing the warranty of the person who speaks, the moral self in the "trace" of transcendence is born as the absolute self.

For Cohen there is a lag between the ethical individual and the moral self founded upon *religio*. Ethics alone leads inevitably to despair from which the individual cannot be liberated through ethics. This despair is a consequence of the inability of the juridical sphere (which has competence only over legal culpability) to liberate the individual from guilt. The law can pronounce a man guilty: in society, the judge makes a determination of fact according to the relevant "paragraph of the law", but he cannot make a judgment about human guilt. When the criminal is declared guilty, he must take the burden of guilt upon himself. Still, he cannot *exonerate* himself: ethics demands the transition to religion. Once guilt reverts to the self and cannot be eradicated by juridical means, it becomes sin<sup>45</sup>. It is the individual who takes sin on himself and in so doing makes himself an absolute self, but, even here, the individual does not do so without reference to the other:

the absolute self (the individual I) makes itself in *correlation with* or before God. Cohen is careful to dissociate the notion of sin from the nature of man: if man were evil by nature, sin would be a cause and belong to the phenomenal realm. But sin is an idea, a necessary first principle which is tested in experience and whose correctness is pragmatically established. Cohen means that rather than *beginning* with the individual, "sin before God" may be used as a hypothesis whose fruitfulness is determined by whether it will *yield* the individual. It may appear that Cohen (perversely) applies the method of science to sin. But this is a misinterpretation of his intent: in actuality, sin is employed as a transitional concept in the Hegelian sense in order to mediate between social plurality and a higher stage, that of the absolute individual<sup>46</sup>.

### The idea of the infinite

Who is the absolute individual who emerges after the burden of individual guilt is assumed? For Cohen this unique "I" is neither a substance bearing qualities nor a functional concept but a regulative idea: the moral self is conceived as an infinite task. The will's efforts at actualization approach asymptotically but never attain the moral perfection of the ideal. For Cohen the individual's potential for moral development as infinite must be understood as part of a two-sided process, one entailing the conception of formal perfection, the other that of endless continuity. As a moral ideal the infinite is a measuring rod of ethical perfection. On the other hand, the natural background is necessarily connected to the moral infinite as its accompanying sphere of actualization with God the logically necessary guarantor of his continuity<sup>47</sup>.

In his last work Cohen interprets the process Messianically and eschatologically: immortality is the infinite development of the human race towards an ideal endpoint, a Messianic society in which "the individual soul is always only the impetus of the ascent, always the sum total of ascents which come together in the infinite development"<sup>48</sup>. Since Cohen ties the implementation of the ideal to a Biblically derived Messianism he stipulates the material condition required for the infinite progress of humanity, "an infinitely ramified heredity to carry the human race forward"<sup>49</sup>. The separation of the two types of infinity is required by Cohen's struggle against pantheism:

The human soul is not the world-soul. Its infinity does not coincide with that of the world, but it has always to remain limited to the specific context of man and his moral infinity. The universe has no morality. Its infinity is a mathematical moral one and is contained in it. It can be thought of as a task only with regard to mathematical insight and inquiry. The human soul, on the contrary, is always an infinite task, which can never be contained in any finite element<sup>50</sup>.

But what of the individual when the body dies if he is merely a moment in the forward course of human progress, "only the infinite impetus in the infinite task?" What Cohen calls the "empirical prejudice" leads us to believe that the individual is tied to the organism when actually personal identity depends not upon the organism but upon the relation to God:

The spirit returns to God . . . The development removes the individual from its seeming identity with its former body, and turns it over to the infinite development of matter, as the negative condition for the infinite task of holiness<sup>51</sup>.

The moral infinite is the necessary condition for personal immortality while the infinite as the ongoingness of the phenomenal sphere is required for the progress of mankind as a whole.

While the infinite appears to have a quite different signification in Levinas' work, there are parallels which appear upon closer investigation. Levinas begins by arguing that an examination of our ideas reveals that ideas are related to their content as container to contained, that is we conceive of our ideas as adequate to their content. Notions of truth and falsity depend upon this presupposition. But, as soon as we think of the infinite, the possibility of adequacy is challenged and we are brought to the point where the process of cognition itself is undermined. We apprehend the inadequacy of cognition when confronted with a content, the infinite, which exceeds any idea we can have of it. The challenge to cognition awakens a moral self first by disrupting the structure of egoity through presentation of a non-incorporable content and second by awakening a desire which can never be brought to repletion, a desire for the infinite<sup>52</sup>.

The form of Levinas' argument is Cartesian: the idea of the infinite is a thought which could not have been self-produced. If the idea of the infinite is not self-generated, where does it come from? For Levinas it is produced in the act of being revealed<sup>53</sup>. Levinas adapts the form of the Cartesian conclusion on Kantian grounds: existence is not a property which adds anything to the concept of God. The idea of the infinite is used to prove neither the existence of God nor that of the self. It quickens a moral self through fostering an encounter with alterity in a process which bypasses cognition. The moral self in Levinas does not function as a regulative idea since the moral self is not a necessary object of thought by which the understanding reaches for ever more connecting links in the realm of experience but is given as passive subjectivity simultaneously with the quest for alterity<sup>54</sup>.

Levinas explicitly rejects the Kantian notion of infinity on the grounds that infinity is, for Kant, a demand of reason required for the conceptual completion of finite being. The same objection would hold for Cohen. In relation to Kant Levinas writes:

The Kantian notion of infinity figures in an ideal of reason the projection of its existence in a beyond, the ideal completion of what is given incomplete — but without the incomplete being confronted with a privileged *experience* of infinity, without it drawing the limits of its finitude from such a confrontation. The finite is here no longer conceived by relation to the infinite; quite the contrary, the infinite presupposes the finite which it amplifies infinitely<sup>55</sup>.

Levinas views the Kantian infinite as the most anti-Cartesian moment in Kant. This may be so, but Levinas remains, *malgré lui*, Kantian rather than Cartesian since he relates the infinite to moral imperatives instead of to the self-perfection of God. In addition, he, like Cohen, attaches special significance to paternity as holding a privileged place in relation to the future of man. The child is at once self and other guaranteeing one's own continuity through another while accepting the alterity of the other: "My child is a stranger . . . but a stranger who is not only mine for he is me"<sup>56</sup>. While it is true that he does not ground this mode of biological continuity in conceptual necessity so that it extends the chain of heredity infinitely as in the case of Cohen, paternity phenomenologically founds the transcendental dimension in time and history. Levinas writes: "In paternity being is produced as multiple and as split into the same and other; this is its ultimate structure. It is society and hence it is time"<sup>57</sup>. For both Cohen and Levinas the infinite involves a complex dialectic between transcendence and history expressed as the unfinished character, the open-endedness, of the moral realm which gives the self its meaning. What appears to have been disclosed at every level of the recursive engagement of a phenomenological and neo-Kantian perspective is that the latter has by no means exhausted its power.

### Notes

- 1 "A discussion Between Ernst Cassirer and Martin Heidegger", ed. Nino Languilli, *The Existentialist Tradition* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1971), p. 195. This piece is a translation of "Arbeitsgemeinschaft Cassirer-Heidegger" in Guido Schneeberger *Ergänzungen zu einer Heidegger Bibliographie*, Bern, 1960, pp. 17–27. For other accounts of the Cassirer-Heidegger debate see C. Hamburg, "A Cassirer-Heidegger Seminar". *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, XXV, December, 1964, pp. 208–222; Hendrick J. Pos, "Recollections of Ernst Cassirer", ed. Paut A. Schilpp, *The Philosophy of Ernst Cassirer*, New York, 1949, pp. 67–69; T. Cassirer, *Aus Meinem, Leben mit Ernst Cassirer*, New York, 1950, pp. 165–167. A more conciliatory tone than in the remarks cited is taken in Martin Heidegger, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson, *Being and Time*, New York: Harper and Row, 1962, H. 51, n. XI: "In Cassirer's *Philosophie der symbolischen Formen*, vol. II, *Das Mythische Denken* clues of far-reaching importance are made available for ethnological research. From the standpoint of philosophical problematics it remains an open question whether the foundations of the Interpretation are sufficiently transparent — whether in particular the architectonics and the general systematic content of Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* can provide a possible

- design for such a task, or whether a new and more primordial approach may not here be needed".
- 2 Emmanuel Levinas in "Martin Heidegger et l'ontologie", *En découvrant l'existence avec Husserl et Heidegger*, Paris: Vrin, 1967 [Hereafter cited as DEHH], p. 53, writes: "Idealism has sought to purify the subject of this final contamination by time, of this final mingling of being at the heart of the event summoned to found being. For the neo-Kantians as for Leibniz, time becomes a vague perception, foreign to the deep nature of the subject" (Translation mine).
  - 3 By the "existential turn" I mean no more than a shift in focus from a disinterested spirit of inquiry to involved participation in the problems of human existence. The emphasis upon the split between religion and ethics is given prominence in Nathan Rotenstreich, *Jewish Philosophy in Modern Times* (Holt, Rinehart, Winston: New York, 1968), p. 64: "The meaning of the individual is real in relation to sensation. The breach in Cohen's conception of the nature of religion is connected, from the standpoint of method, to this shift to logic, where the individual is stressed and religion is given an existential meaning". A contrary approach is taken in Stephen S. Schwartzschild, "The Tenability of Hermann Cohen's Construction of the Self", *Journal of the History of Philosophy*, XIII, July, 1975, p. 368, n. 30: "It has been argued 'the old Cohen' made a turn away from the radical neo-Kantian idealism to religious metaphysics. But in fact this is not the case. At most one can speak of a shift in evaluative emphasis". Another instance cited by Schwartzschild as a variant of the two-Cohen point of view is Jacob Gordon, *Des Ichbegriff bei Hegel, bei Cohen und in der Suedwetdeutschen Schule*, Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1927. Others who attest the unity of Cohen's work include Henri Dussort, *L'école de Marbourg*, Paris: Presses Universitaires, 1963; H. Vuillemin, *L'héritage kantien et la révolution copernicienne: Fichte, Cohen, Heidegger*, Paris: Presses Universitaires, 1954. They do so on the grounds that the understanding of the noumenal at each level of analysis conceptually necessitates the next level for its resolution. Thus, there is an interlocking system of entailments between the thing-in-itself, the moral law and God.
  - 4 This view is rather more widely disseminated than is generally realized. It is held not only by European personalists (Buber, Marcel, *et al.*) but also by some American philosophers. In a letter to a friend, W.E. Hocking writes: "Kant was dead-right in finding a sense of obligation at the center of our consciousness: There's an aboriginal I-ought which goes with I-exist . . . The I-ought implies a Thou-art . . . That Thou is the self within the world, the one elemental Other". Cited in Louis Dupré, *Transcendent Selfhood: The Loss and Rediscovery of the Inner Life*, New York: Seabury, 1976, p. 109.
  - 5 The influence of Franz Rosenzweig on Levinas' thought is strong and must be considered as partly responsible for his view of Hermann Cohen. Levinas shares Rosenzweig's antagonism to Cohen's uncritical admiration of the German spirit. In a letter to his mother apropos Cohen's death Rosenzweig writes: "... After hearing his lecture 'On the Peculiar Characteristics of the German Mind', I was deeply disturbed. I thought he had fallen victim to chauvinism . . . I behaved very crudely, starting with the accusation he had betrayed the Messianic idea". See Nahum Glatzer ed., *Franz Rosenzweig: His Life and Thought*, New York: Schocken, 1953, p. 68 f.
  - 6 Levinas' interpretation of Husserl presumes that phenomenology begins as an epistemological theory but ends as ontology thus sometimes conflating Husserl and Heidegger. See André Orianne, "Translator's Forward", in: Emmanuel Levinas, *The Theory of Intuition in Husserl's Phenomenology*, Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973, pp. XI-XXIII and Edith Wyschogrod, Emmanuel

- Levinas: *The Problem of Ethical Metaphysics*, The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1974, pp. 26–50.
- 7 Levinas, *The Theory of Intuition in Husserl's Phenomenology*, p. XXXV.
- 8 Languilli, *The Existentialist Tradition*, p. 193.
- 9 Cohen's method is not without a pragmatic aspect. The transcendental deduction can legitimate subjective principles, but one finds in the science of fact the empirical relevance of these principles. This view protects philosophical autonomy and uses science as a concrete control. See Dussort, *L'école de Marbourg*, pp. 99 ff.
- 10 Emmanuel Levinas, trans. Alphonso Lingis, *Totality and Infinity* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969, p. 71. Hereafter cited as TI.
- 11 In Raymond Duval, "Exode et altérité", *Revue Scientifique de Philosophie et de Théologie*, vol. 59, avril 1975, pp. 217–241. Levinas' work is viewed in terms of pairs of opposition oppression/deliverance and being/Other. It is being (and not nothing) that oppresses. Suffering (and not death) is the proof of freedom for in suffering the will is undone.
- 12 Harold Durfee, "War, Politics and Radical Pluralism", *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, June 1975, comparing social contract and natural law theories of the state with Levinas' view writes (p. 551): "Community depends upon the linguistic communication of those who would otherwise be separated".
- 13 Hermann Cohen, trans. Simon Kaplan, *The Religion of Reason out of the Sources of Judaism*, New York: Fredrick Unger, 1972, Chapter IX. Hereafter cited as RRSJ.
- 14 *Ibid.*, p. 144.
- 15 *Ibid.*, p. 45.
- 16 *Ibid.*, p. 160.
- 17 The idea of vulnerability is pervasive in Levinas. See esp. TI pp. 244 ff.: "The accomplishing of the I qua I and morality constitute one sole and same process in being: Morality comes to birth not in equality but in the fact that infinite exigencies, that of serving the poor, the stranger, the widow and the orphan converge at one point of the universe". (p. 245).
- 18 It is in relation to separated individuality that Levinas remains most committed to phenomenological method. See Stephen Strasser, "Antiphénoménologie et phénoménologie dans la philosophie d'Emmanuel Levinas", *Revue philosophique de Louvain*, vol. 75, no. 25 (February 1977).
- 19 TI, pp. 21–30; p. 176 f et passim.
- 20 It lies beyond the scope of this paper to canvas the extensive literature of British and American analytic philosophy on the question of personal identity. However, Terence Penulham's view in "Personal Identity", *Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, New York: Macmillan, 1967, puts forward criteria for reidentifying persons around which much of the debate has centered: the bodily criterion and the memory criterion. For Levinas these would apply to the infra-ethical self of totality and interiority respectively. The disadvantage of persons constituted on these criteria would (for Levinas) lie in their inability to grasp alterity. Levinas would see the relation of the ascription of responsibility to reidentification as a problem for jurisprudence rather than for philosophy.
- 21 Heidegger, *Being and Time*, esp. H. 42, 43, 45.
- 22 TI, p. 176.
- 23 *Ibid.*, p. 178.
- 24 Leo Strauss, *Introductory Essay*, in: RRSJ, p. 17.
- 25 *Ibid.*, p. 133 f.
- 26 *Ibid.*, p. 128.
- 27 *Ibid.*, p. 308.

- 28 TI, pp. 122–127; DEHH, pp. 111–145 et passim. See also Edith Wyschogrod, Emmanuel Levinas: The Problems of Ethical Metaphysics, The Hague, Martinus Mijhoff, 1974, pp. 144 ff.
- 29 TI, p. 36.
- 30 By de-structuring is meant bringing to the fore what has been concealed or forgotten. This process does not terminate in some point of origin but is the attestation in language of a beyond which is unreachable. See Jacques Derrida, trans. David Allison, *Speech and Phenomenon*, Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973, p. 85 for an account of the “trace”. In terms of a theory of truth as reference, the face is not a referring item.
- 31 Heidegger, *Being and Time*, H. 121–124.
- 32 RRSJ, p. 18.
- 33 The difference in thrust between Cohen’s earlier “*Ethik des Reinen Willens*” (Berlin: Cassirer, 1904) and RRSJ can be attributed to differing conceptions of reason: in the former, reason is the instrument through which the concept of man is derived, in the latter, man is created a moral entity, as having moral reason, by a God of reason. See Stephen S. Schwarzschild, *Journal of the History of Philosophy*, vol. XIII, no. 3, p. 366.
- 34 TI, pp. 194–204; DEHH, p. 197 f. et passim.
- 35 Stephen Strasser, *Revue Philosophique de Louvain*, vol. 75, no. 25, p. 109, insists that Levinas’ attack on Husserl’s transcendental objectivism leads to a characterization of seeing itself as anti-ethical. Therefore the face does not appear. The form of the face is a disguise for its nudity.
- 36 DEHH, p. 199.
- 37 Ibid., p. 198.
- 38 Ibid., p. 225.
- 39 Ibid., p. 230.
- 40 It would not do to confuse Levinas’ de-structuring with mere etymological reduction as though an earlier signification were truer and the earliest the “most true”. The word is a trace of a silent origin. Jacques Derrida makes the point (radically) in trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *Grammatology*, Baltimore: John Hopkins, 1974, p. 61: “The trace is not only the disappearance of origin . . . It was never [even] constituted except reciprocally by a non-origin, the trace would thus become the origin of the non-origin”. But, if this is true, can ethics ever be incorporated into language? This question is the source of Emmanuel Levinas’ “*Autrement qu’être et au delà de l’essence*”, The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1974. See Etienne Feron, “*Ethique language, ontologie chez Emmanuel Levinas*”, *Revue de Métaphysique et de Morale*, vol. 82, January–March, 1977, pp. 64–87.
- 41 Emmanuel Levinas, “*Humanisme et anarchie*”, *Revue Internationale de Philosophie*, nos. 85–86, p. 331.
- 42 See “*La substitution*”, *Revue Philosophique de Louvain*, vol. 66, August 1968, pp. 487–508.
- 43 “*Experience*” is placed in quotation marks in this context since Levinas insists in trans. Richard Cohen, “*God and Philosophy*”, *Philosophy Today*, Summer 1978, p. 144 [originally appearing in *Nouveau Commerce*, vol. 301, Spring 1975]: “The adventure of knowledge which is characteristic of Being, ontological from the first is not the only mode of intelligibility of meaning. Experience as the source of meaning has to be put into question”.
- 44 TI, pp. 282 ff.
- 45 RRSJ, pp. 166 ff.
- 46 For evaluation of Hegelianism in Cohen (despite his avowed anti-Hegelian posture) see Schwarzschild, *Journal of the History of Philosophy*, vol. XIII,



no. 3, p. 369, n. 31. For a dialectic of sorts in Levinas see Raymond Duval, "Exode et altérité", *Revue Scientifique de Philosophie et de Théologie*, vol. 59, April 1975, pp. 217–241. Levinas' work is interpreted in terms of pairs of oppositions, oppression/deliverance, being/other, etc. It is being (and not nothing) that oppresses, suffering (and not death) that attests freedom since in suffering the will is undone.

47 *Ibid.*, p. 308 f.

48 *Ibid.*

49 *Ibid.*

50 *Ibid.*, p. 323.

51 *Ibid.*, p. 307. The actualization of the infinite task in Cohen does not pose the dilemma of Zeno's paradox of the infinite sequence of tasks the solution to which depends upon the condition that all points which must be passed over are bounded by a finite interval. If the points are not so bounded (and they are *not* in Cohen's conception) it would not be possible to pass over them (and it is *not* possible to do so in Cohen). For accounts of the paradox see James Thomson, "Infinity in Mathematics and Logic", *Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, vol. 4, New York: Macmillan, 1967, p. 188; and Gilbert Ryle, *Dilemmas*, Cambridge: The University Press, 1953, pp. 36–53.

52 Emmanuel Levinas, trans. Richard Cohen, "God and Philosophy", *Philosophy Today*, Summer 1978, originally in *Nouveau Commerce*, vol. 301, Spring 1975, p. 133, writes: "We are outside the order in which one passes from an idea to a being. Unlike every content, the idea of God is God in me, but already God breaking up the consciousness which aspires to ideas".

53 *TI*, p. 26.

54 Jacques Derrida, "Violence et métaphysique, essai sur la pensée d'Emmanuel Levinas", *Revue de Métaphysique et de Morale*, vol. 69, no. 4, p. 470 interprets the uses of alterity in Levinas as a new empiricism. See also Edith Wyschogrod, *Emmanuel Levinas: The Problem of Ethical Metaphysics*, The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1974, pp. 89–94.

55 *TI*, p. 196.

56 *Ibid.*, p. 267.

57 *Ibid.*, p. 270.

- 28 TI, pp. 122–127; DEHH, pp. 111–145 et passim. See also Edith Wyschogrod, Emmanuel Levinas: The Problems of Ethical Metaphysics, The Hague, Martinus Nijhoff, 1974, pp. 144 ff.
- 29 TI, p. 36.
- 30 By de-structuring is meant bringing to the fore what has been concealed or forgotten. This process does not terminate in some point of origin but is the attestation in language of a beyond which is unreachable. See Jacques Derrida, trans. David Allison, *Speech and Phenomenon*, Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973, p. 85 for an account of the “trace”. In terms of a theory of truth as reference, the face is not a referring item.
- 31 Heidegger, *Being and Time*, H. 121–124.
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- 41 Emmanuel Levinas, “*Humanisme et anarchie*”, *Revue Internationale de Philosophie*, nos. 85–86, p. 331.
- 42 See “*La substitution*”, *Revue Philosophique de Louvain*, vol. 66, August 1968, pp. 487–508.
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- 44 TI, pp. 282 ff.
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no. 3, p. 369, n. 31. For a dialectic of sorts in Levinas see Raymond Duval, "Exode et altérité", *Revue Scientifique de Philosophie et de Théologie*, vol. 59, April 1975, pp. 217–241. Levinas' work is interpreted in terms of pairs of oppositions, oppression/deliverance, being/other, etc. It is being (and not nothing) that oppresses, suffering (and not death) that attests freedom since in suffering the will is undone.

47 Ibid., p. 308 f.

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51 Ibid., p. 307. The actualization of the infinite task in Cohen does not pose the dilemma of Zeno's paradox of the infinite sequence of tasks the solution to which depends upon the condition that all points which must be passed over are bounded by a finite interval. If the points are not so bounded (and they are *not* in Cohen's conception) it would not be possible to pass over them (and it is *not* possible to do so in Cohen). For accounts of the paradox see James Thomson, "Infinity in Mathematics and Logic", *Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, vol. 4, New York: Macmillan, 1967, p. 188; and Gilbert Ryle, *Dilemmas*, Cambridge: The University Press, 1953, pp. 36–53.

52 Emmanuel Levinas, trans. Richard Cohen, "God and Philosophy", *Philosophy Today*, Summer 1978, originally in *Nouveau Commerce*, vol. 301, Spring 1975, p. 133, writes: "We are outside the order in which one passes from an idea to a being. Unlike every content, the idea of God is God in me, but already God breaking up the consciousness which aspires to ideas".

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