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To Lévinas's credit, this never becomes a serious problem for him because he recognizes in dispositions a readiness which serves a still deeper commitment only awakened or perhaps threatened in certain situations. My reaction to seeing you facing me thus has the character of responsibility already when I feel concerned or irritated or even bored, because, he contends, I am in relation with you even before any question of ever realizing it. This, however, is not yet responsibility in its fully moral or committed form. Responsibility, as the subjectivity of Lévinas's heteronomous subject, is not yet the work of trying to live by it. This difference—the difference between guilt and expiation—requires a clear and decisive shift into action. One no longer lives simply as if one were the origin of one's own actions; instead, one is now guided by a conviction that the tendency to do so, even if innate, is nonetheless pretentious. Lévinas bars us from thinking of this as anything more than a change of heart, the birth of new willingness to dedicate oneself first and above all to the other person. Yet this is already enough to ask how we are to explain even the *inclination* to such a change if not in terms of convictions already in place. How do we explain the fact that an appeal not only reaches us but, further, moves us to a conscientious response? Can there be a committed act without a desire to appease the law that commands it?

Now, Lévinas has certainly indicated that the exercise of any such desire can be truly just only if it is itself committed in advance to the necessity for an immediate ethical critique. He is also clearly aware of the fact that one always makes that same commitment at great risk of crossing over into the demonic evil, which does not merely exempt itself from infinite responsibility but which, by deciding for itself the content of that responsibility, in fact closes itself to that responsibility. Lévinas seems not to have considered closely enough, however, the fact that both the just act and evil at its most

extreme have in common a single desire to abolish any and all differences between who one is as oneself and what the law specifies as goodness. The work of justice, we have noted, approaches such differences as obstacles to unqualified responsibility and therefore tries to convert them into gifts. What we have called demonic evil, even on Lévinas's own account, bypasses this entire effort, simply usurping for the individual the place of absolute authority. In both cases the difference—or perhaps better, distance—between the individual and the absolute disappears. Without it there is neither the transcendence of what always exceeds the desire seeking it nor the immanence of a desire which always has something more to seek.

Free of every limit, a desire for the transcendent is contradictory; it destroys both itself and what it aims at. But since we are evidently saved from it, there must already be limits in place. Where do we find such limits if not in the human faces which, as Lévinas himself admits, call us ceaselessly to particular acts which concretize that desire? The face, then, does not call me to an unlimited responsibility so much as it saves me from what might otherwise consume me. Let us be precise with this observation: even if responsibility is unqualified, it also always has a real and recognizable content. However uncompromising, your appeal for help reaches me only here and now, which is thus where I must always begin. The face is not only imperious and commanding but also flesh and blood. It not only stands over us but also exposes itself to blows or caresses. It is not only the law but also the bearer of the law. If, as Lévinas has argued, it is indeed first or most of all the law, this primacy is nonetheless itself impossible without the support of the very dimension which it subordinates. The corporeality of the face, the aspect of the ethical appeal which enters our experience, making it comprehensible, is a necessary condition for ethics. So too is the local here and the punctual now, which Lévinas would similarly submit to the primacy of futurity—to the sense in which an otherness beyond comprehension arrives from beyond every projected horizon.

If the desire which Lévinas has led us to think of as religious takes aim at the cleft between individual human life and absolute transcendence, and if, as he has also contended, only the relation with that transcendence saves us from the unrestrained violence of wills competing without any external limit, then precisely this ambiguity in the face must be retained. If Lévinas has rightly detected a transcendence in the face of the other person, he has perhaps also gone too far where his account of it undermines our sense of the goodness of its incarnation. The face, we must insist, permits us to concretize a desire which, so long as it is unconcretized, threatens to become excessive. It is not the aim and focal point of religious desire but in fact a relief from it. Even if it is true that there is a responsibility commanded in the face of the other person, we must also insist that it centers not on that other's otherness alone but on its entanglement with the flesh and language which we two have in common. Imploring eyes may well make it impossible for me

to be truly self-absorbed, but not without also calling me immediately into a domain of recognizable needs and concrete tasks.

As for the specific problem at hand, we can now argue that the absolute object of desire which Lévinas calls "Good" is also profoundly evil, and in the double sense that the desire aiming at it is both a desire for death and a desire to be God. This contention agrees with our insistence that what Lévinas has called the Good must always be incarnated: darkest evil may be seen wherever that incarnation either erodes or falls away, both threatening the life of the individual and occluding the absoluteness of the absolute. Here it becomes necessary to distinguish sharply between the absolute as such and its specific incarnation as the Good, with only the latter now to be contrasted with extreme evil. If there is goodness in the incarnation, calling us to a respect which is literally life-giving, so too must there be evil in a secondary incarnation, urging us against that respect. Good and evil must be held up to one another and opposed at the limit of human finitude as it moves toward the absolute. This is no longer Lévinas's "crossroads": the evil which menaces our attempts to live a good life is not exhausted by selfishness and narcissism; it must also include a drive toward dangerous excess. The good act, in other words, does not merely suspend the evil which encompasses everything from falling short of it to actively resisting it; it must also overcome a temptation to go still further, or *always* further, until there is neither a Good to live by nor a life to seek it.

In taking this position, I pretend to nothing more than a reinstatement, now within an anthropology, of the theological concept of the Devil, as the contrary but not the equal of God. Furthermore, against both Lévinas and the popular modernity with which I have associated him, I consider this anthropology to be the proper heir to that theology, if indeed it is in need of one. More specifically, the debate with Lévinas seems to have brought into view an anthropology which is "religious" neither in the post-ontotheological sense that he describes nor in the traditional sense, either as matching his accounts of it or not. The fact that this is specifically an *anthropology* is evident since plainly it begins by parsing desires which are irreducibly individual, human, and personal. As it happens, the implicit definition of religion which this involves is perhaps nowhere clearer than in the present context, where it has become necessary to resist Lévinas's rival theory of religion, especially as it is applied to the problem of evil. After all, we have just seen that the latter culminates in a definition of blasphemy, the usurpation of divinity.

For Lévinas a primary form of blasphemy occurs in religious imagery, which he charges with courting idolatry.<sup>20</sup> While we would certainly do well to heed this warning, our own hesitations at the argument supporting it warn us equally against his insistence that we can and should try to do entirely without such imagery. Even granted a certain vigilance against the propensity of images and icons to obscure the very distance they mark, doubts that



we can do without them lead immediately beyond a mere difference of accent to a wholly different theory of religion. For me to render good and evil in personal figures is to admit that I cannot help *but* attribute motives and a desire even to the Good which, as Lévinas puts it, has chosen me before I could ever have chosen it. Here what is readily confirmed in our everyday relations with other people is extended to our relation to the absolute. The opposition between God and the Devil, between absolute good and extreme evil, not only gives each of them a certain form but also attributes to each a will. Opposed to God, the loving creator, is Satan, the seducer. Just as God desires that we bow before divine transcendence, so Satan desires that we violate it. The erotic dimension of these formulations is unmistakable: God, I believe, loves me from before creation and beyond understanding; Satan wants only to use me for himself, for his own perverse objectives. This dimension, let us immediately insist, is not absent from Lévinas's ethics of radical responsibility but only relegated to the background of his overt focus on the Good. One does not notice an original attachment to the Good—indeed, Lévinas argues everywhere against it—because the Good is, from the first, alleged to reach us before and beyond any sort of contact.

What the anthropology of the Devil forces us to see, Lévinas would thus seem to have taken great pains to avoid: the incarnation of the religious absolute is a self-offering which, by making itself susceptible to our interpretations and decisions, implies in it a vulnerability which we for our part are always striving to integrate in one or another way. Christian theology, for instance, addresses this vulnerability as the infinite and eternal love of a Creator who *desires*, but does not *pre-determine*, that we actively emulate Him. To put it somewhat differently, when Lévinas denies us the right to such positive statements about the Good, he can be seen as protecting a rather more severe definition of transcendence, namely, without either desire or vulnerability of any kind.

It is precisely this conception of an *invulnerable* transcendence which instructs Lévinas to detach the seat of authority from any incarnation as this or that "law." Because the absolute has always already withdrawn from anything that we may take as its incarnation, we are primordially open and therefore ordered to the other person prior to any *archê*, responsible to him or her before any question of care for ourselves. Because the Good has always already withdrawn from us, we are always already on our way to it, which for Lévinas is also on our way to the other person. One can never do enough and therefore cannot *but* fall short. For Lévinas the transcendence of the transcendent—the goodness of the "Good"—necessarily implies (let us not say "causes") the inescapable and irremediable evil of simply being. Because God is without any desire—hence, invulnerable—we creatures are made up of a desire whose proper aim is always already out of reach. The lack which has been purged from the absolutely other has re-surfaced to consume each individual person.

To take the opposite tack in ethics would mean attributing desire to opposed (but again, *not* equal) figures of the absolute and centering our responsibility on how we relate to the two of them.<sup>21</sup> It would be, for instance, to conceive of the figure of the Devil—the personification of evil, possessed of his own desire—as an expression of the most destructive of allures: the complete satisfaction which would coincide with immersing our finitude in the absolute “object.” To adopt this perspective would mean recognizing a susceptibility in each of us to take either of those two paths: a conflict of tendencies, one seeking life and pleasure, and the other—subterranean and excessive—moving toward death. Moreover, it would mean that the task of ethics is to teach us how to manage these conflicting tendencies, how to accept them as one’s own, how to be alone with one’s desire as it serves life and, beyond life’s limits, death.

Finally, this perspective must also furnish an explanation for deliberate moral evil, an explanation which Lévinas himself has never fully provided. Ethics, he has argued, attends first to the simple fact that the otherness of the other person commands a respect which is unconditional. Anything short of this involves treating humans as objects or ideas, which, says Lévinas, is an infinitely different matter from the misuse of those objects and ideas. To treat the other person in the same way as one treats an object or idea is to treat that person as if he or she were not a person at all. In this sense ethical disrespect is “murder.” The first and only statement of our responsibility is thus to be found in the Decalogue: “Thou shall not kill.” For Lévinas, to ask whether this has been unavoidable, and then also whether the acts of violence which may have been avoided were committed by neglect or aggression, is already to mistake questions of civil legislation for fundamental ethics.

In response to this, have we not learned that the definition of our responsibility has to do not only with our relation to the other person but also with a distinct but inseparable relation with religious transcendence? Have we not also come to suspect that the conflation of these two relations in the ethics of radical responsibility expresses, first, a refusal to concede the necessity of an incarnation of that transcendence and, second, but more deeply, an unwillingness to address a lack in it—an unwillingness to recognize a desire in “God” that we commit our own individual desires to praise and respect? To have come to this point, emphasizing now the role which one’s own desire plays in religious attitudes and imagery, is to have come to the threshold of an ethics entangled in the erotics of relations not only with other people and images of the absolute but also with ourselves.

There is no doubt much to learn from Lévinas’s attunement of ethics to a desire which is religious. But it is necessary to expand the scope of that desire beyond the divine matrix which links us to the absolute: the very formulation of that matrix, it must be contended, responds to an experience

of the desire itself, as something that defines us from a place which we cannot grasp or make secure. We begin not simply in the wake of an "object" which we can never have (cannot touch) but also with an interpretation of that inaccessibility and thus of the "object" itself. Thus we begin not in false security, as Lévinas has claimed, but more deeply in an all too real insecurity which we could hardly be more anxious to avoid. Murder, then, must be more than an extravagant exercise of individual vitality. To the contrary, one strikes out against one's neighbor, whether in weakness or fury, out of a deeper solitude, which only the most fortunate among us have learned to accept comfortably. Killing is more than an affair of aggression, even if there is always a kind of aggression in it. Before it is social and imperial, killing is solitary and insecure. One begins alone and helpless, in need of company and shelter. Life takes hold only by salving a pain which never fully abates. What Lévinas calls "violence" expresses first our incapacity ever to forget it. It is not merely its enjoyment but also its hollow core which make our deepest commitments indispensable. "Killing," said the poet, "is a form of our wandering sorrow. . . ." <sup>22</sup>

### Notes

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1 Stephen Vincent Benét, *The Devil and Daniel Webster* (Weston: Countryman Press, 1937).

2 In contrast, Socrates's perfect city was to be achieved only "in speech," and Augustine referred such aspirations to the divine counterpart of this world where we feel them, namely, the "City of God."

3 E. Lévinas, *Totality and Infinity*, trans. A. Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne Univ. Press, 1969) p. 196. The relationship between Lévinas and Kant is too important, complex, and lacking in documentation to be addressed here at any serious length. For the sake of clarity, I offer the following marginal remarks on Kant. (1) Whereas his moral philosophy clearly defends at least the *ideal* of an unqualified moral act, Kant later describes in the *Religion* a "propensity" (*propensio*) to evil which belongs to each individual human will and which might well be considered to stand in the way of actually achieving that act. (2) Accepting this then means sparing Kant from the judgment that he himself has been as "optimistic" or "utopic" as some of his fellow moderns and their successors. But it calls for a rereading of the Second *Critique* in particular, and not only where it allegedly (according to Lévinas) makes infinity dependent for its concretion on the individual act but also where the section entitled "Dialectic of Pure Practical Reason" moves in the direction of a "pure practical faith," in which an innate disposition to the good guides our choice for the law. Either the *Religion*, with its thematization of radical evil, makes clear that Kant's moral philosophy wagers on what can never be more than an *ideal* (in which case Kant is anything but optimistic about our prospects of doing the good), or this later text's willingness to confront separate propensities to good and evil simply rejects the earlier position. In any case, my concern in this essay is not with interpreting Kant but with examining, *via* a reading of Lévinas, one possible dimension of contemporary

- ethics. One thing that the work of Lévinas has surely made urgent is a careful reading of Kant.
- 4 In *Totality and Infinity* Lévinas uses the term "Stranger" (*l'Etranger*) in both this more phenomenological sense (p. 39) and the familiar parlance of inter-cultural difference (p. 75). His apparent willingness or capacity to conflate these two phenomena must not be taken for granted, but it deserves separate attention.
  - 5 As is well known, this formula appears first in Augustine, who already goes so far as to deny that evil is a substance (*Confessions* VII.12.18). It is Aquinas, however, who brings this idea to completion: "Evil, opposed to good as darkness to light, cannot signify any *being*, *form*, or *nature*, but only some *absence of good*" (*Summa theologiae* I.48.1). This "good," we are told elsewhere, is particular and fitting to the moral agent, and yet in the case of evil, it is absent. See *De malo* I.1 and *Contra Gentiles* III.8.
  - 6 V. Jankélévitch, *Le mal* (Paris: Arthaud, 1947) pp. 8–9.
  - 7 In truth, this distinction between being and acting is not as clear for Lévinas as one might wish. Already in his earliest work, devoted to Heidegger, Lévinas insists on the active, or "verbal," sense of *Sein* and speaks of authentic existence as the endpoint of a "task." See "Martin Heidegger et l'ontologie" (1932), reprinted in E. Lévinas, *En découvrant l'existence avec Husserl et Heidegger* (Paris: Vrin, 1988) p. 59. From there would grow steadily a powerful dissatisfaction with the innate self-relatedness of the individual being (rendered variously as *l'être*, *l'existent*, and even *l'étant*), thus conceived as active and, eventually, "violent."
  - 8 This second term in particular occupies an important place in Lévinas's two books focused on subjectivity: *Existence and Existents* (1947), trans. A. Lingis (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1978), and *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence* (1974), trans. A. Lingis (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1981). Yet, whereas in the former Lévinas is content to link subjectivity with the spontaneity in which we "live from the elements" (to be distinguished from Heidegger's more pragmatic relation to tools; cf. p. 45), in the latter, where his ethicization of that elemental subjectivity has come to the fore, it is explicitly assigned the sort of ambivalence that I wish to point out here. Contrasting the innate contentment of simply living from the elements with the deeper "restlessness for the other" which that contentment presupposes and yet covers over, Lévinas speaks of the "scandal of sincerity"—the impossibility of *not* falsely answering one's own concerns first (p. 143).
  - 9 One finds this reading of Lévinas both in Roger Burggraeve, "Het kwade als keerzijde van het goede" in *Het Vele Gezichten van het Kwaad: Meedenken in Het Spoor van Emmanuel Lévinas*, ed. R. Burggraeve and L. Anckaert (Leuven: Acco, 1996) pp. 11–56, and in C. Chaliel, *La persévérance du mal* (Paris: Cerf, 1987).
  - 10 See *Totality and Infinity*, p. 149: "Before defining man as the animal that can commit suicide it is necessary to define him as capable of living for the other and of being on the basis of the other who is exterior to him."
  - 11 As will become clearer, this extraordinary inaccessibility renders problematic the very word "law," which can be taken to imply the tangible presence of transcendence. See "The Transcendence of Evil" (1978) in E. Lévinas, *Collected Philosophical Papers*, trans. A. Lingis (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1987) pp. 175–86 *passim*. Unwilling simply to yield to this claim on our language, I will retain the word until compelled to do otherwise.
  - 12 In addition to his straightforward ethical censure of this notion of freedom, Lévinas also challenges its coherence. For him true freedom consists not in the sort of rootless detachment that is rendered most vividly in Sartre's subject

- for-itself, but instead in a primordial "investment" in responsibility for the other person. The freedom which would do without its own root in that responsibility is the absurd freedom of von Münchhausen, who tries vainly to raise himself up by his own hair. For this perspective on Sartre, see *Totality and Infinity*, p. 303.
- 13 Lévinas introduces the term "obsession" in *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*. Although there it designates the primordial ambivalence of a subject at once comprised of its responsibility to another and constantly serving itself first, I use it here to signify the more conscious ambivalence of a subject aware of that tendency in itself and committed to redressing it at every instant. Needless to say, the ethical imperative for choosing this "second" obsession presupposes that the first is indeed our original and irreducible condition.
  - 14 *Totality and Infinity*, pp. 78–81. True, in *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*, Lévinas conceives of a "God" to be distinguished from the other person, but this is a "God" with whom we can have no contact except through the ethical relation which, moreover, is our only evidence for Him.
  - 15 This word comes, not by chance, from Kierkegaard. Lévinas's two short essays on Kierkegaard deal with precisely this problem and accuse him of precisely this blasphemy. Cf. "Existence et éthique" and "A propos de Kierkegaard vivant," consecutively in E. Lévinas, *Noms Propres* (Paris: Fata Morgana, 1976) pp. 109–15.
  - 16 On this "crossroads" see *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*, p. 197 n24. The word is by no means a *hapax legomenon*. In addition to the obvious link between its sense here and Lévinas's celebrated expression "a religion for adults" (see the 1957 essay by that name in his *Difficile Liberté* [Paris: Albin Michel, 1976] pp. 25–41), it also evokes his occasional references in *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence* to the "fine risk" (*le beau risque*) to be run in attempting to communicate ethically—that is, in attempting to respond to the other person *justly*, as other (p. 120).
  - 17 This sort of language appears throughout *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*. From the perspective of classical theology, it is a matter of Lévinas's interpretation of "original sin," ostensibly "original goodness of creation" (p. 121), and yet only insofar as that classical expression is re-defined in terms of an "accusation preceding the fault, borne against oneself *despite one's innocence*" (p. 113, emphasis added). One sees immediately that the risk of what I have already called a "divinization of the other person" is also a risk of conflating religion and ethics. Perhaps this is more evident in *Totality and Infinity*, where justice, the establishment of a respectful relationship with the other, is said to "produce" infinite otherness—to bring it to light. To embrace one's responsibility is thus to invert the order of a world falsely closed to the infinity which it presupposes. "Man," writes Lévinas, "redeems creation" (p. 104).
  - 18 *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*, pp. 93, 112.
  - 19 Consider the programmatic remarks at *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*, p. 122: "If ethical terms arise in our discourse, before the terms freedom and non-freedom, it is because before the bipolarity of good and evil presented to choice, the subject finds himself committed to the Good in the very passivity of supporting. . . . This antecedence of responsibility to freedom would signify the Goodness of the Good: the necessity that the Good choose me before I can be in a position to choose, that is, welcome its choice."
  - 20 In "Reality and Its Shadow" (1948) the image is interpreted as an "idol." Opaque, it folds the gaze back on itself, truncating the movement of the eye toward the transcendence of what is already on its way toward us even before we begin to look. Lévinas does not hesitate to draw religious conclusions: "The proscription

of images is truly the supreme command of monotheism, a doctrine that overcomes fate . . ." (*Collected Philosophical Papers*, p. 141, and repeated in *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*, p. 191 n21).

- 21 The importance of these relations and negotiations is also emphasized in the work of Paul Valadier. See, e.g., his *Eloge de la conscience* (Paris: Seuil, 1994), esp. pp. 179f.
- 22 "Töten ist eine Gestalt unseres wandernden Trauerens . . ." (Rilke, *Sonnets to Orpheus* II.11).

# VIOLENCE AND THE VULNERABLE FACE OF THE OTHER

The vision of Emmanuel Levinas on  
moral evil and our responsibility

*Roger Burggraeve*

Translated by Jeffrey Bloechl

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According to the French-Jewish thinker Levinas (1905–1995), ethics begins with the appearing of the other person, or, as he calls it in his first major work, *Totality and Infinity* (1961), with his or her “face.” Let us follow Levinas in his attempt to describe this central ethical phenomenon. In this way, we will be led to pay special attention to the problem of violence, hate, and murder, since every ethics is ultimately concerned with the difference between moral good and evil. Through this analysis—which of course can explain only some aspects of Levinas’s many-sided and at the same time single-minded thinking—we still hope to make clear the power and importance of his ethics for, among other things, the contemporary discussion on racism.

## **From the human countenance to the face of the other**

If we go in search of what Levinas means by the term “face,” we immediately encounter a great, but obvious misunderstanding. When we hear the word “face,” we spontaneously associate it with “countenance,” with the physiognomy, facial expression, and, by extension, character, social status, situation, and past, that means the “context” from which the other person becomes visible and describable for us. The face of the other thus seems to coincide perfectly with what his appearance and behavior offers to “seeing”

and “representing.” By taking literally an “option” regarding the other person, we suppose ourselves able to “define” him, whereupon we then also delimit our reactions and behavior. Likewise, in all sorts of forms of counseling (medical, psychological, therapeutic), we begin from a “diagnosis,” from a methodically and technically professionalized “observation” through which, based on our foreknowledge of symptoms—the images of sickness—we can propose a diagnosis with an eye to prognosis and treatment.

What Levinas really means by the “face of the other” is not his physical countenance or appearance, but precisely the noteworthy fact that the other—not only in fact, but in principle—does not coincide with his appearance, image, photograph, representation, or evocation. “The other is invisible” (TI 6). According to Levinas, we therefore can not properly speak of a “phenomenology” of the face since phenomenology describes what appears. The face is nonetheless what in the countenance of the other escapes our gaze when turned toward us. The other is “otherwise,” irreducible to his appearing, and thus reveals himself precisely as face. Surely, the other is indeed visible. Obviously, he appears and so calls up all sorts of impressions, images, and ideas by which he can be described. And naturally, we can come to know a great deal about him or her on the basis of what he or she gives us “to see.” But the other is more than a photograph, or rather not only is he factually more—not only more in the sense where there is always more for me to discover—but he can never be adequately reproduced or summarized by one or another image. The other is essentially, and not merely factually or provisionally, a movement of retreat and overflowing. I can never bind or identify the other with his plastic form (EI 90–91). Paradoxically, the other’s appearing is executed as a withdrawal, or literally, as *retraite* or *anachorese*. The epiphany of the other is always also a breaking through and a throwing into confusion of that very epiphany, and as such the other always remains “enigmatic,” intruding on me as the “irreducible,” “separate and distinct,” “strange,” in short as “the other” (AS 81). The other is insurmountably otherwise because he escapes once for all every effort at representation and diagnosis. The epiphany of the face makes all curiosity ridiculous (TI 46).

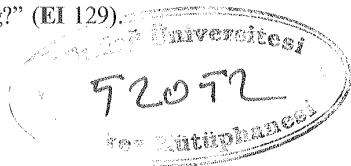
Still, for Levinas it is precisely in this insurmountable irreducibility of alterity that is the vulnerability of the face (TI 275), and through which the lighting up of its ethical significance is made manifest. As “countenance,” the other is vulnerable, and can very easily be reduced to his appearing, as social position, “accomplishments,” and image of health or illness. The appearance of the face as countenance, as it were, invites the “I,” or “ego,” to reduce the other to that countenance. This “invitation to reduction” depends not only on the vulnerability of the face but also on the way of being of the I to whom the face appears. Borrowing an expression from Spinoza,



Levinas describes the I as *conatus essendi*—as effort and tension of existing (AE 4–5). As an individual being, the I is persistent in its concern with its own existence, and tries obstinately to maintain itself (AS 63–64). The “natural” or spontaneous being of the I is self-interest: its *esse* is *interesse*. This implies that the I also approaches the other person from an “interested” position, which is to say that it tries to integrate the other into its project of existing as a function, means, or meaning.

This also goes with the manner in which I approach the face of the other. On the basis of my perception—whether spontaneous or permeated by method—“vision” in the literal sense of the word—I strive to grasp the other in an image and to keep him in my sights. And this perception takes place not out of “contemplative” consideration that wishes only to respectfully “mirror” the other or “let him be seen,” but according to self-interested concerns. When I thus succeed in discovering or “dis-closing” the other person, I can also know how I can interact with him, and how I can include him in the realization of my autonomy and right to freedom. Hence does the face appear as preeminently vulnerable, in so far as it can be reduced—based on its appearing and on the ground of my perception—precisely to its countenance. In this respect, Levinas takes the paradoxical position that the other presents himself to me as the “temptation to murder” (EI 90). In its appearing, the face presents itself to me naked; it is, as it were, handed over defenseless before the “shameless gaze” that observes and explores it. The nudity of the face is an “uncomfortable” nudity, one that testifies to an essential destitution. The proof of this is in the fact that the other tries to camouflage his poverty by taking on airs, by posing or posturing, making and dressing himself up, grooming and preening. This makes it clear that the other is naked, and by its appearing the basic onlooking—literally “voyeuristic”—I is as it were invited to violence. By its “countenance,” its visibility, the face challenges my self-interested effort of existing to imprison the other there, in what I see, or, to invoke a play of words, the other who is seen, “*is seen*” (AE 113–15).

But in this very fascination, says Levinas, there lies the ethical significance of the face. At the moment in which I am attracted by the naked “countenance” of the other to reduce him to that countenance, I simultaneously realize that that which can be actually must not. This is the core of the fundamental ethical experience beginning from the face—namely, the prohibition against committing the other solely to his own countenance (LC 44). Levinas expresses this as a categorical imperative emanating from the face: “Thou shall not kill.” In my self-sufficient effort of existing, which on the ground of perception and representation aims to become the expression and realization of individual freedom, I am not merely limited from the outside but at my deepest—in the very principle of my freedom—shocked and placed in question: “Do I not kill by being?” (EI 129).



## An ethics of goodness

It is through its countenance and its naked poverty that the face can be killed. And the fact that this is not only a possibility but an everyday—or even banal—reality is abundantly clear from our newspaper and television reports of violence, homicide, and war. In this sense, the face as an ethical appeal is not an ontological or natural “necessity,” like an object that, when let go, must fall, according to the law of gravity. The “must” that asserts itself in the face—and by which the face is precisely a face—is not the “cannot be otherwise” of natural necessity, but to the contrary a “can be otherwise” that, on the other hand, must not. The commandment against murder does not make murder impossible, even when its “authority” is maintained in bad conscience over evil committed (NLT 22–23). In this respect, the ethical “must” is absolutely opposed to “compulsion” or “inevitability.” The face as command does not force compliance, but only appeals. The face presents itself to me as an “authority,” but one that cannot compel me to anything, but can only ask and appeal, an authority that requires only by beseeching. The authority that reaches me from the face as a prohibition against murder is an “unarmed authority” (AS 69) that can call only upon my free, good will for help. The term “appeal” expresses both the unconditionally obliging character of a categorical imperative in the Kantian sense, and a call to human freedom as good will—that is to say, as a will that can override its own self-interest and stand essentially open for the other than itself, but that can also, again as free will, cast this appeal to the wind. The face of the other signifies for me the experience of violence as continuous enchantment and real possibility, and thus immediately the ethical “shame” that I must not be the murderer of the other (EI 91).

When Levinas offers a positive analysis of this putting into question of the ego’s self-interested effort of existing, he speaks of a call to responsibility for the other. This responsibility consists in the first place in taking care not to violate or destroy (“kill”) the other in his otherness, which is to say not to reduce the other to his countenance, but instead to recognize, respect, and do justice to him in his otherness. When we look at an other and see eyes, nose, a forehead, a chin, and so forth, all of which can be described, then we consider the other only as an object. And this is precisely a form of lack of respect, hence a form of violence. In his evocative language, Levinas can then also propose that the best manner in which to meet the other consists not in the least in taking note of the color of his eyes (EI 89). When one sees the color of the eyes, the other becomes a “spectacle” by which his irreducible and infinite otherness is violated. In contrast with the shameless intrusion that breaks in on the other without embarrassment, we can, with Levinas, designate the ethical relation supposed in the commandment “Thou shall not kill” as “holding back”: *le mouvement apparemment négatif de la retenue* [the seemingly negative movement of holding back] (NLT 96).

Confronted with the vulnerability of the face, I am thereby called to restrain myself and to pull back—in other words, to *not* do something, or concretely, not to do the other violence, which in fact runs counter to the spontaneous dynamics of my effort of existing that presses brutally forward (*comme une force qui va* [like a force that goes]).

This makes possible a better grasp of the manner in which the “good will” mentioned above relates itself to the “effort of existing.” As “aimed at the good” one might think that the good will is to be found wholly outside of the *conatus essendi*. Indeed, such a dualistic interpretation is put forth easily by numerous interpreters of Levinas, inspired not least by Levinas himself, particularly in *Totalité et Infini*. In that work, “the Same” (*le Même*) and “the Other” (*l’Autre*), “the effort of existing” (*l’intéressement*) and “responsibility” (*la responsabilité par Autrui*), and “being” (*être*) and the “otherwise than being” (*autrement qu’être*) are held apart from one another as two different and distinct fields of meaning that can also be radically contrasted. However, since Levinas never speaks of the Same *or* the Other, but of the Same *and* the Other (*le Même et l’Autre*), the question is really how they do indeed relate to each other.

A correct understanding of this relation can be clarified via the Husserlian method to which Levinas often refers. This method consists in first withdrawing from what appears and is given to everyday perception, in order to—from a position of systematic and methodical doubt—return *zu den Sachen selbst*, or to what is covered over or forgotten in the perceived phenomena, and thus to return to “true reality”—to the thing itself—of the phenomenon. What is immediately obvious in our everyday perception of the dynamic of human existence is that it is driven by the *conatus essendi*. On closer inspection, this description of the subject appears too hasty. According to Levinas—and here we come upon what is in my opinion the real originality of his ethical thinking—our characterization of the I by self-interest and effort of existing has covered something up, something already at work in that very effort of existing. Concretely, there is at work in the effort of existing itself—in the Same, and not outside it—a scruple that places the *conatus essendi* in question from inside out and breaks it open to the other than itself. Literally, the word *scruple* means a *pebble in one’s shoe* making it impossible to stand still, and instead moving or inciting one to take another step. It is therefore not by chance that Levinas speaks of “the Other *in* the same” (AE 141). This scruple that disturbs even the effort of existing comes to light through an encounter with the face, but it is not introduced or created by that encounter. The confrontation with the appeal of the naked and vulnerable face awakens in the *conatus* the scruple over itself through which the “being” of the I reveals itself as also “otherwise than being.” As paradoxical as it may sound, this “otherwise than being” is not introduced by the face but in fact is manifested as essentially belonging to the dynamic of the *conatus*. The scruple over itself that operates from

inside out within the *conatus* means precisely the “good will” as an ethical event. As orientation to the good, the good will is not a “natural necessity”—nor is the effort of existing—in the sense that a person can do nothing other than choose either for the other or for self-interest. The good will enacts itself precisely as scruple, as placing in question, as a discomfort with itself in the effort of existing. As *conatus essendi*, I am uneasy about my own *conatus essendi*; I realize that the evidence of my striving to exist is not at all evident, that I might not outlive my self-interest after all. In the exercise of my effort of existing it occurs to me that, left to itself, that effort is brutal, and leaves everything behind it, in its own wake. There is also a certain “natural impulse or inclination” in the *conatus* to think and act from its own interest, though this still does not mean that it is abandoned to itself as an inevitable mechanism of natural necessity. It is because it can be marked by an internal scruple or reserve about itself that the *conatus* is ethical, and by this it exceeds nature—nature being understood here as moderated or exercised in accord with natural law. And through the crisis that it bears within itself—*la crise de l'être* [the crisis of being]—it is not abandoned to itself as fatality, but can exceed itself to the other than itself. Through the internal scruple a choice is put before it between self-interest and the otherwise than being, by which it exceeds itself as “involvement with the good,” and is thus “good will.” In short, the paradox of being human is that as the effort of existing we are not abandoned to our nature as to a natural impulse, but, through the scruple—through our conscience as *mauvaise* conscience [bad conscience]—we can arise above ourselves to choose for the good, that is to say for “unselfishness.” In this way, the effort of existing in itself also already marked and touched by the good, not as necessity but as possibility and call. It is not for nothing that Levinas cites this as *le miracle de l'humain* [the “miracle of the human”]: the other in the same, transcendence in immanence, the “extraordinary” in the “ordinary,” the other that affects the same and unsettles it, or more forcefully, throws it into such disorder that the effort of existing is turned inside out and exposed as vulnerable to the other than itself, which is to say the face of the other (AT 141–43).

The apparently negative movement of reserve and placing oneself in question in the effort of existing, so to speak, makes room for the positive movement of attention and responsibility for the other. This responsibility, which establishes the nonkilling of the other and which begins as from the summons of the face—and, finally, which is therefore radically heteronomous—Levinas characterizes time and again throughout his writings as “goodness.” “Responsibility” is a term very dear to him, and the highest realization of it consists in existing close to the other in his extreme vulnerability, that is, not to leave the other alone in his exposure to the inexorability of his death. And although I can do no more for the other, he cannot reimburse me for my goodness. As countenance, the face is also “in the sights” of death as the ultimate and inescapable menace making all

will-to-live ridiculous. This, then, is goodness as nonindifference, one that is also asymmetrical and that thus in no way takes as a precondition for goodness any payment or reward from the other. Levinas sometimes tries to clarify the “unselfishness” of the responsibility for the other as “pure goodness,” “love without eros,” charity without reciprocity—“to fear for the other” without this fear beginning from “fear for myself.” In this respect, for Levinas this “fear for the other pursued and stricken by death” is the foundation and even modality of responsibility-to-and-for-the-other as goodness (EI 128).

### Goodness as inverted world

With this strong accent on goodness—not merely surprising but also moving—Levinas himself is nonetheless also conscious of a possible reproach, namely that his ethics of goodness is in fact a cheap, romantic, and naive philosophy. Levinas resists this charge vehemently. His ethics of responsibility is a very realistic philosophy that departs precisely from the moral evil of violence and injustice (NLT 23–24).

Levinas concedes that on first sight the idea of goodness seems simple, even banal. But for him it loses its simplicity in light of the evil that wishes to transgress it. Levinas’s basic ethical idea of care for the other—who is always essentially “other” and thus “foreign”—acquires its full force in light of the denial and destruction of the other. This latter point has already been touched on when analyzing the call to responsibility going out from the face in connection with the command “Thou shall not kill” and through the definition of the ethical as the scruple in the *conatus essendi* itself. This command points directly to the possibility and reality of violence and murder as evil. Moreover, there arise no norms in human society, and few prohibitions, unless reality is such that they become either necessary or at least desirable. Were each of us spontaneously and, as it were, inherently nonviolent, there would exist neither ethics nor any prohibition against murder. Only when a specific evil has a certain factual evidence—which is not to say “necessity”—do there come to be ethical values and norms, formulated for the most part in the form of prohibitions, precisely in order to make clear that such values (which in fact are often and easily violated) must not be violated. Were there always and everywhere respect for the otherness of the other person, then there would also be no ethics, which is also to say that there would be no need for an obligation to respect, or to formulate a prohibition against murder as the minimal expression of that respect. In this sense, goodness as nonviolent relation to the other that tries to do him or her justice is anything but a cheap and naive thought, good only for pious souls or idealistic adolescents not yet familiar with life’s hard realities. Goodness as the path to the other is not at all a self-evident, “natural” idea that would emerge spontaneously in our everyday struggles. It is anything

but self-evident. On the contrary, it establishes an “inverted order,” an *Umwertung aller Werte* [a “revaluation of all values”], for it is possible only as a radical transgression of our “ordinary” striving to be that, according to its self-interest, orders the other to itself with the greatest self-evidence. The naivete, in other words, lies not on the side of goodness, but on that of freedom and the I, which in its “natural” or spontaneous “being” acts as if everything were there “for him” alone. Only when we have understood goodness as the overcoming of our “quasi-natural” self-interest that, on the basis of our neediness, seems rather more evident than does “being for the other,” can its true, revolutionary, and counterintuitive character emerge. To employ one useful image—an image that comes from Levinas himself—goodness goes so far that it keeps the cold in and for itself while we by nature rather appreciate the warmth. The true meaning and real value of goodness, understood as the unconditional of the other despite its “otherness,” consists precisely in overcoming the evil threatening the other with reduction and destruction, instead establishing another relation with him or her, one resting on attention and devotion to the other. In this sense, the Levinasian idea of responsibility for the other can never be thought of or explained without also pointing to its counterpart, its negative inverse, which it resists in particular, namely the evil of reducing the face of the other person to his countenance, which is also to say indifference before, or rejection of the other—not of the human in general, but of the other person, of the alterity of the other person (CAJ 78).

### Use, consumption, and misuse of the other

To make clear that goodness is not a weak concept but an iron-strong ethical one, I find it important to pause for a moment over the attention that Levinas pays to moral evil, and specifically to the evil that one person perpetrates against another. On one hand, he discovers in evil the same basic structure, namely the “reduction of the other to the same” (TI 6). On the other hand, he distinguishes in it different forms. These can be arranged in ascending order, starting from the “comprehending” and thus grasping consideration of the other, through tyranny, the passion of murder and hate, and finally coming to an end at what for Levinas is evil in the extreme, namely racism and, more particularly, anti-Semitism as a “horribly perfect” form of racism. I go into each of these different forms of evil because they illustrate unambiguously the ethical refusal to put one’s effort of existing in question.

A first form of evil lies in considering the other as a potentiality or function of the establishment and affirmation of my ego, or I. In a state of “want,” I have need of the other—I cannot be without others. It is from there that my spontaneous, natural consideration of others is always self-interested and self-involved. This we can call the economic relation to the

other, which develops de facto into an economic regime of reciprocal, well-understood private interests in the sense that people relate to each other on the basis of satisfying one another's needs, in which case they are thus also "interesting" for one another. One can go so far in this that the otherness of the other is no longer respected but, to speak with Kant, reduced to a mere means. Concretely, this happens whenever I try to make the other person subordinate to me as "food" or "power," or to press him into one or another form of service, hence to "consume" the other, to instrumentalize him and to use him: to cannibalize, whether under a hard form or a milder one. For this, I can of course apply all the riches and power that I have assembled for myself in my struggle for existence. I can use all possible means—or better put, misuse them—to draw the other to myself, to extort from him, to intimidate him or buy him, in short to subject him to myself—and without there arising a direct expression of brutality or enslavement (TI 209, LC 268). At first glance, this would seem to indicate a milder form of evil, but in essence this modality already contains the possibility of a stronger and even an extreme form of evil, for it, too, displays what we have seen as the fundamental dynamic of all evil: the reduction of the other to oneself.

Now, this reduction of the other on the practical plane is usually accompanied by, and is in any case also strengthened by, a reduction on the noetic plane. Concretely, I try to gain access to the other by stripping him of his alterity via concepts, categories, and thematization. In this way, I can make "images" or photographs of the other person so that I suppose myself to know him. In doing so, I approach the other not according to his otherness itself, but from a horizon, or another totality (QLT 77). I look the individuality of the other, so to speak, up and down, forming a conception of him not as this-individual-here-and-now but only according to the generality of a type, an a priori idea, or an essence. Still more concretely, this means that the other conceived within this reductive form of thinking is seen from out of the wider horizon of his history, culture, environment, customs, and traditions, personal past, characterological properties, sociological conditioning and (depth-) psychological structures. The "comprehending" I, or ego, negates the irreducible uniqueness of the other and tries to conceive of him in the same way as he does the world. Comprehensive knowledge is thus also no innocent phenomenon but a violent phenomenon of power. By my "penetrating insight" I gain not only access to the other, but also power over him. Through my knowledge, I not only can fix the other to his physical, psychological, and sociological appearance at a particular moment, but can also manipulate and blackmail him. From this, it is clear how knowledge, which is indispensable for my separation and is thus a good for me, nonetheless at the same time brings evil for the other. This is the tragedy of human understanding. The development of my noetic identity is not without wrinkle or blemish, exhibiting a dark underside, namely, a

disrespectful and essentially merciless exercise of power over the other. By applying my cognition to understand the other, there occurs “a determination of the other by the same, without the same being determined by the other” (TI 145).

### **The effort of existing as potentially violent**

The economic pursuit of autonomy, which makes not only the world but also the other person a “means of existence and self-development,” brings us immediately to another, radical form of evil: interhuman violence. Notwithstanding the fact that this reductive interaction among people lies in the same line as the reduction of the world to economic concerns, Levinas also points explicitly to their difference: Though both have a certain resistance to worldly facts, both also always submit in one or another manner to my project of existing. But in the case of one’s fellow humans this includes a specific difficulty. For insofar as they, too, are “I’s,” or “alter egos,” they exhibit the same self-interested effort of existing as do I myself, and thus also act just as reductively. All I’s in pursuit of autonomy want to ensure, establish, and expand their own identity as much as possible. Hence does my primitive egoism sooner or later strike up against the primitive egoism of other I’s, or alter egos (TH 93). This implies the inevitable existence of a general situation of conflict: The many I’s who inhabit one and the same world cannot all at the same time be at the absolute center to which all else is made to refer. According to their ontological nature, or effort of existing, they measure themselves and exert themselves with all power and every possible means against one another (DEHH 173). It becomes a struggle for power of all against all, war in the most general sense of the word (AE 5). And this is a war waged openly and directly, or indirectly, either from a subtly laid ambush, or more circuitously, taking the other by surprise (TI 200–01). Hence does the effort of existing, necessary for life and seeking autonomy, strike against its own contrary.

### **Violence as tyranny and enslavement**

Another form of the reduction of the other to the same, and thus also of violence, is, according to Levinas, tyranny, a despotic and unlimited expression of the effort of existing (LC 264–66). Tyranny consists in an I trying to subjugate the others—without killing them—in such a way that in one or another manner they give up to him their freedom. The tyrant attempts by persuasion, rhetoric, propaganda, seduction, trickery, diplomacy, demagoguery, (threats of) torture or physical violence, brainwashing, plagiarism, intimidation, or bribery to bring other free subjects to abandon the autonomous exercise of their freedom in exchange for satisfaction of their needs (“bread and games”) (TI 42, 205).



This tyrannical penetration into and seizure of freedom makes of its victims not only “slaves,” but in its extreme form also “enslaved spirits.” Incarnated freedom can indeed allow itself to be appropriated by the intrigues of another and by doing so become its slave. In this way, one’s freedom is abandoned to that other person. One no longer has an individual will; one loses his freedom to think and act. In its consistent form, this means that even the “capacity” to obey an order, which implies freedom, is eradicated. There is only a degenerate form of heteronomy. An enslaved spirit acts out of “blind” obedience. Here, “blind” means literally that the obedience in question is not in the least bit cognizant of obedience. The enslaved subject loses the experience of his autonomy and of his obedience. There is no longer any “conscious” obedience, but only an inner, irresistible “inclination” and “drive” to accommodate oneself to the powerful (TI 213–14). This inclination, which can grow into masochistic “desire,” is marked by an extreme submissiveness and compliance, by an “extreme weakness” that in everyday language is indicated as slavish dependence, or “canine trust and which in a fascist situation becomes trust for trust, sacrifice for sacrifice, obedience for obedience” (DL 197). The inclination to submit becomes second nature. The subject overwhelmed and possessed is no longer conscious of being overwhelmed; the two now radically coincide. The enslaved spirit no longer feels the strange and unreasonable like a slap in the face. The tyrant, no matter precisely which form, in fact no longer finds anyone against him, but only a mass of material without any substantial core or resistance, at which point he can give full rein to his passions to his heart’s content. Love of the “master” fills the enslaved spirit so completely that he is without any distance or even the capacity to seek it. Fear of the powerful “lord” takes possession of him to such an extent that he no longer sees it for the simple reason that he sees only “from out of” that very fear (LC 265–66).

### The passion of murder and hate

From the forms of reduction of the other to the same described up to now it follows that the consistent exercise of willpower of my effort of existing emerges in a denial of the other of which murder is the physical incarnation, though not the only one (DVI 244–45).

Murder manifests itself not so much as a fact taking place once and for all, but as a passion driven by a well-determined intentionality—namely, to destroy the other totally. The “denial” occurring in the “consumption” and “use” of others still remains partial. In the “grasp” that I exert on them, I do indeed contest their independence but I still preserve their existence in reality so that they are and continue to be “for me.” Killing is radical: One does not dominate (appropriate, use, and consume) the other, but clears him out of the way, or destroys him; the other is driven even from existing.

Murder, then, renounces absolutely all “comprehension” of the other, for one no longer wishes to include the other in the “same,” that is, in one’s own project of existing, but, on the contrary, to exclude him, because he is “too much” in the way of one’s struggle for identity. Murder manifests itself as the effort and realization of an inexorable struggle for omnipotence: The I plays not “all *or* nothing” but “all *and* nothing.” It promotes itself to “all” so that the other must be reduced to “nothing” or “no one,” which is also to say to “is-no-longer,” in not only the factual but also, and above all, the active sense of “is” no longer (*être* understood not formally as existence but qualitatively as *conatus essendi*, thus as “capacity”; TI 172).

Levinas points out how hate is another form of denial that is at the same time related to murder and in a certain sense worse (though, of course, from another perspective it is also less serious). Hate is an extremely paradoxical manner of denying the other, for one wants at the same time both to radically negate the other and also not to do so entirely. From its offensive height, hate wishes to humiliate and crush the other, but without destroying him completely. On one hand, hate aims at making the other suffer, such that he would then be reduced to pure passivity. But on the other hand, hate wishes that the other in this passivity would remain at his most active, so that he could bear witness to this hate. Still more, hate wants not only that the other undergoes it but also that he suffers from it, for it is only by this suffering that he can testify to the hate. Only the suffering of the other reveals the destructive, reductive power of the “same” at work in hate. Hate does not always wish the death of the other, or at least it wishes his death to come only as the highest form of suffering. Whoever hates wants to be the cause of a suffering of which the hated person is the living proof. To make the other suffer through one’s hate is not simply to reduce him to an object, but on the contrary to enclose him forcefully in his subjectivity. Or better, hate at one and the same time both does and does not objectify the other. In his suffering, the other must realize his objectification, and for this very reason remain a subject. Hate wants both of these two aspects, which ensures that it is insatiable. It is sated precisely when it is not. The other gives satisfaction to the one who hates him only by being an object, and yet he can never be object enough, for hate demands that, at the same time the hated one falls, he nonetheless also remains clearheaded and bears witness. This is what makes hate so absurd and sordid. Hate wants the death of the other, yet without killing him; it holds the other, still living, at the verge of destruction, so that through the terrible pain of rejection and denial the other testifies to the triumph of hate (TI 216)!

### Racism as denial of the otherness of the other

Levinas also considers all of the forms of moral evil discussed up to this point to return in an extreme but consistent way to racism (VA 100). Strictly

speaking, racism takes the view that one group of people is morally or culturally superior to another group, based on a hereditary difference in race. Racism considers the racial origin of an individual or a community as the factor determining not only the appearance but also the way of thinking and acting. Moreover, racism accords value to one race above all others, and one who is racist usually reckons himself among the superior race. According to racist thinking, people are considered in the first place or even exclusively in terms of their belongingness to a different race, most often visible in color of skin and other physical features (figure, nose, eyes, and so forth). On the basis of these features, they are then judged and above all condemned. And these condemnations are in turn nourished and strengthened by all sorts of "images of the enemy" cast against the "other" race.

For Levinas, it is clear that racism was incarnated in an "exceptional" way in the persecution of the Jews by the National Socialism of Hitler and his followers (AS 60), which he therefore designates as "the diabolical criminality of absolute evil" (CCH 82). In his work *Mein Kampf*, Hitler argued for the superiority of the so-called Aryan race, the race of the *Übermensch* ["Superman"]. Only those who belonged to the "pure" Aryan race, who all the more so embodied this race purely, had the right to live and reproduce. The Nazis therefore not only developed ingenious, scientifically designed programs to "solve" the Jewish question (the *Endlösung*, or *Shoah*) by means of concentration camps and gas chambers (of which Auschwitz in Poland was only one, but the most famous). They also developed and enacted complex, extensive sterilization programs aimed specifically at the physically and mentally handicapped so that the Aryan race would not be stained by begetting "impure" children. And there were also the infamous euthanasia programs established in order to remove "gently" the incurably ill and mentally handicapped, who were thus less valuable and unnecessary members of the Aryan race. Because homosexuals did not contribute to the furthering of the pure Aryan race they were severely persecuted, and the gypsies were eradicated because they did not belong to the Aryan race and therefore represented a threat to its purity.

In a wider sense, one also speaks of racism when one recognizes and relates to others on the basis of their belonging to another culture, language group, or religion. As contemporary examples of this, we can point to the manner in which people today reject immigrants from the Arab world and wish to expel them because of their origin in another religion, specifically Islam and its related traditions. Or think of the long-standing suppression and discrimination against African Americans in the United States, many of whose ancestors were brought over from Africa as slaves.

According to Levinas, the core of racism consists not in the denial of, or failure to appreciate, similarities between people, but in the denial of, or better said, failure to appreciate and value, people's differences, or better still, the fundamental and irreducible otherness by which they fall outside of

every genre and are thus "unique": "Alterity flows in no sense out of difference, to the contrary difference goes back to alterity" (VA 92). A racist relation wants to recognize and value only the "same," or one's "own" [*het eigene*], and therefore excludes the "foreign." Out of self-defense, we are easily inclined to accept and consider positively only that which agrees with, or is "similar" to, ourselves. One finds the other embarrassing, threatening, and frightening. One therefore tries to expel him from oneself, to place him outside so that he can be considered as the "enemy" from whom one "may" defend oneself, and whom one may even "destroy" as what brings life and well-being under pressure, unless one can reduce him to oneself or make him a part of oneself. One wants to accept "others" (or "strangers," or "foreigners") only to the extent that they belong to one's own "genre" or "kind," which is to say to one's own blood and soil, to the same family, tribe, sex, clan, nation, church, club, or community, do the same work, have the same birthplace and date. One's "own" is praised and even divinized at the price of the "other," which is vilified. The "stranger" becomes the scapegoat on whom we blame all of our problems and worries. One accepts differences only insofar as they are a matter of accidental particularities or specificities within a same genre or basic design, in which individuals differ from one another within a same "sort" only very relatively (for example, character, taste, intellectual level), and in which their deeper affinity is not at all tested (VA 97). Against this background, it is clear that for Levinas anti-Semitism, as a specific and advanced form of racism, takes aim at the Jew as the intolerable other. For anti-Semitic thinking and sentiment, the Jew is simply the enemy, just as for every racism the other is the enemy as such, that is to say not on the basis of personality, one or another character trait, or a specific act considered morally troublesome or objectionable, but due only to his very otherness. In anti-Semitism, the Jew, as "other," is always the guilty one. It is never "oneself," the embodiment of the "same" that not only arranges everything around itself but also profiles itself as principle of meaning and value (CAJ 77-79).

From this perspective on racism as rejection of the other, it appears, according to Levinas, that racism is not a rare and improbable phenomenon existing in the heart and thought of only some "perverse" people that has nothing to do with us. Insofar as one is, according to the spontaneous dynamic of existing, or *conatus essendi*, directed toward the "same," toward maintaining and fortifying one's "own"—all such as I have just sketched it—one must be considered "by nature" potentially racist, though of course without being "predestined" for it. In itself, this admits no question of psychological or pathological deviation. According to Levinas, this implies that one cannot simply dispense with the racism of Hitler and the Nazis, in contrast to something instead occurring only once, as a wholly distinct and incomparable phenomenon, at least if one views it not quantitatively but qualitatively, which is to say in terms of its roots and basic inspiration.

In an attempt to hold open a pure—in fact, Manichean—distinction between “good” (us) and “bad” (the “others”), thus keeping oneself out of range of the difficulties in question, it happens all too often that Hitlerism is described as something completely unique that has nothing in common with the aims and affairs of the common mortal. The perspective of Levinas shows that Hitlerism, with its genocide and other programs of eradication, is only a quantitative extension, that is to say a consistent, systematic, and inexorably refined outgrowth of racism in its pure form, one that, in its turn, represents a concretization of the effort of existing, which, as the reduction of the other to the same, is the nature of our existence (without, on the other hand, our being abandoned to this nature as a fatality, since as ethical beings we can overcome it). No one is invulnerable; any of us is a potential racist, and at least sometimes a real racist. Racism, like Hitlerism, does not occur by chance, or by an accidental turn. Nor is it an exceptional perversion occurring in a group of psychologically disturbed people. It is a permanent possibility woven into the dynamic of our very being, so that whoever accedes to and lives out the dynamic of his own being inevitably extends racism in one or another form (AS 60–61). We can no longer blame racism and anti-Semitism on “others,” for both their possibility and the temptation to them are borne in the dynamic of our own being, as “non-reciprocal determination of the other” (TI 99), which is precisely the kernel of our freedom (TI 97).

It is specifically to unmask this racist violence, and all forms of violence as modalities of denial of the other as other, that Levinas discerns the basic ethical norm in the commandment mentioned and explicated above, “Thou shall not kill,” which is to say in the commandment to respect the otherness of the other. In committing to the possible overcoming of evil, and of racism in particular, through the ethical choice for the good, Levinas certainly realizes how vulnerable this “overcoming” of evil is. By rejecting the idea that every objective system, through its ironclad, mechanistic laws and coerciveness, might be able to render evil impossible forever, and instead basing everything on the ethical call to the good, he makes clear that abuse, violence, and the racist exclusion and elimination of the other are constantly possible and can never be definitively overcome. In ethics, there is no eschatology, in the sense of a guaranteed “better world” or “world without evil.” There is only the “good will” that must always prove itself in a choice against evil that is neither evident nor easy. Only in this way can there be a good future and justice for the other: only through ethical vigilance with respect to all forms of violence, tyranny, hate, and racism, and a society that nurtures in both our upbringing and education a “sensibility” for the other as “stranger.” Such a sensitivity takes in full seriousness the ethical essence of the human person, and serves always to put us back on the path to a culture “where the other counts more than I do,” and where the most foreign enjoys our complete hospitality.

### The Jewish wisdom of love

Levinas designates as “the wisdom of love” [*la sagesse de l’amour*] the connection just described between the commandment “Thou shall not kill” and the commitment to responsibility and goodness for the other. For him, love is not a subjective feeling bubbling up in the ego’s heart or “good sentiment,” like an expression of my personality, but is, in contrast, a commandment descending on me “from elsewhere”—from the alien, irreducible face of the other—specifying the “invested” and developed personality in which I “feel comfortably myself” and am able to function well, turning me upside down in order to abandon myself for the other. Love is obedience to the respect commanded by the other—that is to say, respect for human rights without such a turn to the other also requiring as its precondition any tendency, predestination, or capacity already in place.

Levinas calls this love a “wisdom” insofar as it is also a form of knowledge, though a knowledge of a completely different sort than the “comprehension” that manifests itself as a form of reduction and violence. Paradoxically, Levinas contends that justice is prior to truth (TI 62). Concretely, this means that to speak the truth, as the response to the other insofar as the other is real, presupposes the work of justice. Responsibility-to-and-for-the-other, as Levinas describes it, consists precisely in “letting and making be.” Obeying the appeal that goes out from the face means not reducing the other to his countenance, but in contrast doing absolutely conscientious justice to his infinitely withdrawing transcendence or irreducible alterity. Here there emerges a special sort of wisdom, namely the wisdom of gratitude. And this gratitude is at once a fundamental ethical posture and a form of knowledge made possible by that very ethical posture. By opening oneself to the other and doing right by his otherness, one takes up the fundamental ethical posture of justice. This justice is at the same time a form of truth to the degree that one wants not at all to manipulate or reduce the otherness of the other, but on the contrary to recognize and therefore also “know” according to the (ethical) truth. Love is wise because it is essentially conscious of an obedience that makes each truth possible.

According to Levinas, we meet with the wisdom of love primarily in Jerusalem, which is to say, for him, in the biblical tradition of *Torah* [Law] (EN 212–13). Whereas in the so-called first tablet of the decalogue our relationship with God is central, the second tablet focuses on worldly relationships and behavior. The first commandment of the second tablet reads: “Thou shall not kill.” This priority is not to be taken purely formally and externally, but also in terms of content and quality. “Thou shall not kill” is the foundation of all the other commandments and prohibitions, and is thus the source of a humane society that consists precisely in respecting the other person. The Torah “exposes ethical meaning as the ultimate intelligibility of the human, and even of the cosmic” (SaS 10). By this,

Levinas does not at all mean to say that Jerusalem or the Bible has some sort of monopoly on the priority of the other person, ethics, and human rights. Indeed, it is not that it is true because it stands in the Bible, but that it is in the Bible because it is true—if it is true. This latter qualification means that a check against experience and reflection is always necessary. In these, the insightful accessibility and general human communicability of the expression in question can appear (EFP 110–11). It is for this reason that Levinas pays constant attention to a phenomenological disclosure of how “Thou shall not kill” is the foundation of ethics, responsibility, and goodness (EA 12–13).

### Conclusion

Although Emmanuel Levinas is certainly not the only one in philosophy who pays attention to the human face, he is indeed the only one who makes of it a central category. Moreover, he gives to it a very specific meaning that departs markedly from the available qualifications based on physiognomy, visibility, and describability. For Levinas, the “face” is precisely that which radically and infinitely exceeds the “countenance,” not as inaccessible but as exceptionally vulnerable. It is this vulnerability that exposes the ethical meaning of the face: the simultaneous temptation to violence and the prohibition “Thou shall not kill.” The goodness that is nothing other than the positive inverse of this prohibition is then also anything but a banal or simplistic idea, good for pious and naive souls. It signifies, in contrast, the difficult and arduous struggle against moral evil, of which racism, as ostracization and extermination of the “foreigner,” is the extreme but consistent expression. The nonviolent and nonracist recognition of the other in his otherness incarnates the “wisdom of love,” which as an ethical option is never guaranteed but always returns to present itself anew as a must. This wisdom of love is the criterion of human culture, insofar as it does not draw the truth and the ethical good out from the interiority or immanence or the same or the own, but in contrast brings it in from the radical transcendence of the other or “stranger,” as criterion of justice and truth.

### Abbreviations

- AE: *Autrement qu'être ou au-delà de l'essence*, Den Haag, Nijhoff, 1974. [English translation (ET): *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*, trans. A. Lingis. The Hague/Boston, Nijhoff, 1981.]
- AS: *Autrement que savoir* (Interventions in the discussions and *Débat général*), Paris, Osiris, 1988.
- AT: *Altérité et transcendance*, Montpellier, Fata Morgana, 1995.
- CAJ: “Conversation avec un juste” (interview by D. S. Schiffer), in *L'événement du jeudi*, 1996, no. 585: 76–79.

- CCH:** "Comme un consentement à l'horrible," in *Le Nouvel Observateur*, 1988, no. 1211: 82–83.
- DEHH:** *En découvrant l'existence avec Husserl et Heidegger*, Paris, Vrin, 1949 (1st ed.), 1967 (2nd exp. ed. with "Essais nouveaux"). [ET: *Discovering Existence with Husserl*, trans. R. Cohen. Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1988.]
- DL:** *Difficile Liberté. Essais sur le Judaïsme*, Paris, Albin Michel, 1963 (1st ed.), 1976 (2nd rev. and exp. ed.). [ET (2nd ed.): *Difficult Freedom*, trans. S. Hand. London, Athlone, 1994.]
- DVI:** *De Dieu qui vient à l'idée* (Essais), Paris, Vrin, 1982.
- EFP:** "Entretiens," in F. Poirie, *Emmanuel Lévinas. Qui êtes-vous?* Lyon, La Manufacture, 1987, pp. 62–136.
- EI:** *Ethique et Infini. Dialogues avec Philippe Nemo*, Paris, Fayard/Radio France, 1982. [ET: *Ethics and Infinity. Conversations with Philippe Nemo*, trans. R. A. Cohen. Pittsburgh, Duquesne University Press, 1985.]
- EN:** *Entre Nous. Essais sur le penser-à-l'autre*, Paris, Grasset, 1991.
- LC:** "Liberté et commandement," in *Revue de métaphysique et de morale* 58 (1953): 264–72. Republished in book form, with foreword by P. Hayat: *Liberté et commandement*, Paris, Fata Morgana, 1994 (also includes the essay "Transcendance et hauteur," originally published in *Bulletin de la Société française de philosophie* 56 (1962), no. 3: 89–113, with discussion and correspondence). [ET: "Freedom and Command," in E. Levinas, *Collected Papers*, trans. A. Lingis, pp. 15–23.]
- NLT:** *Nouvelles lectures talmudiques*, Paris, Minuit, 1996.
- QLT:** *Quatre lectures talmudiques*, Paris, Minuit, 1968. [ET in E. Levinas, *Nine Talmudic Readings*, trans. A. Aronowicz. Bloomington/Indianapolis, Indiana University Press, 1990, pp. 1–89.]
- SaS:** *Du Sacré au Saint. Cinq nouvelles lectures talmudiques*, Paris, Minuit, 1977. [ET in E. Levinas, *Nine Talmudic Lectures*, trans. A. Aronowicz, Bloomington/Indianapolis, Indiana University Press, 1990, pp. 89–197.]
- TH:** "Transcendance et hauteur," in *Bulletin de la Société française de philosophie* 56 (1962), no. 3: 89–113, with discussion and correspondence. (Cf. also LC.)
- TI:** *Totalité et Infini. Essai sur l'extériorité*, Den Haag, Nijhoff, 1961. [ET: *Totality and Infinity*, trans. A. Lingis. Pittsburgh, Duquesne University Press, 1969.]
- VA:** *La vocation de l'autre*, in E. Hirsch, ed., *Racismes. L'autre et son visage*, Paris, Cerf, 1988, pp. 89–102.



# HYPERBOLIC JUSTICE

## Deconstruction, myth, and politics

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### The deconstruction of political philosophy

The oldest desire (*philia*) of philosophy is for the *arche*, the *principium*, the overarching principle. The *arche* supplies unity which rules over multiplicity, necessity which drives out chance, order which subdues the chaos. Political philosophy shares philosophy's taste for the *arche*, its love of *principia*, its desire for rule. Indeed it cannot resist the temptation to lift the crown from the hand of philosophy and set it upon its own head, to anoint itself the ruling science.<sup>1</sup> The science of ruling wants to be the ruling science; that is its desire. Political philosophy, which is not to be confused with politics and still less with the *polis* itself, wants to provide the *arche* for politics and the *polis*, to draw up the blueprints according to which the *polis* should be constituted.

It is for just this reason that Hannah Arendt says, from a standpoint which is not precisely deconstruction's but which bears significantly on deconstruction, that political philosophy represents a flight from politics, from the complexity and unregulatability of acting in the *polis*.<sup>2</sup> For Arendt, political philosophy attempts to escape from what she calls the "frailty of action," by which she means both the unforeseeable initiatives and fresh choices that are made by agents (the "natality" of action) and the unpredictable, uncontrollable outcomes of their actions, the chains of consequences that run beyond the agent's control.<sup>3</sup> Faced with such unforeseeability and uncontrollability, with such unregulated, shall we say anarchic, conditions, political philosophy seeks to impose order, to set out a frame of regularity around the shifting, mobile scene of action, to write a kind of *regulae ad directionem civitatis*.

Political philosophy is an exercise in fashioning or making a city, of building walls around the *polis*; it is, quite literally, statecraft. Political philosophy means to turn out master builders, philosopher-architects, archi-constructors. In its earliest version, the philosopher-architects keep an eye on a heavenly pattern which, being heavenly, is not itself made but serves as the basis for making, which is not an *Abbild* but an *Urbild*. Just so, the archi-constructors must someday be prepared—and they say this with great humility, this is not a grab for power, it is even against their will—to be called upon to put in time as the philosopher-king. This was the first modest proposal put forth by political philosophy. It completes the coup: as political philosophy would be the first among philosophical sciences, the political philosophers would be the first among politicians. First in thought and first in action; *principium principiorum*; first philosophy.

Such a project, objects Arendt, reconceives *praxis* in terms of *techne* and thereby subjects action to the metaphysics of making. Political philosophy treats the *polis* as an artifact, as a made object. That makes the state—this is the point which Lacoue-Labarthe pursues—a work of art, maybe even a *Gesamtkunstwerk*, a monumental film or building or massive canvas, governed by the laws of *mimesis*.<sup>4</sup> This is to transpose action into the terms of construction, to take acting in technical terms and to submit it to an architectonic. This subjugates the mobility and subtlety of action—the “frailty” of acting—to a master plan, which requires a master name, which authorizes master builders, maestros of all sorts, a whole caste of masters.

That is why political philosophy deserves deconstruction. There is a need to loosen the hold of architectonics over action, of *techne* over *praxis*, to slacken the constraints on the mobility of action. Every political-philosophical fabrication is a construct just begging for deconstruction. Law-making and state-crafting are exercises in construction which seek to conceal the unsettling and destabilizing effects of *différance* over which they are stretched as across an abyss. Still, philosophy is inescapable and the desire (*philia*) for the *arche* is (almost) irresistible, (almost) a natural tendency, if there were such a thing. The need for a wall of structure around the frailty of action cannot be simply denied, above all not now, in a world that has grown as dangerous and violent as ours. We are always inside/outside political structures. That is why political philosophy deserves deconstruction in another sense, in the sense that it is worth it. We should, out of sheer love for the *polis*, which is our mother, want to deconstruct the constructions of political philosophers whose training makes them adepts in wall-building and city-planning, in master plans and master names and mastering generally.

The deconstruction of political philosophy is not bad news. Political philosophy is necessary even as it necessarily betrays action; its walls are both unavoidable and dangerous. Deconstruction wants to keep political philosophy on its feet, if also just slightly off balance. That is the civic duty of

deconstruction and the good that it does for the *polis*. Deconstruction is good news for politics and the *polis*, even if the philosopher-kings have an unfortunate propensity to mistreat the bearers of such messages.

### The myth of justice

Deconstruction itself, if there is such a thing, inhabits the gap between political statecraft and the frailty of action. It does not seek to fill this gap but to inhabit it, to move around within it, to operate within the difference. Action belongs in the element of justice. Political philosophy does not insure justice; it finds justice very elusive. That, I will argue here, is because justice is less an *arche* than an *an-arche*, so that when it concerns justice the archi-constructors are out of their element. If there were justice, if justice existed, we would not need an *arche*. If justice existed, the political philosophers and politicians would be unemployed or, since unemployment is unjust, employed otherwise. *Polis* and *praxis* would need no walls, and statecraft would have withered away. We are tempted to say that justice would be the only rule except that justice is not a rule or a pattern. Justice is what rules want to have but which they do not possess necessarily, i.e., structurally. Structurally, the "rule" of law and the "reign" of justice are not to be confused. (Does justice "reign"? Or is justice less royal and more democratic? Does it hold sway gently? Or should it simply flow across the land like water?) Laws should be nourished by justice; they should yearn for justice; but it is very dangerous for them to confuse themselves with justice. That is why the revisability and repealability of law, even the resistance to law, is structurally part of the law. The deconstructibility of laws is part of the structure of the law. So deconstruction is not bad news but old news. Laws without resistance, undeconstructible laws, represent the nightmare of perfect terror.<sup>5</sup>

Justice eludes law and philosophy. Justice is beyond them, exceeds them, transcends them, and often enough even transgresses them. For often enough it is necessary, for the sake of justice, to break the law and even to spend some time in jail. Philosophy is the desire for the *arche*, the love of law and order, rules and *regulae*. But justice is to be found amidst the chaos and singularity of action, the idiosyncrasies of human interaction, the unreproducible exchanges between people. If there were justice, that would mean that we would be willing and able to live with the frailty of action and that we would have allowed action to follow its own course.

Political philosophy needs to be disturbed by justice. That would be good for it, and that is the good that deconstruction wants to do for it. Political philosophy, like all philosophy generally, needs to be disturbed from within, in its most interior recesses, by its other, which is justice. Philosophy conducts its business in the element of the universal, in the sphere of principles, *archai*, rules, or maxims that it wants to make into rules. But justice is

“older” than that, older than any rules. It belongs to a time immemorial, to a past that has never been present and that has taken hold of us without our consent. We have always already been delivered over to the element of justice. We were never consulted about the claims of justice; there is no manager with whom we can register a complaint.<sup>6</sup> Justice is not up to us: it is older, more primeval than us, even if it does not exist, or only barely exists, or has not quite managed to exist. It belongs to a past that was never present and to a future that will never be present.

That means that justice is a myth, that it belongs to a mythic past and an equally mythic future, that it is the stuff of a mythic desire. I do not mean that justice is a “*fiction*” in the sense of Lacoue-Labarthe, a mimetic myth, a myth of imitating and making, a *fictus*, a work of formative, plastic art. The myth of justice is not the myth of an ideal pattern, a heavenly picture. It is a myth of another sort, one that I hope here to identify, a myth of a nonmimetic, nonrepresentational sort, a myth that has to do not with making but with action, not a mytho-technics but a mytho-praxis.<sup>7</sup>

But what sort of myth is that?

A myth (*mythos*) is, at the least, a story, a memorable story, a tale we tell about something that belongs to time immemorial. When it comes to justice, it is best to tell a story, about a man or woman who effects justice, or who suffers for it, or who presumes to run roughshod over it. Such stories make their point although they fall short of philosophy’s love of the *logos*, of *theoria*, its desire for the *arche*.<sup>8</sup> Philosophy dwells in the element of universals, of *archai*, of *principia*, while the stories of justice have to do with particular men and women—like Antigone or Abraham—with the radically singular, if that were possible. Which it is not. For it is impossible to address the singular in an absolutely singular way. Story telling, like every form of discursivity, slips back inevitably, structurally—it cannot help itself—into the element of the universal, of the repeatable. But always in such a way as to remind us all the more persistently of the singular. Stories about justice cling persistently to the singular, even as they belong inevitably to the universal. Antigone is not just some particular sister, but something like “the” sister, a mythic sister, a sister in mythic space, in just the same way that Abraham and Isaac are not just a particular father and son. So the myth of justice tosses back and forth between universality and singularity. It is inevitably affected by a *logos*, inevitably mytho-logical. That is the best it can do.

The stories of justice are stories about something (im)possible, about an ancient, immemorial desire. We must have justice even though justice is nowhere to be found. Justice must be possible; it is what we desire, yet it everywhere eludes us. What is justice? What sort of myth is this? What sort of impossible desire is it that we have, or that has us? What do we desire? Of what do we dream when we dream about justice? What is it that does not exist even as it belongs to our most immemorial past?

### The undeconstructibility of justice

Derrida has recently made a startling revelation: he too believes in myths, at least in one, in the myth of “undeconstructible justice.” The truth is out and deconstructors everywhere are red-faced. The archi-deconstructor, the unflagging adversary of the dream of perfect presence, is a dreamer and a myth-maker. A big one. He has had a dream that is every bit the match of Martin Luther King’s, or maybe even Descartes’. He has embarrassed a whole generation of Franco-American academics who pride themselves on their resistance to the lure of Being-in-itself and on their tough-minded anti-onticism. Here is the hard saying:

Justice in itself, if such a thing exists, outside or beyond law, is not deconstructible. No more than deconstruction, if such a thing exists. Deconstruction is justice.<sup>9</sup>

Undeconstructible justice; what can this be if not an ageless truth, an unshakeable foundation, a *fundamentum inconcussum* lying beneath the surface of deconstruction? It is not as if Derrida does not know what he is doing, as if he does not realize the scandal he is causing his friends and how many academic gowns will be rent by the saying:

If I were to say that I know nothing more just than what I today call deconstruction (nothing more just, I’m not saying nothing more legal or more legitimate), I know that I wouldn’t fail to surprise or shock not only the determined adversaries of said deconstruction or what they imagine under this name but also the very people who pass for or take themselves to be its partisans or practitioners.

(FL, 957)

This is a text that will repay a closer look. Derrida is distinguishing between “law” (*droit*; also *loi*) and justice. Laws he says are essentially deconstructible, and this because they have been constructed in the first place. The possibility of deconstruction is “built into” laws: laws are “drawn up,” “made,” “written”: they do not fall from the sky but are woven from the fabric of *écriture*. But the deconstructibility of laws is not “bad news,” Derrida adds, because it is the only way for politics and the *polis* to make historical progress. That is where deconstruction comes in:

But the paradox that I’d like to submit for discussion is the following: it is this deconstructible structure of law (*droit*), or if you prefer of justice as *droit*, that also insures the possibility of deconstruction.

(FL, 945)

The deconstructibility of law is the enabling legislation of deconstruction; it gives deconstruction its orders, gives it gainful employment. But that is

(literally) only half the paradox. For Derrida likewise insists that the undeconstructibility of justice—this is really scandalous—is likewise a condition of deconstruction, also part of its enabling charter. Deconstruction is possible only insofar as justice is undeconstructible, for justice is what deconstruction aims at, what it is about, what it *is*. There are thus two conditions for deconstruction:

1. The deconstructibility of law (for example) or of legitimacy makes deconstruction possible. 2. The undeconstructibility of justice also makes deconstruction possible, indeed is inseparable from it. 3. The result: deconstruction takes place in the interval that separates the undeconstructibility of justice from the deconstructibility of law (authority, legitimacy, and so on).

(FL, 945)

Deconstruction moves back and forth, traverses the terrain, explores the territory, between undeconstructible justice and deconstructible law, looking for the cracks and crevices in the wall of the law through which the flowers of justice have begun to grow. The aim of deconstructing the law is not to level the law, to bring down the wall—because it is the strong arm of the law which holds oppressive, unjust forces in place—but to give the law flexibility and “give.” To deconstruct something is not to swing a wrecking ball at it, but to reformulate it, rewrite it, redo it, remake it, or rather it deconstructs itself, auto-deconstructively (FL, 981). Deconstruction thus is essentially positive, an affirmation of everything that we want to dig out from under the constructions under which it labors, in order to prevent the distinction between justice and law from becoming hard and fast.<sup>10</sup>

The interval between undeconstructible justice and deconstructible law is the distance between the singular—which is somehow beyond or in excess of the law—and the universal. Justice concerns the call of the “singular,” i.e., the demand of the singular, of the other one:

justice always addresses itself to singularity, to the singularity of the other, despite or even because it pretends to universality.

(FL, 955)

The law can never do that, because, as Levinas points out, and Derrida on this point is repeating Levinas (FL, 949), the law concerns the “third” one. Justice is what I owe you, in your singularity. It is the responsibility I have to the demands you place upon me with the full force of the singular demand which you, in your unique and unreproducible individuality, have always already put upon me. The demands of justice issue neither from a Platonic Good nor from a Kantian Ideal, but from this singular one, here, now, who lays claim to me.

The law is necessary because there is a third person, besides you, so that you cannot claim everything from me; it forces me to distribute my responsibility among many. The law arises, on this Derridean-Levinasian account, not only in order to restrain injustice, but in order to restrain justice, so that justice will not be spent entirely in one place. So the law is formulated as a universal—that is what the law is, what it means to be—and thus it necessarily, structurally, loses sight of the singular. Laws belong in the element of calculation (FL, 947). We must calculate a law carefully and precisely—the I.R.S. code is a good example of a law, even if it is not an example of a good law (unless you are wealthy)—in order to allow it to take account of as many cases as possible, in order to insure a certain proportion between the law and the individual cases. But if we were, *per impossibile*, to write a perfect set of laws, that would look like a map so detailed as to be the same size as the region it is mapping.

The task of deconstruction is to keep the singular one in view, to keep traversing the space between the universal and the singular, between the law and justice, between the calculable and the incalculable, to keep the lines of communication open between them. The law lives on credit: it promises to take justice into account, and laws are only as good as they are able to deliver on their promises. But the authority of the law is borrowed from the authority of the singular one who calls to us from beyond the law and in the name of whom we have erected the law. The task of deconstruction is to hear that call and in so doing to suspend the credit of the law, to suspend its authority, and thereby to risk an epoché, or even a teleological suspension, that fills us with anxiety:

This moment of suspense, this period of epoché, without which, in fact, deconstruction is not possible, is always full of anxiety, but who pretends to be just by economizing with anxiety? And this anxiety-ridden moment of suspense—which is also the interval or space in which transformations, indeed juridico-political revolutions take place—cannot be motivated . . . except in the demand for an increase in or supplement to justice, and so in the experience of an inadequation or an incalculable disproportion.

(FL, 955–57)

Deconstruction holds the law up for scrutiny, lets it waver in instability. For Derrida, conduct must be both regulated—we always already act within a tradition of laws—and unregulated—we want always to be responsive to the singular one who calls from beyond the law, whom the law misses. But trying to keep one's balance on such shifting terrain leads to aporias, Derrida says, at least three of them.

Let us call the first the aporia of *phronesis*: mere conformity to a law does not insure justice. Rather the law requires a “fresh judgment,” a judgment

which “conserve[s] the law and also destroy[s] it or suspend[s] it long enough to have to reinvent it in each case” (FL, 961). Otherwise the judge is a calculating machine. What is to be done cannot simply be calculated—it must be judged. Furthermore, a just decision, which is never a merely programmed, calculated application of a rule, is always made in the element of undecidability, must always pass “through the ordeal of the undecidable” in which our respect for the universal trembles before “the unique singularity of the unsubsumable example” (FL, 963). Every decision worthy of the name, every decision which “cuts,” which must give itself up to the “impossible decision,” is haunted by the ghost, by the aporia of undecidability. Finally, one must decide; one cannot deliberate forever. Justice cannot wait for all the results to come in. We are pressed by the urgency of the moment of decision, precipitated into action. “The instant of decision is a madness, says Kierkegaard,” delivered over to “acting in the night of non-knowledge and non-rule,” (FL, 967) always implicated in the “irruptive violence” that cuts off deliberation and acts in a moment of “precipitate urgency” (FL, 988) (the aporia of decision).

With the mention of Kierkegaard a certain Derridean cat peeks out of the deconstructive bag. The whole analysis of undeconstructible justice sounds like a citation of *Fear and Trembling*, a repetition of distinctly Kierkegaardian motifs. Derrida’s analysis takes the form of a discussion of three problemata (aporias) which surround the decision in which the singular one exceeds the universal. It describes a moment of “anxiety-ridden suspension.” It thematizes the decisive “cut” (of Abraham) which passes through the “ordeal” (the proper category for Abraham and Job, whom God was testing) of undecidability and which is exposed to fear and trembling. It invokes the madness of an infinite economy which confounds the stockbrokers of the finite.<sup>11</sup>

There are very prophetic-mythic voices in this remarkable essay: that of Kierkegaard and Abraham, not to mention the (silent) voice of Johannes de Silentio, who suffers from the disadvantage that he does not exist, which is not necessarily a disadvantage if justice is a myth. It may even be a clue to the nature of the myth of justice. Maybe even a decisive one. Perhaps there are other prophets haunting this text on mystical forces.

### Hyperbolic justice

We are perhaps inching closer to the meaning of the myth of justice. But to get any further we must clear our heads and raise tough questions. For, given the presuppositions of deconstruction, we need to ask what undeconstructible justice can possibly *be* (or *not be*). Is it not an undisguised metaphysical postulate, one which threatens at every point to adorn itself with capital letters, to crown itself the *arche*? What is the Being of undeconstructible justice, if it indeed exists? Or should we understand that it



is altogether beyond Being, otherwise than Being? In short, what has Derrida wrought? Has he gone mad (over justice)?

Unless he has lost his senses, Derrida cannot mean that justice in itself, were there such a thing, is a kind of Platonic *agathon*, an absolute being in itself (*Ansichsein*), a subsistent absolute against which all sensible, particular actions and transactions should be measured. That would be precisely, paradigmatically, what Derrida once called the metaphysics of presence, the very exemplar of metaphysics in its most uncritical and innocent form, the form of pure and perfect presence, which likewise formed the basis of the whole mimetic myth of the state.

Nor can he mean that the undeconstructibility of justice represents an Idea in the Kantian sense, a regulative ideal which monitors the empirical search for justice (FL, 965–967). For that is more of the same thing, more philosophical idealism, even if the Idea has ceased to be a subsistent entity and has become instead an inexistent ought.

It is no less believable that such justice has the status of an absolute, categorical command, of Kant's famous "categorical imperative." For Kant's imperative is the issue of pure reason, of reason which has made a "clean cut"<sup>12</sup> with every empirical and pathological impulse, and it issues in what is absolutely universalizable. But undeconstructible justice concerns the singular, and it is full of *pathos* and very empirical.

The one comparison that Derrida allows (aside from Kierkegaard) is to Levinas, and even this is to be held at a distance (FL, 959, 969). Justice in Levinas's sense is the claim of the absolute Other, the singular one who, meeting us face to face, places us in a situation of absolute responsibility, or better, who awakens us to the fact that we have never not been placed in such a situation. For Levinas, it is not politics that is first philosophy but ethics; politics on the other hand is war. (That is not a deconstruction of politics, I think, but a riding roughshod over it that will not do because it does not take account of the fact that we are always inside/outside political totalities.) For if we are to understand what truly is and is truly, Levinas says, if we wish to reach what we have called from of old "first philosophy," then we must acknowledge the ethical. We must grant that the ethical comes first, that it does not float skittishly outside reality like a de-ontological "value" or "ought" outside the "is" and that it is not something merely "ontic" which must wait for ontology to clear its way and make it possible. The ethical is there from the start and does not require either ontological preparation (the Heidegger of *Being and Time*) or a de-ontological foundation (value theory). The ethical does not wait and does not need to have a space prepared for it.

The ethical comes first, comes at us and towards us, like a kind of *physis* and *An-wesen*, which rises up and surges towards us, concerning us and laying claim to us. But it comes towards us by confronting us frontally and unequivocally, face to face, which is not *physis* at all, but something more.

That is what Levinas calls the meta-physical: *meta*, because it is more than *physis*, infinitely more, because its claim exceeds and excels *physis*, because in surging up and coming towards us, it lays claim to us absolutely, in a way that is denied to *physis*. For *physis* is finite, is not transcendent, does not truly exceed us, *is* not fully, infinitely excellent. *Physis* is still visible, phenomenal being. *Physis* can be seen and secured, owned and eaten, apportioned and appropriated. *Physis* cannot resist us, cannot withdraw into the secrecy of its hidden recess, cannot command us to stop the assault, to halt the aggression. *Physis* lies helpless before us, vulnerable, visible, edible. But the other person exceeds our grasp, resists our assaults, commands us to stop. The other person exceeds the visible world, exceeds *physis*, is more than and beyond *physis*. The other person introduces us to metaphysics, leads us into it, shocks us out of our self-enclosed immanence with a command that issues from a sphere beyond *physis*, beyond Being, if Being means *physis*.

But can this be the status enjoyed by “undeconstructible” justice? I would say most assuredly not, and for the following reason. For Levinas, the commanding claim of the other which comes from beyond is literally extra-terrestrial, for it cannot have to do with the paganism, the *sacré*,<sup>13</sup> of earth and sky. It is neither on the earth nor under the sky; it is otherwise than *physis*. So we are not to think that it is beyond Being because it is merely normative, a mere value that has been superadded to facts and that somehow *fails* to be. It is not beyond Being because it is less than Being, but rather because it is more than Being, because it exceeds Being. It is beyond Being because it *is* so radically, so absolutely, so fully, that it cannot be contained by Being (so long as Being means *physis*).

Now this is not without philosophical precedent: “When I said that God was not a Being and was above Being,” Meister Eckhart said, “I did not thereby contest his Being, but on the contrary attributed to him a *more elevated Being*.”<sup>14</sup> That, I would say, *pace* Levinas, is the Levinasian gesture. Against Levinas’s deepest desire, at the risk of heresy and of being shown the talmudic door, I would say it is impossible for what is otherwise-than-Being to avoid being-otherwise.<sup>15</sup> To say the Other comes to us from on high, in a way that is higher and more eminent than Being (*physis*), is to attribute to the Other a higher being, a being higher. Across the curved space which the Other traverses there stretches the *via eminentiorae*, the path of excess, i.e., of eminence beyond negation, of supereminence and transcendence, as a certain *hyperphysis* or *hyperousia*. The gesture is completely classical: the other is a phenomenal face (*via affirmationis*); but this is to be denied, for the Other is more than that, more than a visible phenomenon, more than being (*via negationis*); so the Other commands from on high in a way that is beyond Being as phenomenality (*via eminentiorae*).

That is why undeconstructible justice cannot be assimilated to this infinity, to Levinas’s, which, if it is neither Platonic, Cartesian nor Kantian, is rather more Neoplatonic, like the One beyond *nous*, like an inexhaustible

Neoplatonic infinity. That is why I do not think that Derrida can quite believe Levinas, why he must hold him at a distance, why he cannot accept the infinity of Levinas (although he perhaps would like to and is willing at least to offer Levinas as a point of comparison). For if it is neither a Platonic Good nor a Neoplatonic One, neither a Cartesian infinity nor a Kantian noumenon, there is just no accounting for Levinas's infinity.

Except to say that it is a hyperbole, that this discourse on excess is an excessive, emphatic discourse.<sup>16</sup> Except to say that it is (to be deconstructed down to) a hyperbolic infinity.

That is, I think, what it is and what Derrida makes of it. The work of Levinas comes over us today like the voice of an Old Testament prophet, like the cry of Amos demanding that justice flow over the land like water. We are awed, shocked, even scandalized by the moral sublimity, by the excess, of what Levinas demands, which is clearly too much. Who can endure these hard words? What he asks is not possible. It is even perhaps not a little mad, exorbitant, off its axis, an irrational economy of excess, of the expenditure of self without demanding a return. It is even violent—towards oneself: one is held hostage, one allows oneself to suffer deprivations and outrages that one would protest if it befell the other.

I would say that this is prophetic hyperbole. If it is taken seriously, held to the canons of philosophical discursivity, it cannot be believed or defended and it lapses at strategic points into the most classical Neoplatonic metaphysics and negative theology.<sup>17</sup> So it is a mistake to take Levinas on his own terms, meta-physically, for then Levinas is swallowed up by all of the criticisms which beset metaphysics. His is instead a prophetic voice, one which soars and sears with prophetic hyperbole, one which tells unbelievable stories. We do not believe the stories the prophets tell, and it is a degradation and a distortion of prophetic discourse to treat it as if it were a record of eyewitnessed events, to measure it in terms of truth taken as *adequatio*. We are rather to be instructed otherwise by their impossible tales, which have to do always with justice—which is, I have been arguing, im/possible. These stories belong to the myth of justice. The prophets use their stories to make impossible, mad demands on everyone, especially themselves. The voice of the prophet interrupts the self-assured voices of the powerful, of the *arche*, the princes of this world, bringing them up short, calling them to account for themselves. That is why the prophets had a habit of getting themselves killed, which was one of their most serious occupational hazards. They were not a little mad, mad for justice, mad about injustice, and maybe just a little plain mad.

But then is Derrida's undeconstructible justice prophetic justice? Is Derrida the latest in a long line of Jewish prophets? That would be mad, excessive, too much, too scandalous, and he has warned us against such exaggerations (FL, 965–966). I do not want to risk saying anything that mad lest I too be mistaken for the follower of a prophet and risk incurring

a prophetic fate for which I have no taste. ("I do not know the man.") But I would say that this discourse on undeconstructible justice is "not far away" from prophetic discourse,<sup>18</sup> though it has no strings attached to God or to divine revelation and still less to any institutional religion. Derrida would certainly demythologize any such myths, but in the name of another, perhaps post-religious myth and of prophesying differently. For I would say the discourse on undeconstructible justice has the ring of prophetic justice, that it traffics with prophetic myth, that this is its *glas*.<sup>19</sup> This is not, *strictu sensu*, prophetic religion or prophetic hyperbole, but a kind of deconstructive hyperbole cut to fit the needs of ethics and politics, which for Derrida always have to do with singularity.

I would say that at the point Derrida begins to speak of undeconstructible justice he is reproducing, in terms of ethics and politics, his discourse on singularity and the proper name. The whole thing has the ring (*glas*) of *Glas*. From its opening passages, which are already a repetition, the citations of the opening passage of Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit* and Genet's "What Remains of a Rembrandt," *Glas* is implicated in im/possibility, in the impossible movement between the singular and the universal. *Glas* has chosen to slip and slide on the treacherous terrain that stretches between the unrepeatable, incommunicable being of the individual and the system of universals, of repeatability, which communicates across many particulars. The singular is from the start im/possible, a failed project, deferred:

what, after all, of the remain(s), today, for us, here, now, of a Hegel?<sup>20</sup>

The aim of the language of immediacy, the thrust of its intentional arrow, is the absolutely singular: what is immediately present, here and now. Here: without spatial difference (displacement); now: without temporal difference (deferral). The immediate without mediacy, without difference, without *différance*. This is a dream, the dream of being without *différance*, of laying aside difference, of un-veiling Being in its naked beauty, its immediate Being. Which is a pure myth, the myth of pure immediacy. For we are always already too late for such unveilings. As soon as language has arrived on the scene the singular has already fled, already slipped out the back door. The singular one is gone, *vorbei*, passed on, past, absolutely past. It belongs to a past that was never present to begin with. The absolutely singular one is not a past presence but absolutely past; not a future presence, but absolutely unforeseeable, unforegraspable, unforehaveable. The immediacy of the singular is blocked off by the massive mediation of "here" and "now" whose intervention has made the singular an impossible dream. "Here, now" are in uncontrollable slippage; they are always different. No two heres ever occupy the same place; no two nows are ever simultaneous. It is never now twice even though it is always now. The individual is always already in flight. The singular always already steals away, is always stolen, like the

watches that Genet lightly lifts from our pockets. The lure of singularity is a useless passion.

Yet, on the other hand—in the other column, shifting to the other leg—the tranquil surface of the universal is likewise always already disturbed from within. The universal is insistently, consistently haunted by the ghost of its other, the singular. The smooth glide of the eagle's flight is disrupted by an alien power. The universal never fits, can never find an absolutely appropriate application. The concrete situation is always more complicated, and it was never possible to anticipate, to have in advance, the idiosyncrasies of the particular. It is never possible to prepare the universal for the disruptiveness of the singular. The universal cannot fold its eagle wings around the individual and lift it up to its heavenly home, cannot enfold the manifold of intuition, cannot embrace, circumscribe, encompass the singular. The *glas-machine* won't work. It gets jammed, clogged, every time we press it against the surface of the singular; it cannot digest these particulars, cannot make its gears mesh on the terrain of singularity. It always leaves something behind, a remnant, a residue, an undigestible fragment which will not yield its materiality to this powerful spirit. The singular resists. The lure of the concrete universal is likewise a failed project.

The concrete universal and the absolutely singular belong to the same broken system. It is only in virtue of having a language at all, a set of coded repeatable traces, a network of universals, that it is possible to pick out the singular, to sound their names, to summon them up, to call upon them, to call their *glas*. So the call fails. The singular escapes, is lost before we open our mouth. Language is nothing but a system of universals. The gears of the system are jammed by the glue of the singular, by singular glue, gluey singles. The singular always steals away even as the concrete universal always leaves something singular out. Singularity and universality, two impossibilities, two unrectable columns, belong to the same (non)system.

Such impossible singularity is what interests *Glas*, which is punctuated with figures of singularity. In the one column, Abraham, Jesus, Antigone: all of whom take the side of singularity against the universal. Abraham, the fearsome father of faith, the father of fear and trembling, who breaches and ruptures everything *heimlich*, everything that ties him to home; Jesus, who takes the side of withered hands and lepers against the Law; Antigone, the absolutely unique sister who takes her stand on behalf of the corpse of an irreplaceable brother, who sides with nighttime singularity against the daylight law of the *polis* and the father. A column of prophets and religious madness! In the other column, the exceptional fags with names like nuns. We cannot say their names, cannot call them up, cannot give them a family name, cannot enter them on a register or a roll call—not without killing them. If we ever call their names, class, *Gattung*, *Geschlecht*, they are dead men, and the fate of these undecidables is decided (*Glas* 86b). They are classic (*glas*) exceptions. We do not know their proper names. How shall we

call them? What shall we call them? How will they answer? How will they know their name when they hear it? How will they answer our call? What bell will call them to order, line them up in an order of rank?

Deconstruction traverses the terrain between the failed universal and the inaccessible singular, swings across the abyss which opens up between the impossible universal and the singular that steals away. It moves within the space of two impossibles, and that twofold impossibility constitutes the condition of its possibility. This abyss is likewise the interval between law and justice. The discourse on justice is isomorphic (iso-amorphic) with the discourse on singularity and the proper name. They trade in the same impossibilities, the same amorphousness; they dream the same dreams, awoken to the same realities, traffic with the same myths.

That explains the prophetic tone. It has nothing to do with God or institutional religion; it has no backups from "on high." It is a matter of prophetic exasperation, of prophetic hyperbole, of the prophetic demand for justice "here, now," for this one, for this broken body or ruined life, without waiting, without delay, without deferral. Even as the law soars with serene ease in the element of the universal and, spreading its eagle wings, swings over earthbound singulars.

The undeconstructibility of justice has to do with the impossibility of singularity; it is a function of it. Justice in itself, if there is such a thing: that is a hyperbolic demand for justice for this one, here and now. The myth of justice is a hyperbolic myth and it turns on a hyperbolic, not true, infinity. Unlike in Levinas, it has no divine backup, no veritable Infinity, Platonic or Neoplatonic, Cartesian or Kantian, Jewish or Christian, which leaves its trace in the visible world. Deconstruction lacks Levinasian assurances, Levinasian depth, and it traffics in a more uncertain, more finite world. This is not divine hyperbole or prophetic religion. The point of deconstructive hyperbole is not ethico-religious but ethico-political. It has not written off politics as war or made war on politics; it means merely to deconstruct politics.<sup>21</sup> The ethico-political in deconstruction does not sail off into a religious, apolitical infinity; it does not let the arrow of its longing land in heaven. It is not God that commands but the singularity of the situated other who always slips away. If the other commands without a divine backup, then so be it. That is as much commanding as we get. Where is it written that our every desire must be filled? The call of undeconstructible justice demands immediate justice, justice for this singular one here. It calls for justice, for what it cannot say, for what it is impossible to say, for what eludes saying, for what saying causes to slip away.

The oldest desire of philosophy is for the *arche*. But the desire for justice is an-archic, for it has to do with the (im)possible singular. But this is not simply anarchic, a simple anarchy which inverts and reverses the *arche*. Deconstruction is always the deconstruction of such simplicity. Justice is the desire to respond to the anarchic, to the singularity which eludes or is beaten

down by principles. But that means that the desire of ethics is impossible, for the desire of the absolutely singular is an impossible desire, a mythic desire which courts ineffability. As soon as we open our mouths it is already too late. The singular has withdrawn, is deferred, put off; always and already. So justice has no choice except to adopt the prophetic-mythic mode, which means to call for justice, and to tell stories. Justice calls from an impossible place and it calls for something impossible, something we cannot say, something we can only broach by way of impossible stories.

Do we call for justice or does justice call for itself? Who can say? In either case, justice is called for. What is the call of justice? What does it say? The call says "Come!" That is all. The call is indefinite, because justice is indefinite, and that is because of the indefiniteness and frailty of action. Justice does not call for a plan, even though plans are called for. It only calls for justice. Plans are drawn up; plans are constructions. The call for plans is the call upon which deconstruction insistently intervenes in order to keep the plans just, in order to keep the plans pliable. The role of deconstruction is to expose all such constructions to their own deconstructibility.

Far from building from a plan, the projection of justice is utterly without a plan, utterly devoid of patterns, heavenly or earthly. The projection of justice has to do with action, not making. Its projection upon the possible is not a remodeling of the world according to a model or *arche*.

Justice is unforeseeable, so the mytho-prophetic tone in deconstruction has nothing whatever to do with telling the future. (See FL, 969–71.)

Justice is unrepresentable, unmakeable, unmodelable. It is not a matter of executing a plan, reproducing a design. It has nothing to do with mimetics. We do not know what we want when we want justice because it has to do with singularities and has no "what," even though justice is *what* we want.

Justice, come!

That is a quasi-prophetic call, a call from nowhere, a call to nowhere, a call for no-thing, a mythic call from time immemorial. The call of justice cultivates the possible as possible.<sup>22</sup> The future towards which it calls us is not definite, not future-actual, which would reduce it to a matter of prediction and of working towards a preset goal, of reaching a mark which we set for ourselves, an articulated *telos* towards which we need only strain our wills (although that is hard enough). This call maintains itself resolutely in the sphere of the possible, of radical openness and flexibility, in a kind of mythic space. It is not a call for chaos, but a call to stay open to the frailty and fragility of the future, to refuse to be taken in by the enormous prestige of accumulated actuality.

Hyperbolic-prophetic justice does not mean to foretell the future, as if we were predicting an earthquake. The call of hyperbolic justice is a wail, a cry against injustice. We do not know what we want. We cannot lay it out, because it depends upon the contingencies of the situation, the idiosyncrasies of the details, the multiple frailties of action.

Justice is im/possible. A myth. A story we tell about the fate of singulars. Hyperbolic justice is neither legal nor philosophical justice, both of which desire the *arche*, both of which can subsist only in the element of the universal. Still it must inform politico-philosophical justice, waxing the strings of the law lest they be drawn into too tight a knot. Hyperbolic justice is an-archic. It calls from beyond the universal, from the abyss of singularity. It calls upon us, calling for a response, calling upon our most secret responsiveness and responsibility.

What does the call say? Who calls? What is called?

*Abyssus abyssum invocat.*

## Notes

- 1 Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, I, 2.
- 2 Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1956), 222; cf. 220–30 and 192–97.
- 3 Not to mention the abyss within the agent, the destabilization of agency by everything which decenters the subject.
- 4 Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, *Heidegger, Art, and Politics*, trans. Chris Turner (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1990), 61–70, 93–98.
- 5 On the notion of terror as the reduction of an opponent, as utter elimination from a game, see Jean-François Lyotard, *Just Gaming*, trans. Wlad Godzich (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985), 67–68, 99–100; on the “victim” as one whose capacity for dissent or for registering dissent is eliminated, see *The Differend*, trans. Georges Van Den Abbeele (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), 9–14.
- 6 These are the terms in which Constantin Constantius complains about having been thrown into actuality without having been consulted; see Kierkegaard, *Repetition* in “*Fear and Trembling*” and “*Repetition*”, trans. H. and E. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983), 200–201.
- 7 It is more a Jewish myth than a Greek myth. That is why Lacoue-Labarthe is mistaken to agree with Blanchot that, because they reject idols, “the Jews embody the rejection of myths” (Lacoue-Labarthe, 96). As the authors of one of the world’s great bodies of literature, they had a powerful mythic imagination, albeit one which refused to express itself in graven images. Their mythic imagination had nothing to do with the “fiction” of politics in Lacoue-Labarthe’s sense, but with a myth of another sort, a myth of justice and the law. On the Jewish imagination, see Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), 60ff., and Richard Kearney, *The Wake of Imagination* (London: Hutchinson, 1988), 37–78.
- 8 Edith Wyschogrod makes this point very well in her recent *Saints and Post-modernism: Revisioning Moral Philosophy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 1–31.
- 9 “Force of Law: The ‘Mystical Foundation of Authority,’” trans. Mary Quaintance, in “Deconstruction and the Possibility of Justice,” *Cardoza Law Review* 11 (1990), 945. Hereafter “FL.” The French text is on the facing pages. I do not mean that Derrida subscribes to a myth of origins, and still less that he subscribes to Benjamin’s “mythic violence”—discussed by Derrida in the second half of “The Force of Law”—which he thinks communicates with aestheticizing,



- mimetic myth (cf. FL, 1041). The myth of undeconstructible justice is a myth of quite a different sort. (However much one demythologizes, one is always drawn to some sort of myth. It is never possible to stand entirely clear of myth; it is at best a matter of vigilance about the sort of myths by which one is engaged.)
- 10 In the second half of "The Force of Law," Derrida discusses Walter Benjamin's claim that the law is inherently violent, both in its original founding and in the way it sustains itself in existence, that occasionally its naked violence is exposed, and that parliamentary systems are naive to think otherwise. See Walter Benjamin, "The Critique of Violence," in *Reflections*, ed. Peter Demetz (New York: Schocken Books, 1978), 277–300. Benjamin is pushing the "constructed" character of the law to an anarchistic extreme rejected by Derrida who is set, not on the destruction, but on the deconstruction of the law (cf. FL, 1044–45), and who wants to keep up the communication between justice and the law. Dominic Capra seems to think that Derrida is inadvertently implicated in just such a violent view of law in "Violence, Justice, and the Force of Law," in *Cardoza Law Review* 11 (1990), 1065–78; see Drucilla Cornell's rebuttal of that point of view in "The Violence of the Masquerade," *Cardoza Law Review*, 1047–64.
  - 11 This is no place to recount the essentials of *Fear and Trembling*. Apart from the famous account of the decision made in the dark night of faith, I draw the attention of the reader to the recurrent economic images in this text in which de Silentio accuses Christendom of looking for a bargain in matters of faith (getting it *aufgehoben*, in speculative thought) and of trying, to use Derrida's felicitous expression, to "economize on anxiety." Like the merchants in Holland who threw their spices into the sea to drive up the price, de Silentio wants to drive up the price of faith. See *Fear and Trembling* in "Repetition" and "Fear and Trembling", 5, 27, 121. Just so, deconstruction wants to drive up the price of a just decision.
  - 12 Derrida is critical of Kant's desire for a clean cut (the regionalizing, border patrolling character of the three critiques) in *The Truth in Painting*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Ian McLeod (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 83ff.
  - 13 Levinas distinguishes biblical holiness (*saint*, apartness, transcendence) from Heideggerian paganism (*sacré*, immanence) in *Nine Talmudic Readings*, trans. Annette Aronowicz (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), 140–41 and 91ff. *passim*.
  - 14 This text of Meister Eckhart is cited by Derrida in his famous "Violence and Metaphysics" article on Levinas in *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), 146. The point of this remark, Derrida rightly points out, is to affirm the Being of an infinite existent. For a fuller treatment of Derrida and negative theology, see my "Mysticism and Transgression: Derrida and Meister Eckhart," *Continental Philosophy* II (1989): 24–41.
  - 15 Levinas tries to take precautions against just such a claim at the beginning of *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1981), 3–4.
  - 16 Deconstruction is "hyperbolically" sensitive to justice, Derrida says (FL, 955). Incidentally, when Meister Eckhart was called on the carpet by the police of thought (the Curia) for his bold formulations, he defended himself precisely on the grounds that he spoke hyperbolically. That, says Alasdair MacIntyre, is a weak defense, for which he criticizes both the Meister and me for defending the Meister. But, when it comes either to God or justice (or to anything else, for that matter), there is, quite literally, no literal discourse. See Alasdair MacIntyre, *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1990), 167–69.

- 17 The argument Derrida mounts against negative theology in his debate with Jean-Luc Marion applies in its essentials to Levinas. See "How to Avoid Speaking: Denials," in *Languages of the Unsayable*, ed. S. Budick and W. Iser (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990), 3–70.
- 18 In an interview with Richard Kearney Derrida says, "It is possible to see deconstruction as being produced in a space where the prophets are not far away." See Richard Kearney, *Dialogues with Contemporary Continental Thinkers* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984), 119.
- 19 Neither should it be confused with Benjamin's "divine justice," which for Derrida opens up the possibility of seeing the holocaust as an expiation demanded by a just and angry God (FL, 1044–45.) Seyla Benhabib suggests that Derrida and Levinas are taking up in their own way a "negative utopianism," the utopia of what can never be represented or named, the gesture of an unnameable hope, which is more biblical than Greek, and which is first found in Adorno and Benjamin; see her "Critical Theory and Postmodernism," *Cardoza Law Review* 11 (1990), 1446–47, n. 27. That is an interesting suggestion.
- 20 Jacques Derrida, *Glas*, trans. John Leavey and Richard Rand (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1986), 1a.
- 21 For further evidence, if such is still needed, of the concrete political engagement of deconstruction, see the recent, extensive (663 pages) collection of Derrida's work on the university and educational politics entitled *Du droit à la philosophie* (Paris: Galilée, 1990).
- 22 The source of Derrida's notion of "*avenir*" is, in part at least, Heidegger. In *Being and Time*, Dasein maintains an authentic relation towards the future only insofar as it maintains itself in a future which is open and indeterminate, only insofar as it cultivates the possible *as possible*, as "to come" (*zu-kommen*, *à-venir*), without further determination, as opposed to a foreseeable future actuality. See Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John MacQuarrie and Edward Robinson (New York: Harper & Row, 1962), 305–6.

# LEVINAS'S POLITICAL JUDGEMENT

The *Esprit* articles 1934–1983

*Howard Caygill*

Source: *Radical Philosophy* 104 (Nov/Dec 2000): 6–15.

The critical neglect of the political dimension of Levinas's thought is surprising given its centrality to his life and work. Of all the twentieth-century philosophers Levinas was the most directly touched by the violent events of the century's political history. He witnessed as an adolescent the October Revolution in Lithuania, studied in Strasbourg in the 1920s when Alsace was one of the foci of interwar Franco-German tension, worked in Paris during the travails of the Popular Front government in the 1930s and was a member of the French army defeated in 1940. He survived the war in a special POW camp but lost close members of his family in the Shoah. In the 1950s he taught students from North Africa and the Middle East during the decolonization struggles and the establishment of the State of Israel, and at the height of the student movement in 1968 was teaching at Nanterre. Such proximity to the convulsions of twentieth-century political history made reflection on politics and the exercise of political judgement a predicament rather than a choice for Levinas, and had an enormous, if unappreciated, impact on his formulation of an ethics of alterity.

The underestimation of the role of politics and political judgement in Levinas's thought distorts not only his ethics but equally the relationship he proposed between ethics and politics. Typically the latter is reduced to a numerical formalism that moves from the dyadic ethical to the triadic political relation, from an ethical relation to the 'other' to a legal-political relation to the 'third'. Yet this formalism is conspicuously absent in Levinas's specific exercises of political judgement, most evidently in his radio discussion with Schlomo Malka and Alain Finkielkraut on 28 September 1982. In this conversation following the murders a week before of Palestinian refugees in

the Chatilla and Sabra camps by Phalangist militias within Israeli-occupied Lebanon, Levinas revealed a capacity for political judgement that at first glance seems remote from the prevailing picture of Levinasian ethics. While refusing the synthesis of realpolitik and mysticism that to some extent characterized the Likud era in Israeli politics, Levinas was nevertheless forthright in making a link between his ethical theory and the political struggle between the State of Israel and Palestinian nationalists, claiming that 'in alterity we can find an enemy'.<sup>1</sup> The other is not only the stranger, partner in a dyadic relation, but also 'the unhated enemy' with whom the relation has to be one of war.

The link between political judgement and ethical reflection evident in the case of the Chatilla and Sabra murders is not a lapse in the consistency of Levinas's thought, but is fully characteristic and, perhaps uncomfortably, comprises one of its unacknowledged strengths. The tension between ethics and politics motivates Levinas's exercise of political judgement and allows it to yield far richer results than the abstract considerations regarding the triadic form of political institutions would seem to promise. However, the precise contours of Levinas's political judgement are difficult to trace, especially in the light of the inconspicuous ubiquity of the political in his writings. Hence the heuristic value of his articles in the journal *Esprit* that show him developing his thoughts on ethics and politics in the course of responding to specific demands for political judgement. These essays are invaluable not only for understanding the development of Levinas's view of the relation between ethics and politics but also for showing the range and flexibility of his political judgement. The writings for *Esprit* form a corpus that extends over almost half a century – from 1934 to 1983 – paralleling the development of Levinas's authorship from early writings such as *Existents and Existence* (1947) and *Time and the Other* (1948) to the mature critique of ontology in *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority* (1961) and the formulation of an ethics of alterity in *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence* (1974). Some of the writings for *Esprit* are familiar apart from their context, others almost completely and unjustly forgotten; but they are rarely if ever considered as a discrete body of work. This is unfortunate since together they add up to a fascinating and contained corpus that moves audaciously from the consideration of concrete political issues to ethical and political reflection. In this respect, Levinas's articles faithfully respect the journal's brief of combining politics and philosophy in a movement from a specific occasion for political judgement to a reflection on its broader philosophical significance.

### Personalism into politics

Levinas's series of contributions to *Esprit* began in 1934 with an essay whose importance for the development of his thought is increasingly acknowledged. His 'Reflections on the Philosophy of Hitlerism'<sup>2</sup> was written in

direct response to the political crisis that followed the National Socialist 'seizure of power' in Germany. His next contribution, the essay 'On the Spirit of Geneva', responded to the 1955 Geneva Summit on reducing East-West tension and negotiating limitations on the development and use of nuclear arms. This was followed in 1960 by two contributions, 'Principles and Faces', on the significance of Khrushchev and the post-Stalin epoch in the Soviet Union and 'The Russo-Chinese Debate and the Dialectic', ostensibly on the deteriorating relations between the two socialist superpowers. Perhaps Levinas's finest essay for *Esprit* – 'Space is Not One-Dimensional'<sup>3</sup> – was published in 1968 in response to the Six Day War between Israel and the Arab states, and contains some of his most sustained reflections on the political significance of the State of Israel. The series of articles published in *Esprit* closes with two reprinted pieces, one on Franz Rosenzweig in 1982 and, the final contribution, an interview on the theme of 'Philosophy, Justice and Love'.

Before looking more closely at these articles it is important to consider their occasion – the journal *Esprit* and the 'personalist' movement in Catholic thought that it represented. Levinas described the journal in his 1990 introduction to the translation of 'Reflections on the Philosophy of Hitlerism' as representing 'progressive, avant-garde Catholicism' which, while not inaccurate, underplays the significance of the personalist movement. Founded by Emmanuel Mounier following the Wall Street crash in 1929, personalism through its journal *Esprit* constituted an important current in postwar political culture, one that guided the radical wing of European Christian Democracy. Among politicians it counted supporters such as Aldo Moro and to a certain extent the current Pope, Karol Wojtyla. The latter's main philosophical work *Person and Act* (1969) may be read as an attempt to use Max Scheler's phenomenology to divert personalism from its radical political orientation to a more, subjective/moral one, thus defusing the radical philosophical and political agenda central to Mounier's vision of personalism.<sup>4</sup>

Perhaps because of its Christian commitments, personalism is a body of thought barely noted in contemporary continental philosophy, which remains almost Jacobin in its secular prejudices.<sup>5</sup> Although the roots of personalist theory are to be found in Kant and neo-Kantians, its development as a social and political movement was initially the almost single-handed work of Mounier. In his short texts *What is Personalism?* (1947) and *Personalism* (1949) Mounier located the beginnings of the movement in the Wall Street crash and a sense of the imminent collapse of capitalism. He responded to this crisis with a political, religious and philosophical analysis that, in his words, aspired to combine the insights of Marx and Kierkegaard. At the core of this analysis was a concept of personality as both a moral and a social fact, a balance that Wojtyla's theory and practice would later decisively tip towards the moral. Mounier, by insisting on the moral and

social basis of personality, was able to sustain both a moral and a political anti-capitalism without retreating to the conservative moral anti-capitalism later sustained by Wojtyła.

Mounier was convinced from the outset that personalism should not be simply another philosophical position available within the French university but should address a far broader social base. Consequently, the journal *Esprit*, first published in 1932, was intended to take debates in philosophy, politics and theology out of the university and into civil society and wherever possible to relate these debates to current economic and political crises. From the beginning *Esprit* was politically committed, taking up positions and debating their significance in its pages. In its early years it took a principled position against anti-Semitism and 'Hitlerism' and supported the Republic in the Spanish Civil War. After an initial hesitation with respect to Vichy – one that was by no means uncommon in 1940<sup>6</sup> – Mounier opted for resistance and *Esprit* was silenced for the duration of the war. In the post-war years *Esprit* was conspicuous for its opposition to the French presence in Algeria and support for the Hungarian revolution in 1956. Even after Mounier's early death in 1950, *Esprit* continued to be both a philosophical journal offering a space for debates on, for example, Marxism and existentialism and a political journal committed to making principled judgements on contemporary political issues.

The significance of the journal for the development of Levinas's thought lies less in his adoption of specific personalist theses than in the demand to combine ethical and political judgement in response to concrete political issues.<sup>7</sup> This is already evident in the 1934 article on Hitlerism, which is both a response to the first year of National Socialist rule in Germany and a reckoning with the contribution of philosophy to its victory. Written only three years after Levinas's 'Freiburg, Husserl and Phenomenology' in which Heidegger is described in almost messianic terms – 'At the seminar . . . all nations were represented'<sup>8</sup> – and less than a year after Heidegger's entry into the National Socialist Party, the essay attempts to come to terms with the Heideggerian philosophical heritage while framing a political judgement of National Socialist racism. 'Reflections on the Philosophy of Hitlerism' attempted to reorient the political and philosophical judgement of Nazism, showing not only that racism was essential to its definition but also that its racism was not parochial or particularistic, but universal and couched within a universal philosophy of history. The prescience of Levinas's article is impressive, especially given the widespread belief throughout the 1930s and in some cases into the 1940s (and even after!) that Nazi racism was not essential to its conception of the political. The political and philosophical misjudgement of the character of Nazi racism would lead in many cases to tragic personal, political and strategic errors of judgement.

The centrality of racism to the Nazi conception of the political was already clear to Levinas in 1934. His reflections begin by claiming not only that

Hitlerism is a philosophy but also that its racism should not be understood in terms of a particularist response to Enlightenment universalism. Levinas perceptively shows that Nazi racism was not a particularist anti-Enlightenment position but part of a universal history according to which the history of all hitherto existing societies is the history of racial struggle. Levinas locates racism within a neo-pagan and anti-monotheist current of thought that dissolved any notion of freedom into fate and any notion of identity into destiny. For National Socialists the 'facts' of universal racial war and unnegotiable racial identity are ineluctable, and Levinas correctly judged that these considerations would overwhelmingly determine Nazi political action. What is more, Levinas predicted that since Nazi racial ideology was part of a concept of universal history it would also prove expansive and be used to justify ruthless colonial military expansion.<sup>9</sup>

Levinas pits against the universalism of Nazi racism a universal philosophy of freedom with its roots in monotheism and with fragile secular variants in liberalism and Marxism. In this universalism a religiously founded freedom is paramount, for grace and forgiveness have the ability to cancel the past and make present and future identity negotiable. Levinas implies that, by severing their links with the monotheist heritage, secular theories such as liberalism and Marxism are forced to rely on fragile analogies with theological concepts, replacing grace with autonomy for example, making these theories abstract and vulnerable before the pagan religious pathos of Nazism. The implication that a liberal or Marxist anti-Nazism will not prove sufficient without a return to its religious origins was explicitly developed into a call for a monotheistic 'popular front' of Jews and Christians. While this was consistent with the position of *Esprit*, Levinas chose to explore the implications of this position in a series of articles in the journal *Pain et Droit*, culminating in the 1939 essay on the death of Pope Pius XI with its still provocative juxtaposition of the cross and the swastika.

### Cosmo-politics and the inhuman

In the postwar period before the publication of *Totality and Infinity* in 1961, Levinas published three essays in *Esprit* that show continuities with the themes of 'Reflections on the Philosophy of Hitlerism'. Together they exemplify what Levinas meant by his repeated observation that his life was 'dominated by the presentiment and the memory of the Nazi horror'.<sup>10</sup> The presentiment had been all too accurate, and the hope for protection under the shadow of the cross, with noteworthy individual exceptions, had been disappointed by the politics of Pius XII. The outcome was a suspicion of all universal histories and the consequent rejection of his appeal during the 1930s to an anti-Nazi universal history of freedom. The critique of universal history, fortified by the experience of imprisonment and the study of Hegel when a POW, as well as the subsequent reading of Rosenzweig's critique of

Hegel, led Levinas to criticize any claim to progress, whether framed in political, technological or cultural terms. The crisis provoked by this extreme suspicion became particularly marked in his judgements of the actions and the significance of the new State of Israel. The occasional attribution of a universal historical significance to the foundation of the State of Israel in terms of the 'passion' of the Shoah is constantly qualified by a suspicion guided by the practice of what Levinas described as 'A special patience – Judaism – for all premature messianic claims.'<sup>11</sup> The difficulty of sustaining an otherwise than universal history was particularly exposed in the case of the State of Israel where the debate around the messianic role of the state was particularly intense.

The title of the essay of 1956 is an ironic reference to the then much-applauded 'spirit of Geneva' or the summit conference that seemed initially to promise an end to the Cold War. Levinas takes the occasion of the Geneva negotiations on nuclear arms control to reflect on the Cold War, and once again his political judgement proved to be more acute than that of many of his contemporaries. The essay continues the critique of paganism opened in 'Reflections on the Philosophy of Hitlerism' but now makes an explicit link between paganism and technology, and in particular the technology of nuclear warfare. In the 'Hitlerism' essay Levinas described paganism in terms of the subjection to expansionary natural forces, defining these forces in 1934 in terms of the biological definition of race. The link between paganism and expansive force is sustained in 1956, but now the forces are nuclear and defined in terms of the nuclear arsenals of the super-powers. The essay begins a proposition that exemplifies Levinas's suspicion of universal history: 'Human conflict has lost all meaning without struggle having come to an end.'<sup>12</sup> The universal historical struggle in this case, between socialism and capitalism or between liberty and tyranny, has been revealed as hollow rhetoric by the inhuman forces released by nuclear fission which now exceed human control. For Levinas this fact signifies the end of any universal history: 'The release of atomic energy has taken the control of the real away from human will. This is precisely what is meant by the arrest of history.'<sup>13</sup> Not only does struggle no longer possess any meaning or direction (*sens*) but this lack of orientation signifies a fundamental transformation of the political, if not of politics.

Levinas explains the link between the arrest of history and the transformation of the political by means of one of the first appearances in his work of the 'third'. Fascinatingly, the third appears here in an unusual context; normally it signifies the impersonal institution of legal and political judgement, but here the impersonality of the third signifies the end of the epoch of the human political. Levinas writes of the summit negotiations that 'The third partner here is not the third man. It is not a human, they are forces without faces. Strange return of the natural powers . . .'<sup>14</sup> The forces



without faces will return in the 1960 essay 'Principles and Faces'; here they signify a development of the same forces of fatality proposed in the 'Hitlerism' essay. In the earlier essay human struggle was conducted in terms of the forces of race, with biological forces serving as 'the third'; here the significance of human struggle is finally evacuated by the inhuman scale of the destructive forces released by nuclear energy.

The location of the moment of the political or 'third' in nuclear forces leads Levinas to a redefinition of the political. He proposes a contrast between the human political and a 'cosmo-political', regarding the Cold War as a technologically advanced return to prehistory. Under the reign of the human political,

The inhuman, which in those centuries was prodigious, came to us still through the human. The human relations that made up the social order and the forces that guided that order exceeded in power, efficacy and in being those of the forces of nature. The elements give themselves to us by means of society and the state, which imprint meaning upon them.

In this negotiation of the human and the inhuman, the encounter of the human and the elements is governed by the third of the human social order. This humanized 'world' is the condition for meaningful human action, even conflict; it still contains, however occluded, the sentiment of responsibility for the other human. In principle such a predominance of the political over the physical serves as 'an invitation to work for a better world, to believe the world transformable and human'.<sup>15</sup>

In the 'Spirit of Geneva' essay Levinas comes close to acknowledging that the moment of such politics has now passed. He writes that,

For the first time social problems and the struggles between humans do not reveal the ultimate meaning of the real. This end of the world will lack the last judgement. The elements exceed the states that until now contained them. Reason no longer appears in political wisdom, but in the historically unconditioned truths announcing cosmic dangers. For politics is substituted a cosmo-politics that is a physics.<sup>16</sup>

The reduction of politics to physics is met by an abdication 'on both sides of the iron curtain' of responsibility in favour of the balance of uncontrollable forces. The parallel between pre- and postwar conditions hardly needs to be spelt out: Nazi biopolitics and Cold War cosmo-politics share the surrender of a political situated within a human horizon for a calculus of implacable inhuman forces that deprives humans of their wisdom, their agency and ultimately their responsibility.

### Particularities

In the 1960 article 'Principles and Faces' Levinas develops the themes of 'On the Spirit of Geneva' but introduces a further element prominent in the Hitlerism essay. His judgement of the Cold War political is now explicitly linked to an argument for the complicity with it of 'Western Philosophy'. The exposure of the ontological commitments of 'Western Philosophy' and the argument for 'ethics as first philosophy' in the philosophical writings of the 1950s culminating in *Totality and Infinity* are here linked with the theme of the abdication of political responsibility in the Cold War. Levinas takes the occasion of a speech by the then general secretary of the Soviet Communist Party, Khrushchev, denounced by many journalists as 'propaganda', to show that the speech may be located within 'the implicit or explicit metaphysics on which the political thought of the West depends'.<sup>17</sup> Consistent with his political position in 1956 and his philosophical position developed during the 1940s, Levinas argues that 'the fate of the West' 'depends on the perpetual postponement of the consequences flowing from its own principles'.<sup>18</sup> The apocalyptic tone of 'On the Spirit of Geneva' is succeeded by the admission that a political may still be possible, but one organized around postponement of the consequences of its founding ontological principles. With this Levinas begins the articulation of his notion of prophetic politics, or a politics in which the totality of the political and institutional structures of the West are interrupted and diverted by a prophetic voice sounding from the ethical responsibility for the other.

The title of 'Principles and Faces' promises a confrontation between ontological principles and the ethical face-to-face, and both are indeed given voice in the essay. The political 'consequences' of the ontological principles of the West were already anticipated in 'Reflections on the Philosophy of Hitlerism'. One significant consequence is the ontological reduction of being to the play of forces; another is the link between reason and universality. Already in the 1934 essay Levinas had shown that the combination of force and universality was potentially explosive; now in 1960 he underlines the necessity of postponing their fusion with the example of Khrushchev's speech. Fascism is cited as an example of an imperfect fusion of the principles of force and universality, with the force of the nation remaining particular; National Socialism by contrast combined force and universality in the concept of race. Levinas now argues that Soviet socialism marks another possible fusion of force and universality. In Khrushchev's speech, the worker is both the source of ultimate force – productivity – and of universality; their combination in the universal history of class struggle marks another political realization of the desire for totality that informs the principles of Western philosophy.

In his reflections on the notion of postponement, Levinas returns to the choice between particularism and universalism that he posed at the outset of

'Some Reflections on the Philosophy of Hitlerism'. He refuses to prefer 'the particularities of tradition, family, country, corporate group' to the 'millennial quest for universality' and is no longer inclined, as in 1934, to contest one claim to universality with another. In order to rethink the political it is necessary to reconsider the entire opposition of universality and particularity and to ask '*Is there not a universality other than that of the state and a freedom other than objective?*' Difficult reflections, for they must go further than one thinks. Well beyond Marx and Hegel. They lead perhaps to putting into question the deepest foundations of Western Metaphysics.<sup>19</sup> This would be Levinas's project in *Totality and Infinity* and *Otherwise than Being*; what this passage clearly shows is that the motivation for putting into question ontology and the formulation of an ethics of alterity is first and foremost *political*. The ethical face-to-face in 'Principles and Faces' is acknowledged in the significance Levinas lends to Khrushchev's visits to the West, which satisfied the ethical 'necessity for humans to see behind the anonymous principle the face of the other human'.<sup>20</sup>

The programmatic statement of the possibility for sustaining a concept of the political beyond and otherwise than Hegel's and Marx's equation of universality and freedom is strangely disappointed by the essay in *Esprit* from the same year, 'The Russo-Chinese Debate and the Dialectic'. Given his suspicion of the principles at the foundations of Western metaphysics, Levinas might have been expected when speaking of Asia to step out of the particularist construction of Europe and look for new sources of universality and freedom. That he does not make this step is but one of the many mysteries of this tormented essay, whose precise political object only becomes clear towards the end. The immediate occasion of the article was the growing Sino-Soviet tension, to which Levinas responded with some strange sentences on the geopolitics of the Soviet Union, Europe and Asia. To be precise, Levinas never speaks of the Soviet Union, but always of 'Russia', and this lapse is important for the alliance he evokes between 'Russia' and Europe against Asia. In an extraordinary reprise of the worst universal history, Levinas writes:

The exclusive community with the Asiatic world, strangers to European history to which Russia, in spite of all its strategic and tactical denials, has belonged for almost a thousand years, would this not be disturbing even to a society without classes. . . . In abandoning the West, does Russia not fear to drown itself in an Asiatic civilization . . .<sup>21</sup>

This evocation of an essential national and cultural identity which must be protected against a culture that is a stranger to its history would seem to be everything that Levinas ever argued against.

The continuation of the argument is hardly more encouraging, with a shocking passage that begins:

The yellow peril! It is not racial, it is spiritual. It does not involve inferior values; it involves a radical strangeness, a stranger to the weight of its past, from which there does not filter any familiar voice or inflection, a lunar or Martian past.<sup>22</sup>

Even when explicitly qualified it is difficult to believe that a phrase such as 'the yellow peril' can ever not be racist, but equally disturbing is the phantasm of the Asiatic past as part of the history of another planet. It is almost as if Levinas was undertaking the experiment of mounting a particularist argument against the universal claims of Hegelian-Marxist philosophy. This is certainly supported by his provisional conclusion, which claims that 'progress towards a universal society will pass by paths where the diverse human groups do not have to overcome their histories. There exist particularisms dialectically indispensable.'<sup>23</sup> This move towards particularism was surely not the post-Hegelian or Marxist thought of the universal and freedom that Levinas intimated in 'Principles and Faces'.

In the light of references to an alleged spiritual 'yellow peril', the spirit of universal freedom that Levinas opposed to Nazi racism in 1934 begins itself to seem uncomfortably parochial. With its references to the 'Graeco, Judaic, Christian West', the 1960 essay seems to have converted the monotheist popular front against Nazism of the 1930s into a Cold War spiritual and geopolitical bloc, uncannily similar in its simplifications to Heidegger's geopolitical 'analysis' of the position of Germany between the USA and the Soviet Union.

The uncharacteristic distortion and even inversion of Levinas's positions in this essay are partially clarified in the final paragraph, which seems to suggest that its object is other than a debate between the Soviet Union and China. The essay ends with the sentence 'It will be necessary to be a little Chinese, to again call a cat a cat and to recognize in the anti-capitalist nationalisms the shadow of National Socialism.'<sup>24</sup> Far from rediscovering an openness to the Asian other, the conclusion of the essay masks a discrete political judgement. In the final paragraph Levinas describes one of the main points of tension between 'Russia' and China as the former's support for radical nationalist movements: the Chinese criticized the Soviet Union for its support of nationalist movements regardless of their commitment to socialist or communist principles. Levinas criticizes the Soviet faith in the dialectic that allowed it to appear reasonable 'to support anti-communists if they represented a stage towards socialism and to show sympathy to those who torture communists in their prisons. It would appear reasonable to take seriously socialist pretensions and anti-imperialist slogans made by avid nationalists.'<sup>25</sup>

This probably should not be read as a Maoist turn in Levinas's politics, nor as a straightforward ethical expression of sympathy for communists imprisoned by radical nationalist regimes. It is more likely that Levinas has

a particular nationalism in mind at this point – Arab nationalism – and specifically the Nasserite regime in Egypt and the nascent Ba'athist regimes in Syria and Iraq, all of which were supported diplomatically, economically and militarily by the Soviet Union and all of which were united in their 'anti-imperialist' hostility towards the existence of the State of Israel. This reading is confirmed by the claim regarding the 'shadow of National Socialism' falling on these regimes: this is consistent with a political and cultural discourse widespread at that time that emphasized the alleged historical links and similarities between Arab nationalism and German National Socialism. Whatever the historical judgement on the veracity of this claim, it is indisputable that the discourse existed and extremely likely that Levinas is subscribing to it at this point.<sup>26</sup> If this is true, then the 'Asia' against which Levinas warns Russia is not only China but also the Arab nationalism that was preparing for war with the State of Israel. The tensions evident in the essay around universal history and particularity are characteristic of Levinas's writings on the State of Israel, notably the next essay in *Esprit*. Whatever the explanation of its distortions, 'The Russo-Chinese Debate and the Dialectic' is an extremely tormented and uncharacteristic essay that must be reckoned with in any responsible interpretation of Levinas.

### Non-Euclidean politics

The next contribution made by Levinas to *Esprit* was the magnificent reflection on Jewish identity, the diaspora and the State of Israel provoked by the Six Day War, 'Space is not One-Dimensional'. The war marked the high point of solidarity between the diaspora and the State of Israel, so much as to provoke a resurgence of anti-Semitism in France. It is to this renewed anti-Semitism that Levinas responds in his essay, written in the conviction that 'a sense of spirit still inhabits the journal *Esprit*'.<sup>27</sup> The essay begins by evoking the French Revolution and the tension between citizenship and nationality bequeathed by it (a tension also discussed at length by Arendt in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*). Levinas had been interested in this tension from early in the 1920s in connection with the anti-Semitism revealed in the Dreyfus Affair, and now returned to it as the condition for the revival of the anti-Semitic discourse of the 'double-allegiance', this time with respect to France and Israel.

The significance of the French Revolution in Levinas's thought is reaffirmed in this essay, notably in the statement that 'Adherence to France is a metaphysical act, of course; it had to be France, a country that expresses its political allegiance with a trinitarian emblem which is moral and philosophical, and inscribed on the front of its public buildings.'<sup>28</sup> But liberty, equality and fraternity, like the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, remains an equivocal formula susceptible to a host of interpretations. The revolutionary trinity, like the Christian Trinity before it, invites a choice as to which

person of the trinity is to be given the most importance. Marxist theory long ago demonstrated the contradiction that arose in bourgeois societies between liberty and equality – economic liberty producing inequality – and pitted against it the ‘fraternity’ of the international working class. But there were also other possible versions of fraternity that would trump liberty and equality in much the way that ‘the Son’ trumps the Father and the Holy Spirit in the Arian heresy – one is the fraternal nation of brothers-in-arms (the Jacobin version), another the fraternal confession (the Gallo-Catholic version) and a third the fraternal ‘race’. Jewish citizens by definition would always be excluded from the second and third versions of the revolutionary trinity, and their claims to free and equal citizenship would always be under threat from the trump card of confessional or racial fraternity.

Levinas’s response to the resurgence of this threat in 1967 is to argue that the three dimensions of liberty, equality and fraternity cannot be reduced to the single dimension of fraternity – ‘Does being French, short of Euclidian space, mean moving only in one dimension?’<sup>29</sup> The question is particularly telling given ‘what happened in Europe between 1933 and 1945’, which no longer leaves even the comfort of Euclidian three-dimensional space. Levinas describes the Shoah in terms of a topological analogy: ‘there are human events which tear open their own envelope’ – in this case the three-dimensional envelope of the modern political trinity. The transgression of political dimensionality following the Shoah puts in question liberty, equality and fraternity, not to speak of any attempt to reduce even these three to a single dimension. What is more, the non-Euclidian politics to which Levinas alludes is summed up in the extra, religious dimension of politics deliberately unthematized in the revolutionary trinity. It was precisely this lack of thematization of the religious that provoked the set of issues collected under the chilling title ‘the Jewish question’.

The rethinking of the relationship of a Jewish French citizen to France and to Israel must then take account of the fourth, religious dimension of the political. In this the focus lies in the nature of Israel, and by this Levinas intends the question of the religious-political of Israel rather than the politics of the State of Israel. There is a relationship between the two, but one which cannot be reduced to simple identity. There is, in short, a tension between Israel as an event in ‘sacred history’ and the State of Israel as an event in ‘universal history’. This tension is ubiquitous in Levinas’s analyses of Israel and the State of Israel, as when he writes ‘The Nazi persecution and, following the exterminations, the extra-ordinary fulfilment of the Zionist dream, are religious events outside of any revelation, church, clergy, miracle, dogma or belief.’<sup>30</sup> Here the historical events of the Shoah and establishment of the State of Israel are placed in a class of religious events beyond the established categories of the religious, in short as part of a sacred history.

The reference to a sacred history of Israel informs Levinas’s messianic concept of Israel, which is not the same as the State of Israel. The concept of

sacred history – developed out of Rosenzweig's work – is contrary to the Hegelian universal history that locates all historical events within the progressive actualization of the idea of freedom in the state. An account of the foundation of the State of Israel according to universal history would locate this moment as the historical outcome of a sacrifice. Levinas seems on occasion to come to close to this position, but always to tip it in the direction of sacred history. In the following passage, the State of Israel is not *founded upon* sacrifice, but *produces* the sacrifice that is consistent with the prophetic vocation of Israel:

It is not because the Holy Land takes the form of a state that it brings the reign of the Messiah any closer, but because the men who inhabit it try to resist the temptation of politics; because the state proclaimed in the aftermath of Auschwitz embraces the teaching of the prophets; because it produces abnegation and self-sacrifice.<sup>31</sup>

The teachings of the prophets do not fuse with the politics of the state to produce a messianic *Sittlichkeit*, but rather unsettle the state by awakening a 'demand for the absolute' that cannot be satisfied by a state. The 'messianic institutions' of Israel of which Levinas here speaks are not the real existing institutions of the State of Israel, but nor are they forms of the ideal state in the manner of Plato's *Republic* – they are rather to be understood as postponements or corrections of the existing institutional structures.

One way to clarify Levinas's position is to situate it in a key debate within the history of Zionism that recurred throughout the history of the State of Israel. Viewed from the viewpoint of universal history, the State of Israel is primarily a political event set within a particular political history; this view would be consistent with the Zionist position that saw the State of Israel as the realization of a civil freedom that could not be guaranteed to Jews in the diaspora. An opposed view would be to see the 'state' of Israel and its wars and politics as secondary to the messianic mission of Israel in Jewish sacred history. The political logic governing the actions of the real-existing State of Israel always seems to be in between the two positions – refusing the extremes of sacrificing the messianic mission of Israel in order to ensure the security and material well-being of the State of Israel, or sacrificing the State of Israel in order to fulfil the messianic mission of Israel in sacred history. This is a conflict that in the history of the State of Israel has been played out in terms of territory: how far must attempts to realize the religious claims to the Holy Land be qualified by considerations of protecting the existence of the State of Israel within current borders? That is to say, how far should territorial expansion be limited or even reversed in order to protect the existence of the state?

Levinas tries to sustain the inconsistency between sacred and universal history by holding that 'sacred history' involves a 'truth and destiny' 'not

contained within political and national categories',<sup>32</sup> while referring to a 'destiny confusedly felt' with respect to the events of May–June 1967 that concerned the very survival of the state, and thus fell under the political categories of universal history. He describes this inconsistency in terms of 'an awkward position within being',<sup>33</sup> this position cannot be understood solely in terms of universal history, but challenges the very dimensionality of its concept of the political, pointing to a need for extra dimensions of political experience that would include the ethical and the religious. The 'awkward position in being' also characterizes the State of Israel that leads 'a dangerous and pure life' as a hybrid product of sacred and universal history – 'a Holy Land resuscitated by the State, in spite of the profane forms it assumes' always in danger of one of its aspects – sacred or secular – destroying the other.

In this context Levinas properly insists on increasing the number of dimensions according to which political judgements, especially those concerning Israel, are made. Yet the conclusion of the *Esprit* essay seems on balance to prefer to judge the actions of the State of Israel according to the criteria of universal history. After a reference to 'my Muslim friend, my unhated enemy of the Six-Day War', Levinas concludes with the reflection, echoing Kant on the French Revolution, that 'it is from adventures such as these run by its citizens that a great Modern state – that is to say, one that serves humanity – derives its greatness, the attention it pays to the present and its presence in the world'.<sup>34</sup> With the exception of the reference to serving humanity, all of these epithets concern the secular universal historical significance of the State of Israel rather than the sacred historical significance of the prophetic mission of Israel.

The question of sacred and universal history preoccupied Levinas for the rest of his life, for reasons that are by now evident. It is particularly apparent in his comments on Sartre and in particular Sartre's words 'If there is a Jewish history Hegel is wrong. Now there is a Jewish history.' Levinas's critique of Hegel is largely indebted to Rosenzweig, a writer central to *Totality and Infinity* on whom Levinas wrote a series of fascinating articles, including one reprinted in *Esprit* in 1982. With this essay Levinas effectively closed the series of articles for the journal, referring to the writer who was their political and religious inspiration. The final work to appear under his signature was the translation of an interview published in Spanish that linked its themes, 'Philosophy, Justice and Love', by means of the concept of prophesy and its orientation towards the future.

Levinas's articles for *Esprit* span the historical interval between the advent of National Socialism and the consolidation of the State of Israel. They show the link between his exercise of political judgement and the broader development of his philosophy, beginning with the racist character of the National Socialist political, moving to the Cold War political, and finally to the prophetic political of Israel and its awkward relation to the State of



Israel. In almost all of his analyses Levinas opts for a complexity of political judgement that far exceeds the formalism of many of his discussions of justice and politics in terms of 'the third'. This complexity of judgement also precedes and underlies the formulation of his ethics, providing the political setting in which he developed his critique of ontological principles and the ethics of alterity. Perhaps before trying to find a passage between Levinas's ethics and politics it is necessary first to recover the specific political conditions to which his ethics was a response?

### Notes

- 1 'Ethics and Politics', in Seán Hand, ed., *The Levinas Reader*, Basil Blackwell, Oxford, 1989.
- 2 Translated by Seán Hand in *Critical Inquiry* 17, Autumn 1990, pp. 64–71.
- 3 Translated in *Difficult Freedom: Essays on Judaism*, trans. Seán Hand, Athlone Press, London 1990, pp. 259–64.
- 4 The difference in orientation is most evident in a comparison between Wojtyła's *Person and Act* and Mounier's *Treatise on Character* (1947), which in spite of their shared project of philosophical anthropology arrive at quite opposed conclusions.
- 5 For two examinations of the secular limits of the canon of continental philosophy, see P. Blond, *Post-Secular Philosophy*, Routledge, London, 1998, and Hent de Vries, *Philosophy and the Turn to Religion*, Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, 1999.
- 6 As was evident in Ricoeur's position in 1941: 'until 1941 I was attracted, along with many others – the propaganda was intense – to certain aspects of Pétainism. It was probably that I held against the Republic the feeling of having participated in its weakness, the feeling that a new, stronger, France had to be formed.' *Critique and Conviction*, trans. Kathleen Blamey, Polity Press, Cambridge, 1998, p. 16.
- 7 While there are evident links between some of Levinas's positions and those of personalism, such as the stress on alterity and the critique of the money form, the substantial links between them are less evident than in the case of Ricoeur, who might with justice be described as a personalist philosopher.
- 8 *Discovering Existence with Husserl*, trans. Richard A. Cohen and Michael B. Smith, Northwestern University Press, Evanston IL, 1998.
- 9 At the end of the essay Levinas debatedly links this expansive characteristic of Nazism with Nietzsche's thought, in the first manifestation of his by no means unequivocal critique of Nietzsche.
- 10 'Signature', in *Difficult Freedom*, p. 291.
- 11 'Judaism and the Present', in *ibid.*, p. 214.
- 12 'Sur l'esprit de Geneve', in *Les Imprevus de l'histoire*, Fata Morgana, 1994, 161.
- 13 *Ibid.*
- 14 *Ibid.*, p. 162.
- 15 *Ibid.*, p. 163.
- 16 *Ibid.*, p. 164.
- 17 'Principes et Visages', in *ibid.*, p. 166.
- 18 *Ibid.*, p. 167.
- 19 *Ibid.*, p. 168.
- 20 *Ibid.*, p. 169.

- 21 'Le Debat Russo-Chinois et la dialectique', in *ibid.*, p. 171.
- 22 *Ibid.*, p. 172.
- 23 *Ibid.*
- 24 *Ibid.*, p. 173.
- 25 *Ibid.*, p. 172.
- 26 For a historical defence of the thesis of this discourse, see Howard Sacher's *A History of Israel from the Rise of Zionism to Our Time*, Alfred A. Knopf, New York, 1996; for a critique, Albert Houriani's *A History of the Arab Peoples*, Faber, London, 1991.
- 27 'Space is Not One-Dimensional', in *Difficult Freedom*, p. 259.
- 28 *Ibid.*, pp. 260–61. The exploration of the inseparable political, ethical and philosophical significance of the trinity 'liberty, equality and fraternity' informs all of Levinas's work.
- 29 *Ibid.*, p. 259.
- 30 *Ibid.*, p. 263.
- 31 *Ibid.*
- 32 *Ibid.*, p. 264.
- 33 *Ibid.*
- 34 *Ibid.*

# ONTOLOGICAL DIFFERENCE, SEXUAL DIFFERENCE, AND TIME

*Tina Chanter*

Source: T. Chanter, *Time, Death, and the Feminine: Levinas with Heidegger*, Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2001, pp. 37–74.

to be a body is to have time  
(TI 117)

Heidegger's ontological difference has a central and lasting significance for Levinas. By tracing Levinas's insistent return to and recasting of the ontological difference not as a distinction but as separation, and as amphibology, it is possible to see that there is an important sense in which Levinas never completely overcomes the Heideggerian problematic. It also becomes possible to see that the themes of sexual difference, corporeity, and the meaning of the instant (which in his early work is investigated in terms of solitude) play a structuring role not only in his early work, but also in his later work. Even those readers who have provided interpretations of Levinas which take up some of the earlier themes in order to follow through how they are recast in the later work have neglected, in my view, to explain the importance of the feminine and corporeity in Levinas's work, or to expand sufficiently on the relation between time and the instant.

In a 1977 preface to the second edition of *De l'existence à l'existant*, Levinas remarks upon the passage between *Totality and Infinity* and *Otherwise than Being* in terms of his attempt to rethink the ontological difference. One cannot simply reverse, he suggests, Heidegger's famous ontological difference by giving priority to beings over Being, as *Totality and Infinity* might be said to do.<sup>1</sup> Rather—and this is what Levinas identifies as the effort of *Otherwise than Being*—one has to go beyond this initial reversal, and allow the infinite to signify from “beyond the ontological difference.”<sup>2</sup> In a footnote,

Levinas refers to the work of Jean-Luc Marion, and Marion responds to Levinas in an essay that first appeared in 1986. Marion comments, "If even Levinas must, after the fact, underline such an essential periodization, this is without a doubt because it does not appear evident right away."<sup>3</sup> He adds that this might be due not only to the "ignorance or confusion" of Levinas's readers, but also "to the difficulty of the thing itself—a difficulty for Emmanuel Levinas himself, in his self-interpretation."<sup>4</sup> Having underlined this difficulty, Marion goes on to argue that Levinas's notion of "amphibology is substituted for that of difference because 'beyond or on the hither side' of Being and beings (AE 55, 63; OB 43, 49), an absolutely new term, as yet unnamed, insinuates itself. From the outset, the ontological difference no longer offers a goal, but only a point of departure, a given to be over-interpreted and destroyed."<sup>5</sup> Marion continues: "One result is decisively established: ethics is instituted by a new difference, a difference of the second degree, between, on the one hand, the entire ontological difference and, on the other hand, the Saying. Therefore, the beyond of the ontological difference absolutely cannot, here, be confused any longer with a reversal of the terms inside the ontological difference to the benefit of beings."<sup>6</sup> But to regard "the ontological difference" as "only a point of departure, a given" to be "destroyed" is, I suggest, to overlook the perpetual need that Levinas's philosophy exhibits to refer back to the ontological difference, if only to give it new meaning. It is also to risk obliterating the significance of all the work that Levinas does in infusing the corporeal and the temporal with a significance that Heidegger could not achieve, because his appeal to "ontological finality" (EE 42; DE 64) did not allow for any consideration of materiality apart from its significance in the overall structure of Dasein's care for existence. If Heidegger "thereby failed to recognize the essentially secular nature of being in the world and the sincerity of intentions" (EE 42; DE 65), does not Marion neglect the bodily aspect of existence that facilitates the very idea of sincerity to which he wants to appeal, and does he not thereby short-circuit the very difficulty, to which he had earlier alerted us, of situating the ontological difference within Levinas's corpus? Marion says that "sincerity phenomenologically destroys the terms of the ontological difference: 'A fission of the ultimate substantiality of the ego, sincerity is reducible to nothing ontic, to nothing ontological and leads as it were beyond or on the hither side of everything positive, every position' (AE 183; OB 144). Exactly as, for Heidegger, anxiety leads into the ontological difference, for Levinas, sincerity is excepted from it and liberates from it."<sup>7</sup> Does sincerity absolutely destroy the ontological difference, and is it completely liberated from it? What about the "ultimate substantiality of the ego" to which Levinas refers us in the very quote that Marion provides, "an ultimate substantiality . . . even in the very vulnerability of sensibility" (OB 142; AE 181), as Levinas puts it at the beginning of the section from which Marion quotes? What about the "constraint to give with full hands, and thus a constraint to corporeality"

(OB 142; OB 181)? It does not seem to me that these references to substantiality, and position, to hands and corporeality, are merely gratuitous.

The issue that Marion raises speaks to a central problem that has occupied other prominent readers of Levinas—that is, the question of how to think ethics in relation to ontology.<sup>8</sup> One of the major theses of the present work is that the relation of priority between the two cannot adequately be addressed without taking up the relationship between ontological difference and temporality. It will also be suggested that a thorough investigation of this relationship reveals precisely the import of corporeality in Levinas's philosophy, another aspect which commentators have been slow to elaborate.<sup>9</sup> And finally, it is necessary, I maintain, to follow out the theme of sexual difference, which structures Levinas's recasting of ontological difference and time from his early to his late work, but whose implications for his critique of Heidegger have also been largely neglected.

Thematically, Levinas might be said to be interested in ontology, in solitude, in bodily materiality and the instant in his early work, but his interest is already motivated by a concern for ethics, for the other, and by time itself.<sup>10</sup> In just the same way, his references to substantiality and corporeality in his later work should not be dismissed or read over as trivial or superfluous to the real import of the work, as if its ethical call could be divorced from its material resonance. Thus, it is in order to preserve the alterity of the other that Levinas sees the need to attend to "the ontological root of solitude" (TO 41; TA 19). "I hope," he says, "to glimpse wherein this solitude can be exceeded" (TO 41; TA 19). Similarly, the reason Levinas devotes his attention to the "anonymous and irremissible existing" (TO 81; TA 72) of the *il y a*, the there is, and to hypostasis, is to show that the "reality of time" consists in the fact that it is "absolutely other and new" (TO 80; TA 71). The newness or alterity of time governs his analysis even when it would seem that the phenomena he presents contest, or at least do not easily accommodate, time as the very "relationship with the other" (TO 82; TA 73). So, Levinas's interest in the themes of materiality and solitude is dictated by his effort to move beyond conceiving of the future either in Heideggerian or in Bergsonian terms, as "anticipation, projection, and élan" (TO 80; TA 71), where he thinks the present retains "a power over the future" (TO 80; TA 72). For Levinas the future is mysterious, ungraspable, and unknowable.

To say that even Levinas's effort to uncover the movement of hypostasis, in relation to solitude and materiality, is motivated by his attempt to rethink time as alterity is not to imply that the solitary ego is immediately reducible to the otherness of time, or that Levinas's analysis of the irremissible tie of the ego to itself that describes the materiality of solitude has no significance in and of itself. On the contrary, it is precisely that the movement of hypostasis is irreducible to the I's relationship to the other, or to time, that Levinas wants to insist upon. To see this more clearly, it is worth recalling that Levinas conceives of his philosophy as an attempt to break with the notion

of Eleatic being that he thinks not only dominates Parmenides and Plato, but even extends to Heidegger's attempt to renew the efforts of Greek philosophy to think Being. (See TO 93; TA 88.)<sup>11</sup> Levinas's analyses of "sexuality, paternity and death" facilitate the break with Eleatic being because they "introduce a duality into existence, a duality that concerns the very existing of each subject" (TO 92; TA 88). Paternity will answer to Levinas's attempt to conceive of a "pluralist existence" (TO 54; TA 34). He says, "I do not *have* my child; I *am* in some way my child. But the words 'I am' here have a significance different from an Eleatic or Platonic significance" (TO 91; TA 86). Levinas thereby elaborates anew the ontological difference, by showing that the task of existing to which the existent (or, in Heidegger's terminology, Dasein) is in some sense condemned—in the sense that the self finds that existence is unavoidable and inescapable—is in another sense capable of encountering another dimension, an alterity that cannot be reduced to the identity of the I, or even to the knowledge that belongs to the I. "The return of the ego to itself that begins with hypostasis is thus not without remission, thanks to the perspective of the future opened by eros. Instead of obtaining this remission through the impossible dissolution of hypostasis, one accomplishes it through the son. It is thus not according to the category of cause, but according to the category of the father that freedom comes about and time is accomplished" (TO 91; TA 86).

In attending to the function of hypostasis, and in attending to solitude and materiality, and enjoyment, Levinas reworks not only the ontological difference, but several other fundamental themes from *Being and Time*, such as the meaning of existence, world, everyday life, the for-the-sake-of, the role of the present, being-with-others, death as freedom, and forgetfulness. Thus, for example, "everyday life is already a way of being free from the initial materiality through which a subject is accomplished" (TO 63; TA 46), and "far from constituting a fall, . . . forms the very accomplishment of solitude. . . . [It] is a preoccupation with salvation" (TO 58; TA 39).<sup>12</sup> There is, in Levinas's reorientation of Heidegger's analysis, an insistent sexualization of two divergent aspects or tendencies of existence. On the one hand there is the virility of mastery, and on the other hand there is the passivity that Levinas will associate with the feminine. This differentiation is not to be thought of as a straightforward opposition between the active mastery of the subject and its passive submission, but rather as a duality that consists in the task of existing itself, or the necessity of having to be oneself. For what is at stake is precisely a rethinking of the ontological difference, which would preclude assuming a dichotomy between activity and passivity that already presupposes what is at issue in Levinas's return to the ontological difference: namely that the subject is already constituted in relation to a world of objects. In thinking through the ambiguous situation whereby a subject takes on its existence, Levinas no more assumes that the world is already constituted than he does that the subject is already imbued with the

traditional characteristics of subjectivity, such as consciousness, freedom, and the capacity to know the world. The I is “neither a thing, nor a spiritual center” but “has to be grasped in its amphibological mutation from an event into an ‘entity,’ and not in its objectivity” (EE 79–80; DE 136). Bound up in Levinas’s departure from Heidegger’s rendering of death as ultimately the ground of Dasein’s virile, solitary, and masterful freedom is a reassessment of the metaphors of sight that accompanies it, and which is suggested by the word “lucidity.” Levinas says, “Death in Heidegger is an event of freedom, whereas for me the subject seems to reach the limit of the possible in suffering” (TO 70; TA 57–58), and he marks the contrast by identifying Heidegger’s comprehension of death as masculine, while rendering his own as feminine. Thus, “Being toward death, in Heidegger’s authentic existence, is a supreme lucidity and hence a supreme virility” (TO 70; TA 57), while for Levinas “the unknown of death signifies that the very relationship with death cannot take place in the light” (TO 70; TA 57).<sup>13</sup> Levinas thereby associates the unknowability of death with “the feminine” as “a mode of being that consists in slipping away from the light,” or as “a flight before light,” as “hiding” and as “modesty” (TO 87; TA 79).

Levinas explicitly counterposes the mastery that resides in “the virility of grasping the possible, the *power to be able*” [“*pouvoir de pouvoir*”: TO 82; TA 73], with death as “the limit of the subject’s virility, the virility made possible by the hypostasis at the heart of anonymous being, and manifest in the phenomenon of the present, in the light” (TO 74; TA 62). The very terms that Levinas adopts to designate the mystery and unknowability of death insist not just that the “passivity” through which death announces itself is resistant to the language of experience and light (see TO 70; TA 57), but that the vocabulary of light—and the concepts of vision, mastery, grasping, possessing, and knowing with which it is inevitably associated—are wholly inapplicable to the approach of death, in the face of which “we are no longer *able to be able* [*nous ne ‘pouvons plus pouvoir’*]” (TO 74; TA 62). Further, Levinas wants to rehabilitate a notion of the present that does not simply fall prey to the idea of mastery that caused Heidegger to question the privilege of the present. Above all, it is the ambiguity of the present that Levinas is at pains to emphasize. “It is essential,” says Levinas, “to grasp the present at the limit of existing and the existent, where, in function of existing, it already turns into an existent” (TO 52; TA 32). Here we are returned, once more, to the ontological difference. By “positing the present as the mastery of the existent over existing, and in seeking in it the passage from existing to the existent” (TO 54; TA 34), Levinas wants to retain the complexity of the presencing of the present both as “pure event that must be expressed by a verb”—analogous to the verbal sense of being—and as a being “already a something, already an existent” (TO 52; TA 32)—analogous to Dasein, the being that exists. The ambiguity of the present is due to the fact that it is “a way of accomplishing the ‘starting out

from itself' that is always evanescence. . . . Evanescence would thus be the essential form of beginning," and yet it "result[s] in something" (TO 53; TA 32–33), it turns into an existent, and can be formed into time (see TO 53; TA 33).<sup>14</sup>

There is, then, the aspect of mastery that Levinas associates with the present, and which he consistently marks as virile, and there is the limit or loss of mastery that Levinas associates with suffering, death, and love, and which he consistently marks as feminine. Thus there emerges a contest between the virile mastery of a self capable of preserving itself, and an effeminate self, one that finds itself unmanned, "unable to be able," deprived of all it powers, wounded in love (see TO 89; TA 82), incapable of exerting its power of reason over the alterity that confronts it, be it in death or in eros. Before commenting further on this sexualized language, which (as will be clear by now) I take to have a significance beyond rhetorical embellishment, let me lay out in more detail what I have already hinted at, namely the fact that Levinas does not assume that the subject is invested with freedom from the start.

Let me briefly restate the trajectory I am following. I am, (1) pointing out how a sexualized language infuses Levinas's entire thought, his notions of self, freedom, and ethics, (2) how paternity is the privileged model of the relation to the other, and (3) how the sexualization of Levinas's discourse leads to complex questions about the conditionality of his philosophy that commentators have ignored to date for the most part. The father is the "category" that allows time and freedom to be introduced, but hypostasis is that which is somehow "before time" or allows time to appear. I will suggest that the feminine plays a structural role similar to the "before time" of hypostasis, but in a way that remains unthought by Levinas, and by his commentators. To thematize the "before" of the feminine both throws into relief the structural dynamic of the temporality of conditioning that allows Levinas to say what he is saying, and performs and enacts the aporetic relations that are inadequately framed as oppositions in Levinas's texts (ethics/ontology, infinity/totality, saying/said).

### **Two freedoms, two moralities . . . two registers of language**

I suggest that, just as Levinas sees the importance of examining solitude outside of community, not in order to refute the obvious empirical situation that we all necessarily live in a world where there are others, but in order to draw out more fully than Heidegger was able to do the ontological implications of solitude, similarly his insistence on considering the dialectic of the instant outside or before that of time is not simply a refusal of the indisputable fact that in one sense the instant cannot be divorced from time. Clearly and inevitably, each instant coalesces with a continuous time, or subsides into the infinite fabric of existing, but then time is already hypostatized. (See



TO 53; TA 33–34.) In this sense, it is impossible to conceive of the instant as outside time, or to construe the hypostasis as a present that is not yet time. What sense, then, can be made of Levinas's claim to resist the tendency to find in the instant something other than the dialectic of time, and to attribute to it a separate dialectic? Levinas means to catch sight of the event that makes possible the linking up of moments into the stream of time (see TO 52; TA 32), to go behind experience, as it were (TO 54; TA 34), to ask about the present not when it is already the time of an existent, and as such can be mastered, possessed, represented, experienced, and thematized, as belonging to someone, but as it occurs prior to any such possession. This marks a fundamental difference between Levinas and Heidegger. For Heidegger, time can be understood only by starting out from Dasein's worldly experience of temporality. The difficulty of formulating the meaning of the instant as separable from its meaning as it is experienced in time is not lost on Levinas. Because of the apparent impossibility of circumventing the language of experience he is forced to use temporal language to explore an allegedly nontemporal significance (before, prior, not yet, first, beyond, previous, already, outside). Indeed he acknowledges that he must have recourse to the language of experience and subjectivity, even as he maintains that the present, or instant, does not presuppose a subject who experiences the world. Thus, in order to describe the order of hypostasis, Levinas must employ the very language that does not properly pertain to it. Desire is not knowledge, yet Levinas says, "Desire knows perfectly well what it wants" (EE 43; DE 65), and the metaphor works. Similarly, Levinas will speak of a freedom that is not a freedom in the sense with which we are familiar, a morality that is not a morality in terms of what we usually mean by the term, a possession that is not a possession (see EE 27; DE 35–36), and an "I" that is not yet an I. Even the term "hypostasis" does not have its traditional resonance. It is that which allows time, or freedom, or ethics to first appear that Levinas is trying to think, and in this sense, once again, his thought coincides with that of Heidegger, who, in understanding Being as *Ereignis*, which in turn he renders as "Appropriation or event of Appropriation," cautions that we should "bear in mind . . . that 'event' is not simply an occurrence, but that which makes any occurrence possible" (TB 19). Marking both the distance (insofar as Heidegger's philosophy remains limited to a thinking of Being) and the proximity (insofar as it attempts to think Being as an event that makes any occurrence possible) between his own thinking and Heidegger's, Levinas claims that "everything that will be said of this *Ereignis* in *Zeit und Sein* is already indicated in §9 *Sein und Zeit*. Being is that which becomes my-own, and it is for this that a man is necessary to being. It is through man that being is 'properly'" (GWC 92; DQV 146–47). At issue here is the "wonder which Plato put at the origin of philosophy" (EE 22; DE 28), and it is no accident that Levinas associates this wonder or astonishment with the "questioning of Being" (EE 22–23; DE 28):

It is the very intelligibility of light that is astonishing; light is doubled up with a night. The astonishment does not arise out of comparison with some order more natural than nature, but simply before intelligibility itself. Its strangeness is, we might say, due to its very reality, to the very fact there is existence. The questioning of Being is an experience of Being in its strangeness. It is then a way of taking up Being. . . . The question is itself a manifestation of the relationship with Being. Being is essentially alien and strikes against us. We undergo its suffocating embrace like the night, but it does not respond to us. There is a pain in Being. If philosophy is the questioning of Being, it is already a taking on of Being. And if it is more than this question, this is because it permits going beyond the question, and not because it answers it. What more there can be than the questioning of Being is not some truth—but the good.

This passage announces several themes that Levinas will develop. There is the “doubling back” on itself of a being already situated in a world of knowledge, already engaged in relationships that are characterized by light, but capable of articulation in terms that do not follow the contours of “this natural correlation between us and the world” (EE 22; DE 27). There is the alienation, or the “pain in Being,” that Levinas also refers to as an evil that lies in the “very positivity” of Being (EE 20; DE 20), and which resides not in the lack or defect that Levinas thinks is implied in Heidegger’s understanding of finitude, but rather in a certain excess or plenitude (EE 27; DE 36). And there is the reference to Plato’s Good beyond Being, which is not only an attempt to point to that which makes it possible for beings to appear as such, but also a way of stipulating that ethics is always already in play, even in the most mundane occurrence of a relationship that arises within the context of the world.

### Interruption

We are always already in the world. In this sense, the world, and everything in it, is given. But Levinas wants to think what it means for it to be given, to go behind the world as phenomenon. He characterizes the “primary relationship which binds us to Being” as an “anonymous state of being” (EE 21; DE 26). This state, what he calls the “there is,” is not so much a state that can be said to exist before the world, but rather a relationship (but “a relationship only by analogy”) that appears (and, we could add, it appears only by analogy) “where the continual play of our relations with the world is interrupted” (EE 21; DE 26). Putting this in terms of the temporal flow of duration, Levinas says, “In the midst of the anonymous flow of existence, there is stoppage and a positing” (EE 34; DE 48), or “During the duration of the work, the effort takes on the instant, breaking and tying back

together again the thread of time" (EE 33; DE 48). With the notion of interruption as stoppage, as a break, Levinas seeks to supplement Heidegger's interpretation of temporality as ecstasy, an interpretation which, he thinks, can take account of the present only insofar as the future inherits its meaning. Levinas says, "In the midst of the advance over oneself and over the present, in the ecstasy of the leap which anticipates and bypasses the present, fatigue marks a delay with respect to oneself and with respect to the present" (EE 31; DE 44). Focusing on the "dynamism of the thrust" of the instant itself—which, he says, "is not constituted by the anticipation of the future" (EE 31; DE 45)—Levinas resists interpreting the present simply in terms of its legacy for the future, even as he recognizes that its relationship to the future cannot be completely ignored. Thus, when he examines indolence as a "recoil before action" (EE 27; DE 37), a "hesitation before existence, . . . a refusal" (EE 28; DE 37), he finds that "what is essential in indolence is its place prior to a beginning of an action, its way of being turned to a future. It is not a thought about the future, followed by a holding back from action. It is, in its concrete fullness, a holding back from the future. The tragedy of being it reveals is then the more profound. It is a being fatigued by the future" (EE 29; DE 39). Indolence, then, both as a way of being "turned to a future" and as a "holding back from the future" both assumes its place in time, by submitting to the impossibility of stopping time, and yet maintains its character as refusal, in still holding back from the inevitable demise of the instant. In precisely this duality, Levinas sees an adherence to existence that is also a cleaving (see EE 22; DE 27), just as "weariness concerns existence itself," and yet "in weariness existence is like the reminder of a commitment to exist, with all the seriousness and harshness of an unrevokable contract" (EE 24; DE 31). Because weariness is "a weariness of everything and everyone, and above all a weariness of oneself" (EE 24; DE 31), Levinas sees in it "the hesitation of a refusal" (EE 25; DE 32). "Weariness by all its being effects this refusal to exist; it is only in the refusal to exist" (EE 25; DE 32).

Weariness is not a judgment (EE 25; DE 32) and does not arise from "a lack of deliberation, for it is not deliberating over the end. It occurs after the intention has been formulated" (EE 25; DE 33). "Effort is not a cognition; it is an event" (EE 31; DE 44). Fatigue and indolence are "prior to reflection." They are "positions taken with regard to existence" before they "are 'mental contents'" (EE 24; DE 30). In the midst of our worldly intentions, interrupting our formulation of goals and ends, Levinas discerns the "inclination to 'drop everything'" (EE 31; DE 44). In the duality of the instant, in which effort "lunges forward out of fatigue and falls back upon it" (EE 31; DE 44), he locates both the freedom to give up ("If we find our suitcase too heavy, we can put it down, enlist the help of a porter who is stronger than ourselves" [EE 30; DE 43]) and the condemnation to finish what we have begun, to be who we are, the weight of "the burden of existence itself"

[EE 29; DE 38]. As a “condemnation to being,” fatigue alerts us to what Levinas calls “a peculiar form of forsaken[n]ess.”<sup>15</sup> This is, says Levinas, “not the solitude of a being forsaken by the world with which it is no longer in step, but of a being that is as it were no longer in step with itself, is out of joint with itself, in a dislocation of the *I* from itself, a being that is not joining up with itself in the instant, in which it is nonetheless committed for good” (EE 35; DE 50). Can the word “good” here be gratuitous? If not, this dislocated *I*, out of step with itself, worn out with the effort of trying to be itself, might anticipate the sense in which Levinas will speak of the restlessness of substitution.<sup>16</sup>

In trying to think the instant outside time, then, Levinas reaps the consequences of Heidegger’s injunction to raise anew the question of Being. He attempts, that is, to think time without assuming that he knows in advance the kind of being that time has, without acting as if the only possible access to time were through beings that are already constituted as such, as if the only way of approaching time were as a being, or an existent. The problem with such an assumption, as Heidegger revealed, is that it imports temporal assumptions into its interpretation of being without acknowledgment, so that it has already decided in favor of a dominant interpretation of time, namely as present-at-hand, but obliquely, and therefore without making this decision available to inquiry.

In the midst of an account of the feminine, Levinas makes what he calls a “fundamental comment” concerning freedom: “I do not initially posit the Other as freedom, a characteristic in which the failure of communication is inscribed in advance. For with a freedom there can be no other relationship than that of submission or enslavement. In both cases, one of the two freedoms is annihilated. The relationship between master and slave can be grasped at the level of struggle, but then it becomes reciprocal” (TO 87; TA 80).<sup>17</sup> To “posi[t] the Other as freedom” would be to think “the Other in terms of light” (TO 88; TA 81), and Levinas, as we have seen, wants to think the relationship with alterity as “the failure of the movement that tends to grasp or to possess a freedom,” (TO 88; TA 81), and as distinct from possession and from knowledge.<sup>18</sup> Yet, while Levinas distances himself from positing the Other as freedom, there is a sense in which he affirms the freedom of an existent not as a free will, but as a freedom of beginning. In describing hypostasis, or the event by which an existent or being arises, Levinas says, “the appearance of an existent is the very constitution of a mastery, of a freedom in an existing that by itself would remain fundamentally anonymous. In order for there to be an existent in this anonymous existing, it is necessary that a departure from self and a return to self—that is, the very work of identity—become possible” (TO 52; TA 31).<sup>19</sup> This departure and return indicates a complication that specifies the particular sense that Levinas wants to give to freedom here. Levinas distinguishes between two senses of freedom.<sup>20</sup> The existent, he says, “is a first freedom—not yet

the freedom of free will, but the freedom of beginning. It is by starting out from something new that there is existence. Freedom is included in every subject, in the very fact that there is a subject, that there is a being. It is the freedom of the existent in its very grip on existing" (TO 54; TA 34). This first sense of freedom is associated with virility. "As present and 'I,' hypostasis is freedom. The existent is master of existing. It exerts on its existence the virile power of the subject. It has something in its power" (TO 54; TA 34). Solitude is necessary for this virile mastery, for the "freedom of beginning" (TO 55; TO 35). But this first freedom has a price: "the definitiveness of the I riveted to itself" (TO 57; TA 38, translation altered), which Levinas identifies as a "great paradox: a free being is already no longer free, because it is responsible for itself" (TO 55; TA 36).<sup>21</sup> If this freedom is already a responsibility, in what sense does it remain free?<sup>22</sup> Levinas says, "Though it is a freedom with regard to the past and future, the present is an enchainment in relation to itself. The material character of the present does not result from the fact that the past weighs upon it or that it is anxious about its future. It results from the present as present" (TO 55–56; TA 36).

By insisting on both the materiality of the self and its freedom, both its being weighed down and its ability to be master, Levinas makes it possible to understand the activities of everyday life that Heidegger consigns to inauthenticity as an overcoming, to some extent, of "the material structure of the subject" (TO 62; TA 45), one that involves the subject in enjoyment. As a "way of being free from [its] initial materiality," everyday life does indeed involve "a forgetfulness of self" (TO 63–64; TA 46), but not the self-forgetfulness of Heidegger's *Dasein*, who takes over as its own the opinions of the "they," and in doing so takes itself for a being that is present-at-hand, and forgets to inquire after its own specific mode of being. Rather, this forgetfulness is one that consists of the subject's ability to live hypostasis at a level that is beyond a pure and simple return to itself: that is, beyond the necessity of having to be, or the impossibility of being able to escape its materiality—beyond, that is, the "tragedy of solitude" (TO 57; TA 38). In *Totality and Infinity* Levinas will elaborate the sense of this beyond in the immediacy of enjoyment.

Levinas says, "Though in the pure and simple identity of hypostasis, the subject is mired in itself, in the world, instead of a return to itself, there is a 'relationship with everything that is necessary for being'" (TO 63; TA 46). In contrast, eros "is a relationship with alterity, with mystery—that is to say, with the future, with what (in a world where there is everything) is never there, with what cannot be there when everything is there—not with a being that is not there, but with the very dimension of alterity" (TO 88; TA 81–82). If eros, which is figured as feminine in Levinas's discourse, opens the perspective of alterity as the future, that alterity can be accomplished in only "one way: through paternity" (TO 91; TA 85). Does this mean that the alterity of the feminine is only a provisional alterity? Levinas

articulates two different modes by which an event is accomplished when he distinguishes between the event of hypostasis, "by which an existent arises" (TO 88; TA 81), associated with virility, freedom, power, and mastery, and the "event of alterity" (TO 87; TA 80), associated with the feminine, mystery, withdrawal, and modesty. "The existent," says Levinas, in a statement that is crucial for understanding what is happening in the sexualization of his discourse, "is accomplished in the 'subjective' and in 'consciousness'; alterity is accomplished in the feminine. This term is on the same level as, but in meaning opposed to, consciousness. The feminine is not accomplished as a *being* [*étant*] in a transcendence toward light, but in modesty" (TO 88; TA 81). By claiming that the feminine is "not accomplished as a being," Levinas appears to be privileging the feminine in a certain way, by situating it in a dimension, or allowing it to designate a domain, that cannot be qualified as ontological. The feminine would thereby seem to indicate an escape from being: its otherness would not be governed by the powers of mastery that define the self, nor by the freedom of self-initiative, nor by consciousness, but would come from elsewhere. The feminine is the absolutely other. In this way, the feminine would seem to interrupt the language of ontology, would seem to provide access to a new way of thinking ontological difference, by not immediately identifying itself with the turning of existence into existents, by resisting the illumination of the world. It would seem to stand for a mode of being's withdrawal.

Levinas's appeal to the feminine has therefore been heralded as radical. The "exceptional position of the feminine in the economy of being" (TO 86; TA 78) is celebrated, because it facilitates a break with being. Without wishing to entirely discredit or contain whatever radicality might be claimed for Levinas's notion of the feminine, I do not want to immediately grant its revolutionary status. Instead I want to proceed more slowly, by asking about how the feminine functions for Levinas in relation to terms such as fecundity, paternity, and the son.

It is clear that Levinas does not want his use of the term "feminine" to function in a way that is reducible to a member of the female sex. His intentions in this regard are overtly stated: "Need one add that there is no question here of defying ridicule by maintaining the empirical truth or countertruth that every home *in fact* presupposes a woman? . . . [T]he empirical absence of the human being of the 'feminine sex' in a dwelling nowise affects the dimension of femininity which remains open there, as the very welcome of the dwelling" (TI 158; TeI 131). Ontologically, too, it seems clear that we would simply be mistaken to equate what Levinas means by "the feminine" with women as such. If the "feminine is not accomplished as a being," whatever meaning is to be granted to it cannot be assimilated with the empirical woman. It is rather a way or mode of being, a tendency, a regime. Levinas's intentions, and the ontological function of the feminine, might preclude feminist objections to his use of the term, were it not for the

fact that intentions and ontology, as Levinas himself maintains, do not count for everything. And so we find Levinas resorting to language that, despite his disclaimer, does indeed assume the empirical woman (see TI 155; TeI 128–29), and we find him affirming that “welcome in itself” is “the feminine being” (TI 157; TeI 131). Even if we take this to mean a being (male or female) that is feminized, the question remains as to how this being which is not quite a being is to be thought, and even more pertinently, who is to think it. Even if we keep in mind that it is the ontological equivocation of the feminine, or its very ambiguity (or, perhaps, amphibology) as a being that is unknowable, or a being that is accomplished not in light but in modesty, still it must be asked how the feminine is figured. We will see that the notion of accomplishment provides the decisive clue.<sup>23</sup>

The fact that it is impossible to simply equate what Levinas means by the term “feminine” with individual subjects does not mean that all the problems raised by his use of this term, and his systematic differentiation of it from other sexualized terms, are resolved. To assert that the feminine is intended metaphorically, far from solving all the questions arising from his use of the term, merely reintroduces them at another level.<sup>24</sup> As Sikka concisely asserts, “metaphors matter.”<sup>25</sup> Neither is it satisfactory, in my view, to simply suspend the political questions that impose themselves as secondary to the ontological function that terms such as “the feminine” play in his philosophy, as if politics and ontology could be so easily distinguished, or as if the politics of ontology did not inform its very vocabulary.

Is there a way to read the feminine in Levinas’s texts that avoids short-circuiting the resources it provides for breaking out of the closure of ontology, for disrupting its said, and at the same time refuses to naively bracket the implications Levinas’s discourse has for feminism? Having begun to address this question with reference to Levinas’s early work, I want to continue to perform this balancing act, initially by attending to the role of the feminine in *Totality and Infinity*. In the concluding chapter I will return to this theme by revisiting some of Levinas’s later texts, including *Otherwise than Being*.

As we have seen, Levinas thinks that Heidegger’s attempt to overcome the metaphysics of presence achieves only limited success. By appealing to an ecstatic understanding of temporality, Heidegger emphasizes the interrelation between the disparate ecstases, so that it is Dasein’s temporality as a whole that is understood in the moment of vision. Heidegger’s interpretation of being-toward-death thus focuses attention on the future rather than the present, but the future that is anticipated in the moment of vision is one which gathers together the past and future into a new, authentic present, as Dasein is summoned back to itself in resoluteness.<sup>26</sup> Dasein’s resolute anticipation of its own finitude serves as a ground for its freedom. For Levinas, this model privileges the mastery, lucidity, and transparency of a self that remains essentially in control of its own destiny. Levinas is critical of what he regards as the supreme virility of Heidegger’s Dasein, and offers

instead an account of subjectivity that remains open to the other, an account that privileges alterity over sameness, responsibility over freedom, infinity over totality. Rather than becoming a ground for the spontaneous or free action of a resolute Dasein, death retains an essential mystery for Levinas, remaining ungraspable, unknowable, and refractory to light. The future retains a genuine novelty of alterity that sets it apart from any present that can be mastered, or from Dasein's authentic realization of its own truth through the anticipation of finitude in anxiety. Levinas says, "This future is neither the Aristotelian germ (less than being, a lesser being) nor the Heideggerian possibility which constitutes being itself, but transforms the relation with the future into a power of the subject. Both my own and non-mine, a possibility of myself but also a possibility of the other, of the Beloved, my future does not enter into the logical essence of the possible. The relation with such a future, irreducible to the power over possibles, we shall call fecundity" (TI 267; Tel 245). Through fecundity, across generations, the privilege of the constant, self-identical, and masterful I breaks up, as the child offers the possibility of a new beginning that escapes every project I might have for him.

Levinas seems to offer a philosophy that is other-oriented, generous, and which prioritizes the ethical relation as one that is not chosen, but through which I am elected: he seems to break the hold of the subject of mastery, knowledge, and control.<sup>27</sup> His philosophy thus appears to share in common several affinities with feminism. The problem is that, on closer inspection, Levinas's version of alterity is permeated with a conceptual metaphors that revolves around paternity, filiality, and fraternity by reinscribing the most traditional and patriarchal of Judaically inspired assumptions about the privilege of the father and his relation to the son, and the subordination of the feminine to the properly ethical and infinite relation. Rather than providing a potential ally for feminists, he seems to endorse a position that is deeply problematic for women. The transcendence of the ethical relation as Levinas presents it occurs on the basis of and at the expense of the feminine, which serves as the ground and condition of ethics, but which is itself excluded from the ethical. How then, if at all, can Levinas have anything of value to offer feminism? How can we rigorously follow all the nuances and complexity with which Levinas invests the feminine without foreclosing the issue of its political implications?

Even if his own conception of the ethical relation is interwoven with heavily patriarchal assumptions, there might be a way of reworking this relation that liberates it from its patriarchal baggage. While it might seem that his notion of the feminine and of materiality of the corporeal offer the most obvious sites in Levinas's philosophy for a productive rethinking along feminist lines, I will suggest that in fact it is to his notion of time that feminists can more readily turn. My claim is not that Levinas's notion of time is inherently feminist, nor that his notions of the feminine and the body



are irrelevant to feminist appropriations of Levinas, but rather that in order to see what is at stake in Levinas's conception of bodies, we need to also understand his conception of time, and further that Levinas's understanding of time can be developed in a way that helps to avoid the problems that soon emerge in feminist appropriations which confine themselves to the apparently more obvious resources in his philosophy.

Ewa Ziarek argues that "The most productive engagement between Levinas's ethics and feminism can occur in the context of the ethical interpretation of embodiment."<sup>28</sup> I agree, as Ziarek goes on to say, that "Even though this possibility is never realized in Levinas's own work, and even though his own conception of eros and femininity remains entangled in both patriarchal and metaphysical traditions," Levinas's exploration of bodily materiality "enables the elaboration of the ethical significance of flesh, and, by extension, opens a possibility of an ethics of eros."<sup>29</sup> As Ziarek also acknowledges, Levinas "suspends the 'virile and heroic' conception of masculinity in the Western philosophical tradition, by exposing the masculine subject to the constriction of embodiment, passivity of aging, vulnerability and passion," but fails to address "[w]hat the feminine side might look like in the light of Levinas's ethics liberated from the restrictions of patriarchal thought."<sup>30</sup> I suggest that a careful engagement of Levinas's critique of Heidegger's temporality will allow us to see how Levinas's discourse of the feminine functions as a critique of Heidegger, and thus serves as a corrective to what Levinas sees as Heidegger's markedly virile and heroic *Dasein*.<sup>31</sup> We can thereby begin to articulate what the feminine might look like, liberated from patriarchy.

In the absence of a thorough engagement with Levinas's notion of time, it is hard to avoid confirming Simone de Beauvoir's complaint that Levinas ends up reducing the feminine to alterity in a way that replays a very traditional trope of Western metaphysics, enclosing corporeity within immanence and excluding it from transcendence.<sup>32</sup> It is after all paternity that breaks the mold of the heroic subject of self-mastery for Levinas. Paternity is offered as a relation that opens onto infinity, and it is the figure of the son that completes the meaning of responsibility, through a paternal election that effects a break with the knowing subject, whose choice is spontaneously and freely determined. As Kelly Oliver says, "In relation to his son, who is both himself and not himself, the father discovers his own subjectivity. As he realizes that his son is distinct, a stranger, he discovers that he too is distinct, even a stranger to himself. Paternity challenges what Levinas calls the 'virile' subject that always returns to itself, the subject of the 'I can' of traditional phenomenology."<sup>33</sup> As Oliver goes on to argue, for Levinas, "paternity opens onto infinity because it is a relationship with an absolute other in which the I survives. The I survives because paternity is also a relationship with the same." Donna Brody makes the same point when she says that Levinas "writes, controversially, 'I do not *have* my child. I *am* in some way my child'

(TO 91; TA 81). The caress is fecund: ideally it issues in the child. In this way the father, at least, manages to be both himself and other than himself. The mother does not appear to have a relation to transcendence. Levinas talks of the child as a son, not a daughter. A momentous biological essentialism is at work: the principle of identity and difference—necessary as opening onto the subject's relation to infinity—is reserved to the male sex.<sup>34</sup> Oliver suggests that in one way Levinas's notion of paternal election offers an alternative to traditional notions of paternity, but in another way it is continuous with them.<sup>35</sup> It departs, for example, from the Freudian notion of the father-son relationship, as "a virile struggle for recognition in which the son must kill the father in order to inherit his recognition, designation, and power."<sup>36</sup> For Levinas, as Oliver says, "The father chooses the son after he has had no choice. His love *elects* this particular child in his uniqueness as the loved one, the one meant to be. In this regard, Levinas suggests that all love for another person must approach paternal love insofar as that love elects the loved one from among all the others."<sup>37</sup> By presenting paternity as a relation of love which respects the other as unique, Levinas overcomes the idea that the son must contest the authority of the father in order for his own identity to be recognized and sanctioned. For Levinas, paternity is no longer based on the law, and filiality is no longer based on the guilt of patricide, but rather the paternal relation is one of generosity and infinite love. Levinas's idea of paternity nevertheless rejoins the tradition, Oliver suggests, because it "is founded in the masculine identity passed down from father to son."<sup>38</sup> This identity excludes the body, which is entrusted to the feminine. Thus, "like the traditional notions of paternity that link father and law" through virile struggles, according to Oliver, "Levinas's notion of paternal election masks a fear of an abject paternal body. Like the traditional notions of paternity that evacuate the paternal body, Levinas's notion of paternity presents us with another version of the patriarchal story of an absent father."<sup>39</sup> Oliver again: "In Levinas we see once again the body identified with maternity and the social identified with paternity at the expense of the body."<sup>40</sup>

The structure of paternity is indispensable to Levinas's philosophy. Its importance cannot be underestimated. It is the linchpin that enables him to claim to have broken from Eleatic being.<sup>41</sup> It is also the structure through which the alterity of time is accomplished. Paternity "articulates the time of the absolutely other" (TI 269; TeI 246), says Levinas. One could go even further, and claim that paternity is in fact what renders Levinas's philosophy intelligible. Without it, Levinas's philosophy might well retreat into the realm of negative theology and succumb to all the problems that Derrida has so forcefully articulated.<sup>42</sup> What makes the notion of paternity so crucial for Levinas is that it provides the sameness without which Levinas's philosophy of radical alterity could find no expression, no ground, and no coherence. The father recognizes himself in the son, and through this

recognition discovers himself anew, is brought back to himself, but in a return that transfigures him from a masterful, powerful subject to an impotent, responsive father.<sup>43</sup>

But if paternity is essential for the coherence of Levinas's project, the price that is paid for that coherence is the incoherence of the feminine, from which, it could be said, paternity borrows without any repayment or acknowledgment. The scrupulous determination Levinas exhibits elsewhere to observe the deviation between speaking for myself and speaking for others deserts him when it comes to the feminine. The privilege that allows Levinas to assume his masculinity in a way that leaves unquestioned his prerogative to speak as a man also enables him to elide the question of repayment—an elision that seems to be justified by the ethical character of his philosophy, which presents itself as exemplary in its call for sacrifice, and yet retreats from stipulating itself as a call to others. By usurping the generosity of the feminine, appropriating it for paternity, and suggesting that it be a universal model, Levinas never has to confront the necessity to which his own philosophy has recourse for its very intelligibility: the necessity by which the saying turns into a said, by which the ethical relation occurs in a political world, by which there is never only one other, but there are always multiple others—in short, the necessity that the infinite obligation to another requires the checks and balances of justice. Were Levinas to think through the relation that the feminine has to the political in his work, he would be forced to acknowledge that the one excludes the other, reciprocally, necessarily, and inevitably. To put the point most prosaically: Levinas exempts himself from the responsibility of ever taking account of the fact that the infinite ethical obligation for which his philosophy calls, serving as a reminder, rather than a ethical program, is one which a history of oppression has repeatedly demanded of women.<sup>44</sup> Women are therefore left with the dilemma that we either take Levinas at his word (see TI 155; TeI 129) when he suggests that the feminine includes all the possibilities of the transcendent relation with the other—in which case we can identify with the ethical relation of the face-to-face as the mainstay of Levinas's philosophy, which is nevertheless figured as masculine by Levinas himself, and in doing so we erase the very significance of the feminine as alterity. Or we identify with the feminine as mysterious, ineffable other, bringing men to the brink of ethics, before retreating into hiding, as the feminine withdraws from the categories of things in the world, light, knowledge, and philosophy—in which case we repeat the gestures of generosity that have been women's lot since time immemorial, and we rejoin a tradition that excludes women from the serious public realm of politics, which has always been a masculine affair, and confines us to the private, corporeal, domestic realm, to watch over the children, to take care of men's needs, to provide solace and love and sustenance, to give a break, interrupt the monotony, create a delightful lapse in being.<sup>45</sup>

By focusing on the peculiar conditional status that the feminine has, I want to suggest a third alternative to these two positions, which seem to amount either to a return to the philosophy of recognition that Levinas wants to put into question, or to a failure to take seriously how to read Levinas as a feminist. I want to inflect Levinas's notion of the feminine more rigorously in the direction of the temporal, and to suggest thereby that the feminine remains the privileged unthought in Levinas's philosophy, aporetically organizing his philosophy in a way that throws into question the adequacy of transcendental modes of thinking what conditionality means.

### Dwelling with the feminine in 'Totality and Infinity'

"Representation is a pure present".

(TI 125)

Is the feminine to be regarded as the condition of the properly ethical relation, and if so, how is its conditional status to be thought? Is the feminine to be thought as somehow foundational, as a ground, as the transcendental condition of ethics? Or must it rather be thought in terms of the series of terms that Levinas engages as his analysis moves along, terms such as "accomplishment," "constitution," and "condition," terms which operate in a way that demands that we rethink our usual expectations of philosophical method? To understand the sense in which the preoriginal welcome is feminine, and to understand if and how it conditions the ethical, requires that we attend to the relation between enjoyment and representation, and the complex structure of conditionality that governs that interrelation. In turn, this will require us to follow, or to map out, the temporality of the interiority or ipseity to which Levinas refers as he describes its moments, and to gain an appreciation of how the body figures in this articulation of separation, or the movements of the same. Before turning to the task of elaborating the way in which Levinas calls into question our usual understanding of philosophical method—a challenge in virtue of which whatever conditional status the feminine has must be thought—and before turning to the ways in which Levinas's notions of temporality and the body inform what is said of the feminine, I want to pause to acknowledge an intervention by Derrida that bears on the question of how to think the feminine in Levinas's philosophy.

In *Adieu to Emmanuel Levinas*, Derrida suggests that whatever else can be said of the feminine, a certain indisputable privilege of the feminine as the welcome before all welcoming is not to be forgotten. He says (*Adieu* 44–45):

whatever we might speak about later, and whatever we might say about it, we would do well to remember, even if silently, that this thought of welcome, there at the opening of ethics, is indeed marked by sexual

difference. Such sexual difference will never again be neutralized. The absolute, absolutely originary welcome, indeed, the pre-original welcome, the welcoming *par excellence*, is feminine: it takes place in a place that cannot be appropriated, in an open "interiority" whose hospitality the master or owner receives before himself then wishing to give it.

In exhorting us to remember that the preoriginal welcome is indelibly marked as feminine and in suggesting that this marking of sexual difference will never be erased, Derrida focuses his attention on the following passage from *Totality and Infinity* (Derrida's emphasis):<sup>46</sup>

The home that founds possession is not a possession in the same sense as the movable goods it can collect and keep. It is possessed because it already and henceforth is *hospitable for its owner*. This refers us to its essential interiority, and to the inhabitant that inhabits it *before every inhabitant, the welcoming one par excellence, welcoming in itself—the feminine being*.

Let me make two further observations about how this passage is taken up by Derrida. First, having already gestured toward whatever else could be said of the feminine (a gesture that anticipates and defuses in advance the significance of "whatever we might speak about later"), Derrida does concede, later, that while the feminine claims a certain privilege as the pre-eminent welcome, it is through paternity that a relation with the infinite is maintained. Referring to the concluding pages of *Totality and Infinity* Derrida says, "Where the feminine being seemed to be the figure of the 'welcoming one par excellence,' the father now becomes the infinite host or the host of the infinite" (*Adieu* 94).

Second, Derrida indicates two disparate readings of this passage. One would "make of this text a sort of feminist manifesto. For this text defines the welcome *par excellence*, the welcome or welcoming of absolute, absolutely originary, or even pre-originary hospitality, nothing less than the pre-ethical origin of ethics, on the basis of femininity" (*Adieu* 44). Notwithstanding Derrida's defusing of the paternal function that Levinas will go on to endorse, which in fact amounts to nothing less than a complete reversal, a thorough overturning, an exchange or substitution of the feminine face for the masculine, Derrida does not want to choose between a feminist reading, and another reading, one that ignores concerns about the "classical androcentrism" (*Adieu* 44) of Levinas's understanding of femininity. Derrida asks, "Need one choose here between two incompatible readings, between an androcentric hyperbole and a feminist one? Is there a place for such a choice in an ethics? And in justice? In law? In politics? Nothing is less certain" (*Adieu* 44). By refusing to acknowledge any certainty about whether a place can be made for choosing between a reading that would make of

Levinas a spokesperson for feminism, and one that would criticize him for his traditionally androcentric views, has Derrida by default thrown his lot in with the privilege he, as a man, is free to assume? Perhaps there is no imperative for him to make such a choice. Or is he rather raising the question of the possibility of safeguarding a place for a feminist critique of Levinas? Perhaps he is pointing out that there can be no safe place for such a reading to situate itself, that no dwelling, no domicile, no home can protect such a critique, because wherever it might reside, wherever it might make a home for itself, inhabiting a domain that it can make its own, such a place is itself never exempt from critique. Any place that feminism marks out for itself is not exempt from calling itself into question. Feminism itself, far from being immune from the tendency to colonize, must be called to account for itself. I will return to this issue.

### Philosophy as critique

"To philosophize," says Levinas, "is to trace freedom back to what lies before it, to disclose the investiture that liberates freedom from the arbitrary" (TI 84–85; TeI 57). The prerogative of knowledge as critique or philosophy "consists in being able to put itself in question, in penetrating beneath its own condition . . . , in taking charge of the very condition that supports it and that supports even this very act of taking charge" (TI 85; TeI 57). The movement of philosophy is thus a reversion to the condition that makes it possible, a kind of inverse movement that tries to uncover its own origins, but which discovers as it does so that its freedom is in question. Since it is "in the face of the other and under his authority" that this "critical attitude . . . is produced" as a "calling into question of oneself" (TI 81; TeI 53), and since knowing is posited "as the tracing back beyond the condition to the other that founds" (TI 88; TeI 60), Levinas departs "from a whole philosophical tradition that sought the foundation of the self in the self" (TI 88; TeI 60). The other is "more primordial than everything that takes place in me" (TI 87; TeI 59).

Levinas seeks not to displace knowing as such, only to divest us of our tendency to assume that objectivity offers the ultimate transcendence, and to affirm that justice is "the condition for knowing" (TI 90; TeI: 62). Nor does he challenge the supremacy of reason as such, but rather he denies that it issues from an impersonal ground. In this he remains true to the aspiration of intellectualism.<sup>47</sup> Similarly, representation retains a certain privilege for Levinas, whose implicit target is Heidegger when he observes that "The ancient thesis that puts representation at the basis of every practical behavior—taxed with intellectualism—is too hastily discredited" (TI 94; TeI 67).<sup>48</sup> Yet this privilege of representation is not absolute, because representation is not without its conditions. (See TI 126; TeI 98–99). We have seen that Levinas takes philosophy to be the task of tracing itself

back to its own conditions. Among the conditions for representation is what Levinas calls the "dwelling"—a condition that "cannot be forgotten . . . even if representation is a privileged condition, absorbing its condition. For it absorbs it only after the event, a posteriori" (TI 153; TeI 126–27). We shall have to return to the temporality indicated by this "after the event." Contemplation and representation "constitute, after the event, the dwelling itself," although they also "presuppos[e] the event of dwelling" and "recollection in the intimacy of the home" (TI 153; TeI 126–27). Since "woman is the condition for recollection" (TI 155; TeI 129), representation also presupposes woman.

### Accomplishment, constitution, conditioning

In his elaboration of terms such as "sensibility," "enjoyment," and "nourishment," Levinas seeks to articulate another plane or order than that of experience, representation, or thought. While recognizing that this dimension of "living from" the elements takes place only in a world that is already permeated with representation, already constituted by thought, and that we can have access to it only through language, and in this sense alimentionation occurs in the midst of the intentional movement of representation, Levinas nonetheless insists that "sensibility" designates a dimension of existence to which the very thought that thinks it is inadequate. This excess, this overflowing of representation, this ecstasis of enjoyment that is somehow above and beyond being, according to Levinas, is what Husserlian phenomenology cannot admit in its pretension to render the world completely knowable or intelligible by reducing it to noemata. "The thesis that every intentionality is either a representation or founded on a representation" is one that Levinas describes as an "obsession" for Husserl (see TI 122; TeI 95). Levinas is critical of the privileged role that representation or constitution plays for Husserl, whereby the subject comes to know the object by identifying alterity with the same, or by reducing otherness to itself, such that the object appears as "a product of consciousness" even if it is "distinct from consciousness" (TI 123; TeI 96). Levinas's critique is based not on a wish to replace Husserl's intellectualism, nor on a desire to undercut the claims of transcendental philosophy as such, but rather on an attempt to displace "the primacy of the same, which marks the direction of and defines the whole of Western philosophy" (TI 45; TeI 16) and "to contest the ineradicable conviction of every philosophy that objective knowledge is the ultimate relation of transcendence" (TI 89; TeI 62). At the heart of this critique is Levinas's acknowledgment of the necessity to think through the temporality of representation. Levinas points to what he calls the "illusion" of representation, a power that invests it with its force and yet which is based on "forgetting" (TI 125; TeI 98). "At the very moment of representation the I is not *marked* by the past, but *utilizes* it as a represented and objective

element. . . . Representation is a pure present. . . . It is void of time, interpreted as eternity” (TI 125; TeI 98). Levinas does not want to repeat the error that representation produces (and indeed relies upon and derives its power from), the illusion that the world can be adequately thought as if it were an unconditioned moment, as if it were self-contained and self-sufficient, as if it did not emerge from a past with a history, and as if it was not about to be superseded by a new moment, a future which could completely alter the destiny of the knowledge that represents itself as instantaneous, as absolute, and as unassailable. “[W]e are far from thinking that one starts with representation as a non-conditioned condition!” he exclaims (TI 126; TeI 98).

In order not to repeat the error of a philosophy of representation, which imagines its subject as sovereign and answerable to nothing outside itself, Levinas needs to think through the conditions of representation. The task is complicated not only because there is more than one condition of representation, and because the senses in which these conditions condition representation differ, but also (and partly as a consequence of the fact that there is more than one sense of conditioning at play here) because to think something as a condition is to reduce it to a meaning, and the sense in which representation is rooted in something other than a representation is precisely the sense in which representation finds itself conditioned by a surplus that it did not produce.<sup>49</sup> To sort through the labyrinthine relationship between constitution and conditioning in Levinas’s analysis, we can begin by asking what it means to say that “representation is conditioned by life, but that this conditioning could be reversed after the event” (TI 169; TeI 144). Recall that, while not refuting that knowledge is the legitimate aspiration of philosophy (as he is sometimes understood to do), Levinas sees the purpose of such knowledge as the calling into question of the arbitrary freedom of the self as the same. By asking about the peculiar intentionality of enjoyment—an intentionality that reverses the movement of constitution, in which the subject makes the world into an object, conforming it to an idea which seems to have come from itself—Levinas asks after a conditioning that “is produced in the midst of this relation between representing and represented, constituting and constituted” (TI 128; TeI 99). The fact that this conditioning is “produced in the midst of” the process of representation indicates both that it is a conditioning that occurs, rather than being known (and thus mastered and controlled), and that even as conditioning conforms to the intentional, constituting movement of representation in one way—it reduces the otherness of the world to the sameness of me—it departs from it in another way. There is a turning back, a reversion, an inversion, a change of direction. It is not just that I constitute the world in my enjoyment of it; it is also that it constitutes me, or, as Levinas prefers to say (since it is less theoretical, and more at the level of sensibility), it nourishes me. In this sense, it precedes me; it is there already, before I bring my powers to bear on it. Levinas says (TI 129; TeI 102):



The world I live in is not simply the counterpart or the contemporary of thought and its constitutive freedom, but a conditioning and an antecedence. The world I constitute nourishes me and bathes me. It is aliment and "medium" [*"milieu"*]. The intentionality aiming at the exterior changes direction in the course of its very aim by becoming interior to the exteriority it constitutes, somehow comes from the point to which it goes, recognizing itself past in its future, lives from what it thinks.

As we saw, among the conditions for representation Levinas includes the dwelling, which, he says, "cannot be forgotten [*ne saurait être oubliée*]" (TI 153; TeI 126–27). The formulation is worth pausing for. To say that the dwelling cannot, should not, be forgotten is also to acknowledge that it is forgotten, and that (like Heidegger's question of Being) it needs to be remembered. Indeed we have seen above that the power of representation rests precisely upon the illusion of forgetting where it comes from, and presents its knowledge as if it were purified of any history or any legacy, as simply present. In fact, Levinas says, "the dwelling cannot be forgotten among the conditions for representation, even if representation is a privileged conditioned, absorbing its condition" (TI 153; TeI 126–27), thereby immediately conceding that although dwelling must not be forgotten, the privileged status of representation makes us forget it, by absorbing the very condition that facilitated it, allowed it to emerge, or (if we avoid thinking this phrase in the strictly transcendental mode, which reduces it to a thought) made it possible. We might think then that dwelling makes representation possible in the sense that it provides the concrete conditions which allow recollection, critical reflection, to occur.<sup>50</sup> But even this way of putting it proves untenable, since it would seem to reintroduce a straightforward opposition between the concrete, physical, material, or bodily side of life on the one hand, and the theoretical, abstract life of thought and representation. While in some ways Levinas does return to certain aspects of the Cartesian dichotomy between body and mind that underlies this opposition, he does not reproduce the dichotomy with any exactitude. We might say that the work performed by Levinas's notion of the feminine measures the extent to which he deviates both from Descartes and from Heidegger. Levinas takes his distance from Descartes's categorical distinction between the physical extension of matter characteristic of bodies on the one hand and the thought that characterizes the mind on the other hand, yet he does not want to follow Heidegger, whose notion of worldhood glosses over the distinction between the physical and the mental.<sup>51</sup> He departs from Heidegger precisely by retaining some aspects of the Cartesian differentiation of body and mind, even while not wanting to reproduce the distinction with any exactitude, neither adhering to Descartes's metaphysical commitments in this regard, nor maintaining the distinction as categorical. In this respect, Levinas's return to Descartes's understanding of bodies resembles Lacan's.

Levinas retains what he calls “the profound insight Descartes had when he refused to sense data the status of clear and distinct ideas, ascribed them to the body, and relegated them to the useful” (TI 130; TeI 103). According to Levinas, the “profundity of the Cartesian philosophy of the sensible consists . . . in affirming the irrational character of sensation, an idea forever without clarity or distinctness, belonging to the order of the useful and not of the true” (TI 135; TeI 109). Like Kant, who also separates sensibility from understanding, Descartes affirms that sensibility is not “situated on the plane of representation” (TI 136; TeI 109). Levinas calls the order of sensibility that of enjoyment, rather than experience (TI 137; TeI 110). He says “the sensitive being, the body, concretizes this *way of being*, which consists in finding a condition in what, in other respects, can appear as an object of thought, as simply constituted” (TI 136; TeI 109).

To see what is at stake in Levinas’s retrieval of the essentially irrational status Descartes attributed to sensibility, I want to consider the sense in which a reversal of the movement of constitution takes place in the intentionality of “living from . . .” and to explore how “the simultaneity of hunger and food constitutes the paradisaical initial condition of enjoyment” (TI 136; TeI 110). For Levinas the body appears not, as it does for Descartes, “as an object among other objects, but as the very regime in which separation holds sway” (TI 163; TeI 137). The body is thus not wholly passive, as the classic interpretation of Descartes has it, nor is its active dimension circumscribed by Heideggerian equipmentality, which “presupposes a primordial *hold* on things, possession” without recognizing “the being established at the threshold of an interiority the dwelling makes possible” (TI 163; TeI 137). “In the paradisaical enjoyment, timeless and carefree, the distinction between activity and passivity is undone in agreeableness [*agrément*]” (TI 163; TeI 137).<sup>52</sup> There is a “primordial equivocation” that exists as the body (TI 164; TeI 138), so that “Life is a body, not only lived body [*corps propre*], where its self-sufficiency emerges, but a cross-roads of physical forces, body-effect” (TI 164; TeI 138). Corporeal existence is not simply independent; rather it “affirms its independence in the happy dependence of need” (TI 165; TeI 139). The paradox that Levinas had earlier understood as a freedom that is already responsible for itself is reworked here as the indigence of the body that is nevertheless capable and resourceful, with the ability not only of satisfying its needs, but of being happy in its enjoyment of food, walking, fresh air, or drinking coffee. “The body indigent and naked” changes or reverses the play of constitution (TI 129; TeI 102).

Dwelling both makes possession possible and opens onto suffering, risk, and betrayal. At any moment the security of the dwelling can be removed, through illness, misfortune, but also through the Other who contests my enjoyment, my happiness, and my right to possessions. The dwelling allows the being at home with itself a delay and postponement. “To be conscious is precisely to have time” (TI 166; TeI 140), says Levinas. If we

wonder how this accords with the statement that to be a body is to have time, we must return to the idea of the body as primary or original equivocation. Levinas also says that "The ambiguity of the body is *consciousness*" (TI 165; TeI 139). The dwelling provides for representation an ordering of the fluid rhythm of "living from . . .". Being at home with itself, a subject recollects itself, finds a respite and a break from its daily excursions, finds the time and has the luxury to gather itself up and come back to itself. As Levinas says, "[t]he extraterritoriality of a home conditions the very possession of my body" (TI 162; TeI 136).

Representation is conditioned by life, and it absorbs its condition but does not negate it or transmute it into a higher truth, leaving no residue. This is not a Hegelian sublation; there is an excess to the life that one enjoys which is unaccounted for by rationality or representation, which can justify this life or apologize for it, after the fact, but cannot empty it of its content. One can feel satisfied in the contentment of enjoyment, or one can feel ashamed of it, but one cannot alter the fact of it.

Dwelling frames and enables the being capable of satisfying its needs and able to be happy in the enjoyment of the life it thereby lives. If dwelling is among the conditions of representation, there is another condition that must be considered. The idea of infinity conditions everything that is said in *Totality and Infinity*, in that Levinas affirms its "philosophical primacy" (TI 26; TeI xiv). It is as infinite that the Other interrupts the presumption of Western philosophy that the self must be founded in the self. Levinas says, "To posit knowing as the very existing of the creature, as the tracing back beyond the condition to the other that founds, is to separate oneself from a whole philosophical tradition that sought the foundation of the self in the self, outside of heteronomous opinions" (TI 88; TeI 60). Contrasting representation and the welcoming of the Other, Levinas says, "The total freedom of the same in representation has a positive condition in the other that is not something represented, but is the Other" (TI 126; TeI 98). This Other commands my attention, yet, like the feminine other in the dwelling, who can (but should not) be forgotten, the infinity and transcendence of the Other can be forgotten. Levinas says, "the possibility of this forgetting is necessary for separation" (TI 181; TeI 156). The feminine can be forgotten because it is discreet (see TI 170; TeI 145) and silent; but how can the idea of infinity be forgotten? Because of atheism (see TI 181; TeI 156), according to Levinas, or the idea that a free being can be created. In order to represent things "in themselves, that is, represent to them to myself, refuse enjoyment and possession, I must know how *to give* what I possess. . . . But for this I must encounter the indiscreet face of the Other that calls me into question" (TI 171; TeI 145). The Other, says Levinas, "imposes himself . . . as more primordial than everything that takes place in me" (TI 87; TeI 59). The Other claims an ethical priority, and marks the end of my powers of mastery, because his "exceptional presence is inscribed

in the ethical impossibility of killing him" (TI 87; TeI 59). Yet there remains the "possibility of injustice and radical egoism, the possibility of accepting the rules of the game, but cheating," which is in fact the "very condition of man" (TI 173; TeI 148).

Contemplation comes "after" the dwelling: that is, "after the suspension of the chaotic and thus independent being of the element, and after the encounter of the Other who calls in question possession itself" (TI 163; TeI 137). The problem I want to focus on here is what sense can be given to this coming "after" or following on from both the dwelling and the Other. In other words, in what sense does the dwelling, and the feminine welcome that gives shape to life as being at home with oneself, condition representation, and in what sense is the infinite Other a condition of representation?

### The temporality of representation: after the event

"A movement radically different from thought is manifested when the constitution by thought finds its condition in what it has freely welcomed or refused, when the represented turns into a past that had not traversed the present of representation, as an absolute past not receiving its meaning from memory" (TI 130; TeI 103). This "absolute past" or "unrepresentable antiquity" is the "world which precedes me" (TI 137; TeI 111). A "relation of myself with myself is accomplished when I *stand [me tiens]*" in this world (TI 137; TeI 111), and "[d]welling is the very mode of *maintaining oneself [se tenir]*" (TI 37; TeI 7). We have already pointed out that representation rests on the illusion that there is nothing outside itself, that it is answerable only to itself. But for Levinas, "The represented, the present, is a *fact*, already belonging to the past" (TI 130; TeI 103). Levinas is at pains to point out that representation is not without conditions, among which he includes on the one hand the dwelling, and the feminine or woman who conditions the dwelling, and on the other hand the infinitely Other, whom I must encounter in order to "see things in themselves" and "to know how *to give* what I possess" (TI 171; TeI 145).

The model that most clearly informs Levinas's understanding of the temporality by which the subject discovers itself after the fact in relation to the Other is Descartes's idea of infinity. Just as the Cartesian I finds itself to have had in it the idea of God as infinite and perfect, while it is itself finite and imperfect, so Levinas finds that "I must have been in relation with something I do not live from. This event is the relation with the Other who welcomes me in the Home, the discreet presence of the Feminine" (TI 170; TeI 145). Separation is thus produced, but it is not known without my encounter with the infinitely Other, who "paralyzes possession, which he contests by his epiphany in the face. . . . the untraversable infinity of the negation of murder is announced by th[e] dimension of height, where the Other comes to me concretely in the ethical impossibility of commit[t]ing murder"

(TI 171; TeI 146). What, then, is the relation between the discreet feminine presence and the indiscreet infinite presence that forbids murder? Levinas never articulates it as such, except inasmuch as he makes clear that the dwelling at home with oneself that is the domain of the feminine is one that I must "be able to free myself from" (TI 170; TeI 146) in order to "welcome the Other" (TI 171; TeI 146). The feminine is thereby relegated to the same, while the subject who has benefited from being in relation to it "is ashamed of its naiveté" and "discovers itself as a violence" (TI 171; TeI 146). Is it ashamed of the feminine? Again, this is left unclear by Levinas—who does, however, tell us that the "discretion" of the feminine "includes all the possibilities of the transcendent relationship with the Other" (TI 153; TeI 129), without providing us with many clues as to what this could mean. The gentleness, grace, and radiance of the feminine face that provides the first welcome is meant to cut across formal and dialectical logic, according to Levinas (see TI 150–51; TeI 124–25). But how exactly does it function? The feminine would seem to provide an implicit model for the giving that the I can come to know only through the infinitely Other who does not welcome me, but challenges me from above. Alison Ainley has pointed out that both Kant and Levinas draw on the feminine in similar ways, by seeing it as an initial, implicit, but informal ethical imperative.<sup>53</sup>

Let us return to the Cartesian model of the idea of infinity, which the reflective I discovers itself to have understood after the fact, to the way in which the infinite is contained in the finite, or the idea of God's existence as somehow exceeding the I who has the idea. One can see that the infinite is there before the path of contemplation or meditation is undertaken by the I who already has access to the idea of the infinite, even if it has not fully comprehended what this means. In this sense, the idea of God precedes the I that thinks it, and overflows the very thought that tries to contain it. The philosopher traces back the conditions that must have preceded him at every moment. Just as the Cartesian reflective I recuperates everything that can be thought except the meaning of the idea of the infinite, but cannot recuperate the materiality of the physical world, so Levinas's I is confronted by the encounter of the Other who infinitely escapes my powers, and also lives a life of sensibility which might be constituted and represented after it has been lived, but which retains a sense that is impervious to the thought that thinks it. It is irreducible. Levinas says that the "aptitude to keep [se tenir] to the immediate is not reducible to anything else. . . . Sensibility is not a thought unaware of itself. To sense is precisely to be sincerely content with what is sensed, to enjoy, to refuse the unconscious prolongations, to be thoughtless. . . . to maintain oneself at home with oneself" (TI 138–39; TeI 112).<sup>54</sup>

Levinas develops a formal comparison between representation and enjoyment in terms of their different relations to temporality. Representation is characterized as total presence. The same determines the other without

being determined by it (see TI 124; TeI 97).<sup>55</sup> “The same in relating itself to the other refuses what is exterior to its own instant” (TI 125; TeI 98). Thus, “Every anteriority of the given is reducible to the instantaneity of thought and, simultaneous with it, arises in the present. It thereby takes on meaning. To represent is not only to render present ‘anew’; it is to reduce to the present an actual perception which flows on. To represent is not to reduce a past fact to an actual image but to reduce to the instantaneity of thought everything that seems independent of it; it is in this that representation is constitutive” (TI 127; TeI 100). The constitutive power of representation lies in its reduction of past and future to an intelligible instant, or a “pure present” that is “void of time, interpreted as eternity” (TI 125; TeI 98). By contrast, the “intentionality of enjoyment . . . consists in holding on to the exteriority which the transcendental method involved in representation suspends. To hold on to exteriority is not simply equivalent to affirming the world, but is to posit oneself in it corporeally. The body is the elevation, but also the whole weight of position” (TI 127; TeI 100).

Whereas in representation the same determines the other but the other does not determine the same, in enjoyment the “same both determines the other while being determined by it” (TI 128; TeI 101), but not reciprocally. Levinas uses the term “living from . . .” to designate this plane or “the way in which the same is determined by the other,” a way which “is brought about by the body whose essence is to *accomplish* my position on the earth” (TI 128; TeI 101). Before we can fully grasp what is at stake in this accomplishment, we need to recall that when Levinas stipulates the difference between representation, as determining the other without being determined by it, and enjoyment, where the same is determined by the other even as it determines the other, the comparison Levinas draws is merely formal. That is, the comparison holds only when both representation and enjoyment are considered detached from their conditions. (See TI 126; TeI 99.) The formal comparison is complicated in part because one of the conditions of enjoyment is in fact representation, and because representation itself is conditioned by enjoyment, or “representation is conditioned by life” (TI 169; TeI 144). So although the intentionality of enjoyment reverses that of representation, “the body naked and indigent” is also “*conditioned* by its own representation of the world” (TI 127; TeI 100). Thus, representation reverts into the life that conditions it. (See TI 127 and TeI 100; TI 169 and TeI 143–44.) In turn, representations themselves sustain life, and we live from them. The intentionality of the “world I live in” is thus both a “conditioning and an antecedence” (TI 129; TeI 102), in the sense that “I welcome” sensible objects “without thinking them” (TI 137; TeI 110–11); yet, as we saw, “conditioning is produced in the midst of the relation between representing and represented” (TI 128; TeI 101), and in this sense its conditioning is already caught up in constitution. Thus Levinas can say that the intentionality of “living from . . .” “changes direction in the course of its very aim by becoming

interior to the exteriority it constitutes, somehow comes from the point to which it goes, recognizing itself past in its future" (TI 129; TeI 102).

The order of sensibility as a mode of enjoyment recollected in the dwelling circumvents the present of representation, and in doing so, it engages with temporality in a way that does not conform to the model of mastery, domination, and conquest. Even if it is inextricably bound up with the constitutive time of representation, which reduces the past and future to a present, the intentionality of enjoyment also undercuts its virile movement, and thus offers a way of thinking time that is open to alterity. Levinas says, "A movement radically different from thought is manifested when the constitution by thought finds its condition in what it has freely welcomed or refused, when the represented turns into a past that had not traversed the present of representation, as an absolute past not receiving its meaning from memory" (TI 130; TeI 103).

To take account of the peculiar conditionality of the feminine, the way in which the feminine both conditions ethics and yet cannot be contained by the thought that thinks its status as a condition, must we say that there are two versions of welcome in *Totality and Infinity*? Must we say that each is achieved or produced by a movement that Levinas calls accomplishment, or must we distinguish between two modes of accomplishing? One mode of welcoming would occur under the sign of the feminine, while the other would be under the auspices of the masculine. There would be the welcome of contentment, where a "relation of myself with myself is accomplished when I stand [me tiens] in the world which precedes me as an absolute unrepresentable antiquity" (TI 137; TeI 111). This first, feminine, welcome of the dwelling would be associated with materiality, sensibility, and the corporeal. The second, masculine, welcome would be the "welcoming of the other by the same" that is "concretely produced as . . . ethics that accomplishes the critical essence of knowledge" (TI 43; TeI 12).

Welcoming does not aim at the other as an object: it is not a thought; it is rather a way of the same's being determined by the other. Although the first, feminine, welcome is replicated by the second, and moreover the second, masculine, ethical, welcome takes place in virtue of the dwelling, the relation between the two is not clearly articulated by Levinas. This is, I suggest, because of the temporality that governs Levinas's thinking of the feminine. The dwelling, as that which is primarily enjoyed, rather than represented, cannot be thought strictly as a condition, which would reduce it to a thought. Is to think the feminine as a condition thus necessarily to destroy its openness to alterity, or its welcome, to reduce it to thematization, represent it as if it were a pure present, rather than an absolute past? And if it is, how is it that the exteriority of the Other that is accomplished in the face-to-face does not succumb to the same conversion into objectification, since it also "recedes from thematization" (TI 296; TeI 272)? The answer lies in the fact that the Other "expresses himself," and thus his presence "is not

reabsorbed into my vision" (TI 296; TeI 273). Here is where the symmetry between the feminine and the masculine welcome turns into an asymmetry. The one who welcomes in dwelling does not speak, and cannot attend her manifestation; and the distance she facilitates does not constitute a "dimension of height" (TI 127; TeI 273).

Must we say that the feminine that conditions the dwelling ultimately facilitates recollection, provides a delay and a postponement, remains unthought and unrepresented? And if the feminine is unthought, is it unthought in the same way that the Other infinitely escapes representation? The Other contests my powers, but the feminine welcomes. The Other calls me into question, but the feminine allows the appropriation of a domain for me. The Other requires that I think the condition of my life, but the feminine dwelling requires no thought; in fact it tends, as we have seen, to be forgotten. Can the feminine be thought only after the Other has made representation possible? But what would this "after" mean here, given that we are always already in the midst of representation, and others? To insist, as Derrida does in *Adieu*, that the third does not wait for the face, or to emphasize that the feminine is understood by Levinas not as outside language, only as excluded from the "transcendence of language" (A 37), does not solve all the problems raised by the temporality of the feminine. To the extent that Levinas reminds us of the feminine, even if he maintains it as a silent, discreet dimension, he has uncovered a tendency, regime, or way that is usually neglected, overlooked, and ignored by philosophers. The feminine facilitates sensibility as a way of "living from . . ." that runs counter to the mastery of representation, which puts the subject at the center of its world, reduces the object to noemata, reduces everything to the same. It thus offers what could be taken as a critique of the virile, masculine will to conquer. Yet, the "very possession that the welcome of the Home establishes" is what the I must free itself from (TI 170; TeI 145). To the extent that in his own philosophy the feminine remains subordinate to the ethical demands of the Other, Levinas seems to reiterate the classical trope of Western metaphysics. Not only does he associate the feminine with the home; he makes the two almost synonymous. He seems to disqualify the feminine from ethics as such, rejoining Hegel's attribution of the feminine to the private realm of the domestic, while the masculine principle is represented by the truly ethical, and therefore with the third party, the political, the public—with reason, with philosophy, with justice.

Let me pose some questions to Levinas: If there always has to be some being—whether this is a way or manner of being, a particular being, or the female sex—to create a dwelling, does this being have to be the same being over time? Is its identity fixed by its function? Or can the role of the feminine be performed by different identities at different times—in which case, what sense can be made of retaining the term "feminine"? Can Levinas's notion of diachrony help to make sense of such a suggestion? By divorcing the term



"feminine" from the empirical woman (insofar as he does so successfully), Levinas seems to point beyond a politics of identity. But in requiring that there be someone to perform the feminine function without clarifying if this function can be shared, Levinas seems to require relations of domination and submission, however these are parceled out between the sexes. Can alternative communities be envisaged without someone to facilitate the dwelling? Is there a place to think the conditions of representation outside the home? Such questions return us to Derrida's concern when he asks whether there can be a place for such questions in the realm of justice and politics. Derrida is right to suggest that the feminine in Levinas cannot be divorced from questions of national identity as they relate to the meaning accruing to the state of Israel. But perhaps the idea of the dwelling as refuge or exile that performs as a model for thinking Israel as a place for "political invention" (BV 194) marks the feminine as the privileged unthought of Levinas's philosophy.

### Notes

- 1 Levinas says, for example: "*Being* before the *existent*, ontology before metaphysics, is freedom (be it the freedom of theory) before justice. It is a movement within the same before obligation to the other. The terms must be reversed" (TI 47; TeI 17).
- 2 Emmanuel Levinas, *De l'existence à l'existant*, 2d ed. (Paris: J. Vrin, 1984), preface.
- 3 Levinas refers to Marion's *L'Idole et la Distance: Cinq études* (Paris: Grasset, 1989), and Marion responds in "A Note Concerning the Ontological Indifference," *Graduate Faculty Philosophy Journal*, 20.2–21.1 (1998): 25–40, esp. 26. This essay first appeared as "Note sur l'indifférence ontologique," in *Emmanuel Levinas: L'éthique comme philosophie première. Actes du Colloque de Cerisy-la-Salle 23 août–2 septembre 1986*, ed. Jean Greisch and Jacques Rolland (Paris: Editions du Cerf, 1993), pp. 47–62.
- 4 Marion, "A Note Concerning the Ontological Indifference" (above, n. 3), 26.
- 5 Ibid., 27.
- 6 Ibid., 28.
- 7 Ibid., 31.
- 8 See Jacques Rolland's essay in the 1982 edition of Levinas's *De l'évasion* (Montpellier: Fata Morgana, 1982), p. 49; and Jacques Derrida, "A Word of Welcome," in *Adieu to Emmanuel Levinas* (Paris: Galilée, 1997), p. 136 n. 10. Derrida already raises the question of how to think the relation between ethics and ontology in his earlier work, "Violence and Metaphysics" (in *Writing and Difference*, trans. A. Bass [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978], pp. 79–153) and "At This Moment in This Very Work Here I Am" (trans. R. Berezdevin, in *Rereading Levinas*, ed. R. Bernasconi and S. Critchley [Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991], pp. 11–48). See also Jean Greisch, "Ethics and Ontology: Some 'Hypocritical' Considerations," trans. Leonard Lawlor, *Graduate Faculty Philosophy Journal* 20.2–21.1 (1998): 41–69; Robert Bernasconi, "Fundamental Ontology, Metontology, and the Ethics of Ethics," *Irish Philosophical Journal* 4.1–2 (1987): 76–93; John Llewelyn, *The Genealogy of Ethics: Emmanuel Levinas* (London: Routledge, 1995), pp. 29–30, 176.

- 9 Recent exceptions include Brain Schroeder, *Altared Ground: Levinas, History, and Violence* (New York: Routledge, 1996). Schroeder sees that Levinas's attempt to go beyond conceptuality involves a turn back toward the corporeal, a movement he describes as "(un)grounding itself" (p. 131).
- 10 See Levinas's comments on solitude, for example, in his interview with François Poiré, *Emmanuel Levinas: Qui êtes-vous?* (Lyon: La Manufacture, 1987), pp. 62, 105; to appear in English as "Interview with François Poiré," trans. J. Robbins and M. Coelen, with Thomas Loebel, in *Is It Righteous to Be? Interviews*, ed. Jill Robbins (Stanford University Press, forthcoming).
- 11 By aligning Heidegger with the Platonic impulse to subordinate multiplicity to the one (see TO 92; TA 88), Levinas articulates an association that has been taken up by other thinkers. Hannah Arendt also criticizes Heidegger for elevating Dasein's self-individuation through its confrontation with its own death over the plurality of community, and she does so, in part, by showing that Heidegger remained committed to the Platonic celebration of the contemplation of life (*bios theôrêtikos*) over practical affairs (*vita activa*). Perhaps unsurprisingly—given that both thinkers were profoundly influenced by Heidegger, and both were forced to rethink their attachment to his thinking in confronting his Nazism—this is not the only parallel between Levinas's and Arendt's critiques of Heidegger. Arendt emphasizes the need to make nativity more central than being-toward-the-end, just as Levinas emphasizes evanescence, and the importance of new beginnings. Both of them criticize Heidegger for denigrating the world of work, and both of them provide accounts of the private, domestic sphere of habitation that are intended to correct Heidegger's neglect of these themes. For a valuable discussion of Arendt's critical interrogation of Heidegger (and one which shows signs of being influenced by Levinas), see Jacques Taminiaux, *The Thracian Mind and the Professional Thinker: Arendt and Heidegger*, trans. Michael Gendre (Albany: SUNY Press, 1997). Julia Kristeva, in a presentation informed by Taminiaux's work, recently took up the relation between Arendt and Heidegger, in a paper presented at the 1999 IAPL, to which I had the privilege of being asked to respond.
- 12 Taminiaux (above, n. 11: 5), points out that Heidegger's notion of "productive activity," which "reaches its accomplishment" in "the work itself," is a reworking of Aristotle's *energeia*, and so, in turn, Levinas's understanding of accomplishment might be read as a reassessment of productive activity—that is, of *technê* and *poiêsis*.
- 13 Levinas says that the alterity of death is "not unknown but unknowable, refractory to all light" (TO 75; TA 63).
- 14 As Taminiaux says, quoting from Levinas's *Existence and Existents*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1978): "whereas the Heideggerian ekstasis is grounded in a process of temporalisation which is focused upon the future of the end and deprives the present of all privilege, the point in Levinas is to grasp the hypostasis as an event which occurs thanks to 'the very stance of an instant' (17), an instant which is the 'polarization of Being in general' (18). In this context, whereas Heidegger puts the emphasis on the end, Levinas claims that 'beginning, origin and birth present a dialectic in which this event in the heart of the instant becomes visible' (18)" ("The Early Levinas's Reply to Heidegger's Fundamental Ontology," *Philosophy & Social Criticism* 23.6 (1997): 29–49, esp. 34).
- 15 By using the term "forsakenness" but qualifying it as "peculiar," Levinas leaves open the question of whether this is something that Heidegger saw or not.
- 16 Levinas says: "An identity in diastasis, where coinciding is wanting. I am a self in the identifying recurrence in which I find myself cast back to the hither side of

- my point of departure! This self is out of phase with itself, forgetful of itself, forgetful in biting in upon itself, in the reference to itself which is the gnawing away at oneself in remorse" (OB 115; AE 147).
- 17 On the relation between freedom and slavery, see also TI 116–17; TeI 89–90.
  - 18 Just as Levinas declines to posit either the subject or the Other as initially free, yet nevertheless admits freedom in a diminished form, in the sense of a freedom of the I as beginning, so he refuses to characterize the existent initially in terms of possession, but can still say that the I consists in an "*original* possession of being, in which the I nevertheless reverts ineluctably to itself" (EE 80; DE 136).
  - 19 Taminiaux (above, n. 14: 46), quoting from EE, says that "the hypostasis has a threefold character. Thanks to hypostasis 'anonymous being loses its *there is* character.' Moreover, 'an entity . . . is a subject of the verb to be, and thus exercises a mastery over the fatality of Being, which has become its attribute' (83). But, on the other hand, in this emergence of a subject, 'we can discern the return of the *there is*. The hypostasis, in participating in the *there is*, finds itself again to be a solitude, in the definitiveness of the bond with which the ego is chained to itself" (84)."
  - 20 I suggest that we can also see these two different senses of freedom in *Totality and Infinity*. In the section entitled "The Subjectivity in Eros," Levinas says: "The subject is imposed upon itself, drags itself along like a possession. The freedom of the subject that posits itself is not like the freedom of a being as free as the wind. It implies responsibility—which should surprise, nothing being more opposed to freedom than the non-freedom of responsibility. The coinciding of freedom with responsibility constitutes the I, doubled with itself, encumbered with itself" (TI 271; TeI 271). Compare Levinas's discussion of freedom under the heading "Freedom Invested," where he makes clear, in one of his more programmatic statements, that he contests "the primacy of freedom," which means not that he is "against freedom" but that he "seeks for it a justification" (TI 302; TeI 279). He explains his conviction that "Freedom must justify itself" (TI 303; TeI 280) by referring to the "the presence of the Other," who puts in question "the naive legitimacy of freedom" (TI 303; TeI 280). Here, freedom appears to itself "as a shame for itself" (TI 303; TeI 280).
  - 21 See also EE 79 and DE 135; TI 271 and TeI 249; TI 303 and TeI 280. Freedom must justify itself, according to Levinas.
  - 22 One could also ask, In what sense is this responsibility already ethical? It would seem that responsibility is a term that already assumes the relation with the other, just as freedom, in the full sense of the word, already requires the other. And indeed, this will prove to be the case, for the feminine is already assumed by the dwelling, and the dwelling is Levinas's attempt to rework the corporeity and solitude of this provisional I that has a provisional freedom. By inhabiting the home, the I has also been exposed to another.
  - 23 See TI 270–73; TeI 247–51.
  - 24 It is not enough to say that "the 'feminine' presence by which a building becomes a home is a metaphor . . . for . . . a climate of intimacy indispensable for a dwelling" (Adriaan Peperzak, *To the Other: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas* [West Lafayette: Purdue University Press, 1993], p. 158).
  - 25 Sonya Sikka, "The Delightful Other: Portraits of the Feminine in Kierkegaard, Nietzsche and Levinas," in *Feminist Interpretations of Emmanuel Levinas*, ed. T. Chanter (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, forthcoming).
  - 26 Insofar as it is the call of conscience that summons us, which "resolves upon Being-guilty" (BT 353; SZ 305), Heidegger's understanding of death seems very close to Levinas's exposure to the other; but to the extent that wanting to have a

conscience is still ultimately interpreted as "an understanding of oneself," Levinas wants to depart from its fundamental structure.

- 27 For a reading that emphasizes the positive aspects of Levinas's notion of paternal election, see Kelly Oliver, *Family Values: Subjects Between Nature and Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1997), pp. 211–14.
- 28 Ewa Ziarek, "The Ethical Passions of Emmanuel Levinas," in Chanter, ed. (above, n. 25).
- 29 Ibid.
- 30 Ibid.
- 31 While critics have noted that one aspect of Levinas's notion of the feminine is its disruptive effect on Heideggerian ontology, the full dimensions of this have not been appreciated. See, for example, Alison Ainley, "Levinas and Kant: Maternal and Illegitimate Creation," *ibid.*
- 32 Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans. H. M. Parshley (New York: Random House, 1952), p. xix.
- 33 Kelly Oliver, "Paternal Election and the Absent Father," in Chanter, ed. (above, n. 25).
- 34 Donna Brody, "Levinas's Maternal Method from 'Time and the Other' through *Otherwise than Being*: No Woman's Land," in Chanter, ed. (above, n. 25).
- 35 While aspects of Levinas's discourse gesture beyond the biological, the consistent assignation of the birth of the child and parenthood to male lineage indicate a foundational essentialism. See Brody (above, n. 34). See also Stella Sandford, "Masculine Mothers? Maternity in Levinas and Plato," in Chanter, ed. (above, n. 25).
- 36 Oliver (above, n. 33).
- 37 Ibid.
- 38 Ibid.
- 39 Ibid.
- 40 Ibid. Although paternity involves transubstantiation (see TI 269; TeI 246), its significance and meaning lie in its goodness. The body is ultimately subordinate to the ethical relation, and the ethical relation is a masculine preserve.
- 41 Levinas says that in the fecundity that involves "the alterity of the Beloved . . . Being is produced as multiple and as split into same and other; this is its ultimate structure. It is society, and hence it is time" (TI 269; TeI 246). The term *l'aimée*, as Luce Irigaray has noted, marks the beloved as feminine: see "The Fecundity of the Caress," in *An Ethics of Sexual Difference*, trans. Carolyn Burke and Gillian Gill (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993), pp. 185–217, esp. 190.
- 42 See Derrida, "Violence" (above, n. 8); see also Sikka (above, n. 25).
- 43 If there is a parallel structure in Heidegger, perhaps we can find it in the experience of uncanniness that returns Dasein to itself from the depths of the disquietude of one who loses his bearings, and for whom "Authentic 'thinking about death' is wanting-to-have-a-conscience" (BT 357, SZ 309). Or perhaps, it falls to the work of art, insofar as the experience of the artwork takes us out of ourselves, "where we believe we are at home," and confronts us with the uncanny, so that the truth of the work of art resides in some kind of challenge that disrupts "[t]hat which is familiar, reliable, ordinary" (PLT 54), rendering it unfamiliar and extraordinary. The work of art thereby gives us back to ourselves, not as unchanged, but precisely in a way that allows us to see the world, and ourselves, differently.
- 44 See Catherine Chaliel, *Figures du féminin: Lecture d'Emmanuel Levinas* (Paris: La Nuit Surveillée, 1982).
- 45 See Sikka (above, n. 25).
- 46 This translation differs slightly from Lingis's translation at TI 157; TeI 131.

- 47 But, like Heidegger's equipmental world, for Levinas "the intellectualist conception of a world as a spectacle given to impassive contemplation likewise fails to recognize the recollection of the dwelling" (TI 163; TeI 137).
- 48 Levinas says, "Representation is a pure present" (TI 125; TeI 98).
- 49 The issue that I am trying to think through here is also what I think is at stake for Fabio Ciaramelli when he writes: "Through the notions of separation and recurrence, Levinas alludes to the paradoxical past of subjectivity, which is the necessary condition or the presupposition of its constitutive activity. The transcendental power of subjective constitution is thus conditioned by this prior presupposition which, itself always already constituted, only *afterwards* turns out to be constituting" ("The Posteriority of the Anterior," *Graduate Faculty Philosophy Journal* 20.2–21.1[1998]: 410). While I agree with Ciaramelli, I also want to emphasize the fact that Levinas does not want to think recurrence simply as a transcendental condition, which would reduce it to a presupposition that can be entirely contained in thought; he also wants to claim the material excess of the anterior posterior. In this sense, Levinas finds the language of the "constituted" and "constituting" inadequate to that which does nevertheless become constituted, and thus comes to function as a condition (and thus is also constitutive), but this process of becoming part of the movement of constitution is not without loss. Sensibility remains excessive to representation in a way that representation is never adequate to conceptualize or contain, even if it must be called upon to acknowledge even its own inadequacy.
- 50 Although Levinas describes dwelling in "the intimacy of a home" as "the first concretization" (TI 153; TeI 126), it is not strictly accurate to regard dwelling as providing our concrete situation, insofar as Levinas thinks that "concrete man" is already in relation to the Other. He says, "In reality man has already the idea of infinity, that is, lives in society and represents things to himself" (TI 139; TeI 112). It is precisely the complex network of conditionality that informs the relationship between representation and enjoyment that I am concerned to articulate here.
- 51 Heidegger's overcoming of the Cartesian split is addressed more fully in Chapter 2.
- 52 Although Levinas refers to the "pure passivity" of the "recollected being" (TI 165; TeI 139), this must be understood as preceding the distinction between activity and passivity.
- 53 See Ainley (above, n. 31).
- 54 To sense is not a thought unaware of itself, but it is implicit, from the perspective of the philosopher who explicates its contentment, after the encounter with the other. (See TI 138; TeI 112.) "To reflect on each of one's acts is, to be sure, to situate them with respect to infinity, but the unreflected and naïve consciousness constitutes the originality of enjoyment" (TI 139; TeI 112). Thus "in the eyes of reason the contentment of sensibility is ridiculous. But sensibility is not a blind reason and folly. It is prior to reason" (TI 138; TeI 111).
- 55 Levinas adds, "To be sure, representation is the seat of truth: the movement proper to truth consists in the thinker being determined by the object presented to him. But it determines him without touching him, without weighing on him—such that the thinker who submits to what is thought does so 'gracefully,' as though the object, even in the surprises it has in store for cognition, had been anticipated by the subject" (TI 124; TeI 97).

# POST-STRUCTURALISM, THE ETHICAL RELATION, AND THE LAW

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*"Let us descend a little lower and consider one of those mysterious creatures who live, as it were, off the leavings (déjections) of the big city. . . . Here we have a man whose task is to gather the day's rubbish in the capital. Everything that the big city has cast off, everything it lost, everything it disdained, everything it broke, he catalogues and collects. He combs through the archives of debauchery, the stockpile of waste. He sorts things out and makes intelligent choices; like a miser assembling his treasure, he gathers the trash that, after being regurgitated by the goddess of Industry, will assume the shape of useful or gratifying objects."*<sup>1</sup>

In a lecture on post-structuralism, one must inevitably begin with a definition of post-structuralism. Instead I have evoked the figure of the *Chiffonnier*. I am not well suited for the task of providing us with a working definition because I suspect that there may not be any such thing as post-structuralism. (Of course, my own wariness to identify post-structuralism can itself be understood as part of the phenomenon.) Yet in spite of my reluctance to define post-structuralism, I can at least give a list of authors—Derrida, Foucault, Lyotard, Bataille, Heidegger, and Nietzsche—most of them French, some living, some dead, who have been gathered together under that rubric. And I can also read off a series of catch phrases with which post-structuralism has been associated: the radical indeterminacy of linguistic meaning, and more generally of any semiotic field; the critique of communitarian aspirations for the replication of the logic of identity; the debunking of the myth of the centered, self-conscious subject transparent to itself; the exposure of

the traditional conception of reason as the rationalization of power; the proclamation of the end of metaphysics; and the refusal of the "melancholy science" in the name of "joyful wisdom." Such attempts to identify a wide range of thinkers and philosophical positions as a cohesive movement with amplifying themes, however, often obscure as much as they illuminate.

And yet, as I hope to show, the figure of the *Chiffonnier* may help to bring into focus what is unique about the project of post-structuralism, even if we find that the boundaries of any given definition inevitably yield. But to understand why I have chosen the figure of the *Chiffonnier* to stand-in for a definition of post-structuralism, we need to enter the discussion of post-structuralism from a specific vantage point. We need to focus on the rebellion against Hegelianism, not only as Hegelianism has actually been articulated by the left and right wing followers of Hegel, but also, and more specifically, as Hegelianism has been understood to represent the most sophisticated exposition of the logic of identity. Of course, as soon as one begins to speak of post-structuralism as post-Hegelianism, the very possibility of the "post" is itself called into question. For as Derrida always reminds us, we cannot easily—if ever—escape from the shadow of Hegel. As we will see, I will argue that the Hegelian "ideal"<sup>2</sup> of reciprocity remains crucial to the debates within American jurisprudence.

But my purpose is not solely to argue that within the sphere of law we are wise to remain Hegelians, or even to suggest that there is a reading of Hegel faithful to the critique of the logic of identity he initiated in his own *Science of Logic* ("Logic")<sup>3</sup>—a reading I have attempted to justify elsewhere. Nor is my purpose to try to demonstrate that there is a beyond to Hegelianism, that we can call post-structuralism. Rather, I want to emphasize the ethical impulse behind the rebellion against Hegelianism, for all too often post-structuralism has been pitted against the ethical by both its friends and foes.

Indeed, I will suggest that the entire project of deconstruction, one of the major strands of post-structuralism under anyone's definition, is driven by an ethical desire to enact the ethical relation. By the ethical relation I mean to indicate the aspiration to a nonviolent relationship to the Other, and to otherness more generally, that assumes responsibility to guard the Other against the appropriation that would deny her difference and singularity. I am deliberately using a broad brush here in defining the ethical relation, so as to include a number of thinkers who share the aspiration to heed the call to responsibility for the Other, but who would otherwise disagree on the philosophical underpinnings of the ethical relation and on its precise definition. I am, then, defining the ethical relation more broadly than the thinker Emmanuel Levinas, with whom the phrase is usually associated.<sup>4</sup> I will, however, return again and again to Levinas' specific formulation of the ethical relation as the "beyond" to ontology,<sup>5</sup> because it is Levinas' own understanding of the ethical relation that Derrida interrogates. As we will

see, one way to approach the ethical desire of deconstruction is by examining Derrida's engagement with Levinas' ethical philosophy of alterity.

But perhaps the ethical desire of deconstruction is never more evident than in Derrida's encounter with Hegel. When we confront our desire to "escape" from Hegel, to put him to rest once and for all, we need to ask why we are trying to get out from under his shadow; or, more precisely, in the name of what do we make our escape. One answer, of course, is that the deconstruction of Hegel simply puts into operation "the truth" that speculative reason will always turn against its own pretenses if it cannot come home to itself in Absolute Knowledge. On this reading, the motor of deconstruction is speculative reason, even if now turned against itself. But there is, as I have suggested, an alternative reading that locates the drive behind deconstruction in an ethical desire. (I want to note, however, that I am not advocating that the "ethical" as opposed to the "true" is the "proper" entry into deconstruction: I am only suggesting that an emphasis on the "ethical" as opposed to the "true" yields a very different encounter with deconstruction.) On the ethical reading I offer here, we ask ourselves the opening question of Derrida's *Glas*<sup>6</sup>—a kind of wake for Hegel, with all the implications of both death and salvation that a wake implies—"what, after all, of the remain(s), today, for us, here, now, of a Hegel?"<sup>7</sup> in the name of the elusive residuum left over once the relentless machinery of the Hegelian dialectic has finished its work? The subtle phrasing of Derrida's opening question acknowledges that we cannot separate the question of what remains of Hegel from the question of the remains of Hegelianism. What of the rest that has been pushed out of the system? To ask the question is already a kind of tribute to the forgotten Other, whose remains have been scattered. *Glas* attempts the only salvation of the rest that remains possible through the work of mourning itself. Indeed, for Derrida, it is only through the work of mourning that we can remember the remains because there has never been, nor can there be, a gathering of the rest that makes fully present what has been shut out: For what has been shut out is literally not there for us. Even so, the work of mourning remains demands the mimetic persistence to scrape through the debris left over from Hegel's system at the same time that we recognize that "[t]he rest, the remain(s), is unsayable."<sup>8</sup> *Glas* does rather than says. Derrida may well be our best salvage man, our ultimate *Chiffonnier*. Yet deconstruction as allegory in action can neither testify to its own faithfulness to "things"<sup>9</sup> nor name the law or prescriptive force it so carefully follows.

Even if, however, Derrida practices Walter Benjamin's redemptive criticism only through parody and irony, that is still the way he practices redemptive criticism.<sup>10</sup> It is precisely the silence before the name of the prescriptive or ethical force heeded in deconstruction that has misled many readers to argue that deconstruction has to do with the radical indeterminacy of meaning and, therefore, with the impossibility of ethics. The asserted



impossibility of naming the "Law" of its own ethical desire, however, should not be confused with the complete rejection of the ethical. If anything unites deconstructive critics it is, ironically, their insistence not only on the inevitability of the ethical in reading but also in what Paul de Man would call unreadability.<sup>11</sup> But my suggestion is not only that deconstructive critics recognize that we cannot escape from the ethical. Instead I want to argue that Derrida, in particular, theoretically clears the space for the elaboration of the nonviolent relationship to otherness that Levinas describes as proximity,<sup>12</sup> a relation that is prior to the subject and to contractual consent and yet not encompassed within a unity. Derrida, however, is always careful to preserve the distance that respect for the otherness of the Other implies—which is not to contrast Derrida with Levinas necessarily, because Levinas' conception of proximity is based on the temporal distance that inheres in the precedence of the Other to me. Deconstruction practices Nietzsche's action at a distance in the name of responsibility to the Other.<sup>13</sup>

Derrida is often mistakenly understood to criticize Levinas for his inevitable fall back into the language of ontology, the language that Levinas supposedly thought he had moved beyond in his philosophy of the ethical. Derrida recognizes, however, that Levinas himself understands that he can only disrupt metaphysics from within the tradition. I will suggest that *Glas* is not a critique at all, but a deconstructive exercise that *does* show the inevitable dependence of Levinas' project on the language of ontology, but not, however, to resist Levinas' conception of the ethical relation; rather, to salvage it from potential degeneration into the very violence toward otherness that the philosophy of alterity attempts to guard against. In other words, Derrida's deconstruction of Levinas can itself be read ethically. Instead of simply preferring one to the other, we need to read Derrida and Levinas together to heed the call to responsibility and to enact a nonviolent relation to otherness.

Nor should we simply pit Levinas' philosophy of alterity against Hegelianism. I will suggest that neither Levinas' ethical philosophy nor the practice of deconstruction can be allowed to displace the Hegelian notion of reciprocity within the sphere of law. Within law we are fated to be "unfaithful" to otherness, as we are forced to make comparisons which inevitably call for an analogy of the unlike to the same. Law classifies, establishes the norms by which difference is judged. If classification in and of itself is thought to be violence against singularity, then law inevitably perpetuates that violence. But we are also fated "to fall" into law; for as Levinas himself reminds us, we are never just in a relationship to the Other, there is always the introduction of the third. With the introduction of the third we are forced to make comparisons, to weigh the competing demands of different individuals. The very process of weighing competing demands calls for a scale, a basis for comparison, what we would think of as a principle of justice. For Levinas, we are called to justice by our responsibility to the

Other, even as we recognize that the synchronization of competing demands that justice calls for can never be adequate to the ethical relation. We cannot then simply surpass the synchronization of one to the Other that Levinas associates with Hegel's conception of relations of reciprocity. As a result, I will argue that Hegelianism remains valid for us within the sphere of law. Once we are within the realm of law, it is no longer desirable to seek to surpass the Hegelian "ideal" of relations of reciprocity as a limiting principle for legal interpretation. It is a mistake, in other words, to attempt to directly translate the ethical philosophy of alterity into a new description of justice as the recognition of difference.

But let me turn now, first to Levinas' rejection of Hegelianism for its replication of the logic of identity, and then to Derrida's interrogation of both Levinas and Hegel. By the logic of identity, I mean to indicate the unity of meaning and being that is disclosed in Hegel's *Logic*, as the "truth" of the actual. To understand the interrogation of the logic of identity, then, we must move within the circle of Hegel's *Logic*. What I offer here is a conventional reconstruction of the *Logic* that does not attempt to defend a reading of the *Logic* that might meet the opposition of Hegel's post-structuralist challengers.

In Hegel, the category of Being is the necessary starting point of all thought. Things manifest themselves in and through Being. Reality appears to the thinking subject as an object of thought only because first and foremost things "are." Without the category of Being there would literally *be* no reality; we would instead be immersed in "the night in which cows are all black." Being is both the necessary starting point of all thought and the minimal determination of things. Being is, thus, the most universal, ontological category. And yet Being as a category is both abstract and empty. Certainly Being is "nothing," not just *a* being, because a thing presupposes many determinations other than its mere being. Being "is" only in and through opposition to nothingness. We know "Being" only by what is not; nothing. The copula affirms the inevitability of the is, the category of Being, yet at the same time, Being can be conceived neither as a predicate nor as a subject of the sentence. As copula, Being exists as something other to itself in which it is united to the diversity of determinations. It includes, therefore, that which is not: non-being. Of course, non-being is also not able to be what it *is*, non-being, unless it relies on its opposite, of which it is the inseparable complement. Hegel's opening moves in the *Logic* show that Being and non-being cannot be what they are unless they pass continuously into one another as Becoming. The unity of Being and non-being is their ceaseless changing into their opposite: an endless movement of becoming which is the onto-logical core of all movement and materiality. The interplay of Being and non-being signals the presence of Absolute as the very movement of the interpenetration of oppositional categories. Nothing is, unless it comes to be in and through the circle of Absolute Knowledge.

Hegel's *Logic* culminates in the demonstration that thought and Being are the two opposite names of the Concept or Idea. The thinking which achieves Absolute Knowledge realizes that the self-movement of the Concept or Idea is its own essence, and grasps the full actualization of the structure of the logos in thought and reality itself. The unity of meaning and Being within the circle of the Absolute yields full knowledge of the truth of the essence of the actual. We come home to ourselves through the recognition of identity in nonidentity, of thought in Being. There is no remainder, no outside. Otherness is recaptured, and completely so, in the circle of the Absolute. Nothing escapes, for nothing is, only as non-being.

Within *Hegel's Philosophy of Right*<sup>14</sup> the realization of the truth of the actual yields the complete transparency of the determinations of *Sittlichkeit*, the collective ethics of modernity. For Hegel, we can know the universal language of democracy, the ultimate key to legal interpretation. Although Hegel himself retained the tension between any existing state of affairs and what the actualized concept of democracy demands—and, therefore, his account of *Sittlichkeit* cannot be simplistically condemned, as it often is by Hegel's "liberal" critics, as merely an apology for the current social order—he did identify ethics with the actual. As a result, the dilemma of legal interpretation we are so troubled by today was resolved by the Hegelian identification of truth with history. The meaning of life in the strongest possible sense of meaning is revealed in the circle of the Absolute. The self-conscious recognition of the "we that is I and the I that is we," the coming home to oneself through the Other, is not only a description, but also a normative practice embodied in the institutions of right themselves. Hegel both justifies and interprets the modern law of property and of contract as abstract forms consistent with the actualization of relations of mutual recognition or reciprocal symmetry. As we will see, it is precisely the disjuncture of the ethical and the actual, the infinite from the totality of the Hegelian system, that is characteristic of the post-structuralist rebellion against Hegel.

For Emmanuel Levinas, Hegel's political philosophy exemplifies the thinking of totality he associates with ontology. The thinking of totality, for Levinas, carries within it the danger of totalitarianism because such a thinking would deny "actuality" to the Other "excluded" from the system. We are reminded, here, of Hegel's infamous statement that there is no place for Siberia in the philosophy of history. Siberia becomes the symbol of the otherness that has been squeezed out through the operation of the Hegelian dialectic. That which is left out and thus denied actuality does not count. Levinas' ethical subject called by the Other "dispenses with the idealizing subjectivity of [Hegelian] ontology, which reduces everything to itself."<sup>15</sup>

Levinas argues that Hegel's *Logic* reduces time to contemporaneous presence; the *Logic* unfolds in the moment that is eternity. But, in Levinas, time is diachronic; one moment pursues the other without ever being able to

retrieve it. Levinas' diachronic view of time opens up the meaning of otherness and the otherness of meaning. The temporality of the interface, in which the Other confronts me, is forever beyond me—irreducible, as in Hegel, to the synchrony of the same. We are never together in the present. The Other is always before me. According to Levinas, relations of mutual recognition in Hegel's Absolute Knowledge are the example par excellence of the reduction of the Other to the synchrony of the same. There is always a trace of otherness that cannot be captured by my "identifying" with the Other in relations of mutual recognition. The Other cannot be reduced in relation to me, by which I grasp her essence in the "we that is I and the I that is we." The basis of ethics is not identification with those whom we recognize as like ourselves, instead the ethical relation inheres in the encounter with the Other, the stranger, whose face beckons us to heed the call to responsibility. The precedence of the Other means that my relationship to her is necessarily asymmetrical. Reciprocity is, at the very least, the affair of the Other.<sup>16</sup>

In the asymmetrical and yet face to face relation with the Other, the stranger who calls to me, the subject first experiences the resistance to encapsulation of the "beyond." In the face to face relation we run into the infinity that disrupts totality. Levinas' account of the face to face is still a phenomenology, however, precisely because it is in and through our proximity to the Other in the interface that gives us the resistance of otherness. We encounter God as the transcendence inherent in the ethical relation itself. Transcendence in Levinas is temporal, not spatial. He does not point us to a "beyond" that is "there," a someplace where we are not. Nor can infinity be reduced to the mere Other to the totality of what is, although there is a reading of Levinas on which infinity is completely "beyond" history, a reading founded in the ambiguity of Levinas' own text. There is, however, clearly another reading, which understands Levinas to seek to displace the traditional oppositions of the inside and the outside, the imminent and the transcendent. The beyond, on this reading, is within totality as its very disruption, but not just as its negation. As Levinas himself explains, "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."<sup>17</sup> Yet on either reading, infinity cannot be reduced to actuality.

According to Hegel, on the other hand, the infinite must be infinite, and thus embodied in the actuality of what is. Otherwise, the finite would be the limit of the infinite. Differentiation then is the necessary condition for the infinite to be. Exteriority, therefore, is the inevitable result of the *presence* of the Absolute. The necessary estrangement of the Infinite from its self is overcome through the self-conscious recognition of exteriority as the manifestation of the Absolute. Nature, in this sense, is spirit. In Hegel, matter is purportedly redeemed, by being uplifted into the Hegelian system. Here, we have Hegel, as the eagle who struggles to lift "the stone," the dead

weight of the remains, through the help of the machinery of the dialectic. For Derrida, Hegel's name gives the real nature of his enterprise away.

His name is so strange. From the eagle it draws imperial or historic power. Those who still pronounce his name like the French (there are some) are ludicrous only up to a certain point: the restitution (semantically infallible for those who have read him a little—but only a little) of magisterial coldness and imperturbable seriousness, the eagle caught in ice and frost, glass and gel.<sup>18</sup>

What of the remains of Hegel then? In Hegel everything that counts, counts as part of a greater whole. Only the whole is actual. Truth is the whole, and once we have finished the *Logic*, we have the whole truth. We think God's thoughts.

For Levinas, the blasphemy that identifies God with the actual and therefore denies God's otherness, cannot be separated from the violation of the *heteros* more generally. For according to Levinas, the "redemption" of otherness purportedly achieved by the Hegelian system is ironically the refusal of the Other, or put somewhat differently, the condemnation of the Other to the remains, the refuse, that which does not count.

On any reading we give to Hegel, then, we are always returned to Derrida's opening question in *Glas*, what of the remains of Hegel? The system gives us the truth of the actual. The full presence of Being to itself in Absolute Knowledge denies actuality to what is left over. Of course, otherness remains Other to the Absolute, there is no simple "identity" between meaning and Being in Hegel. And yet *ultimately* otherness is reduced to the Other of the Absolute, or it does not count. The complete apprehension of the *truth* of Being denies its otherness to thought. By rendering the truth of Being fully present in thought, Hegel ironically forgets the *is* of the copula. According to Heidegger, the forgetfulness of Being is Hegel's great sin.<sup>19</sup> For Heidegger, the Other of thought cannot be reduced to thought's Other. And yet how does one think Being if it is truly Other to thought? How does one pay tribute to the Other, that can only be known as the difference from beings and from thought itself? For Derrida, the "prior" forgotten "is" cannot be revealed as an original anteriority to the dialectic. We can only "think" of Being through its absence. One then cannot remember the "is" as a primordial gathering precedent to representational thought. As Derrida explains, "[*t*]*here is* does not mean (to say) *exists*, *remain(s)* does not mean (to say) *is*. The objection belongs to ontology and is unanswerable. But you can always let-fall-(to the tomb)."<sup>20</sup>

But how, then, does one remember the Other, pay tribute to the rest, if the remains are beyond thought, beyond remembrance, and beyond what is there for us? How does one recover the "matter" that has been left out of the system? Levinas continually grapples with this question. The "il y a"

is Levinas' name for the *irreducible* being there of exteriority. The "il y a" is not an object for the thinking subject, and therefore it cannot be conceptualized as the Other to spirit. The "il y a" resists the imposition of meaning by any representational or conceptual scheme. We run up against the "il y a" as the outward clash. It is this experience of resistance that indicates the irreducible trace of radical otherness that remains in any given conceptual system. The "il y a" then, is within our experience, not simply the "outside" to it. Levinas, however, also does not reduce the "il y a" to our experience of resistance, for that would once again deny the independence of the exterior.<sup>21</sup>

We cannot "know" the "il y a" because we can only know things from within a system of representation. Knowledge of exteriority is always a violation of otherness. For Levinas, cognition is suppression in this sense. Levinas brings us up against the limits of representation. We cannot know the "outside," the "beyond," of any system of objectification, for the world that appears to us is the world represented to an objectifying consciousness. As a result, there is nothing that can be said about the "il y a." Levinas himself relies on poetic evocation of the anonymous, faceless, "beingness" out of which things manifest themselves. We are in awe of the "il y a" and more than a bit frightened by the stirrings and rumblings from the "beyond" which we cannot understand and which confront us only through the eerie apprehension of that which is beyond our grasp. We are reminded of the world of horror movies, "the Blob," for example, in which we run up against the dead weight of an indifferent "matter" that takes no heed of our puny humanity. The "il y a" resists Hegel's attempt to lift "matter" into the system.

Derrida is only too well aware that there is nothing to be said of the "il y a," as the "matter" which remains Other to all our systems of representation, because to speak of the "matter" would again be an act of appropriation which would deny the existence of the remains, as remains, as that which is left over, as that which is beyond what has ever been there for us. As already suggested, Derrida resists, as well, the temptation to speak of the "il y a" as an original anteriority, as a primordial gathering of Being before the dialectic. As he remarks,

There never existed (there will never have existed) any older or more original "third term" that we would have to recall, toward which we would be called to recall *under* the aporetic disjunction. This is why what resists the non-dialectizable opposition, what "precedes" it in some way, will still bear the name of one of the terms and will maintain a *rhetorical* relation with the opposition. It will be figured, figurable.<sup>22</sup>

Derrida also rejects the dualism that Levinas' own formulation tempts. I use the word, temptation, deliberately. As I have suggested, we can also

read Levinas to displace the traditional dialectical oppositions, exterior and interior, outside and inside, mind and matter. Yet Derrida rightfully points us to a tension that is never completely resolved in Levinas' own text. There is the temptation in Levinas to turn the excess within history and within totality into the absolutely Other to totality. Derrida highlights this tendency. Yet for all of his care to remind us that there can be no rupture with metaphysics except from within the tradition, for all of his insistence that the excess, the remains, are there only as the absence of what has never been present, Derrida still recognizes *the absence* that is the excess to history. Derrida, then, is by no means simply denying Levinas' aspiration to heed the beyond, the remains.

What I want to emphasize here, however, is the ethical impulse implicit in Derrida's deconstruction of Levinas. Levinas' objection to Hegel is that the infinite cannot be found in nature, because the infinite "is" within totality in another way than "being." Due to Levinas' anti-Hegelianism, however, the "il y a" can potentially be reduced to the unredeemable Other of the infinite; that which the infinite is not. Matter comes close to being condemned as unholy.<sup>23</sup> Derrida understands that because of his temptation to dualism, Levinas risks being swept back into the Hegelian system by postulating "dead" matter as the Other to the infinite. More importantly, Levinas risks betraying his own project of a "pure heterology" which faithfully heeds the call of otherness. Levinas' fidelity to the Infinite as Absolute Other, in other words, carries within it its own potential violence to things, to the remains. Ironically, this potential violence toward the remains can also be understood as violence to the Infinite itself as Other. For as Derrida reminds us, either we turn the infinite into Absolute Other which would reduce the Infinite to absolute Identity, or we recognize that we do not confront the infinite Other then as the remains. We cannot tell the difference between otherness as the highest and as the lowest. We do not look for God other than in the remains. The trace of the beyond lingers as what remain(s) and only "there." But what remains beyond of course, was never and is not now present to us, for then it would not mark the trace of radical otherness. For Derrida, in other words, Levinas' "messianism" is inevitably an allegory. Moreover, unless we read Levinas allegorically, his project of the ethical runs the risk of the very violence toward otherness to the remains it abhors.

For Derrida, we confront the "matter," the remain(s), the "beyond," only through difference; the trace of what differs from representational systems and defers indefinitely the achievement of totality. When we attempt to think "exteriority," whether as the Infinite or as "matter," we are always walking on a tightrope and risking the fall, into another mechanism of appropriation. Derrida reminds us of exactly what is risked in the fall.

Of the remain(s), after all, there are, always, overlapping each other, two functions.

The first assures, guards, assimilates, interiorizes, idealizes, relieves the fall [*chute*] into the monument. There the fall maintains, embalms, and mummifies itself, monumemorizes and names itself—falls (to the tomb(stone)) [*tombe*]. Therefore, but as a fall, it erects itself there.

The other—lets the remain(s) fall. Running the risk of coming down to the same. Falls (to the tomb (stone))—two times the columns, the waterspouts [*trombes*]*—remain(s).*<sup>24</sup>

The remains then, are what cannot be said. Again to quote Derrida, “further on, at the penultimate sentence of the book, ‘The rest, the remain(s), is unsayable.’”<sup>25</sup>

Of course, Levinas is not only aware of the risk of the fall, in the attempt to speak of the beyond to metaphysics; he knows it to be inevitable. For Levinas there is always a difference between my exposure without reserve to the Other which is Saying and to the exposition of the statement of the said.

We cannot escape representational schemes. Yet, at the same time, we must recognize their inevitable infidelity to radical otherness. The Saying cancels itself as soon as it is said. Any comment on the Saying as an object will necessarily fail. Levinas understands that the resolution of his call for the synchronization of the affirmation of the Saying and its cancellation in the said can only yield an aporia. Yet he insists that even so we must philosophically both affirm the Saying and negate the Saying in the said. For Derrida, what we confront in the aporia presented by Levinas is difference, the inevitable difference between the Saying and the said that can only indicate the beyond allegorically, one can only “speak” of the Saying in the language of ontology.

But it would be a mistake to read Derrida’s encounter with Levinas as simply the return of the skeptical critic.<sup>26</sup> Certainly Derrida does not refuse the affirmation of the “Saying” as the stand-in for the indication of the excess, the “beyond” more generally, just because the Saying cannot be said other than in the language of ontology. Derrida constantly warns us against “the sinister ineptitude of the accusation—that of ‘nihilism.’”<sup>27</sup> To run into an aporia, to reach the *limit* of philosophy, is not necessarily to be paralyzed. We are only paralyzed if we think that to reach the limit of philosophy is to be silenced.<sup>28</sup> If we, in other words, conclude that because we can only *ironically* sign for our promise to the remains, we should not sign at all. Derrida’s irony does not stop him from signing for his responsibility to the remain(s). To read “messianism” allegorically is not at all to deny its force. The dead-end of the aporia, the impasse to which it takes us, promises through its prohibition the way out it seems to deny. To promise through prohibition is the “action” of allegory. Aporecity, in other words, evokes precisely through its prohibition. What Derrida says of Paul de Man’s use of the word aporia, equally applies to his own deconstructive exercises.



The word "aporia" recurs often in Paul de Man's last texts. I believe that we would misunderstand it if we tried to hold it to its most literal meaning: an absence of path, a paralysis before roadblocks, the immobilization of thinking, the impossibility of advancing, a barrier blocking the future. On the contrary, it seems to me that the experience of the aporia, such as de Man deciphers it, gives or promises the thinking of the path, provokes the thinking of the very possibility of what still remains unthinkable or unthought, indeed, impossible. The figures of rationality are profiled and outlined in the madness of the aporetic.<sup>29</sup>

Derrida's difference from Levinas then cannot be reduced to skepticism or to nihilistic refusal. Deconstruction does not leave us to wander in circles before the limit we have reached at the "end of metaphysics." Aporecity challenges us to reopen the question—to think again. In this sense Derrida affirms that the "end of metaphysics" returns us, again and again, to the central philosophical questions. It is not quite as Levinas would have it that the deconstruction of metaphysics yields for Derrida an irredeemable crisis rather than a golden opportunity. The reaching of aporia for Derrida is precisely what provides us with the golden opportunity. The difference between the two thinkers has to do with their approach to the beyond, the excess, the remain(s). As we will see, Derrida *does* recognize the excess to history but only as the absence that brings us to mourning. And, as I have also indicated, depending on how we read Levinas' understanding of infinity, it is possible to bring Derrida and Levinas very close together. Yet that being said, Derrida still questions more radically than does Levinas the ability of traditional philosophical discourse to evoke the aporia of the beyond through the Saying of what cannot ever be said.<sup>30</sup> For Derrida messianism is also an allegory because we are left *only* with the promise implicit in the aporia itself. As Derrida himself explains: "The promise prohibits the gathering of Being in presence, being even its condition. The condition of the possibility and impossibility of eschatology, the ironic allegory of messianism."<sup>31</sup> But, "a promise is not nothing."<sup>32</sup>

The recovery of the excess, the remain(s), then, is both "impossible" and necessary; impossible, and yet necessary—for to fail to pay tribute to the remains would be another violation of the *heteros*. We would once again deny that which cannot be represented. We would refuse it, or more precisely turn it into refuse whose existence does not and cannot count. This refusal reinstates the subject-centered system that fails to heed the call of otherness. Derrida remains a materialist in spite of his recognition that there is no adequate metaphysical representation of the "matter" he is evoking, and in spite of his awareness of the inadequacy of dualistic formulations. Again in speaking of Paul de Man, Derrida relates the significance to deconstruction of the word materiality.

There is a theme of "materiality," indeed an original materialism in de Man. It concerns a "matter" which does not fit the classical philosophical definitions of metaphysical materialisms any more than the sensible representations or the images of matter defined by the opposition between the sensible and the intelligible. Matter, a matter without presence and without substance, is what resists these oppositions.<sup>33</sup>

This resistance is what shatters the subject's illusion of sovereignty. Thus Derrida can say "[w]e might have associated it yesterday with death and with that allusion to 'true "mourning"' which makes a distinction between pseudo-historicity and 'the materiality of actual history.'"<sup>34</sup> For death too, shatters the subject's illusion that he is the meaning-giving center and puts him in touch with "the materiality of actual history." We confront the materiality of actual history not so much through the confrontation with our own death which always remain(s) beyond us, but instead through the death of Other. The starkness of losing one you love to death throws us against "irreducible exteriority."

Yet it is not death itself that is real to us as the presence of the "outside"—we do not directly know the death of the Other. We only know the Other's absence. The Other's death, in other words, is only there for us as *his* absence. This is why Derrida says that death does not literally exist; only mourning exists. It is precisely because we cannot know the death of the Other except as his absence, and as our loss, that we are always in danger of violating otherness. For it is *our* loss that we mourn as we remember the name of the Other.

Upon the death of the other we are given to memory, and thus to interiorization, since the other, outside us, is now nothing. And with the dark light of this nothing, we learn that the other resists the closure of our interiorizing memory. With the nothing of this irrevocable absence, the other appears *as* other, and as other for us, upon his death or at least in the anticipated possibility of a death, since death constitutes and makes manifest the limits of a *me* or an *us* who are obliged to harbor something that is greater and other than them; something *outside of them within them*.<sup>35</sup>

We run into the limit of our narcissism, however, as we realize that will what we might, we cannot re-write the other back into life, re-make history so that he is still with us. He is gone. In his very absence we feel the pull of otherness.

The materiality of actual history is thus that which resists historical, historicizing resistance. De Man continues: "True 'mourning' is less

deluded. The most *it* can do is to allow for non-comprehension and enumerate non-anthropomorphic, non-elegiac, non-celebratory, non-lyrical, non-poetic, that is to say prosaic, or, better, *historical* modes of language power." Matter of this sort, "older" than the metaphysical oppositions in which the concept of matter and materialist theories are generally inscribed, is, we might say, "in memory" of what precedes these oppositions.<sup>36</sup>

The irrevocable absence of the Other resists our re-writing of history. We can remember him, but we cannot re-call him. When we speak his name there is no answer. We are left only with the memory of him. Yet it is the Other as Other that leaves the "trace" of himself within us, within our remembrance of him. There is no "within me" without this experience of loss. As Derrida explains, for Freud successful mourning involves mimetic interiorization in which the Other lives on "in us." But for Derrida, this process of mimetic interiorization will always fail, precisely because the Other's absence, which puts the memory in us, cannot be revoked. The precedence of the Other whose mark continues to be felt in his absence, aborts interiorization. Ironically, it is only through this failure to fully re-collect the Other that we "succeed" in mourning the Other as Other. As Derrida remarks, "an aborted interiorization is at the same time a respect for the other as other, a sort of tender rejection, a movement of renunciation which leaves the other alone, outside, over there, in his death, outside of us."<sup>37</sup>

For Derrida, then, the "il y a," the rest, the excess, is only "there" for us as the loss that calls us to mourning. But as a "loss," the remains are not there for us in a way that can be separated from fiction and literarity. There is always an allegorical dimension to mourning. And, therefore, "true" mourning is itself impossible. Yet the trace of the Other remains in the act of mourning. It is in mourning, then, that we remember the remains. But ironically, it is the very failure of mourning as mimetic interiorization that allows us to attempt fidelity to the remains. The inevitable failure of memory to enclose the Other, opens us to the "beyond."

It is the other as other, the non-totalizable trace which is in-adequate to itself and to the same. This trace is interiorized *in* mourning *as* that which can no longer be interiorized, as impossible *Erinnerung*, in and beyond mournful memory—constituting it, traversing it, exceeding it, defying all reappropriation, even in a coded rhetoric or conventional system of tropes, in the *exercises* of prosopopeia, allegory, or elegiac and grieving metonymy.<sup>38</sup>

The remembrance of the "remains" then can best take place in a wake. Thus *Glas* engages us in the impossible task of mourning to which we are

called by otherness. Hegel's philosophy of history in which everything that is to count as Spirit is re-collected into the system is disrupted by the Other that cannot be fully interiorized. There is an otherness beyond spirit which cannot be reduced to spirit's Other. And it is precisely the trace of otherness that cannot be recouped that is the defective cornerstone of the entire Hegelian system. It is this defective cornerstone that both de Man and Derrida understand as allegory. Hegel's philosophy then, reread as allegory, "re-read from the most deficient and efficient cornerstone, is said to be—over its dead body—an allegory of disjunction."<sup>39</sup> Such an allegory of disjunction has as its object not the whole, Hegel's object, but the morsel, which has been disjoined from the system. "The object of the present work, and its style too, is the *morsel*."<sup>40</sup> In place of the book that tells us the whole truth and the truth of the whole, we have the text that testifies to what has been spat out, the morsel.

The object of the present piece of work (*ouvrage*) (code of the dress-maker) is what remains of a bite, a sure death [*une morsure*], in the throat [*gorge*]: the bit [*mors*].

Insofar as it cannot, naturally, bind (band) itself (erect).

Graft itself at the very most, that it can still do.

The graft that sews itself [*se coud*], the substitution of the supplementary *seing* "constitutes" the text. Its necessary heterogeneity, its interminable network of listening lines *en allo*, in hello, that compels reckoning with the insert, the patch.<sup>41</sup>

Derrida's graft or patchwork bears a family resemblance to Walter Benjamin's construction of constellations. The singularity of the scraps pieced together in the patchwork are preserved in the outline of the act of grafting, or sewing; "Sewing [*couture*] then *betrays*, exhibits what it should hide, dissimulacras what it signals."<sup>42</sup> The part is not lost in the whole. The remain(s) are not grasped as simply the expression of a greater system. Yet the remain(s) cannot be known in and of themselves. There can be no direct "perception" of exteriority or of singularity. The very word, remain(s), or morsel, implies a greater configuration from which it has been left over or bitten off. As Benjamin would acknowledge, things do not go straight to heaven.

In the wake for the dissolution of the Hegelian system, we also find the *promise* of the resurrection of the remain(s); for resurrection is the promise of a wake. For Derrida the promise of the future inherent in the allegory of messianism is only "there" as the trace of otherness that marks the impossibility of true mourning. Yet we also encounter the impossibility of "true mourning" only in our remembrance of the remains. As we remember we also resurrect.

Memory stays with traces, in order to "preserve" them, but traces of a past that has never been present, traces which themselves never occupy the form of presence and always remain, as it were, to come—come from the future, from the *to come*. Resurrection, which is always the formal element of "truth," a recurrent difference between a present and its presence, does not resuscitate a past which had been present; it engages the future.<sup>43</sup>

The future, the beyond, is revealed in the remembrance of the remains; the chance for the future, in other words, is preserved in the work of mourning which ironically remembers the remains through the experience of the limits of interiorization, through the very finitude of memory that makes "true" mourning impossible, and yet so necessary. "This work of mourning is called—*glas*."<sup>44</sup>

And whose work is it to mourn? In *Glas*, Antigone stands in as the very figure called to mourning by the law of singularity and by her responsibility to the remain(s). It is the Woman who mourns.

The two functions of (the) burial (place) relieve the dead man of his death, spare him from being destroyed—eaten—by matter, nature, the spirit's being-outside-self, but also by the probably cannibal violence of the survivors' unconscious desires. That is, essentially, the women's, since they, as guardians of (the) burial (place) and the family, are always in a situation of survival. The law of singularity (divine, feminine, family, natural, nocturnal) protects itself as it were from itself, against itself. And in the same stroke [*du même coup*], against the other law, the human (virile, political, spiritual, diurnal) law.<sup>45</sup>

Derrida joins Woman in her work of mourning. The very work of mourning demands her rebellion against the Hegelian *Aufhebung* that would deny the remains. Derrida follows her law. Derrida remembers that the mother comes first. He is constituted by her. The subject only follows the Other. Derrida does not say of himself "I am," (Je suis) he says instead "I follow" (Je suivre). If there is a masculine certainty it lies in that knowledge, in that act of remembrance that marks the precedence of the Other; I follow.

I am (following) the mother. The text. The mother is *behind*—all that I follow, am, do, seem—the mother follows. As she follows absolutely, she always survives—a future that will never have been presentable—what she will have engendered, attending, impassive, fascinating and provoking; she survives the interring of the one whose death she has foreseen.<sup>46</sup>

The Mother gently gathers the remain(s) together, insists that they be protected. Here we are reminded of another great figure of Woman, offered to us in *Finnegan's Wake*,<sup>47</sup> Anna Livia Plurabelle ("ALP"). ALP is also devoted to salvaging the remains. As she stitches and patches together the scraps she has salvaged she is "sewing her dream together." The Mother, ALP, feminizes the figure of the *Chiffonnier*. Like the rag-picker she spends her time sorting through the refuse. She is always turned toward the sewer. But unlike Benjamin's rag-picker she has little about her of the destructive character<sup>48</sup> (although Derrida himself is always careful to remind us of the dark side of the phallic mother). She gets on with her daily project of salvation not just for the sake of clearing away the false positivity of the bourgeois world. She is a different kind of gravedigger. She scrapes through the debris and pieces together the remains as an act of care. She is tireless and fearless in her effort to be faithful to the remains. She erects her tribute to singularity through her persistence in mourning.

Derrida gently mimics ALP's hen-like scraping through the debris. He writes, "And I scrape [*racle*] the bottom, hook onto stones and algae there that I lift up in order to set them down on the ground while the water quickly falls back from the mouth. And I begin again to scrape [*racler*], to scratch, to dredge the bottom of the sea, the mother [*mer*]."<sup>49</sup> Derrida sews together his "reading effect"—which is how Derrida refers to *Glas*—as a gift to her, to open up another way of reading—Woman. Not, however, so he can give us that reading, but instead so that Woman can finally be heard when she speaks for herself and in her own name. By opening up another way of reading, Woman, Derrida wants to make it clear that he is not trying to establish her proper place.

Such recognition should not make of either the truth value or femininity an object of knowledge (at stake are the norms of knowledge and knowledge as norm); still less should it make of them a place to inhabit, a home. It should rather permit the invention of an other inscription, one very old and very new, a displacement of bodies and places that is quite different.<sup>50</sup>

Derrida, in other words, is faithful to Woman in his remembrance of her as more than just the successful interiorization of the Other in himself. Derrida does not simply conjure her up, instead, he heeds her call. "I call myself my mother who calls herself (in) me."<sup>51</sup> It is the Other that leaves within us the trace that we recall. Here again, Derrida is emphasizing the precedence of the Other to the subject. The subject only comes to himself by recalling Her. Subjectivity is not constituted in the present, nor does the subject exist as a presence in and for itself. Instead the subject re-collects himself in the act of remembrance of the Other in himself; an Other, however, that is beyond his memory. In spite of the limit of memory, the remembrance of

things past is the story of the subject, the only one he can tell. For Derrida, the subject only becomes a self in and through the possibility of mourning.

We know, we knew, *we remember*—before the death of the loved one—that being-in-me or being-in-us is constituted out of the possibility of mourning. We are only ourselves from the perspective of this knowledge that is older than ourselves; and this is why I say that we begin by *recalling* this to ourselves: we come to ourselves through this memory of *possible* mourning.<sup>52</sup>

Through the act of remembrance of the Other in himself, Derrida refuses to forget the mother's name. And what is the mother's name or more precisely her name(s) that Derrida inscribes in the text of *Glas*? "The mother's name would be—commonly—the name of a plant or a flower. . . ."<sup>53</sup>

In *Glas*, she is inscribed in the name of Jean Genêt, the blossoming flower.<sup>54</sup> Alongside Hegel's sanctimonious statements about the place of Woman in his system, we have in the second column pieces of Genêt's texts which pull apart the very erection of feminine identity that Hegel tries so patiently to secure. Hélène Cixious and Catherine Clément explain the feminine power of Genêt's texts.

Thus what is inscribed under Jean Genêt's name, in the movement of a text that divides itself, pulls itself to pieces, dismembers itself, regroups, remembers itself, is a proliferating, maternal femininity. A phantasmic meld of men, males, gentlemen, monarchs, princes, orphans, flowers, mothers, breasts, gravitates about a wonderful "sun of energy"—love,—that bombards and disintegrates these ephemeral amorous anomalies so that they can be recomposed in other bodies for new passions.<sup>55</sup>

The "double klang" effect of the two columns in *Glas* makes us distance ourselves, as we read one column from the side of the other. As we read *Glas*, we practice, with Derrida, action at a distance. Derrida, however, takes sides. He views Hegel from the side of Genêt, the name of the "feminine." Perhaps there has never been a more careful deconstruction of Hegel's phallogocentrism than that given to us in Derrida's *Glas*. Derrida painstakingly shows us that Woman in Hegel is simply man's Other, her distance reduced, so that she can be grasped as an object in the man's field of vision. She is lost to herself in the name of the system. She is classified, given her proper place. We see her from the perspective of the man only. Derrida refocuses our attention on the mother, on Woman. His, however, is the "auratic gaze"<sup>56</sup> that preserves her otherness by respecting her distance, and that by so doing conjures up the "memory" of a different world, in which she is not seen by man as merely his Other, mirrored in his eyes. The auratic gaze defies the organization of looking as a form of mastery. Derrida

does not attempt to see through her in order to classify her. The Other is allowed to be in her distance precisely so that she can look back. The mother's distance from man is temporal. She both comes before and remain(s) after. (Not literally, although she well might, but in the sense that she is the site of survival.) As Derrida reminds us, "Remain(s)—the mother."<sup>57</sup> The distance of the mother opens up the diachronic experience of time, the difference that triggers memory and calls us to mourn with her the remains she guards.

To speak from the side of the mother is also to speak from the side of the more, (mere, mehr). There may be no other "voice" that comes so close to echoing the call of the remains. To take on the name of the Other, to re-call the trace of the Other in one's self, to be dialogical, is to refuse castration, the rigid erection of sexual difference in the unconscious that Lacan refers to as *Ça*. Through the practice of writing two texts at once, Derrida skirts being labeled either this or that. He defies castration in the name of Genêt.

If I write two texts at once, you will not be able to castrate me. If I delinearize, I erect. But at the same time I divide my act and my desire. I—mark(s) the division, and always escaping you, I simulate unceasingly and take my pleasure nowhere. I castrate myself—I remain(s) myself thus—and I "play at coming" [*je "joue à jouir"*].

Finally almost.<sup>58</sup>

By writing two texts, Derrida is always talking to the Other in himself. But his dialogism is itself a parody because the Other he speaks to is never "there." The subject of *Glas* mourns for himself as he mourns for the one who has made him what he is, the one who is before him, the one whose passing leaves its mark. The subject is "there" for himself only in and through the dialogue with the Other who is never fully present and, yet, who calls him to mourning by her very absence. Derrida's parody of dialogism, however, exposes the lie of *Ça* and *Sa* that would reduce the Other to one's own thoughts, or to what is absolutely exterior to the self-constituted subject. "Sa loves Ça" in that each sets Woman's place in stone through an appeal to an unshakeable system and to the truth of the whole.<sup>59</sup> Yet the refusal of castration should not be understood as the turning away from the reality that castration exists. Such a rejection would deny the violation to Woman that has been done in order to secure her place. What is denied is the "there is" that refuses the remain(s) to the rigid system of gender identity. "There is" no initial erection of gender that can effectively and once and for all block the chance for a new choreography of sexual difference. Otherness remains beyond the grasp of *any* system. The possibility of a choreography other than the one practiced in our current system of gender identity—the chance that Lacan himself calls the Real—cannot, then,



be wiped out. The dream of a different choreography is "there" in the deconstruction of the "there is" implicit in the erection of *Ça*.

That does not mean (to say) that there is no castration, but that this *there is* does not take place. There is that one cannot cut through to a decision between the two contrary and recognized functions of the fetish, any more than between the thing itself and its supplement. Any more than between the sexes.<sup>60</sup>

The fall of Hegel, which is also the fall of the remain(s) from the eagle's talons, is not just cause for mourning, but for celebration. Hegel's "fall" cannot be separated from the fall of the erection of the *Ça*.

*Je/tombe*, I/fall(s), I/tomb. The play of the anth-erection by which I waken to, embark on [*nais à*], my name supposes that, in more than one stroke [*coup*], I crush [*foule*] some flowers and clear [*fraye*] the virgin thicket of erianthus toward the primitive scene, that I falsify and reap [*fauche*] the genealogy. [ ] . . . the Father's dwelling.<sup>61</sup>

The clamour of the fall of *Ça/Sa* unleashes the many voices that have been silenced by the law which identifies proper speech with the name of the father. *Glas* does not try to suppress the noise. The phallus falls and with its fall goes its claim that its turgidity elects it as the transcendental signifier. Here we find the ultimate embarrassment to the sovereign subject, for as he falls, he finds that he's not as in control as he likes to think.

By evoking the figure of the *Chiffonnier*, I am suggesting that Derrida is deeply sympathetic with Walter Benjamin's "infinite task" of salvaging the remains through the work of mourning that practices mimetic persistence and the auratic gaze. And, indeed, I am suggesting that such a sympathy exists. Yet in spite of his sympathy Derrida is obviously wary of spelling out a conception of mimesis as a more accurate or faithful form of knowledge to the remains. Derrida does not so much tell us about mimesis and the auratic gaze as he "practices" them; and there is no better example of his practice than his deconstruction of Hegel's phallogocentrism from the side of the mother. "I do what I do not say, almost, I never say what I do."<sup>62</sup>

And yet how do we account for his wariness of mimeses? In Walter Benjamin the mimetic capacity signals the ability of human beings to respond to patterns of similarity in nature and to produce such similarities in return.<sup>63</sup> Benjamin traces the imitation of nature to the recognition of nature's greater force as the constitutive Other. Mimesis does not aim to control nature, but rather seeks to imitate the patterns of similarity in nature as a form of paying tribute to her. For Benjamin, mimesis yields a different form of knowledge than what we usually think of as knowledge of the object. The object of mimesis is not there for the subject. Mimetic capacity does not represent the

object to consciousness. The human being who exercises her mimetic ability is not acting as a meaning-giving center; she is responding to what is given to her. For Benjamin, mimetic capacity has almost been eclipsed by the rise of calculative thinking or what his colleague Theodor Adorno referred to as "instrumental rationality."<sup>64</sup> The mimetic capacity itself carries within it its own potential danger for decay precisely because it is open to otherness and therefore to transformation as it mimics its environment. But in spite of the potential for its own eclipse, mimesis still promises a different form of knowledge than the one offered to us by the logic of identity whose sole business is to identify and to classify. The mimetic capacity is emphatic. Mimesis identifies *with*, rather than identifies *as*. Derrida does not simply reject Benjamin's understanding of mimesis, but he does give it a new twist.

For Derrida, mimesis is a parodic strategy. Indeed, *Glas* is certainly one of the great satiric parodies of the humanist tradition. The problem for Derrida with even the Benjaminian understanding of mimesis is that in spite of its promise of a different kind of knowledge, the very notion of mimesis as a theoretical capacity still relies on the traditional, dualistic oppositions between mind and matter, and more importantly on the presence of a nature that is just "there." Mimesis, in other words, lives dangerously close in its recognition of the "there is" to the inevitable perpetuation of myth. (Benjamin himself was very aware of this danger.) As Derrida explains:

There, account taken of the bit and the sublingual slaver, of caesura and agglutination, there is no sign, no tongue, no name, and above all no "primitive word" in the Cratylean sense; nor any more some transcendental privilege for an elementary couple where the analytical regression should finally stop, nor even, since no being [*étant*] or sense is represented there, a mim(s)eme [*mimême*].

Remains that: the problem of *mimesis* must be re-elaborated here, beyond the opposition of nature and law, of the motivated and the arbitrary, all the ontological couples that have rendered it, with the *Cratylus*, illegible.<sup>65</sup>

Yet Derrida respects the attitude toward things that lets things address us rather than the other way around. "I don't believe it at all, but if I were to believe that a proposition acquired its pertinence by miming its subject matter and letting the thing speak (and the thing here is Francis Ponge), I would justify my attack in the name of *mimesis*."<sup>66</sup>

The problem, of course, with any attempt to let the thing speak directly in its language is that it is always blocked by the imposition of our language, our meaning. We are always translating, but without the assurance of the presence of the messianic language that makes translation possible. Yet Derrida continually explores strategies that try to displace the subject of meaning. What obsesses Derrida is not what he says, but what can be said,

given our inevitable fall into language and into pregiven representational systems. Indeed, Derrida constantly reminds us that he rarely says anything at all, or at least he does his best not to say anything. Of course, he knows he inevitably fails in this attempt. His strategies are a promise to the thing, to the remains, to otherness, he knows he can't fulfill—the promise to let the thing speak. And yet he promises, and attempts fidelity to otherness through the constant displacement of representational systems that attempt the capture of the Other. “Here again I do nothing other, can do nothing other, than cite, as perhaps you have just seen: only to displace the syntactic arrangement around a real or sham physical wound that draws attention to and makes the other be forgotten.”<sup>67</sup>

The very work of deconstruction, then, even when narrowly understood as a practice of reading, embodies the promise—even if only promised ironically—to be faithful to otherness. Deconstruction does not impose itself upon the text it reads. In this sense, deconstruction is not criticism. Derrida is suggestive, if only suggestive, on the relationship between deconstruction and the text.

As we have seen, the very condition of a deconstruction may be at work, in the work, *within* the system to be deconstructed; it may *already* be located there, already at work, not at the center but in an excentric center, in a corner whose eccentricity assures the solid concentration of the system, participating in the construction of what it at the same time threatens to deconstruct. One might then be inclined to reach this conclusion: deconstruction is not an operation that supervenes *afterwards*, from the outside, one fine day. . . .<sup>68</sup>

For all of Derrida's hesitancy here—he leaves how he stands on this interpretation open—it is only too clear that deconstruction does not leave the subject free to do with the text what he would. Interpretation is not simply the individual, or for that matter the community, playing with itself. It is a serious error, then, to read deconstruction as advocating the position that there is no text that guides us or more strongly commands us in our readings. Of course, a precise statement of the “thereness” of the text remains problematical in deconstruction because of the dilemma inherent in speaking of “thereness” more generally. What is heeded in the text, as J. Hillis Miller has pointed out, is not the “thereness” of the text nor just what the text “actually” says. Yet when one is reading, one is reading “something.” For deconstruction, however, “the thing” that one is reading is the “heart of the matter” allegorized in the text. The word “thing,” here, echoes the Heideggerian usage. As Miller explains,

The thing is what James calls, in two story titles, “the real thing” or “the right real thing” or what he hailed at the moment of his death

as “the distinguished thing at last.” Heidegger in “Das Ding” and Derrida in *Signéponge/Signsponge* have sought to define the elusive residuum we name “the thing.” To “‘put’ things” is, it may be, to enter into a transaction with that real thing behind the human things narrated and to respond to an obscure demand for narration made by that “real thing.” The “thing” demands that it be respected by being put in words, so becoming a doing which may do other “things” in its turn, as James says.<sup>69</sup>

The ethics of reading practiced by deconstruction commands us to heed “things” in the sense defined by Miller.

Nor is the word command being used capriciously. Again to quote Miller:

The ethical moment in the act of reading, then, if there is one, faces in two directions. On the one hand it is a response to something, responsible to it, responsive to it, respectful of it. In any ethical moment there is an imperative, some “I must” or *Ich kann nicht anders*. I must do this. I cannot do otherwise. If the response is not one of necessity, grounded in some “must,” if it is a freedom to do what one likes, for example to make a literary text mean what one likes, then it is not ethical, as when we say, “That isn’t ethical.” On the other hand, the ethical moment in reading leads to an act. It enters into the social, institutional, political realms, for example in what the teacher says to the class or in what the critic writes.<sup>70</sup>

We can now see how the very practice of deconstruction can be read as an exercise of responsibility to otherness. Derrida, in other words, heeds the call to responsibility in and through deconstruction itself and not just in his “political” essays on the role of the university and on apartheid. Derrida is obviously profoundly concerned with the institutional structures in which academic discourse takes place. He distinguishes deconstruction from other forms of critique because it is committed to the deconstruction of political institutions as well as of texts. But alongside his interest in the politics of interpretation he has also shown an “individual” ethical commitment to take responsibility both for the Other and for his own signature as he engages with and signs for the Other. Derrida, in other words, understands both directions of the ethical moment of reading. He signs for the role he has played in reading the Other. The very recognition of the precedence of the Other, also means that the Other is dependent on me. We need the Other in order to become who we are. Derrida takes responsibility for who he makes the Other become when he reads her.

His call to responsibility then should not be reduced to an idiosyncratic commitment that might well be in conflict with the larger project of deconstruction. The reading of deconstruction that denies or at the very

least downplays its ethical desire more often than not stems from an interpretation of the relationship between Heidegger and Derrida. On that reading the deconstruction of the metaphysics of humanism begun by Heidegger and taken to its radical conclusion by Derrida effaces the ethical even as I have defined it as the aspiration to a nonviolent relationship to otherness.<sup>71</sup> Of course, the question of Heidegger and ethics is itself very complex and much debated. But I want to continue to focus on deconstruction's relationship to the ethical by returning to Derrida's remarkable essays on Levinas' philosophy of alterity.

As I have already suggested, Derrida's essay *Violence and Metaphysics*<sup>72</sup> should not be read as a critique of Levinas simply because Derrida demonstrates that one cannot speak of the ethical as the beyond to metaphysics other than in the language of ontology. Derrida, in other words, does not refuse Levinas' project because he recognizes that it is a logical "impossibility." He knows that Levinas recognizes that the trace of the Other, the "beyond," is the unthinkable. Indeed, he explicitly acknowledges Levinas' own awareness of the impossibility of his project.

It is true that Ethics, in Levinas's sense, is an Ethics without law and without concept, which maintains its non-violent purity only before being determined as concepts and laws. This is not an objection: let us not forget that Levinas does not seek to propose laws or moral rules, does not seek to determine *a* morality, but rather the essence of the ethical relation in general.<sup>73</sup>

Instead of as a critique, I read Derrida's essay as an interpretation of Levinas that preserves the ethical relationship without reducing it to the mere Other of ontology, and therefore of the same, by demonstrating that the ethical relation can only be preserved as Other if it is left as the unsayable. The affirmation of Levinas' project, in other words, demands that we mark the ethical relationship as the limit of the possible, and therefore, as the Saying, rather than as the said. The possibility of the ethical lies in its impossibility; otherwise, the ethical would be reduced to the actual, to the totality of what is.

In this insistence on the disjuncture between the ethical and the actual, we can see the "break" with Hegel. In Hegel, ethics is possible because the ethical relationship of reciprocity has been realized in the actual. For Hegel, if the ethical had not been realized in the actual, the aspiration to ethics would always be a source of dissatisfaction in that the ethical would be sought after and yet unrealizable. Of course, Levinas recognizes that to render the ethical beyond the actual is to leave us with the dissatisfaction that led Hegel to reject Kantian morality. For we can never meet our responsibility to the Other. Our responsibility to the Other is absolute. But for Levinas this inevitable dissatisfaction is sublime. As Levinas explains:

I can never have enough in my relation to God, for he always exceeds my measure, remains incommensurate with my desire. In this sense, our desire for God is without end or term: it is interminable and infinite because God reveals himself as absence rather than presence. Love is the society of God and man, but man is happier, for he has God as company whereas God has man! Furthermore, when we say that God cannot satisfy man's desire, we must add that the nonsatisfaction is itself sublime!<sup>74</sup>

As we will see, Derrida is both "suspicious" of Levinas' acceptance of the inevitability of dissatisfaction and of the right wing Hegelian's complacency that reduces the ethical to the actual, and therefore, at least on the conventional reading of Hegel, to the perpetuation of order. On Derrida's reading the Saying of the ethical as the beyond to metaphysics can only be indicated as the difference that disrupts Hegelian totality. But by the impossible we should not understand an absolute barrier, for to erect such a barrier would be again to mistakenly attempt closure. Nor should the impossible simply be understood as the not-possible, a formulation that would also reduce the ethical to the mere Other of the same. As Derrida reminds us, the impossible occurs at every moment. "There is" disruption of totality. The Other cannot be completely eliminated in any given representational system. The Other survives. In this sense, the ethical is a necessity as well as an impossibility—a necessity in that the remain(s) cannot totally be evaded even if they need not be heeded. The Other remain(s). The call to responsibility is prior to our subjectivity, prior to our choice. We may not answer, but we are not free to simply silence the call.

Robert Bernasconi has offered a reading of Derrida's essay on Levinas similar to the one I have given here.

Though the ethical relation as described by Levinas is thought both by logic and by deconstruction to be impossible, logic dismisses this "original ethics," while deconstruction maintains it by insisting on its impossibility. Deconstruction can—and to a certain extent does in "Violence and Metaphysics"—give a rigorous reading of Levinas which preserves the ethical relation without reducing it to the order of ontology. But the insistence that a [conception] of the ethical relation is impossible—unthinkable—unsayable might be said to preserve the *thought* of the ethical relation (a thought which is not yet also practice) rather than the ethical relation itself.<sup>75</sup>

Bernasconi goes on to say "[t]he issue . . . is whether deconstruction enacts the ethical relation."<sup>76</sup> I agree with Bernasconi that this is the issue. The purpose of this essay is to show how one can give an affirmative answer to the question of whether or not deconstruction *aspires* to enact the ethical

relationship because, of course, the ethical relation cannot be enacted in the sense of actualized but only adhered to as an aspiration. By making the claim that deconstruction does aspire to enact the ethical relation, I am going beyond Derrida who, in spite of his brilliant salvaging of Levinas' project, remains wary of the very word "ethical." I would trace Derrida's wariness to Heidegger, but also to Nietzsche. Yet in spite of Derrida's own wariness, I would read deconstruction as in the service of the ethical relation. Deconstruction guards the trace of otherness that resists assimilation and reduction to the selfsame while deconstructing Levinas' *specific* formulation of the ethical as the beyond to metaphysics and therefore as a radical rejection of Heidegger. Indeed, I read Derrida to warn Levinas against the potential violence to otherness inherent in his own understanding of the ethical, a warning that itself can be understood to be inspired by an ethical desire, as much as it can be read to embody the "truth" that there is no beyond-the-undecidable. As Derrida explains: "*There is no beyond-the-undecidable, but this beyond nevertheless remains to be thought from this 'somewhat more reliable point of 'reference''*"; and one can only be involved there in a promise, giving one's word on this subject, even if one denies it by signing ironically."<sup>77</sup>

We can approach Derrida's warning to Levinas from two directions. First, Derrida shows us that there can and should not be an absolute priority of Levinas' Infinite over and against Heidegger's Being. Levinas' ethical philosophy cannot, in other words, just displace Heidegger's ontological project. More specifically, "transcendental" ethics presupposes respect for the phenomena of the "being" of the Other. Derrida shows us that Levinas' ethical philosophy works within rather than just against phenomenology. As Derrida explains: "For without the phenomenon of other as other no respect would be possible. The phenomenon of respect supposes the respect of phenomenality. And ethics, phenomenology."<sup>78</sup>

For Derrida, the very recognition of the alterity of the Other demands that we recognize the Other as an ego. In speaking of Husserl's project, Derrida suggests that it is this move to recognize the Other as ego, this strange symmetry, that prevents Levinas' project from degenerating into the worst kind of violence.

If the other were not recognized as a transcendental alter *ego*, it would be entirely in the world and not, as ego, the origin of the world. To refuse to see in it an ego in this sense is, within the ethical order, the very gesture of all violence. If the other was not recognized as ego, its entire alterity would collapse.<sup>79</sup>

Ethical asymmetry, then, must operate within phenomenological "symmetry."

We can also see how Levinas' project remains in a relationship with Heidegger's ontology. The determination of the Other as Other, involves the

thought of Being precisely because every determination presupposes the thought of being. (Here we are returned to Hegel's opening insight in the *Logic*.) Levinas rejects Heidegger because he believes that Heidegger reduces the Other to a mere moment of Being and therefore reinscribes otherness in the same. But as Derrida remarks, Levinas' argument presupposes that Heidegger's Being is a philosophical category, which is exactly what Being is not. To reduce Being to a philosophical category is the error of Hegelianism according to Heidegger. Heidegger then cannot be legitimately accused of being the accomplice of totalitarianism—at least not in Levinas' sense. But put more strongly, and to return to the argument that transcendental ethics works with transcendental phenomenology (the two need each other) we could not understand alterity at all unless we understand it as that which one is not. In this way if we are to respect alterity, we must also respect Being. As Derrida explains:

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.<sup>80</sup>

But we can also trace Derrida's interrogation of Levinas to a Nietzschean suspicion of the unhappiness potentially generated by an eschatology without hope for the individual. Although Derrida himself does not interrogate Levinas from a Nietzschean position, the account I offer here reflects his deep sympathy for Nietzsche and his suspicion of the ethical more "generally." In Levinas, we must constantly remind ourselves of our inevitable failure to fulfill our responsibility. We must constantly seek to do more for the Other. We can never do enough. We do not have much fun in "the ethical relation." For Derrida, in other words, nonsatisfaction may well not be "sublime." In his later writings, Levinas recognizes that an emphasis on the good as the beyond to Being can be found within the philosophical "tradition" itself, starting with Plato. But certainly this tradition, as Nietzsche so brilliantly demonstrates, carries within it its own tremendous violence. We might put it this way: absolute responsibility to the Other demands that we suppress the Other in our self. It may well be no coincidence that in the later Levinas the phenomenological account of eros is almost completely absent. To seek to be happy is to fall from the sublime of nonsatisfaction into the profane. Levinas' "messianism" then—by which he means to indicate our "lack of peace" before our responsibility to the other—seems to be at odds with the striving for happiness. Yet as Benjamin has argued, even though the profane striving for happiness *does* work in the opposite direction of messianic intensity, such striving can be understood to *assist* the coming of the messianic kingdom. As Benjamin notes: "For in



happiness all that is earthly seeks its downfall, and only in good fortune is its downfall destined to find it."<sup>81</sup>

Those of us, then, who have been hopelessly profaned because we cannot deny our longing to be happy may still cheer ourselves with the knowledge that our refusal of nonsatisfaction may itself serve to clear the way for salvation,

Perhaps the near absence of eros in the later Levinas' description of the relationship to the body is no better demonstrated than through his choice of the pregnant woman as the very symbol of a subjectivity burdened with its responsibility to the Other. For Levinas, the pregnant woman completely turns her body over to the Other. One can only imagine what Levinas would say of a woman who enjoyed herself and refused the ensuing burden by having an abortion. As Derrida shows us, Woman in Levinas is his Other. *Totality and Infinity* could not have been written by a woman. In his use of the feminine to symbolize subjectivity, Levinas, ironically, reinstates a view of feminine difference as only the Other to the same. By so doing he violates his own responsibility to let the Other be in her alterity.

But we can now see another danger—a danger of which Derrida is only too well aware—inherent in the very effort to name or symbolize what is different. To risk the name of the law of allegory in action is to potentially reinstate myth. The danger of myth, of course, is the very erection of the "there is" that cannot be challenged. Derrida consistently deconstructs the "there is." We can see how Levinas' symbolization of the burdened subject as the mother perpetuates a myth of feminine identity, and by so doing reinscribes the rigid sexual difference of Lacan's *Ça*. We can, then, read Derrida's hesitancy to name the ethical law or impulse of deconstruction as itself an enactment of the ethical relationship which seeks to deconstruct the "there is" implicit in myth for the sake of letting otherness be Other.

Yet as Levinas has remarked, this hesitancy takes its toll. Without the risk of the name, the ethical impulse of deconstruction can easily go unnoticed. Even so, just as it would be a serious mistake to read Derrida as if he simply rejected Levinas' project, it would be an error to deny his *affirmation* of responsibility. Yet unlike Levinas, he hesitates to name the prescriptive force that prompts his call. For Levinas we must philosophically attempt to synchronize the affirmation of the Saying with its negation in the said. Such a synchronization for Levinas yields a positive, philosophical statement of the significance of the negation of the present and of representation. As Levinas explains:

Infinity is beyond the scope of the unity of transcendental apperception, cannot be assembled into a present, and refuses being recollected. This negation of the present and of representation finds its positive form in proximity, responsibility and substitution. This makes it different from the propositions of negative theology. The refusal of presence is

converted into my presence as present, that is, as a hostage delivered over as a gift to the other.<sup>82</sup>

Yet to name the beyond, to speak of the remain(s), to formulate a positive statement of deconstruction, does carry within it the risk of myth and the reduction of the beyond to more of the same. But I would argue that we must take that risk because of the *inevitability* of myth in our time. As Benjamin reminds us, as long as there is a beggar, there will be myth. Very simply put, the practice of allegory may not be enough in this troubled age. By attempting to *say* what Derrida *does* I am also naming the ethical force of deconstruction. In that sense, the arguments I have made take us beyond Derrida's own relative silence. Yet attempts at ethical reconstruction that do not recognize their own implicit appeal to the "there is" are certainly more of a threat to the ethical relationship as I have defined it than Derrida's hesitancy to name the ethical desire that pushes deconstruction forward. Better to do it even if one thinks one cannot say what one does. Deconstruction practices the humility that undermines the complacent self-righteousness that Nietzsche so despised, through the recognition that it can never fully meet the promise of fidelity to otherness inherent in the ethical relation it aspires to enact.

So far I have only discussed the relationship of post-structuralism, or more precisely of deconstruction, to the ethical relation developed in Levinas' philosophy of alterity. I have yet to take up the question of the relationship between the philosophy of alterity, the ethical relation, and the law. To do so I want to return to the opening question of *Glas* to focus on the other dimension of the question, what remains of Hegelianism. As I suggested earlier in this essay, the problem of legal interpretation per se never appears in Hegel because the ethical has been actualized in history. The ideal of reciprocal symmetry has made itself "actual" as the concept of right in the modern state. The realized relations of reciprocity, then, provide us with a rational limiting principle to guide us in our evaluation of competing legal interpretations.

For Levinas, as we have seen, Hegel stands accused of violating the Other by reducing her to the totality of the same. The Other that remains disrupts Hegelian totality. Infinity cannot be captured by the infinite. Levinas rejects relations of reciprocity for the synchronization of the Other to the same. I wish to leave aside the possibility that there is a reading of Hegel that understands reciprocity as a "diachronic" rather than as a synchronic relation to otherness—although I think such a reading is certainly possible. But as I have said throughout, we are relying on a conventional reading of Hegel. It would seem that since Levinas rejects relations of reciprocity as a violation of the ethical relation, anyone attempting fidelity to the ethical would have to come up with a post-Hegelian translation of the name of universal justice. It would seem to follow that we would have to deny the

ideal of reciprocity completely. This is precisely the conclusion that a number of writers concerned with the relationship of post-structuralism to justice have reached.

I obviously disagree with this conclusion since I have advocated the "ideal" of dialogic reciprocity in the debates on legal interpretation. Yet I also agree with Levinas and with Derrida that no matter how creatively and sympathetically one reads Hegel, Hegel's understanding of relations of reciprocity and mutual recognition does not pay adequate tribute to the Other as Other. Even so, I continue to defend relations of reciprocity as a guiding "ideal" within the sphere of law.

But before we even turn to the question of whether or not we can "reconcile" the idea of reciprocity with the philosophy of alterity, we need to cross a preliminary barrier. We need to answer the argument that every idea of an appeal to an ideal is an outdated form of foundationalism. Stanley Fish, for example,<sup>83</sup> has argued that the very antifoundationalist move of deconstruction renders an appeal to the ideal obsolete. But I want to suggest here that Fish is wrong in reaching that conclusion. Of course, we now have to recognize that we can no longer give a *solely* retrospective account of the realized ideal of reciprocity as the concept of the rule of law in the modern state, as Hegel himself did. For Hegel, the ideal had been made actual and therefore we could simply remember or recall what was actually "there." But it is precisely the full presence of the ideal in the actual that has been deconstructed in the writings of both Levinas and Derrida. What exactly are we remembering, then, when we appeal to this ideal as "inherent" in our legal tradition? If we simply deny altogether that there is anything "there" to remember, we would again be denying the reality of the outward clash, the "objective" force of law. Truth may not make itself real, but the law certainly has the power to do so. To understand both that law demands interpretation, and that there is no original anteriority that precedes the interpretative process, does not mean that there is nothing "there" that constrains us in our "acts" of interpretation. I have already argued that it is a serious error to read deconstruction as advocating the infinite manipulability of the text. The "truth" of indeterminacy—here defined to mean that without an original anteriority or materiality which we can know as the outside, there can be no end of the process of interpretation in a definitive grasp of the object—does not leave us with total freedom of interpretation. Certainly such an understanding of our relationship to texts is completely foreign to the work of Jacques Derrida. But at the same time, if there is no original anteriority that we can just re-call, then it also follows that the law and legal ideals can never simply be revealed. They are always made. As de Man reminds us, there is an inevitable moment of "literarity" or of "fictionality" in legal as well as in political discourse. Legal interpretation as a re-collective process that is *necessarily* imperfect always implies a promise to the future. As we have seen, for Derrida, memory does not engage a past

that was once fully present. There is no past that is just “there” for us to recall. When we recall the past, we inevitably remember the future. As Derrida explains, “memory is the name of what is no longer only a mental capacity,” oriented toward one of the three modes of the present, the past present which could be dissociated from the future present. “Memory projects itself toward the future, and it constitutes the presence of the present.”<sup>84</sup> It would, however, be a serious mistake to be scared off the task of legal interpretation because of the impossibility of uncovering the “true” or “perfect” interpretation, uncontaminated by “fictionality.” (Indeed to my mind much would be gained—and there might be much less name calling—if we who engaged in this process of legal interpretation whether as justices, lawyers, or law professors, openly recognized the inevitable moment of “fictionality” in our work. As I have indicated, such recognition would not lead us into the pit of nihilism, but only to an accurate understanding of what the task of interpretation involves.) But to understand that the recognition of “literarity” in legal interpretation does not prohibit evocation of ideals—although it certainly does lead to the conclusion that we cannot prove their truth but only convince others of their rightness—does not explain the preference for reciprocity, or more importantly for my purposes here, tell us how we reconcile this ideal with the philosophy of alterity.

I have argued elsewhere for what dialogic reciprocity can give us as a regulative ideal in legal interpretation.<sup>85</sup> For my purposes here, however, I want to defend reciprocity as an “ideal” for legal relations against the position that reciprocity must be dropped altogether because it cannot be made adequate to the ethical relation.

The essential point is that although law as a system of classification is inevitably violative of otherness and of a singularity, reciprocity nevertheless implies a “limit” on the violence permitted in the classificatory process. Of course, the counterargument is that reciprocity is itself “violence” to otherness. Therefore why prefer its limit? Why not dream up a system of classification more faithful to difference even though it, too, will be unfaithful if translated into a system of law, a system of classification. The attempt at the direct translation of the “ethical relation” into the sphere of law, however, misunderstands the central insight of the philosophy of alterity. The “ethical relation,” even as it is an irremissible necessity, precisely because the other remain(s), cannot be fully enacted in the world. The ethical relation cannot be actualized because of the “precedence” of otherness that keeps the infinite beyond the grasp of the subject and of any system of representation. The power of the call of the Other is precisely that it pulls us away from our immersion in what is. Even so, the ethical relation should not be understood as mere utopianism—though it promises the hope of utopianism. The promise of utopianism is that we are not forever fated to endless repetition of the same. As Levinas explains: “This book [*Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*] escapes the reproach of utopianism—if

utopianism is a reproach, if any thought escapes utopianism—by recalling that what took place humanly has never been able to remain closed up in its site.”<sup>86</sup> The ethical relation, then, cannot be made actual without the reinstitution of totality and with it the reduction of the Other to the same.

Still, we have not answered the question of how to reconcile reciprocity as an ideal with Levinas’ critique of Hegel. For Levinas at least, the “fall” into law (I use the word “fall” here to indicate the “fall” away from the ethical relation) is inevitable. We are never just in the interface with the Other. The entry of a third is inevitable; and with the entry of the third comes the need to make comparisons and to synchronize the competing demands of individuals.

Time means that the other is forever beyond me, irreducible to the synchrony of the same. The temporality of the interhuman opens up the meaning of otherness and the otherness of meaning. But because there are more than two people in the world, we invariably pass from the ethical perspective of alterity to the ontological perspective of totality. There are always at least three persons. This means that we are obliged to ask who the other is, to try to objectively define the undefinable, to compare the incomparable, in an effort to juridically hold different positions together. So that the first type of simultaneity is the simultaneity of equality, the attempt to reconcile and balance the conflicting claims of each person.<sup>87</sup>

In Levinas’ terminology, the infinite is destined to be interrupted by the call to justice. We can never escape from ontology altogether. The fall away from the ethical takes place with the appearance of the third. Levinas himself is attracted to reciprocity as the best way to understand the synchronization of one to the Other as citizens before the law. A diachronic relation to the Other is not possible within the sphere of law. We must face up to the “inevitability” of synchronization. Hegel remains valid within the sphere of law, precisely because the synchronization of one to the Other is not only unfaithful to the ethical, it is also inevitable.

Synchronization is the act of consciousness which, through representation and the said, institutes “with the help of God,” the original locus of justice, a terrain common to me and the others where I am counted among them, that is, where subjectivity is a citizen with all the duties and rights measured and measurable which the equilibrated ego involves, or equilibrating itself by the concurrence of duties and the concurrence of rights. But justice can be established only if I, always evaded from the concept of the ego, always desituated and divested of being, always in non-reciprocatable relationship with the other, always for the other, can become an other like others.<sup>88</sup>

There is also another dimension to the relationship between the establishment of legal justice as relations of reciprocity and the perspective of alterity. The significance of Levinas' statement should not be missed. Levinas is suggesting that only a self that constantly seeks to divest itself of sovereign subjectivity will be open to relations of reciprocity. What has become known as the "decentered" subject then, is not, as often thought, antithetical to relations of reciprocity. On the contrary, such a decentered subject is the very condition of relations of reciprocity. Certainly in our own time it is only too evident that the "possessive individual" turns against reciprocity. The acquisitive individual cannot see his way through to reciprocity. Relations of reciprocity provide the limit to ownership. As we have seen in all brands of libertarian philosophy, such a limit will be rejected in the name of the subject as the center precedent to the other, the community, and the state. Levinas raises the question of what kind of individual seeks justice and can make peace with relations of reciprocity. It is precisely the individual who can live in peaceful proximity with his neighbors who has heard the call to responsibility. The search for a principle of justice inheres in the very response to the call to responsibility, to the call of the Other. "The extraordinary commitment of the other to the third party calls for control, a search for justice, society and the State, comparison and possession, thought and science, commerce and philosophy, and outside of anarchy, the search for a principle."<sup>89</sup>

I want to stress here the phrase "search for principle." Post-structuralism is often simplistically identified with "irrationalism," understood to mean that principles can never be rationally justified. This identification, while it certainly fits some who call themselves post-structuralists, does not accurately describe either Levinas or Derrida. The search for legal principle through "reasoned" dialogue is not denied, although Derrida again would be more cautious than Levinas in naming the process by which one comes to the principles one upholds. Even if reason is not denied, however, the traditional understanding of the relationship between reason and ethics is reversed. In Hegel, for example, we can "rationally" ascertain the truth of the ethical, because this truth has made itself real. Reason and truth give us the ethical. But in Levinas, on the other hand, it is only the aspiration to the ethical that can give us reason. If reason is to be with us as a force, it will only be so because of our vigilance and our promise to heed the call to responsibility. Reason cannot provide us with certainty or serve as the basis for hope. Instead, it is because we hope that we seek reason. We can now turn the perspective I have developed so far on the relationship between alterity and reciprocity, the ideal and the real, into a potential answer to Robert Cover's brilliant essay *Violence and the Word*,<sup>90</sup> which appeared in the Yale Law Journal shortly after his death. My argument against Cover is that the "otherness" to what is, the trace of the ideal, can never be completely wiped out in the perpetuation of the selfsame. Otherness remain(s).

Hope, then, inheres in the inevitable failure of any system, legal or otherwise, "to close us into a site." For those not familiar with Robert Cover's work, I will give a brief summation of his earlier, pathbreaking *Forward: Nomos and Narrative*.<sup>91</sup> There, Cover argued that the trace of a redemptive perspective lingers within the community *nomos* of our law. Revolutionary lawyers are understood to be those who remind us of the trace of the ethical, or of the ideal, in the law and bring it to the fore again precisely by remembering the potential of the ideal to counter what has actually been institutionalized. Cover's favorite example of the revolutionary use of the messianic trace within the law are the efforts of the lawyers who first challenged slavery.

But in *Violence and the Word* Cover has lost his faith in the potency of the trace of redemptive perspective within our own legal system. According to Cover, the violence of the American state has wiped out the lingering traces of the ideal. A redemptive perspective, Cover argued, can only be protected in and through the condemnation of the absolute fall of American law from the ideal. And from what has American law fallen? I would argue that implicit in Cover's view is the argument that American law has fallen, and irredeemably so, from the nonviolative relationship to one another that Levinas would call proximity. It is only in informal, small communities that Cover still finds some trace of the ethical. What I would like to suggest here, against Cover and with Levinas, is not only that the fall from the ethical into law is inevitable, nor only that the disjuncture between the ethical and the real preserves the ideal as a redemptive perspective which can maintain its critical force precisely because it is not actually identified with what is, that our responsibility to seek principles and ideals to counter that violence is still with us, and will always be with us, precisely because the "otherness" which remains leaves open the space for hope and for reinterpretation. Of course, I would not want to deny Cover's eloquent condemnation of the legal establishment of violence. We must take upon ourselves the call to justice if change is to be possible. In other words, the more the system shows itself to be corrupt, the more we need interpretation. If Cover is right in his description of the American legal system, then we need to be even more bold in our attempts at reinterpretation. To give in to despair is to relinquish responsibility. What Levinas says about the responsibility of the judge could just as well be said about the responsibility of lawyers and of law professors:

Justice is impossible without the one that renders it finding himself in proximity. His function is not limited to the "function of judgment," the subsuming of particular cases under a general rule. The judge is not outside the conflict, but the law is in the midst of proximity. Justice, society, the State and its institutions, exchanges and work are comprehensible out of proximity. This means that nothing is outside of the control of the responsibility of one for the other.<sup>92</sup>

I would argue that Cover's brilliant essay exposes the impossibility of legal interpretation as a pure exposition that is not implicated in the call to responsibility. We can no longer read off what the ideal is as if it were *there*, present in the actual—as if our task was only passive. When we interpret, we posit the very ideal we purportedly find “there” in the legal text, and as we posit the ideal or the ethical we promise to remain true to it. Our promise of fidelity to the ethical or to the ideal is precisely what breathes life into the dead letter of the law and provides a barrier against the violence of the word. If we understand that legal interpretation is not simply exposition, but only a promise, if we recognize that law is always fallen because the law can never fully realize the call to the ethical, then we can see that we have our basic task cut out for us, at least for those of us who are lawyers and law professors. To heed the call to responsibility within the law is both to remind our students of the disjuncture between law and the ideal and to affirm our responsibility to make the promise to the ideal, to aspire to counter the violence of our world in the name of universal justice. We do both at the same time, a double gesture. Post-structuralism, at least as I have interpreted it, does not leave us with nihilism, but with the call to responsibility. The echo of the call will continue to resonate because otherness, remain(s).

### Notes

- 1 W. Benjamin, 5 *Gesammelte Schriften* 441 (R. Tiedemann & H. Schweppenhäuser eds., I. Wohlfarth trans. 1974–1982), quoted in, Wohlfarth, *Et Cetera? The Historian as Chiffonnier*, 13 *New German Critique* 143, 151 (Fall 1986).
- 2 Hegel himself, of course, would never have referred to relations of reciprocal symmetry as a regulative ideal. In Hegel, the ideal has been realized as the truth of the actual.
- 3 See G. Hegel, *Hegel's Science of Logic* (A. Miller trans. 2d ed. 1969).
- 4 See E. Levinas, *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence* (A. Lingis trans. 1981) [hereinafter E. Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*]; E. Levinas, *Totality and Infinity* (A. Lingis trans. 1979).
- 5 See E. Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, supra note 4.
- 6 J. Derrida, *Glas* (J. Leavey, Jr. & R. Rand trans. 1986).
- 7 *Id.* at 1.
- 8 *Id.* at 115.
- 9 I am using the word “things” in Heidegger's sense. For a good definition of the Heideggerian usage of the word “thing,” see J. Miller, *The Ethics of Reading* 104–05 (1987), quoted *infra* text accompanying note 69.
- 10 I am adopting the phrase redemptive criticism from Jürgen Habermas who uses it to describe Benjamin's project of salvaging the remains. Habermas, *Consciousness-Raising or Redemptive Criticism—The Contemporaneity of Walter Benjamin*, 6 *New German Critique*, Spring 1979, at 30–59.
- 11 See J. Miller, supra note 9. But see P. de Man, *Allegories of Reading* (1979). As de Man himself explains

Allegories are always ethical, the term ethical designating the structural interference of two distinct value systems. In this sense, ethics has nothing to



do with the will (thwarted or free) of a subject, nor *a fortiori*, with a relationship between subjects. The ethical category is imperative (i.e., a category rather than a value) to the extent that it is linguistic and not subjective. Morality is a version of the same language aporia that gave rise to such concepts as "man" or "love" or "self," and not the cause or the consequence of such concepts. The passage to an ethical tonality does not result from a transcendental imperative but is the referential (and therefore unreliable) version of a linguistic confusion. Ethics (or, one should say, ethicality) is a discursive mode among others.

Id. at 206.

- 12 It would be a mistake to read proximity as "closeness" in the usual sense of the word. As Levinas explains:

Proximity as a suppression of distance suppresses the distance of consciousness of . . . The neighbor excludes himself from the thought that seeks him, and this exclusion has a positive side to it: my exposure to him, antecedent to his appearing, my delay behind him, my undergoing, undo the core of what is identity in me. Proximity, suppression of the distance that consciousness of . . . involves, opens the distance of a diachrony without a common present, where difference is the past that cannot be caught up with, an un-imaginable future, the non-representable status of the neighbor behind which I am late and obsessed by the neighbor. This difference is my non-indifference to the other. Proximity is a disturbance of the rememberable time.

E. Levinas, *Otherwise Than Being*, supra note 4, at 89.

- 13 See F. Nietzsche, *The Gay Science* aphorism 60, at 123 (W. Kaufmann trans. 1st ed. 1974), in which action at a distance is associated with the aura and the power of the feminine. "*Women [Die Frauen] and their action at a distance. . . . The magic and the most powerful effect of woman is, in philosophical language, action at a distance, actio in distans; but this requires first of all and above all—distance.*" Id.
- 14 G. Hegel, *Hegel's Philosophy of Right* (T. Knox trans. 1952).
- 15 Levinas & Kearney, *Dialogue with Emmanuel Levinas*, in *Face to Face with Levinas* 27 (R. Cohen ed. 1986).
- 16 As Derrida has argued in his latest essay on Levinas, *At this Very Moment in this Work Here I Am*, the ethical relation can be read to demand radical ingratitude. J. Derrida, *En ce Moment Même dans cet Ouvrage Me Voici*, in *Psyché* 159 (1987). Gratitude, as a kind of restitution, would again appropriate the Other to the same.
- 17 E. Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, supra note 4, at 23.
- 18 J. Derrida, supra note 6, at 1.
- 19 See M. Heidegger, *Identity and Difference* (J. Stambaugh trans. 1969).
- 20 J. Derrida, supra note 6, at 46.
- 21 Robert Bernasconi has eloquently argued that we should adopt the second reading of Levinas: "Derrida reads Levinas' 'transcendence' as standing outside history and concludes that the 'ahistoricity of meaning at its origin is what profoundly separates Levinas from Heidegger.'" Bernasconi, Levinas, & Derrida, in *Face to Face with Levinas*, supra note 15, at 193 (quoting J. Derrida, *Writing and Difference* 148 (A. Bass trans. 1978)). Derrida's point here arises out of the apparent opposition of infinity and history in Levinas. Certainly the notion of "beyond, history" dominates the preface of *Totality and Infinity*. See E. Levinas,

Totality and Infinity, supra note 4, at 21–30. And yet it should be emphasized that Levinas has in mind here a theological conception of history, which he refers to Hegel, whereby history is constituted as a totality ordered by judgment. See Bernasconi, Levinas, & Derrida, in *Face to Face with Levinas*, supra note 15, at 181.

- 22 J. Derrida, *Acts*, in *Memoires for Paul de Man* 137 (E. Cadava trans. 1986).
- 23 Adriaan Peperzak has highlighted this potential difficulty in Levinas.

What Levinas rejects most of all in Hegel's theory of being and nature is the thesis that the infinite itself reveals itself within and as the realm of the anonymous in which Leviathans are at home. As the element of magic forces, mythic gods, and delightful enthusiasms, nature cannot reveal the infinite, because it exists and "is" in another way than being, in its oscillation into and out of nonbeing. Levinas' hatred for this conception of the relationship between the finite and the infinite is most clearly expressed in his polemics against Heidegger's attempt at resuscitating the gods of Greece and of Hoelderlin, through a celebration of the divine as it appears in the phenomena of the earth, with its places, woods, and rivers, in works of art, in the heroes of politics or thought, and in the time of destiny. It is, however, easy to adapt Levinas' criticism to Hegel's way of looking at nature and culture as the expressions of the absolute life unfolding itself through the hierarchy of stones and stars, plants, animals, and people, states and history.

However, can we not defend Hegel against this criticism? Doesn't he say that the natural exteriority of the idea should not be isolated from its interior light and that, if it were isolated, nature would indeed be an ungodly, monstrous chaos without any meaning, structure, value, light? And couldn't Hegel ask Levinas how he can avoid a dualistic view, according to which part of the world—being or *il y a*—is essentially unholy and unredeemable? How can being thus be conceived of as created?

Peperzak, *Some Remarks on Hegel, Kant, and Levinas*, in *Face to Face with Levinas*, supra note 15, at 209.

- 24 J. Derrida, supra note 6, at 1–2.
- 25 Id. at 115.
- 26 Jan de Greef has powerfully argued that Derrida's interrogation of Levinas should be read as the return of the skeptical critic. Although I disagree with his reading, he offers us a convincing argument for his own position. See De Greef, *Skepticism and Reason*, in *Face to Face with Levinas*, supra note 15, at 159–79.
- 27 J. Derrida, *Mnemosyne*, in *Memoires for Paul de Man*, supra note 22, at 21 (C. Lindsay trans.).
- 28 Radolphe Gasché, in his excellent book, *The Tain of the Mirror*, has defended Derrida as a serious philosopher. I agree with him that Derrida is indeed a serious philosopher. Yet I disagree with his attempt to draw a rigid boundary between literature and philosophy. *Glas* is a reading effect and not a traditional philosophical statement for a reason. Derrida's literary experimentation is not just as an aside of a creative personality, but is instead essential to deconstruction itself which constantly shows us the limit of philosophy. See R. Gasché, *The Tain of the Mirror* (1986).
- 29 J. Derrida, supra note 22, at 132.
- 30 Levinas has explained his difference from Derrida in the following way:

It is true that philosophy, in its traditional forms of ontotheology and logocentrism—to use Heidegger's and Derrida's terms—has come to an end.

But it is not true of philosophy in the other sense of critical speculation and interrogation. The speculative practice of philosophy is by no means near its end. Indeed, the whole contemporary discourse of overcoming and deconstructing metaphysics is far more speculative in many respects than is metaphysics itself. Reason is never more versatile as when it puts itself in question. In the contemporary end of philosophy, philosophy has found a new lease on life.

Levinas & Kearney, *supra* note 15, at 33. Yet, certainly, Derrida would be only too willing to recognize the "speculative" moment within deconstruction. The difference between the two thinkers is not that Derrida would deny that reason is never more versatile than when it puts itself in question but rather that even this versatility runs up against the limits of philosophy in the attempt to faithfully pay tribute to the remain(s).

- 31 J. Derrida, *supra* note 22, at 145.
- 32 J. Derrida, *Des Tours de Babel*, in *Difference in Translation* 191 (1985).
- 33 J. Derrida, *The Art of Mémoires*, in *Memoires for Paul de Man*, *supra* note 22, at 52 (J. Culler trans).
- 34 *Id.*
- 35 J. Derrida, *supra* note 27, at 34.
- 36 J. Derrida, *supra* note 33, at 53.
- 37 J. Derrida, *supra* note 27, at 35.
- 38 *Id.* at 38.
- 39 J. Derrida, *supra* note 33, at 75.
- 40 J. Derrida, *supra* note 6, at 118.
- 41 *Id.*
- 42 *Id.* at 209.
- 43 J. Derrida, *supra* note 33, at 58.
- 44 J. Derrida, *supra* note 6, at 86.
- 45 *Id.* at 145–46.
- 46 *Id.* at 116–17.
- 47 J. Joyce, *Finnegan's Wake* (1975).
- 48 See W. Benjamin, *The Destructive Character*, in *Reflections* 301–03 (E. Jephcott trans. 1978).
- 49 J. Derrida, *supra* note 6, at 204.
- 50 J. Derrida & C. McDonald, *Choreographies*, 12 *Diacritics*, Summer 1982, at 66, 69–70.
- 51 J. Derrida, *supra* note 6, at 117.
- 52 J. Derrida, *supra* note 27, at 34.
- 53 J. Derrida *supra* note 6, at 34.
- 54 See *id.* at 35.
- 55 H. Cixious & C. Clément, *Sorties: Out and Out: Attacks/Ways Out/Forays*, in *The Newly Born Woman* 84 (B. Wing trans. 1986).
- 56 The "auratic gaze" is a phrase adopted by Walter Benjamin. Miriam Hansen has succinctly described the role of the auratic gaze in Benjamin's infinite task of salvaging the remain(s).

The "gaze heavy with distance" that Benjamin reads in Baudelaire's "*regard familier*" turns on the same axis that, according to Freud, links "*unheimlich*" to "*heimlich*" a psychic ambivalence which challenges the narcissistic complacency of the gaze: "The deeper the absence of the counterpart which a gaze had to overcome, the stronger its spell. In eyes that merely mirror the other, this absence remain(s) undiminished."

- Hansen, Benjamin, Cinema and Experience: "The Blue Flower in the Land of Technology," 14 *New German Critique*, Winter 1987, at 179, 217.
- 57 J. Derrida, *supra* note 6, at 115.
- 58 *Id.* at 65.
- 59 "His tomb, he loves only that: *Sa* falls, it loves only *ça* [*Sa tombe, il n'aime que ça*]." *Id.* at 201.
- 60 *Id.* at 229.
- 61 *Id.* at 175.
- 62 *Id.* at 227.
- 63 See W. Benjamin, On the Mimetic Faculty, in *Reflections*, *supra* note 48, at 333.
- 64 See M. Horkheimer & T. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (J. Cumming trans. 1972).
- 65 J. Derrida, *supra* note 6, at 235.
- 66 J. Derrida, *Signéponge/Signsponge* 4 (R. Rand trans. 1984).
- 67 J. Derrida, *supra* note 6, at 215.
- 68 J. Derrida, *supra* note 33, at 73.
- 69 J. Miller, *supra* note 9, at 104–05.
- 70 *Id.*
- 71 Richard Bernstein, for example, has made this argument. See R. Bernstein, Heidegger on Humanism, in *Philosophical Profiles* 197 (1986).
- 72 J. Derrida, *Violence and Metaphysics: An Essay on the Thought of Emmanuel Levinas*, in *Writing and Difference* 79 (A. Bass trans. 1978).
- 73 *Id.* at 111.
- 74 Levinas & Kearney, *supra* note 15, at 32.
- 75 Bernasconi, *Deconstruction and the Possibility of Ethics*, in *Deconstruction and Philosophy* 135 (J. Sallis ed. 1987).
- 76 *Id.* at 135–36.
- 77 J. Derrida, *supra* note 22, at 137.
- 78 J. Derrida, *supra* note 72, at 121.
- 79 *Id.* at 125.
- 80 *Id.* at 141.
- 81 W. Benjamin, *Theologico-Political Fragment*, in *Reflections*, *supra* note 48, at 312–13. I would also trace Paul de Man's brilliant misreading of Benjamin to his failure to fully grasp the relationship between the nihilism that *must* result from the profane striving for happiness and Benjamin's own messianism. Benjamin's "nihilism" is the affirmation of the striving for happiness not only for its own sake, but because such striving forces us to reject what is and therefore helps clear the way for the messiah. De Man is right that in Benjamin history is not messianic. But the striving for happiness undermines the pure disjunction between history and messianic intensity that de Man finds in Benjamin's text. See P. de Man, *The Resistance to Theory* (1986).
- 82 E. Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, *supra* note 4, at 151.
- 83 See Fish, *Anti-Professionalism*, 7 *Cardozo L. Rev.* 645, 677 (1986).
- 84 J. Derrida, *supra* note 33, at 57.
- 85 See, e.g., Cornell, *Two Lectures on the Normative Dimensions of Community in the Law*, 54 *Tenn. L. Rev.* 327, 330–34, 335–43 (1987); Cornell, *In Union: A Critical Review of Toward a Perfected State*, (forthcoming in 136 *Pa. L. Rev.*); Cornell, *Reciprocity and the Critique of Employment at Will* (forthcoming in 10 *Cardozo L. Rev.* (1989) *Hegel and Legal Theory Symposium*).
- 86 E. Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, *supra* note 4, at 184.
- 87 Levinas & Kearney, *supra* note 15, at 21.
- 88 E. Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, *supra* note 4, at 160–61.

89 Id. at 161.

90 Cover, Violence and the Word, 95 Yale L.J. 1601 (1986).

91 Cover, Forward: *Nomos* and Narrative, 97 Harv. L. Rev. 4 (1983).

92 E. Levinas, Otherwise than Being, *supra* note 4, at 159.

## FACING NATURE

## Levinas beyond the human

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For all his radicality and originality, Emmanuel Levinas nonetheless has a general conception of the ethical that is arguably quite Kantian in at least one of its aspects. Ethics is not, one could say with both Kant and Levinas, concerned with maximizing the return to oneself in the economy of the same; it does not entail any sort of calculative reasoning about the relative goods or harms that one can receive from an action. What happens in ethics is something new, something unprecedented in the life of a being concerned for its own well-being. Ethics is something radically un-economical.

In order to articulate this break with economy, Levinas attempts to distance the human being from a sphere in which all is reducible to causes and effects, profits and losses. And to do this he distinguishes between two “orders of things.” Section II of *Totality and Infinity* describes how the subject establishes itself in the world, its attempts at delaying the uncertainties of the future through the activities of acquiring possessions and sheltering itself from the forces of nature. These reflections are aimed at showing us a level of human existence in which the leading motive for action is self-concern, the care that one takes of oneself, the *conatus essendi*. For Levinas this is the animal order, the realm in which there appear beings who are concerned with their being, beings for whom the fundamental question surrounds their persistence in being, literally their livelihood.

Levinas equates this order with the thought of both Heidegger and Darwin, saying that “a being is something that is attached to being, to its own being. That is Darwin’s idea. The being of animals is a struggle for life. A struggle for life without ethics. It is a question of might.”<sup>1</sup> The thought that this is a realm “without ethics” indicates that we are dealing with an *autonomous* and not a *heteronomous* order because for Levinas relationality is here seen to be a relation to oneself, a return to oneself in the care that one takes

for oneself, which shows that here there is to be found nothing truly *heteros*, nothing other. Animal existence is essentially appropriative, a re-appropriation and recuperation of oneself, and this is a thought which colors Levinas' analyses of everything from eating to sexuality.

Although Levinas is convinced that Western philosophy has been, with the notable exceptions of Plato and Descartes, an elaborate account of this egoist ontology, he is equally sure that there is something more to be said. He contrasts the animal order with that of the human, telling us that "in relation to the animal, the human is a new phenomenon" (PM 172). This is due to the fact that in the human order there is a break with being, a detachment or distancing from being not found in the animal. It is, Levinas insists, that "with the appearance of the human—and this is my entire philosophy—there is something more important than my life, and that is the life of the other" (PM 172). The human order is the ethical order, the order in which being is no longer a being-for-itself but is instead a being-for-others, a being-concerned-for-the-other. Diverging sharply from Kant, for Levinas ethics is not a life of autonomous reason presenting itself as a law to itself, but the advent of the other, the appearance on the scene of something which assumes priority over myself, something *heteros* proclaiming the *nomos*.

But the question as to the nature of this novel event of ethics, the "source" of the break with being, as it were, is a difficult one. Those familiar with the work of Levinas are no doubt inclined to respond by saying that it is the face of the other that establishes this order, a dis-ordering of myself and a re-orientation towards the other. And this is undoubtedly true. But what are we who are concerned not only with human others but also with the alterity of other-than-human others to make of this? What is Levinas saying to us?

Although it is clear that the animal order is not reducible to physiology, it is equally clear that for Levinas it is solely the human being that has the being of the other at issue for it. Animals "struggle for life without ethics." And while it is arguable that certain species may well participate in activities which we may want to classify as "ethical" in some sense,<sup>2</sup> it is not necessary to challenge Levinas on this point. Regardless of whether non-humans participate in the human order of ethics, what is at issue here for our understanding of Levinas is the question of whether or not it is only a human which can "effect" the break with being. Is it the case that because only human beings break with being, that only a human being can enact that break? Can a non-human other be "the other"?

### The face of ethics and the face of the animal

To ask these questions is undoubtedly to inquire into exactly what we are to understand by Levinas' use of the term "face." And this is not an easy task.

Grasping his thought on this point amounts to explicating the claim that "the face is a fundamental event" (PM 168).

Ordinarily, and perhaps predominately, meaning is constituted relationally through the placement of an object within an horizon which provides a context that "makes sense" of that object. And it is possible to encounter factual faces in this way. Here there is the face of a student, there that of a clerk, etc., and these faces appear and are understood as such.<sup>3</sup> But Levinas wants us to understand the face of ethics more radically than this, as something which "involves a signifyingness of its own independent of this meaning received from the world" (MS 95).

Because of his insistence that the face appears "without mediation" or "without context" Levinas often comments upon the inadequacies of phenomenology to describe the face.<sup>4</sup> He insists that the face cannot be explained in terms of perception<sup>5</sup> or knowledge,<sup>6</sup> that the face is never just the face that one describes; it is never just an object but rather a "happening,"<sup>6</sup> the event of being faced by the other. And this event is not primarily phenomenal, but ethical. The face is described as a "summons" and a "judge," a "commandment" and an "authority," a "putting into question" of the I which is concerned with itself. The face is the intervention of the other which addresses the I and challenges the *conatus essendi*; it is the expression of the other's poverty—irreducible to sounds uttered—which reveals that one's concern for oneself has come at the expense of the other, an appeal which demands a response and a responsibility.<sup>7</sup> Which is to say that Levinas employs the term "face" to describe the fundamental event of ethics that is the disruption of the self's circling back upon itself through the advent of the other who is at once plaintiff, judge, and jury in the trial of egoist subjectivity.

Wholly shock, rupture and novelty, the face is seen by Levinas to be the well-spring of an ethical relation radically conceived. The other announced in the face is the one who has been laid low, the one who is fundamentally, structurally, weak. The other is, to use one of Levinas' favorite formulations, "the stranger, the widow, the orphan to whom I am obliged" (TI 215). But this is a "humility joined with height" (MS 96) where the destitution of the face claims the I who is fundamentally, structurally, able. We are told that "there is a commandment in the appearance of the face, as if a master spoke to me. However, at the same time, the face of the other is destitute; it is the poor for whom I can do all and to whom I owe all. And me, whoever I may be . . . I am he who finds the resources to respond to the call" (EI 89). Here Levinas indicates the asymmetry of the ethical relation, the fact that the commandment of the face does not promise a return, a reciprocation, but instead claims the I absolutely. The face does not initiate a new economy, but breaks with the economical altogether.<sup>8</sup>

But let us return to our guiding question, which concerns the other-than-human other. Can a non-human express as face? In a preliminary way,



things would appear to bode well for the non-human for two primary reasons. The first is that, as we have just seen, Levinas does not require of the ethical relation an other who can reciprocate. The point is, simply put, moot. Reciprocity is the other's concern, not mine. Hence the fact that a non-human does not return to me the consideration that I extend to it is absolutely irrelevant, the other is absolved.

The second positive indication for an ethics of the non-human deals with the issue of language.<sup>9</sup> For many modernist thinkers the role of language in ethical systems is crucial. Language is taken, by Descartes for example, as an indication of the presence of reason, which is in turn taken as the ground upon which one establishes a being's moral standing. One is obliged only to beings who speak or who have the potential for speech. But for Levinas language is not the "tool" of a rational mind seeking to transpose its contents into a different container, it is rather an appeal, the imposition of the other upon the I that is first and foremost ethical. A being expresses when it "presents itself," where "presentation" is to be understood as a "putting into question in an ethical relation" (TI 200, 206). Thus dialogue is the activity of call and response, plea cried and aid given. Language understood as a system of signs is, to use Husserl's vocabulary, a founded phenomenon, derivative of this fundamental signification of the face: "meaning is the face of the other, and all recourse to words takes place already within the primordial face to face of language" (TI 206). It would seem, therefore, that the ethical relation does not presuppose the capacity for linguistic articulation, that the face does not have to speak to make its commandment heard. Which means that the non-human could not be ruled out on the basis of an inability to converse with us.

Or so it would seem. For when Levinas considers non-human others explicitly things begin to look less optimistic. Upon being asked whether the human face is distinctive in his analyses, Levinas responds by saying that "one cannot entirely refuse the face of an animal. It is via the face that one understands, for example, a dog. Yet the priority here is not found in the animal, but in the human face . . . The phenomenon of the face is not in its purest form in the dog. In the dog . . . there are other phenomena . . . But it also has a face" (PM 169). In the same interview, Levinas is asked "can an animal be considered as the other that must be welcomed?" To this he responds by saying that "I cannot say at what moment you have the right to be called 'face.' The human face is completely different and only afterwards do we discover the face of an animal. I don't know if a snake has a face. I can't answer that question. A more specific analysis is needed" (PM 172).

With these statements, it would seem that Levinas has decided against the non-human face, or at least against it being anything like the face of ethics. The non-human face, as an "impure" version of the face, maintains a secondary status, it is a face discovered "afterwards," and indeed only by

some sort of analogy. "It is clear," Levinas claims, that "without considering animals as human beings, the ethical extends to all living beings. . . . But the prototype of this is human ethics. Vegetarianism, for example, arises from the transference to animals of the idea of suffering. The animal suffers. It is because we, as human, know what suffering is that we can have this obligation" (PM 172). The importance of the claim that the ethical "extends to all living beings" should not be underestimated. But it is, nevertheless, precisely that: an *extension*, the transference of the idea of suffering onto a being that does not, of itself, claim us uniquely.

Oddly enough, this is a highly Husserlian formulation. As in the Fifth of the *Cartesian Meditations*, one starts with a human encounter or even simply oneself from which one "works outward" through an analogical appresentation that discovers, albeit inadequately, some facsimile of a sentient life. But if Levinas is willing to stand by Husserl on this point, then there can be no doubt that he is conceding that the relation with non-humans is nothing at all like the relation to the face since Husserl's thought is routinely criticized by Levinas for its failure to account for alterity.<sup>10</sup> The transcendental consciousness which constitutes the world is not brought up short by its other. Thus we are forced to conclude that non-humans are for Levinas precisely what he claims human others are for Husserl, and precisely what the term "non-humans" suggests: the "not I," or at best the "like I," but never other.

It is because of this "secondary" or "analogical" status of the non-human that Levinas ultimately denies the ethical expressiveness of the non-human face. Citing with approval Descartes' view, presented in the *Discourse on Method*, that animals can be likened to machines based in part upon their inability to speak to us, Levinas writes that "Descartes thus refuses to admit a language that would be imprisoned in the particularisms of a species" (LP 122). In his reading Levinas attributes to Descartes the insight that language is first and foremost an expressive capacity that cuts across formal-linguistic or physiological barriers: "That animals have never spoken to man is said [by Descartes] to prove that they do not speak among themselves. Language is the possibility of entering into relationship independently of every system of signs common to the interlocutors. Like a battering-ram, it is the power to break through the limits of culture, body, and race" (LP 122). In short, if animals were addressing us, we would know it regardless of the fact that we do not share a culture, a language, or a body.<sup>11</sup>

While the reference to Descartes here is largely strategic, designed to stress the point that expression cuts across certain phenomenal borders, it betrays one of Levinas' own phenomenological tendencies. For although he decries the failures of phenomenology, he is still enough of a phenomenologist to grant that our only contact with the other is through concrete manifestations of expression. The other who is silent offers no indication,

provides no clue, and thus cannot be traced beyond its surfaces to ethics and to obligation. An animal would have to employ some sort of sign—any sign, even the most confused or awkward—for us to hear the call of obligation, for although the primordial sense of language as address undercuts all differences between signs employed, it does not make itself heard in the absence of such signs. Non-humans do not speak, and therefore cannot call us to responsibility, or if they can it is only later that we discover this.

But, we may ask, if the ethical address outstrips certain differences—cultural, bodily, racial—then how can the non-human be so quickly excluded from ethical discourse? Perhaps we should remind ourselves that “alterity is not at all the fact that there is a difference, that facing me there is someone who has a different nose than mine, different colour eyes, another character. It is not difference, but alterity” (PM 170). But if it is not difference that is our concern, then how is it possible to determine, in the absence of a “more specific analysis,” that a non-human is not “face”? This point becomes more evident if we note that it would be wrong to view a human as “less than a face” based on some quantitative determination. A change in skin color, for example, does not make one any “less” of a face. Likewise, my obligation is not diminished by the other’s inability to produce certain sounds or to make certain gestures, to speak or to communicate to me on my terms. By the same logic, it is clear that the non-human face is different, that the gestures can be unfamiliar and the sounds produced foreign, unintelligible, or even so alien as to be unheard; but this cannot in itself mean that it is not *other*. Hence Levinas’ hasty assignment of a secondary status to the non-human appears as a violation of one of the fundamental principles of his thought.

It is this insistence of Levinas’ that the face is not a simple “phenomenon” that allows us to begin to move beyond his own apparent restriction of the face-to-face of ethics to the human-to-human. In particular, I want to argue that when Levinas says “face” what he really means is “body,” and that it is on the basis of this understanding that we can speak of the “face” of the other-than-human other.

### The body exposed

For the most part, when Levinas is speaking of the body he is referring to the body of the same. The rich phenomenological descriptions of the structure of corporeal existence found in both *Time and the Other* and *Totality and Infinity* concentrate on explicating how the body of the same exercises its authority over the elements surrounding it. The body for Levinas is a material body, one which is subject to need and depends for its existence upon nourishment. But material existence is seen as an existence lived in the mode of enjoyment, an “exploitation of the other” by the body that lives

off of what it needs (TI 115). The very structure of materiality is to be in relation with an alterity that admits of being consumed. One labors upon and possesses the elements, and this is an acquisition which defines the body in many ways for Levinas, who takes as his model the hand that has a “rigorously economic movement of seizure and acquisition” and whose “primary intention is this acquisition” (TI 159).

But at the same time that Levinas is busy describing the corporeality of the same as possessive and capable of postponing the uncertainty of the future and its material betrayal, he is equally busy describing the other in terms that consistently evoke the image of one whose body has already been betrayed. We have seen that Levinas often speaks of the face as “nude” and refers to the “essential destitution” of the other. Of course, this is meant to describe the nudity of the face without cultural adornment, the face *sans* context. But Levinas also seems to want it to be the body frail and nude, the face whose skin is cracked and bleeding in the cold.

There are many places where Levinas explicitly associates the body and the face. Speaking of the ethical expressiveness of the face, he says that “the whole human body is in this sense more or less face” (EI 97), and he claims that “the whole body—a hand or curve of the shoulder—can express as the face” (TI 262). These statements indicate that, while it may be the case that the phenomenal face is in some sense a privileged location for discovering the expressive powers of the face, it is not true that the power of ethical expression is found only in the face. Rather, the expressiveness of the face is to be found “in the expressivity of the other person’s whole sensible being, even in the hand one shakes” (OI 102). It is important to come to grips with the radicality of this last statement. Levinas is not saying that we can, if we so desire, regard the body as “like” the face. Instead it is the case that the expressiveness of the face *is* the expression of a body.

The late essay “Useless Suffering” is crucial for this discussion because in it we find Levinas anchoring the claim and call of the face in corporeal suffering, in the body, claiming that the other’s suffering is “unpardonable and solicits me and calls me” (US 159). It is the *body* of the other that makes demands of me, that calls for assistance. Alphonso Lingis reads Levinas from this perspective, claiming that the visitation of the face involves “the recognition of a claim put on my substance and my life, the injunction to answer for the destitution of others with one’s own bread and, as a hostage, to give one’s life in sacrifice. *The other’s wants are first of all material*; they make claims on my own sustenance and on my own substance, made wholly of the substance of the sensuous element” (SS 229, emphasis added). This is to say that it is the corporeal neediness of the other that imposes itself upon me, that one is responsible for the other insofar as the other is a body in need.

Indeed, in *Ethics and Infinity* Levinas explains that embodiment is the very condition of ethics, claiming that “the incarnation of human subjectivity

guarantees its spirituality." To this he adds parenthetically that "I do not see what angels could give one another or how they could help one another" (El 97). Many years earlier, in a letter to Martin Buber written in 1963, Levinas explained his own thinking by saying that "the *Du Sagen* operates immediately and already through my body (including my giving hands)," and that it therefore "presupposes my body (as lived body), things (as objects of enjoyment) and the Other's hunger, [it presupposes] that the *Sagen* is thus embodied" (DB 38). These comments show the importance of the body in Levinas' understanding of ethics, that the face-to-face is, necessarily, a body-to-body, the responsiveness of an embodied being to the needs of an embodied being. For in the absence of incarnate being there is nothing to talk about, nothing to give and nothing to receive, neither frailty nor strength, poverty nor wealth.

These thoughts are summarized nicely by Levinas himself in the 1988 interview "The Other, Utopia and Justice." While considering a question about the face, he refers to Grossman's work *Life and Fate*, which discusses how people who waited in line in Russia to contact loved ones arrested for political crimes were able to read "on the nape" of those in front of them "feelings of hope and misery" (OUJ 232). Levinas' interviewer responds by saying "And the nape is a face" to which Levinas replies that "Grossman isn't saying that the nape is a face, but that all the weakness, all the mortality, all the naked and disarmed mortality of the other can be read from it" (OUJ 232). While the thought that "the nape is not a face" encourages us not to confuse the nape and the face—that is, to see that necks are different from faces—the latter portion of the statement demands that we recognize the way in which both the nape and the face "face us" as ethical commands, as expressions of the other's frailty and mortality.<sup>12</sup> What stops me short and summons me to responsibility is the nakedness of the mortal being, the vulnerable body, whether it be read from the face, the nape or the hand one shakes.

As is often the case with Levinas, care must be taken to comprehend that in saying that the face is a body in need we are not claiming that only those who are in dire straits physically are faces in the ethical sense. For Levinas, the other is a body that is structurally weak, just as the body of the same is structurally strong. The fact that we encounter an other who is clothed does not mean that the other is not "naked" in the ethical sense of which Levinas is speaking. The other is a frailty, a vulnerability, a body endangered. And it is this understanding of the body of the other and of ethics that I believe lies at the basis of Levinas' frequent claim that the first commandment of the face, the very first ethical demand, is "Thou shalt not kill."<sup>13</sup> Clearly, an angel could not issue this demand. Only an incarnate being can make such a claim, only a being that in its very being is exposed to need, betrayal, violation and murder can utter the command. And this means that only the body can be the face.

### Facing nature

The preceding reflections, from which one can approach the question of a positive reading of Levinas in relation to other-than-human others, have at the same time exposed some of the tendencies of his thought to exclude such others from his discourse. Throughout his work, Levinas distinguishes between “types” of alterity, or different “ways” of being other. We have seen in our discussion of corporeality that material existence, lived in enjoyment, has its other, to be sure. But this is not the other of ethics. The world is, on this view, the “stuff of life,” other in the sense that it can threaten and deny, be accommodating in its availability or obtrusive in its absence, but it does not “shock” like the face. And this understanding is, by Levinas’ own admission, presupposed by his ethics. The self must be in a world which is there, on reserve, employed or enslaved as a possession, such that the self can, when addressed by the other, “offer up its world,” or give. The other disrupts a relation between self and world that is otherwise complacent, but not in such a way that a radically new understanding of the world, in itself, develops. Surely the game has changed, enjoyment is not the same as giving, and there is a profound difference between the food one puts in one’s own mouth and the food one offers up to the other. But in either relation the world is the “to be consumed.” Either for oneself or for the other, there is a constant referencing of the world to its human owner, whether as possession or as gift.

But despite the obvious difficulties of such a position for environmentalism, the tendency of Levinas’ to move towards an ethic of embodiment indicates another way of thinking the status of the other-than-human in Levinas’ work. If we are to understand that the claim of the face issues from the body of the other, then it would seem that we have some serious thinking to do about who or what is other, about which others are other ethically.

As I have argued, I do not think that Levinas’ ethical phenomenology of the face precludes other-than-human faces, or that it can do so and remain consistent with its own principles and aims. This is particularly true in light of the themes of suffering and incarnation which, although at times underdeveloped by Levinas, are clearly operative in his thinking. If the claim of the other is the claim of the one who is weak, vulnerable, exposed to violation, and hence an incarnate other, then it becomes increasingly difficult to hold any radical distinction between the alterity of the human and that of the other-than-human. This is due to the fact that all life—plant, animal, insect, fish, etc.—is “body.” And we have no grounds, at this level of ethical thinking, to discriminate between the bodies that claim us since the fundamental expressiveness of the body is, “like a battering ram . . . the power to break through the limits of culture, body, and race” (LP 122). Like the human being, the dog, snake, or bird is a body exposed to violence, open to a certain betrayal based simply upon its status as corporeal. And so is the tree,

the flower, the blade of grass and the bee. And if this is so, then all life—what the Greeks understood as *to zoon*<sup>14</sup>—would be other, all bodies would have to be other ethically since what is at issue in ethics is the violation of the other, the murderous capacity of the same to turn its back upon an other who is in need, an other who has needs that can go unmet or be trampled upon, an other whose very neediness is the site of ethics and of responsibility. An ethic of the body is concerned with the very real possibility of disregarding the structural weakness of a body that can be ignored or destroyed. Hence, if we locate obligation in the claim of an incarnate other, then we would have to say that *every* body is the face, every *body* is the other.

Everybody is the other. There is a frailty, vulnerability, weakness of every body that addresses. And this has serious implications for Levinas' thinking. Can material existence be thought outside of ethics? Is it not rather the case that materiality, possessiveness, habitation, and dwelling are, like the social relation, always already ethical? This means that the *heteros* who knocks upon my door and speaks the *nomos* is not simply the other *anthropos*, but *zoon* as well. The home—the *oikos*—into which the other must be welcomed, is also the *ecos*, a place wherein every body should find welcome and shelter. Obligation is heteronomous, but not simply hetero-*anthropo*-nomous. Obligation is hetero-*zoo*-nomous—heterozoonomy.

A sense of obligation as heterozoonomous, which would deny a radical ethical separation between the human and the other-than-human, does not entail an eradication of all distinctions whatsoever. Surely when one is operating in the sphere of one's daily activities certain distinctions must, and should, be made. But in these reflections we have been following Levinas, who claims that "my task does not consist in constructing ethics; I only try to find its meaning" (EI 90). As such we have been concerned to show how the ethical relation as conceived by Levinas can be applied to others who are other than the others of which he speaks, and thus the consideration of how one makes certain practical distinctions, while important, has been left aside. What I have attempted is an articulation of the deeper structure of an environmental consciousness, one that feels the weight of the claim of the non-human, one that perhaps does not need a "more specific analysis" to determine whether or not they are called by the snake. And to do this one must engage in a certain "leveling" of what I would consider to be the strongly Cartesian and anthropocentric tendencies in Levinas that attempt to provide some *a priori* justification for the superiority of the claim of the human other.

By situating the ethical demand of the other in the body we are forced to recognize that there is an incredible multiplicity of ethical demands emanating from an incredible multiplicity of sources. And it is not immediately obvious which demands are to be met, or can be met. But what we must understand is that it is not simply the other person who claims us. Every body is the other.

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- Lingis, Alphonso. "The Sensuality and the Sensitivity," in *Face to Face with Levinas*. Ed. by Richard A. Cohen (Albany: SUNY Press, 1986) pp. 219–0. Cited as SS.

## Notes

- 1 It is in the sentences that follow this remark that we see the connection with Heidegger: "Heidegger says at the beginning of *Being and Time* that Dasein is a being who in his being is concerned for this being itself. That's Darwin's idea: the living being struggles for life. The aim of being is being itself" (PM 172).
- 2 E.g., caring for their young, caring for other members of their species, or even cross-species identification.
- 3 "The manifestation of the other is, to be sure, produced from the first conformably with the way every meaning is produced. Another is present in a cultural whole and is illuminated by this whole, as a text by its context" (MS 95).
- 4 OI 101, EI 85.
- 5 "In visual or tactile sensation the identity of the I envelops the alterity of the object, which becomes precisely a content" (TI 194).
- 6 In the knowing relation the other is "an exteriority surrendering in clarity and without immodesty its whole being to thought, that is, totally present without in principle anything shocking thought . . . Clarity is the disappearance of what could shock" (TI 124).
- 7 EI 88, PM 169–70.
- 8 "I am responsible for the other without waiting for reciprocity, were I to die for it. Reciprocity is *his* affair" (EI 98, emphasis in original).
- 9 For a detailed discussion of the issue of language as it pertains to Levinas' view of animals, see John Llewelyn "Am I Obsessed by Bobby? (Humanism of the



Other Animal),” in *Re-Reading Levinas*, ed. by Robert Bernasconi and Simon Critchley (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991) pp. 235–45. This essay appears, in a modified form, as the third chapter of Llewelyn’s book *The Middle Voice of Ecological Conscience*.

- 10 “The Husserlian thesis of the primacy of the objectifying act . . . leads to transcendental philosophy, to the affirmation . . . that the object of consciousness, while distinct from consciousness, is as it were a product of consciousness” (TI 123). And this of course presents “the possibility of the other to be determined by the same without determining the same, without introducing alterity into it” (TI 124).
- 11 There is, to me, a certain tension in the logic of this passage. For Levinas appears to be saying that if an animal could express as a face, then we would certainly be open to the call insofar as ethical expressiveness transcends differences. At the same time, though, he accepts without question that animals do not express in that manner, offering no explanation for why this is the case. One possible answer to this question is to understand the way in which Levinas is working off of Descartes’ idea that animals do not talk to each other. While Levinas is claiming that Descartes has touched upon the primordial sense of language, Descartes’ point is that if animals could express to each other, they should be able to talk to us as well due to the similarities in our physical constitutions. An implication of this for Levinas is, perhaps, that if animals were thought of as expressing to us, then we would have to assume that they express to each other, thus making the animal order ethical. The snake would claim not only humans but also other snakes. While the idea that the non-human animal kingdom is ethical in this sense may be hard to fathom, it is, again, not clear why this would have to be the case. To say that a being is capable of expressing ethically does not necessitate that it be capable of response.
- 12 It is not surprising that these comments occur in the context of an explanation of how the face “must not be understood in a narrow way” (OUJ 232).
- 13 EI 87–89, TI 199.
- 14 I am taking this term to mean not simply animal life, but “all living things.” See for example Plato’s *Timaeus*, 77a.

# THE POSSIBILITY OF AN ETHICAL POLITICS

From peace to liturgy

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## Abstract

This essay examines the possibility of developing an *ethical politics* out of the work of Emmanuel Levinas. Levinas' own work does not accomplish this kind of politics. He opts instead for a *politics of peace*, which, as this essay argues, falls short of the demands of the ethical. Thus, this essay both provides an account of Levinas' own politics and develops resources from within Levinas' own work for thinking beyond that politics. An alternative, *liturgical politics* is sketched out. In a liturgical politics, law must be thought on a redistributive model. Redistribution, it is argued, responds more adequately to the extravagant generosity of ethics than the neutral '*droits de l'homme*' developed in Levinas' political philosophy.

I cannot live in society on the basis of this one-to-one responsibility alone. (Levinas)

It has become all but commonplace among Continental philosophers to demand that Levinasians produce a politics. This demand typically performs a twofold function: to point out both the limits of both Levinas' pure Hebraism<sup>1</sup> and the movement from the singular Other to *le tiers*.<sup>2</sup> Though I am somewhat suspicious of these demands – as they often mask a call for

a certain *kind* of politics – it is nevertheless true that Levinasians must be sensitive to how the very matters of obligation indicate the horizon of the political. If Levinas wants to contend that Europe is constituted by the simultaneous intertwining of and rupture between ‘the Bible and the Greeks’<sup>3</sup> – tantamount to the singularity of Hebraic wisdom and the universality of Athenian law in politics – then an account of the relation between ethics and the state is imperative. Furthermore, because the demand for a politics emerges from concrete exigencies, those perplexed by Levinas’ now famous comment, that his ‘definition of the other is completely different’ from one inclusive of Israel’s most proximal other, the Palestinian (EP, 294), must feel an even more urgent demand. The question, then, is quite straightforward: is a Levinasian ethics destined for such a closed conception of the neighbor, or could politics, setting out from ethics, be thought otherwise?

The present reflections set out from Levinas and seek an *ethical politics*. This politics must be distinguished from Levinas’ own articulation of a *politics of peace*. Is there a possibility, beginning within Levinas’ thought, for a legitimate ethical politics? Precisely what this politics might look like from a Levinasian perspective remains an altogether open question. Although part of our task here will be to explore what an ethical politics might look like, we will ask if such a politics is necessarily absent from Levinas’ own account of a politics of peace. Thus, we will engage the political in a manner both consonant with and foreign to Levinas’ own reflections on the matter. This engagement entails four basic tasks. The first task is to illuminate the ‘problem’ of politics within the ethical; the second, to examine Levinas’ attempts to negotiate the *movement* from the ethical to the political. The sections on these two tasks highlight three structures: the *gap* between ethics and politics, the *necessity* of their relation, and the *passage* that makes reconciling gap and necessity possible. The third task, in light of the relation between ethics and politics, is to examine Levinas’ passage from ethics to politics with a critical eye. In the fourth and final task, we will outline a Levinasian phenomenology of political space responsive to our question of an ethical politics. In the two concluding sections, on the third and fourth tasks we will have occasion both to voice hesitation with regard to Levinas’ deployment of politics and to extend our considerations beyond the conservative limitations of that deployment.

## I

The motivation for a critique of Levinas’ ‘pure Hebraism’ lies in the putatively contradictory logic of ethics and politics, a contradiction that renders a morally legitimated politics structurally impossible. Gillian Rose puts it directly when she writes of Levinas’ ‘Buddhist Judaism’ that ‘offers an extreme version of Athens *versus* Jerusalem’.<sup>4</sup> The Buddhist character of Levinas’ Hebraism – his resolute insistence on the first position of the

singular face – is betrayed by the vigilant work of ethics in the shadow of the state. Ethics, working within the particularity of moral consciousness, is always a transcendence of politics. ‘Responsibility’, Rose writes, ‘is defined in this new ethics as “passivity beyond passivity,” which is inconceivable and not representable, *because it takes place beyond any city* – even though Levinas insists that it is social and not sacred.’<sup>5</sup> Such a characterization of Levinas’ work is encouraged by the ‘Preface’ to *Totality and Infinity*. There, Levinas describes the task of *Totality and Infinity* by setting the ethics of exteriority in apposition to war and politics: ‘War does not manifest exteriority and the other as other. . . . Morality will oppose politics in history’ (TeI, ix–x/21–2).

The opposition of morality to war and politics arises out of a logical necessity. Politics is necessarily problematic for Levinas because it demands terms opposed to those of the face-to-face relation. As Levinas writes in his ‘Preface’ to the German translation of *Totality and Infinity*, ethical transcendence is wholly the relation of unicity to unicity, the love from stranger to stranger, which places ethics outside the generic idea of community (PEA, 251). Politics as generic community, founded in a general identity, disturbs the intimacy of the face-to-face pair by interjecting the universal between a relation of singulars. This interjection, in the name of third parties, threatens to neutralize the troubled ground of ethics and so trouble the matter of obligation itself. As one of Levinas’ first remarks on the problem makes clear, the relation of singularity to singularity forms ‘a society of me and you. We are just among ourselves. Third parties are excluded. A third man essentially disturbs this intimacy’ (MT, 31/30). In *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas will again underscore this troubling and disturbing presence of another, third party. The character of disturbance marks the priority and purity of the ethical situation; the other party seems to arrive subsequent to the face-to-face. Ethics is independent of the rules and laws of politics and the question of social justice. This independence is established by the immediate responsibility of the one for the Other. Levinas writes that ‘[r]esponsibility for the other is an immediacy antecedent to the questions [of politics], it is proximity. It is troubled and becomes a problem when a third party enters’ (AE, 200/157). Despite its signification within the face-to-face, the third party is problematic because it ‘is other than the neighbor, but also another neighbor, and also a neighbor of the other, and not simply his fellow’ (AE, 200/157). The logic of ethics and politics manifests a remarkable gap. The gap is opened up by the otherness of the third, who is other than me and other than the face that faces the moral I.

The face-to-face relation is always the relation of unicity to unicity. Political matters, however, demand, of necessity, a language other than that of the singular and the unique. This other language is necessary for the simple reason that political questioning calls for media of neutral problems:

equality, comparison and reciprocity. The moral dimension of politics lies in the question of justice. As such, politics calls for a calculation of equal relations, and this calculation always works within the neutral economy of representation. In 'Peace and Proximity', Levinas writes that

... [t]he first question in the interhuman is the question of justice. ... Comparison is superimposed onto my relation with the *unique* and the incomparable, and, in view of equity and equality, a weighing, a thinking, a calculation, the comparison of incomparables. ... [Subjectivity] enters with the dignity of a citizen into the perfect reciprocity of political laws which are essentially egalitarian or held to become so.

(PeP, 148–9/168)

The egalitarian structures of the liberal state cannot account for the language of singularity. The structures that make equality possible are superimposed onto the relation of unicity to unicity. I am a citizen only under a general law, a law based in the comparison of incomparable singulars. It belongs to the very idea of law that it neutralizes the enigma of the singular. Such is the fate of institutions.

The uniqueness of the face-to-face relation is not simply opposed to the state as one logic to another. The ethical explicitly resists the state and therein refuses suppression of its singularity. Levinas notes in 'Ideology and Idealism' that

... 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 inescapably my concern.

(IaI, 247)

The logic and concrete work of ethics resists the scope of political logic. My relation to the Other 'cannot be totally suppressed'. Singularity resists universality. The work of obligation called for in the face-to-face can neither be concealed nor expiated in the legalistic work of the state. In this resistance, Levinas' work both replays some essential features of the conceptual conflict of Hebraism (City of Jerusalem) and Hellenism (City of Athens) and restages something of the ancient confrontation between Antigone and Kreon. The unsuppressable, potentially revolutionary and potentially destructive fact of a singular obligation stakes its claim outside the boundary walls of the state. But, still, one may ask: if Levinas claims ethics is sociality, does that not imply that politics is more than something outside the ethical? Is not sociality always political, even in its ethical signification?

## II

What critics like Rose find objectionable in Levinas' separation of ethics from politics is the supposed failure to think the relation of the ethical to the political. On this account, Levinas' privileging of ethics over politics fails to see how the logics of heteronomy and Hebraism presuppose the very structures they put into question. So, this is a failure born of naivety. The state, so the criticism goes, is both a factual and an essential necessity. To exclude an account of the state from ethics is to forget a – perhaps *the* – condition of the ethical relation and to evade the anxious risks of political community in a gesture of naivety.<sup>6</sup>

But this clearly sells the Levinasian prerogative short. Levinas will admit, with his own qualifications, that the human is *animal politique*, 'a political animal' (MT, 35/33). While he surely does not, and cannot, make politics equiprimordial with ethics,<sup>7</sup> it is altogether wrong to say that Levinas does not think the relation between the two. In his first take on the relation of ethics to politics, the juxtaposition of the singular face and the universality of the law opens up a gap. The face signifies without context. Politics is the face contextualized and compared – the face as citizen. Yet, the Other is always an Other with others. The call to the necessity of politics is already within the face-to-face, something that signals justice, a question of the public realm, as necessary. Levinas writes:

But in the real world there are many others. When others enter, each of them is external to myself, problems arise. Who is closest to me? Who is the Other? Perhaps something has already occurred between them. We must investigate carefully. Legal justice is required. There is need for a State.

(IaI, 247)

The politics of the state is at once what opposes ethics and what is necessary. If one cannot live in society on the basis of one-to-one responsibility alone, then some kind of politics is necessary. Between politics and ethics, there is a gap and the necessity of relation. The gap is manifest in the opposed logics. The necessity is manifest in something like the facticity of my sociality. There are many others and they command me to be a political animal.

What is the sense of this necessity, and how might it be related to ethics? For, if ethics is unsuppressable by politics and politics cannot assume, correct, or substitute itself for the work of ethics, then what would be the status of politics inside or outside the scope of obligation? This is posed by Levinas as the question of the relation of ethics to politics, a question imposed by the necessity of legal justice. It is quite simple: is the legal justice of the state necessary for protection of one from another, or is it necessary as an

extension of my responsibility for the neighbor? Is legal justice born of violence, or of goodness? Levinas puts it plainly:

[I]t is very important to know whether the state, society, law, and power are required because man is a beast to his neighbor (*homo homini lupus*) or because I am responsible for my fellow. It is very important to know whether the political order defines man's responsibility or merely restricts his bestiality. It is very important, even if the conclusion is that all of us exist for the sake of the state, the society, the law.<sup>8</sup>

These remarks confirm the tension inherent in the relation. In 'Peace and Proximity', Levinas attempts to alleviate that tension by insisting on the relation as one of genetic order. When Levinas writes in *Totality and Infinity* that 'behind the straight line of the law, the land of goodness extends infinite and unexplored' (TeI, 223/245), the implication is that the goodness of ethics cannot be subsumed under the labor of politics. The function of ethics, of goodness, is to remind politics of its origin and the place of its justification. The political practice of the state is measured by what is generated by face-to-face obligations. This measuring command of the facing relation is guaranteed by the question of origin. Ethics puts politics in question as both other than politics and the foundation of its justice. This genetic relation is important to recall, for the danger of politics lies in its capacity to claim itself as its own center. Levinas reminds us that politics left to itself 'bears a tyranny within itself' (TeI, 276/300). Or, as he writes in an immensely important passage from 'Peace and Proximity', we can recall politics to its origin in peace. Precisely because the state risks claiming an originary character, Levinas writes that

... it seemed to us important to recall peace and justice as their origin, justification, and measure; to recall that this justice, which can legitimate them ethically... is not a natural and anonymous legality governing the human masses... Nothing would be able to withdraw itself from the control of the responsibility of the 'one for the other,' which delineates the limit of the State and does not cease to appeal to the vigilance of persons who would not be satisfied with the simple subsumption of cases under a general rule.

(PeP, 149-50/168-9)

The state is dangerous when it claims an anonymous foundation to law, namely, a foundation grounded in a generic communal identity. But law does not arise from an originally indifferent situation. Law, in some manner of appealing to ground, looks to the peace of the relation of unicity to unicity for its foundation. 'Justice', Levinas will say, 'demands *and* lays the foundation of the state [*exige et fonde l'État*]' (DU, 216).

This appeal to the ethical relation as the ground of law calls for what Levinas terms a 'phenomenology of the rights of man'. The rights of the human, the universality of equality and comparison, 'are based on an original sense of the right, or the sense of an original right' (DH, 175/116).<sup>9</sup> This original right is concretely produced in the relation to the Other: the unique and the singular. This ethical relation is what the ethical state, practicing the politics of peace, takes as its model. Levinas writes: 'Metaphysics therefore leads us to the accomplishment of the I as unicity by relation to which the work of the State must be situated, and which it must take as a model [*doit se situer et se modeler*]' (TeI, 277/300). The universality of the state is not self-sufficient. Rather, the source of its egalitarian principles is manifest first as the duty commanded by the singular face. Levinas writes in 'The Rights of Man and the Rights of the Other' that

... the rights of man manifest themselves *concretely* to consciousness as the rights of the other, for which I am answerable. Their original manifestation as rights of the other person and as duty for an *I*, as my fraternal duty – that is the phenomenology of the rights of man.

(DH, 187/125)

Ethics has a twofold relation to politics: ethics is both the phenomenological ground of politics and, as the ground on which politics is built, is always capable of calling it into question. Ethics holds an interruptive power in relation to politics, even as it grounds. This interruptive effect derives from its position in the order of priority.

Politics left to itself is tyrannical. Still, if we situate ethics at the basis of the just state, then a relation is forged between ethics and politics that opens up the possibility of an ethical politics. But, the face-to-face itself brings up a paradox: there is a gap between ethics and politics and a necessity to both. This paradox is resolved, in part, by the introduction of the figure of *le tiers* – the third party. In *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas writes that

... [t]he third party looks at me in the eyes of the Other. ... It is not that there would first be the face, and then the being it manifests or expresses would concern himself with justice; the epiphany of the face qua face opens humanity. ... The presence of the face – the infinity of the Other – is destitution, the presence of the third party (that is, of the whole of humanity that looks at us).

(TeI, 188/213)

This intertwining of the face and the third provides something like a resolution to the paradoxical relation of ethics to politics. If this paradox is the simultaneity of gap and necessity, then it can be resolved only by a figure of passage. This passage is necessary, for, without a passage, without



a relation of ethics and politics, politics is left to itself. Safe from the weight of the ethical, such a politics leads to tyranny and the primacy of war. The third party, which hearkens back to Aristotle's third man argument in the *Metaphysics*, functions as this passage. In an important claim, Levinas will say that the third looks at me in the face of the Other originally and not as a supplement. The third party already points to the possibility of an ethical politics, as the third relates the ethical to the universality of the state immanently. Levinas puts it this way:

In the measure that the face of the Other relates us with the third party, the metaphysical relation of the I with the Other moves into the form of the We, aspires to a State, institutions, laws, which are the source of universality.

(TeI, 276/300)

At this point, Levinas remarks that a politics left to itself is tyranny. Without the relations of height described in the ethical, the state is subject to the suspension of morality in war. The presence of the third in the face-to-face, however, marks politics with the demands of moral consciousness. The rights of the human, we might say, are always already marked by the rights of the Other. Their reduction of the singularity of the Other to the 'particularity of an individual of the genre human, to the condition of a citizen' is indispensable for politics. But, this reduction does not make a clean break with its original situation. This reduction, rather, is a movement of 'derivation' whose 'imperative motivation' is to 'inscribe' the incomparable and unique right of the Other human in the law (DU, 216).

The presence of the third signifies the point of passage from ethics to politics, and thereby marks politics with ethics. The co-presence of the face and the third signals the political in the (original) ethical situation. The third is the signification that makes the passage possible – the indicative sign, as it were, of what transcends the given (politics is beyond the face), while simultaneously being immanent to the given (the third signals in the eyes of the Other). Levinas' use of the third as the signification of politics is phenomenologically important, as his analysis has always adhered, methodologically, to the concrete. Levinas' appeal to the concrete means, in this context, that politics cannot simply be constructed out of ethics. Politics must signify concretely within the ethical; the third must indicate itself in the face of the Other. The third intertwined with the face performs precisely this signification. Levinas' turn to the signification of the third is, as Critchley puts it, 'the attempt to traverse the passage from ethics to politics without reducing the dimension of transcendence'.<sup>10</sup> The signification effects a doubling of discourse, manifest in what Levinas calls the 'prophetic word' of 'monotheism'. The invocation of the prophetic word fills out what is left unexplained when Levinas says: 'language is justice.'

Levinas tells us in 'De l'Unicité' that the prophetic voice reminds the judgement of the state that the human face is concealed in the idea of the citizen. Justice, derived from ethics, demands the protection and first position of singularity, and so opposes the neutered disposition of the law of citizenship. The prophetic voice recalls the unicity that 'precedes every genre or is liberated from every genre' (DU, 216).

The prophetic word of monotheism constitutes what Critchley calls the 'double community of *fraternitas*'.<sup>11</sup> The prophetic word doubles community by simultaneously affirming law as generality and liberating unicity from generality. The prophetic word expresses the movement from law to singularity and from singularity to law. Levinas writes that

... the prophetic word responds to the epiphany of the face, doubles every discourse, not as discourse about moral themes, but as an irreducible movement of a discourse which is essentially aroused by the epiphany of the face inasmuch as it attests to the presence of the third party, of humanity as a whole, in the eyes that look at me.

(TeI, 188/213)

The prophet of monotheism, speaking the word of God – said, for Levinas, in the face – puts humanity under an ethical law. This law is ethical because it refuses to undermine the priority of the face of the Other who commands. The ethical law says community in the face of the Other, which is, in Levinas' account, the concretion of the Divine. Freedom in fraternity affirms the responsibility of the one-for-the-Other. Indeed, in his 'Preface' to the German translation of *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas puts fraternity and the sociality of peace immediately alongside the relations of unicity to unicity, the love 'from stranger to stranger' (PEA, 251). 'The Rights of Man and the Rights of the Other' confirms this link:

Should not the fraternity that is in the motto of the republic be discerned in the prior non-indifference of the one for the other, in that original goodness in which freedom is embedded, and in which the justice of the rights of man takes on an immutable significance and stability, better than those guaranteed by the state? A freedom in fraternity, in which the responsibility of one-for-the-other is affirmed, and through which the rights of man manifest themselves *concretely* to consciousness as the rights of the Other, for which I am answerable.

(DH, 187/125)

If, as Levinas will say in *Otherwise than Being*, justice is the birth of consciousness, then this consciousness of the rights of the human (universality) made concrete *as* the rights of the other (singularity) is our first, primordial

political subjectivity.<sup>12</sup> Primordial political subjectivity – the relation of fraternity – is a relation to the universal in the concrete. This subjectivity ‘lives from’ the identical significative locus of the Other and the third.

### III

Political subjectivity outlines what is necessary for a legitimate politics. The political subjectivity of *fraternitas* is a community of difference that stands under the protection of the universality of law. Law and its universality, however, are not established in the name of order. That is, the universality of law is neither an identification of a shared identity nor required by humanity’s beastly nature. It is, rather, a law established in the name of singularity. Against the tradition that grounds the universality of law in an extension of *my* interests, Levinas’ law establishes a protection of the rights of the singular Other. A politics whose universality is answerable to and derived from the singularity of the Other is a legitimate politics. The legitimacy of this politics of peace lies in the justificatory relation of the rights of the human to the rights of the Other. Justification flows in one direction: from the Other to the law. ‘I seek this peace,’ Levinas says, ‘not for me but for the Other’ (IEI, 196). Peace for the Other is a politics justified by its protection of the singularity of the Other. A politics of peace secures the Other’s place in the sun. Peace, one could say, gives the world back to the Other.

But is a politics of peace sufficiently an ethical politics? That is, does the excess of giving, what Levinas will call the ‘extravagant generosity’ of the for-the-Other (cf. DU, 216), inhere in this politics of peace? My contention here is that it does not. The incompatibility of the politics of peace with an ethical politics is due to what I will call Levinas’ ‘conservatism’. By conservatism, I mean to indicate Levinas’ failure to question the roots of the idea of politics, as well as his failure to practice a radical phenomenology. I can see this failure and conservatism in its twofold appearance: Levinas’ practice of politics and his articulation of its structure.

To begin, let us first recall Levinas’ comments on Palestinian–Israeli relations, which speak to his own political practice. This political issue is a factual instance, a case of putting the politics of peace into action, and betrays much about Levinas’ account of politics. In this context, Levinas first explains what he understands to be the accomplished political state. He claims that the necessity of

... a State in the fullest sense of the term, a State with an army and arms, an army which can have a deterrent and if necessary a defensive significance ... is ethical – indeed, it’s an old ethical idea which commands us precisely to defend our neighbors. My people and my kin are still my neighbors. When you defend the Jewish people, you defend

your neighbor; and every Jew in particular defends his neighbor when he defends.

(EP, 292)

Such a delineation of the notion of neighbor must strike any reader of Levinas as, at best, peculiar, if not outright problematic. Has not Levinas long since insisted on the singularity of the neighbor beyond any context or identity? Does this not violate the wisdom of the biblical command to welcome the Stranger? How have we come from Widow, Orphan, Stranger – figures that dominate *Totality and Infinity* – to ‘people’ and ‘kin’? Perhaps troubled by this, the interviewer Shlomo Malka turns to the obvious question: does not the Palestinian–Israeli relation mimic the logic of the Other in the Same, the stateless in the state, the Stranger to s/he who governs, and so ‘for the Israeli, isn’t the “other” above all the Palestinian’? To this question, Levinas responds that

. . . [m]y definition of the Other is completely different. The Other is the neighbor, who is not necessarily kin, but who can be. And in this sense, if you are for the Other, you are for the neighbor. But if your neighbor attacks another neighbor or treats him unjustly, what can you do? Then alterity takes on another character, in alterity we can find an enemy, or at least then we are faced with the problem of knowing who is right and who is wrong, who is just and who is unjust. There are people who are wrong.

(EP, 294)

One cannot but see in this comment a failure of the extravagant generosity so elegantly and systematically articulated in Levinas’ ethics. The possibility of being in kinship, the failure of which constitutes the Other as enemy, establishes a boundary that bars the Palestinian from the work of ethics. For Levinas, here, the political Other, the stateless in the state, does not demand a generosity from the Same.

Now, it would be tempting, and perhaps even somewhat warranted, to see this as a personal failure on Levinas’ part, reading this as born of complex political and psychological urgencies. Surely, one must consider that Levinas has witnessed intimately two of the West’s most horrifying moral failures: Stalinist Russia and Hitler’s Germany. Further, one might see this as a poor application of Levinas’ sense of law, a mistake corrected in a proper reapplication of the law of peace to the Palestinian ‘problem’. But these are two temptations to which we do not want to succumb. Succumbing to them conceals what is most revealing about Levinas’ comments. If taken seriously, these comments reveal a tendency built into both Levinas’ construal of the politics of peace and, perhaps most significantly, the passage from ethics to politics. It is therefore of note that in a politically neutral,

strictly philosophical context, Levinas will still link peace with defense of the Other and Third. Consider what he says in 'The Rights of Man and the Rights of the Other':

This is a goodness in peace, which is also the exercise of a freedom, and in which the *I* frees itself from its 'return to self,' from its auto-affirmation, from its egotism of a being perservering in its being, to *answer for the other*, precisely to defend the rights of the other man.

(DH, 186/124-5)

At first glance, one might read this note as simply reiterating how the universality of law protects the singular Other. However, when it is read in light of his comments on the Palestinian as enemy, another picture emerges. It becomes clear that Levinas identifies an intimacy between the idea of peace and the idea of a defense of the Other. This defense of the Other is undertaken in the name of the law and is thus motivated by the comparison of incomparables. But comparison is not dis-interested. (Recall that dis-interestedness is something of a pre-condition of ethics for Levinas.) It would appear, rather, that this comparison is done in the name of a kind of kinship. The question 'Who belongs to the law?', perhaps the very question Levinas' work in *ethics* has long contested, suddenly reappears in politics under another series of concepts: comparison, defense, kinship. Comparison, when thought in terms of defense and kinship, is wholly interested.

This latter sense of comparison is also indispensable for Levinas' politics. It makes determination of both which neighbor is 'right' and who calls for defense possible. Levinas is clear what clue we have for such comparisons: the 'first language' of the 'wish for peace'. He writes that

...[n]on-indifference and goodness of responsibility: these are not neutral, midway between love and hostility. They must be conceived on the basis of the meeting, in which the *wish for peace* – or goodness – is the first language.

(DH, 186/125)

Meeting, language, peace: this opens the question of who meets, who speaks this language, and s/he for whom peace is sought. The question of who meets is necessarily a question of who is my neighbor. Who speaks the language of the wish for peace is necessarily a question of who 'counts' in my giving. For whom is this peace sought? Here Levinas makes it clear that it is only sought for those who 'fit', so to speak, under the universality of the law. Peace, we could say, obtains only for those who fit the rhythms of political life.

If Levinas understands politics in this manner, a politics consistent in both practice and structural account of that practice, then we must ask

further: what sort of signification makes this politics possible? For whom is peace sought in a politics of peace? And, how does the passage from ethics to politics evidence this 'whom'? How does the signification of politics in the face render such a structural and practical understanding possible? Levinas' own analyses make it clear that the 'who' of the third – simultaneously the who of the Other – is precisely not a question. Levinas' descriptions of the absoluteness of alterity make it clear that he brackets the question of the who of the third. The alterity of the Other is the Other stripped of its contextual marks. Levinas will famously describe this as the *nudity* of the face. In an interview with Philippe Nemo, Levinas will say that

. . . [t]he best way of encountering the Other is not even to notice the color of his eyes. When one observes the color of the eyes, one is not in a social relationship with the Other. The relation with the face can surely be dominated by perception, but what is specifically the face is what cannot be reduced to that. . . . The skin of the face is that which stays most naked, most destitute.

(EI, 79–80/85–6)

This clearly outlines Levinas' conception of sociality: social relations are without context and without factual features of particularity. Singularity is not perceivable and so does not and cannot manifest particular features of the body. To preserve this sense of sociality, the nudity and destituteness of the skin set aside all signifiers that point alterity to contextual, factual determinations. Levinas writes elsewhere that the Other is

. . . [a] uniqueness beyond the individuality of multiple individuals within their kind. A uniqueness not because of any distinctive sign that would serve as a specific or individuating difference. A unity prior to any distinctive sign. . . . A uniqueness that is not forgotten, beneath all the constraints of Being, History, and the logical forms that hold it in their grip.

(DH, 176/117)

Now, this non-perceptual face is the point of passage to politics. So, if the alterity of the Other is nude, then the third must also signify with nudity. Nudity of the third, in turn, leads quite logically to a politics stripped of context. Hence the bareness of the universality of the law. Given Levinas' insistence on the identical significative locus of Other and third, it is surely not too much to say that the descriptive properties of the face determine the content of what is established on the other side of the passage: politics. Because the face signifies as absolute uniqueness, the third cannot carry contextual characteristics over to the content of a politics of peace. The

symmetry of Levinas' law is directly derived from the nudity of the face. The law could not signify otherwise.

It is true that this passage puts the totalitarian practice of politics in question. But it must also be said that it fails to put the traditional idea of political space into question. Levinas' political thinking certainly forgoes war in the name of peace. Nonetheless, peace is maintained in and by way of the hegemonic work of the universal. The universality grounded in the rights of the Other establishes an account of universality answerable to the ethical. The call to defend the rights of the Other alters the character of that answering, and, further, this alteration imposes law upon voices not wishing for peace. In this sense, I think law has failed to be dis-interested. Dominance, even when it is domination with peace, is thoroughly interested. Levinas' insistence on the wish for peace conceals how obligation is often demanded in the contestation of the peace of the moment. Violence can be the only voice of the political other, but Levinas' politics of peace cannot hear this voice. Traditional political space is therefore left safe because the primacy of a fixed universal remains untouched. Peace is maintained in the fixity of law. To stray from law is to wish not for peace and so not to speak the language of neighborly love. To stray from law, Levinas would seem to say, does not put law into question. This is guaranteed, structurally, by the significative structure of the third as nudity. Such a signification does not and cannot carry contextual markers through the passage to politics. So, it is no surprise that Levinas articulates political space as the symmetrical and neutral space of universal laws. This symmetry of political space marks Levinas' account with conservatism in the sense that the idea of symmetrical political space is not put into question. His description of the passage from the third to politics also points to a conservative phenomenological moment. Levinas' insistence on the nudity of the face, and so the nudity of the third, fails to feel fully the force of the alterity of the Other. If, however, we ask who the Other and the third are, then do we not more radically interrogate the alterity of the Other and others? That is, have we not asked about what is most other about the Other, most alter about alterity? If we ask who is the Other and the third, do we not see another politics? Might this other politics restore the extravagant generosity of ethics to political space?

#### IV

Let us begin opening the horizon of this other politics. Our basic critical contention thus far has been that Levinas construes political space – and therefore the passage from ethics to politics – conservatively. This conservatism derives from the logical connection between the nudity of the face and the symmetry of the state. Having hesitated before this passage to and characterization of political space, we are poised to put forth another

question: in what manner is it possible to think political space otherwise? And, what resources remain in Levinas' thought for this thinking otherwise?

To begin this thinking otherwise, let us consider two of Levinas' remarks on the state. First, although Levinas endorses a conservative notion of law, he also questions our common assumptions about universality. This questioning may unsettle the conservatism of Levinas' state. In 'the state of Israel and the Religion of Israel', Levinas remarks that

[w]e need to reflect on the nature of the modern State. . . . The sovereignty of the State incorporates the universe. In the sovereign State, the citizen may finally exercise a will. It acts absolutely. Leisure, security, democracy: these mark the return of a condition, the beginning of a free being.

(SIRI, 259–60)

And, second, in 'Ideology and Idealism', Levinas will make the following claim, important for thinking about an ethical politics: 'In the social community, the community of clothed beings, *the privileges of rank obstruct justice*' (IaI, 243–4; my emphasis). Leisure, security, absolute act, free being – these are aspects of subjective life that Levinas puts in question, for they are, in the case of the ethical, preconditions of violence. The question of his success in such putting in question in ethics is tantamount to a judgement of his lifelong philosophical work. But what limits his ability to question radically these aspects of the symmetrical state is his reliance on the hegemony of the universal. Political space unfolds from this universal. What clue is there for another phenomenology of political space?

Levinas' methodological insistence on the concrete is the most obvious place to look for such a clue. This insistence returns us to the immediate and the factual, with all Levinasian qualifications due to those terms. What seems most apparent about concrete political spatiality is its *asymmetrical distribution*. Power, wealth, representation – the elements of political space – all indicate, in concrete human faces, a fundamental lack of symmetry in consolidations of political capital. Levinas' own reflections would, at times, seem to lead us to such a description. For, if language is already justice, then what would be the implications of the following remarks from *Totality and Infinity*?

Speech is not instituted in a homogeneous or abstract medium, but in a world where it is necessary to aid and give. It presupposes an I, an existence separated in its enjoyment, which does not welcome empty handed the face and its voice coming from another shore. Multiplicity in being, which refuses totalization but takes form as fraternity and discourse, is situated in essentially asymmetrical 'space'.

(TeI, 191/216)



Multiplicity or political difference in political relations refuses totalization, and so is an indicator of asymmetrical space. Testimony to asymmetry comes from the voice of the Other. Such witness comes from the site designated or constructed *as* Other through various elements of political space. Ellison's *Invisible Man* gives us just such a testimony. Consider Ellison's reflections on why the invisible man loves the music of Louis Armstrong – an artist who has 'made poetry out of being invisible'. Ellison writes that

... my own grasp of invisibility aids me to understand his music. . . . Invisibility, let me explain, gives one a slightly different sense of time, you're never quite on the beat. Sometimes you're ahead and sometimes behind. Instead of the swift and imperceptible flowing of time, you are aware of its nodes, those points where time stands still or from which it leaps ahead. *And you slip into the breaks and look around.* That's what you hear vaguely in Louis' music.<sup>13</sup>

Ellison's evocation of what falls between rhythm and melody, what interrupts melody at its points of transition, might remind us of Levinas' claim in 'La ruine de la représentation' that alterity interrupts the *rhythms* of reflection and representation (RR, 135). Representation, which plays within the boundaries of the Same, is put in question by what interrupts. The epistemological and ontological figure of representation is concretized in political space in manifold ways. Democratic power and wealth – as ways in which political space is quantified – are primary sites of political representation. The intimacy of representation and the question of politics is evident when Levinas says that 'idealism completely carried out reduces all ethics to politics' (TeI, 192/216). If Ellison's testimony speaks to anything, it is to the interruption of the visible Same of political space by the invisible Other of political space.

Now, if we have grounds for thinking political space in its asymmetrical distribution, another question arises: what kind of signification makes passage from ethics to asymmetrical politics possible? To navigate this passage, we must revisit the question 'Who is the third?' without the prejudices Levinas brings to it. To reopen the question without prejudice is to trouble the purity of Levinas' account of the Other and the third. As we saw above, this is a question Levinas explicitly sets aside. Thus, his analysis needs what we could call a 'hermeneutic supplement'. This supplement, however, is not attached to the matters themselves from the outside, but is already situated on the margins of Levinas' descriptions. This supplement, which aims generally at radicalizing the alterity of the Other and the third, restores the way in which the third intervenes not as singular, but as an other marked by its social context. Asking 'Who is the third?' reinscribes context into the manifestation of the face by questioning, not only the fact that the Other/third accuses, but, further, in what manner the Other/third sets out accusation.

Reinscription of context into the signification of the face returns us to what Irigaray, with regard to the question of sexed bodies, has called the 'irreducible non-substitutability' of difference.<sup>14</sup> For Irigaray, difference is what makes ethics possible. But inattentiveness to how difference is inscribed on the very flesh of the face risks forgetting what is most other about the Other, most different about difference. If we – unlike Levinas, but inspired by him – take the socio-political context of signification seriously, then we cannot simply generate a transferable notion of alterity. As Irigaray's work on law and sexual difference has shown, non-substitutability already puts the neutrality and universality of law into question. Non-substitutability, which arises out of recontextualizing the face and third, is born not of a political agenda, but of the very idea of the concrete other. The materiality of the face – recall here that Levinas says materiality describes responsibility – manifests the marks of culture: gender, race, class and that embarrassing etc. The socio-political context of signification, which renders alterity non-transferable, is concretely expressed in the materiality of the face. The hermeneutic supplement, then, comes concretely from the expressive horizons of alterity. The accusing Other and third accuse me simultaneously as singularities and as raced/classed/gendered bodies. The effect of this signification is a ruining of the neutrality and universality inherent in the *conservative* construal of law. This opens the door for thinking politically about what, in the context of ethics, Levinas calls a responsible humanism rooted in the anarchical (HA, 90–1/38). Such a modality of signification and accusation also retrieves a sense of contextuality – one that does not signal a philosophy of the neuter, but one that alters alterity. This retrieval widens the very otherness of the Other.

Further, this material signification recontextualizes the body of the subject put under obligation. The accusing face always accuses a *moi* that is in some manner substantial. It is helpful in this context to recall Levinas' trope that the subject is accused 'in its skin'. 'In responsibility,' Levinas writes, 'as one assigned or elected from the outside, assigned as irreplaceable, the subject is accused in its skin' (AE, 134/106). The embodied *moi*, the responsible subject, is exposed to the Other, not as *conscience* alone, but always as a body. The aim of this formulation is to conceive the responsible body without the possibility of evasion (AE, 139/109). Exposure of the body in its skin exposes the body of the *moi* in its singularity. But, at the same time, do we not have to say that it exposes the body, as we said above about the face, with its social, contextual markers? Does it really make sense to say I am accused by the Other without accounting for the gendered, raced and classed character of that accusation? Indeed, in moral 'experience', it is indisputable that these characters of the body accused determine the terms of obligation and the work of the call. Do these very characteristics not compose the concrete content of my being for-the-Other and therefore for-the-Third? Could we not derive this from Levinas' (qualified) affirmation of

Merleau-Ponty's notion that the body has a history? Is this history not brought into relief in obligation itself, where I can evade neither obligation nor the history of my exposed body? To be accused in a raced, gendered, classed, etc., body is to be called to answer in some (infinite) manner to that history.

If we can legitimately claim that contextuality widens the sense of obligation in ethics, then there are consequences for how we think about the passage to politics. What is most significant about this contextualization of alterity is that such marks alter, quite profoundly, the logic of transition from the face and third to politics. One can no longer safely think political space in terms of the anchored universality of law. Rather, with the passage to asymmetrical political space, negotiated through the contextual Other and third, a new set of political demands is presented. These demands exceed not only the singularity of the Other via the third, but also the singularity of the I. I am called to answer in this political space to historical exigencies of *our*, not simply *my*, sociality. Response to this responsibility cannot take place under the universality of law. The historical exigencies of race, class, gender, etc., call for a response within the non-universal and unique character of the demands issuing from *our* history. 'Our' history does not refer to the history of a unified, collective I. This history refers to the agonistic interplay of socialities through which various modes of representation have determined political space as violence. This violent representation is the medium in which an ethically responsive politics must take place. This is asymmetrical political space.

Asymmetrical political space makes it possible to articulate an *ethical politics*, which in turn allows us to exceed the neutrality of political space deemed conservative in Levinas' politics of peace. The central problem of an ethical politics, then, is how to make sense of an extravagant generosity within the asymmetry of political spatiality. This generosity is legitimated when the passage from ethics to politics is altered by the contextual marks of the I, Other and third party. The politics indicated by this passage takes place in asymmetrical space, a space of representation and violence, and so bears within it the possibility of the generosity of the ethical. This political generosity can be culled from the term Levinas gives to the work of ethics: liturgy. Liturgy is the moment in which work accedes to the ethical. Ethics and its duties are taken up in liturgy.<sup>15</sup> If ethics is accomplished in the infinite work of liturgy, then an ethical politics must also be liturgical. In the context of politics, the insertion of the word 'liturgy' is particularly productive. The word must be thought in two intertwined ways. First, liturgy must be understood in the sense Levinas gives it in 'Trace of the Other', translating the Greek with the provocative phrase 'expenditure of funds at a loss'. Second, liturgy must also be thought, in the political context, in terms of its traditional translation: 'public works'. The latter, which Levinas' translation overlooks, reminds us of the political context of liturgical work. Giving

is not simply ethical. In asymmetrical political space, giving is public. Its generous work is made possible by the institutions and laws of the ethical state. Liturgy, conceived in asymmetrical political space, reclaims the political. Liturgical giving in political space calls for a generosity that takes place, not between singularities, but in and through public works. This generosity is enacted in the responsive transformation of political institutions in, quite literally, the face of others: the movement from peace to liturgy. This movement makes the transition from ethics to politics without reducing the dimension of transcendence. This is precisely what Levinas' political thought has always sought to accomplish.

The demands of liturgy – the responsibilities of politics – are certainly necessary for an ethical politics, but are not wholly sufficient. For, to speak of the work of liturgy is to speak of a world in which giving is possible, as well as of the concrete content of that giving. Regarding the latter, the sense of this giving is context-dependent, an-archival, and so subject to the exigencies of an historically concrete moment. We can, however, briefly consider two general aspects of this giving: democratic political power and wealth. Democracy and wealth are perhaps the most important sites of asymmetry in political life. They are, to be blunt, sites of representation and disturbing violence, and so provide important sites of demand, expenditure and public work. Also, these two aspects of giving are particularly relevant because they both represent a distribution of power in political space based on a quantification of the world. It is therefore important to recall Levinas' comments in 'Ego and Totality' that justice is only possible on the basis of a quantification of the world. 'The quantification of man', Levinas writes, 'points to a new justice' (MT, 51/45). The quantification of political space is thus not a question of a violence set between faces, but the condition for the possibility of a liturgical response, of responsible sociality, and so of an ethical politics. Let us sketch something of the impact of this politics on democracy.

According to Critchley, the ethical sense of Levinas' transition to politics allows us to see democracy as ethics in practice. That is, in the case of democracy, we see ethics put into political practice in the sense that democracy, like the Same by the Other, is always power put in question. As Critchley puts it,

I understand democracy to be an ethically grounded form of political life which is continually being called into question by asking of its legitimacy and the legitimacy of its practices and institutions: what is justice? In this sense, legitimate communities are those which have themselves in question. . . . Democracy is the form of society committed to the political equality of all its citizens and the ethical inequality of myself faced with the Other.<sup>16</sup>

Democratic life is put in question by contestations of power through, for example, elections, activism and debate. To be sure, this is sufficient for the ethical dimension of a politics of peace. However, a liturgical politics may demand something more radical. Relegation of the ethical sense of politics to abstract mechanisms of power is not sufficiently concrete, for it appeals to a structure that does not give when put in question. But democracy does represent. Democracy quantifies the world of political power through representations of selves and others. This quantification is fecund when we consider how quantification of power makes giving possible – that is, how the consolidation of relations derived from democratic work puts in question those who emerge victorious. Liturgy here calls for a giving of political power without reciprocity. To take the practice of democracy in the USA, this giving calls for a rethinking of how democratic power is distributed. In opposition to a majority rule democracy, the centerpiece of the US system of democracy, a liturgical politics literally calls for a giving of political power responsive to the inequality of myself/ourselves faced with the Other. Liturgical politics as democracy would therefore call for a distribution of political power that does not solidify the majority. Rather, this democracy calls for a non-reciprocal, redistributive giving to the other of democratic space: the minority. And surely this redistribution is subject to the movement of history, to social change, and so lacks the sort of *arche* typically demanded of a foundation. The an-archic dimension of this redistribution is not a limitation of liturgy, but its very fund and the very condition of generosity.

The same sort of consequences hold for wealth. The asymmetry of wealth distribution under capitalist systems is put in question by the others of political space. If an ethical politics modeled on liturgy requires that we think of democracy as expenditure of political representation at a loss, then we must see distributions of wealth according to the same demands. The quantification of the world in money is treated by Levinas with some care in ‘Ego and Totality’, but we need to begin to think through the same issue liturgically. If the quantification of the world in money leads us to a new justice – here, a redistributive justice – we arrive at a new conception of taxation and possession. The public work of taxation is this quantification. The exigent responsibility of expenditure of these funds at a loss is therefore the justice of a liturgical politics. The collection and distribution of wealth is thereby infused with moral weight. Wealth is the site of my/our violence to the other(s), the possibility of my/our giving, and so of meeting the other(s) without empty hands. The asymmetry of wealth distribution, inherent in the facticity of capitalist political life, transforms that dimension of political space. The moral weight of unequal distributions of wealth shifts political space from a kind of neutrality to outright violence. The liturgical response to this political responsibility, which is signified concretely by the

contextual other and third, gives without expectation of return. Rather, I am called to sacrifice my full hands for the others. Wealth quantifies the world and exposes my hands as full. It also exposes how my full hands usurp the place of the Other and others. One could, I think call this giving, this liturgical justice, a kind of political *sainteté*.<sup>17</sup>

Based on this sketch of some consequences of a liturgical politics, we can return to Levinas' remark that privileges of rank obstruct justice. This remark indicates that there are resources and impulses already in Levinas for a redistributive politics. Redistribution, conceived in the context of liturgy, is responsive to the demands made in asymmetrical political space. This is most decidedly not a politics of reciprocity. The redistributive gift manifests a giving without return. The difficulty of this duty of redistribution ultimately lies in the undecidable, contextual character of political responsibility, as well as the difficulty of accounting, in the Levinasian context, for the identities constitutive of political relations. But we must always decide within this undecidability – within the an-archy of political responsibility – for an extravagant generosity, and not merely for the neutrality of law. An-archy is the fund from which obligation arises in ethics. So too is it the fund from which a responsible political response must arise. If the neutrality of law fails to recognize the weight of this an-archy, then should not peace give way to liturgy?

A liturgical politics makes it possible to think concretely about an ethical politics beyond the politics of peace. The expenditure of funds at a loss in public works – both senses of liturgy thought at once – ruins the petrified idols of violence that have come to dominate political life in the USA: the idols of a certain kind of democratic representation and capitalist conceptions of wealth accumulation. This ruining work opens the possibility of a further *rapprochement* between Levinas and Marx, a reconciliation already begun in the work of Robert Gibbs and Simon Critchley<sup>18</sup> and indicated in various remarks Levinas makes regarding the *idea* of a communism (distinct from Marxist science and the brutal practices of Stalinism).<sup>19</sup> An ethical politics also opens up a new conception of political temporality. Irigaray captures the sense of this new temporality in *J'aime à toi*:

Respect for the negative, the play of the dialectic between us, would enable us to remain ourselves (*demeurer soi*) and to create an *œuvre* with the other. And thus to develop, building a temporality instead of believing in eternal promises. We can construct a History on the basis of an interiority without power.<sup>20</sup>

Respect for the negative is best manifest in a liturgical politics. Respect, ethics, must be concrete – without the utopia of eternal promises. The extravagant generosity of liturgy must interrupt the rhythms of political life,

which introduces a politics answerable to what Catherine Chaliel has called the 'utopia of the *human*'.<sup>21</sup> The demand for respect in liturgy is made by the contextually characterized third, the ethico-political subjectivity it initiates, and so the third and subjectivity marked by their place/non-place in political space. This demand accuses me in a skin that is at once nude and clothed. The *moi* is singular and social. To be so accused by the third is to feel the force of an alterity both unique and political. Is this not what it would mean not only to feel the force of an alterity *in me*, but also to respond to the idea of the infinite *in us*?

### Abbreviations of works by Levinas

- AE *Autrement qu'être, ou au-delà de l'essence*. The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1974; *Otherwise than Being, or Beyond Essence*, trans. Alphonso Lingis. Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic, 1988.
- AHN *A l'Heure des Nations*. Paris: Editions de Minuit, 1988; *In the Time of the Nations*, trans. Michael Smith. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994.
- DH 'Les droits de l'homme et les droits d'autrui', in *Hors sujet*. Montpellier: Fata Morgana, 1987; 'The Rights of Man and the Rights of the Other', in *Outside the Subject*, trans. Michael Smith. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1995.
- DU 'De l'Unicité', in *Entre Nous: Essais sur le penser-à-l'autre*. Paris: Grasset, 1991.
- EI *Ethique et infini*. Paris: Fayard, 1982; *Ethics and Infinity*, trans. Richard Cohen. Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press.
- EP 'Ethics and Politics', in *The Levinas Reader*, ed. and trans. Seàn Hand. Oxford: Blackwell, 1989.
- HA 'Humanisme et an-archie', in *Humanisme de l'autre homme*. Montpellier: Fata Morgana (Editions Livre de poche), 1972; 'Humanism and Anarchy', in *Collected Philosophical Papers*, ed. and trans. Alphonso Lingis. The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1987.
- IaI 'Ideology and Idealism', in *The Levinas Reader*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1989.
- IEI 'Interview: Ethics of the Infinite', in *States of Mind*, ed. Richard Kearney. New York: NYU Press, 1995.
- MT 'Le Moi et la Totalité', in *Entre Nous: Essais sur le penser-à-l'autre*. Paris: Grasset, 1991; 'Ego and the Totality', trans. Alphonso Lingis, in *Collected Philosophical Papers*. Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic, 1987.
- PEA 'Totalité et infini. Préface à l'édition allemande', in *Entre Nous: Essais sur le penser-à-l'autre*. Paris: Grasset, 1991.
- PeP 'Paix et proximité', in *Alterité et transcendance*. Montpellier: Fata Morgana, 1995; 'Peace and Proximity', trans. Peter Atterton and

- Simon Critchley, in *Emmanuel Levinas: Basic Philosophical Writings*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996.
- RR 'La ruine de la représentation', in *En découvrant l'existence avec Husserl et Heidegger*. Paris: Vrin, 1988.
- SIRI 'The state of Israel and the Religion of Israel', trans. Seàn Hand, in *The Levinas Reader*, ed. Seàn Hand. Oxford: Blackwell, 1990.
- TeI *Totalité et infini*. The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1961; *Totality and Infinity*, trans. Alphonso Lingis. Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic, 1992.

## Notes

- 1 See the work of Gillian Rose for a vivid example of this criticism, most recently in her *Mourning Becomes the Law* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996). Rose's criticisms overlook the fact that Levinas will consistently insist on the necessity of the 'Greek' when it comes to the case of politics. While this does not directly address the sense of Rose's appeal to a 'third' city beneath the ruins of Athens and Jerusalem, it does, I think, bring Levinas and Rose into a proximity she perhaps does not anticipate.
- 2 Again, the work of Gillian Rose is exemplary in this regard. See her sustained criticism of the ethics/politics disjunct and her remarks on the problem of the third party in *The Broken Middle: Out of our Ancient Society* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992), pp. 270–96. See also Charles Scott's *On the Advantages and Disadvantages of Ethics and Politics* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996), Chapter 11. Rose and Scott are by no means cohorts in critique. Despite the fact that both are suspicious of Levinas' account of politics, Rose argues for a politics 'below' ethics, while Scott remains suspicious of both ethics and politics. A recent article has gone so far as to conclude that 'the privilege accorded to absolute alterity in Levinas leads to an inability to support political action', which of course fails to take into account Levinas' own efforts, often very nuanced, in that direction. See Ed Wingenbach, 'Liberating Responsibility: The Levinasian Ethic of *Being and Time*', *International Philosophical Quarterly* XXXVI(1) (March 1996): 29–46.
- 3 In *A l'Heure des Nations*, Levinas will remark: 'What is Europe? It is the Bible and the Greeks' (AHN, 128/133). See also an interview with Florian Rötzer, conducted in German, where Levinas remarks, 'Europe, that's the Bible and the Greeks', and links this simultaneity with the question of justice ('Emmanuel Levinas', in *Französische Philosophen im Gespräch*, ed. Florian Rötzer [Munich: Boer Verlag, 1986], pp. 93 ff.; 'Emmanuel Levinas', in *Conversations with French Philosophers*, trans. Gary Ayelworth [Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press, 1995], p. 60). What is most interesting about the latter interview is that Levinas insists that the necessity of the state does not, and indeed cannot, dispense with the relation of goodness with the Other. So, universality and law (in a word, justice) are always bound to singularity and goodness. Explicating this binding is the task of the present essay.
- 4 Rose, *Mourning Becomes the Law*, p. 37.
- 5 *ibid.*; my emphasis.
- 6 Cf., for example, *ibid.*, p. 36.
- 7 Here my description of Levinas' account of the relation between ethics and politics will run counter to that of Simon Critchley, who contends that 'the third party ensures that the ethical relation always takes place within a political con-



text, within the political realm' (*The Ethics of Deconstruction: Derrida and Levinas* [Oxford: Blackwell, 1992], p. 225). This remark puts the case too strongly. While Critchley is correct that Levinas situates ethics and politics in a common significative locus (the face of the Other), we will not claim that ethics takes place within the public realm. Rather, it is quite the contrary. Politics (the politics of peace) is set out from the ethical, and the intertwining of the face and the third is commanded as much by Levinas' methodological allegiance to the principle of concretion as it is by the matters of politics. We cannot, however, go to the opposite extreme of Critchley and claim, as Brian Schroeder does, that for Levinas 'the ethical is prior to and "better" than the political' (*Altared Ground* [New York: Routledge, 1996], pp. 102–3, also p. 72). Schroeder underestimates how seriously Levinas takes the articulation of a politics of peace and how in that context law may be configured as the protection of the Other.

- 8 1aI, 247–8 and also see the parallel remarks concluding 'Peace and Proximity'. With the phrase *homo homini lupus*, Levinas is recalling Hobbes' famed question posed to William, Earl of Devonshire, in the 1855 dedication of *De Cive*. The phrase is of course originally from Plautus' *Asinaria*. We might suspect that Levinas has in mind Freud, who employs the phrase in *Civilization and its Discontents*, but in an interview from 1988 Levinas uses the same phrase – translated into French on this occasion – and invokes Hobbes' authorship. See 'Responsabilité et substitution', in Augusto Ponzio, *Sujet et altérité sur Emmanuel Levinas* (Paris: Editions L'Harmattan, 1996), p. 141.
- 9 In our own formulations, we will use the phrase 'rights of the human' to avoid the gender exclusive 'man'. But it is important to note that this alteration, though in accord with current literary convention, is not without dangers. It covers over the important link, for Levinas, between politics and *illeity*. This connection is linked of course to the masculine *il*, which is a problematic unto itself and cannot be adequately treated here. On this issue, see Simonne Plourde, *Emmanuel Levinas: Altérité et responsabilité* (Paris: Editions du Cerf, 1996), pp. 127–48; she outlines both the linguistic and the temporal aspects of *illeity*, attempting to show how immemoriality 'takes root in the surprising human fraternity' (p. 141). See also John Llewelyn, *Emmanuel Levinas: Genealogy of Ethics* (New York: Routledge, 1995), pp. 209 ff., for another sort of structural account. Llewelyn attempts to negotiate a path around the simple identification of *illeity* with masculine privilege by pointing out that, according to Levinas' logic, 'it must be emphasized that the trace of the other [the He-ism of *illeity*] passes also through the She-ism and *elleity* of maternity; so through a non-neutral *illelley*' (p. 209). I must thank John Llewelyn for alerting me, in numerous personal conversations, to this problem of substituting 'human' for 'man' and s/he for 'he' in Levinas' work.
- 10 Critchley, *Ethics of Deconstruction*, p. 233.
- 11 *ibid.*, p. 227. The obvious gender exclusiveness that comes with the term 'fraternity' is a significant problem, one that comes also with the question of 'illeity' mentioned above in note 9. This problem entails the wider issue of Levinas' problematic use of the feminine and the patriarchal privilege that use betrays. Such issues take us afield from the immediate task at hand, but we should note that they have an enormous impact on both the ethics of Levinas' ethics and the politics of the same. See Tina Chanter's *Ethics of Eros* (New York: Routledge, 1995), Chapter 5 for a rigorous and critical examination of the role of sex/gender in Levinas' ethics (and by extension his politics). Her reading of Levinas, and especially of Irigaray's critique of Levinas, is uniquely sensitive to the complexities of the issue, which in turn yields a sophisticated account of both the feminine in Levinas and the future of an ethics of alterity.

- 12 At this point, one may note how this impacts on Levinas' quiet, yet lifelong, polemic against Hegel. In the *Grundlinien*, Hegel will describe political subjectivity in terms of the 'patriot'. Hegel writes: 'This is the secret of the patriotism of the citizens [*das Geheimnis des Patriotismus der Bürger*] in the sense that they know state as their substance, for it is the state which supports their particular spheres and the legal recognition, authority, and welfare of these' (*Grundlinien der Philosophie des Rechts* [Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1982], p. 458; *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, ed. Allen Wood, trans. H. B. Nisbet [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991], pp. 329–30). Levinas' articulation of the genetic priority and resistance of ethics to politics effectively reverses the Hegelian logic of the state, without eschewing the idea of law.
- 13 Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man* (New York: Vintage Books, 1947), p. 8; my emphasis.
- 14 Cf. Luce Irigaray, 'Questions to Emmanuel Levinas', in *The Irigaray Reader*, ed. Margaret Whitford (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993) p. 185 (question six).
- 15 Cf. Emmanuel Levinas, 'Dialogue: Œuvre et Altérité', in Ponzio, *Sujet et altérité sur Emmanuel Levinas*, p. 150.
- 16 Critchley, *Ethics of Deconstruction*, p. 239.
- 17 In numerous places Levinas will define *sainteté* as being called to 'sacrifice' for the other. See, for example, his 'Avant-propos' to *Entre Nous* (Paris: Editions Grasset, 1991), p. 11 and the interview 'Responsabilité et substitution', in Ponzio, *Sujet et altérité*, p. 143.
- 18 See, for example, Robert Gibbs, *Correlations in Rosenzweig and Levinas* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992), Chapter 10 and Simon Critchley, 'On Derrida's *Specters of Marx*', *Philosophy and Social Criticism* 21(3) (1995): 12–19.
- 19 See Levinas' remarks in 'Ideology and Idealism' on Marxism as a 'prophetic cry' (in *De Dieu qui vient à l'idée* [Paris: Vrin, 1992], p. 19; IaI, 238) and on Stalinism and the meaning of Marxism at IIEI, 197 f.
- 20 Luce Irigaray, *J'aime à toi: Esquisse d'une félicité dans l'histoire* (Paris: Editions Grasset, 1992), p. 231; *I Love to You: Sketch of a Possible Felicity in History*, trans. Alison Martin (New York: Routledge, 1996), p. 148.
- 21 Catherine Chaliel, *Levinas: L'utopie de l'humain* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1993). Chaliel is playing on Levinas' scattered remarks regarding the idea of a utopia without eternity. Levinas will write, for example, that ethics transformed as justice conceives a subjectivity that says '*here I am for the others*', thereby '[losing] his place radically, or his shelter in being, to enter into ubiquity which is also a utopia' (AE, 233/185). Or elsewhere, Levinas will remark that '[t]his concern for the other remains utopian in the sense that it is always "out of place" (*u-topos*) in this world, always other than the "ways of the world"; but there are many examples of it in the world' (IEI, 197).

## NAMELESS MEMORY

Levinas, witness and politics

*James Hatley*

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‘Justice is the way in which I respond to the fact that I am not alone in the world with the other.’

**I. Elemental violence and indecent societies**

The memory of violence, particularly of mass violence, can be personally, politically and historically demoralizing. For this very reason, the fostering of memory often becomes the goad to yet further brutalities, to the nurturing of grudges through decades, centuries and even millennia, whose call for bloody retribution refuses to be stilled. Like the outrageous acts at the heart of Greek tragedy, historical wrongs open up wounds in time that are seemingly beyond repair. With this issue in mind, Rajeev Bhargava reminds us that there are moments in history and particularly in our not so distant history – whether they be the Shoah<sup>1</sup> enacted in Europe, apartheid in South Africa, or the massacres of Sikhs and Hindus in Delhi – when violence has become so endemic to a society, or has been carried through by one group within it with such radical impunity, that it can be argued the very order of human relationships has reverted to a state of ‘barbarism’.<sup>2</sup>

To speak of justice in the context of such a situation of basic indecency becomes problematic – the very depth and breadth of wrong inflicted renders ludicrous any human attempt to punish it, to exact reparations or to reconcile perpetrator with victim. What these moments of violence stir up is so irremediable, so cruel and pitiless, that those who are caught up in them have seemingly escaped the rule of reason itself. Such extraordinary wrongs call for, in Bhargava’s mind, an extraordinary notion of justice, one in

which the first duty of the just is to insist on minimum procedures that restore all members of a society to political discourse.<sup>3</sup> Before one can even settle on a notion of what constitutes a substantial notion of justice, before one can even speak *of* punishment, reparation or reconciliation, those who enforce and follow the laws must be willing to speak *with* one another, to hear one another's voice. Without having met this minimum condition, Bhargava argues, to speak of justice in its more accepted and principled sense is a senseless act.

In a similar vein, Emmanuel Levinas, whose thought witnesses his own experience as a Jewish survivor of the Shoah, writes in his midrashic essay, 'Damages Due to Fire,' on how Auschwitz is a signifier for an elemental violence that leaves all rational attempts to limit its outcome, or respond to its loss, at a loss. In such an event, Levinas states:

We are entering the realm of total disorder, of sheer Element, no longer in the service of any thought, beyond war. Or perhaps we are entering the abyss from which all these uncontrollable forces emerge. An abyss that yawns during exceptional periods. Unless it is always ajar, like a madness which sleeps with one eye open in the heart of reason.<sup>4</sup>

Levinas's point that violence leads beyond war is an important one. In war, the inflicting of damage upon one's enemy, even if it is unjust, continues until the goals for which war is being prosecuted are reached. Within the cunning game of move and countermove that characterizes war, a realization is at work that either side might lose and so both sides must end up abiding by certain minimal covenants. In Bhargava's terms, war can remain minimally decent, even if destructive. But Levinas notes that in elemental violence, a possibility always sleeping within the notion of war with 'one eye open,' a disorder beyond the limits of intentionality, of a play of forces for purposes one can rationally delimit, comes into being. In this violence, a dynamic is at work in which any inflicting of damage against the other provokes the intensification, the escalation of yet further damage to be inflicted.<sup>5</sup> In violence, as opposed to war, damage can never be inflicted enough. In the throes of this dynamic, the very practice of war as damaging the other's means in order to achieve one's own goals slips into a conflagration of violence. One no longer merely resists the other's intention to resist one's own intention but becomes fixed upon crushing the other's humanity and his or her world. In violence, the other is no longer an opponent to be dealt with but a cipher to be crushed, to be annihilated, no matter what the cost. The enemy is not merely to be defeated – rather he or she is treated as if it would have been better if he or she had never existed.

Put in more concrete terms, in violence one treats the other as if he or she were faceless, or one is treated so by the other. Is this not the indecency of

which Bhargava speaks in his own essay, the characteristic of a society, in which one no longer admits one is called to listen to another's voice, to be questioned by the impact of one's actions upon another's face? For Levinas, Auschwitz is one name of the event of such indecency.

## II. Faceless and nameless: when justice confronts the unjustifiable

But even if one accepts the claim that there are historical moments when violence exceeds all reasoned limits, does it necessarily follow that an extraordinary sense of justice is called for in the aftermath of such violence? In this regard, Bhargava makes a distinction between asymmetrical and symmetrical moments of indecency.<sup>6</sup> In some events, such as many civil wars, Bhargava contends that the insistence on treating others as voiceless and faceless infects all factions of a society. In these particular circumstances, truth commissions, such as those founded in the aftermath of Apartheid, may be more effective in returning a society to justice than an insistence on bringing all those who participated in violent actions to trial and punishment. One simply cannot put an entire country in prison. But in events such as the Shoah, National Socialism's treatment of Jews is asymmetrally indecent. And the Allies, for all their shortcomings, also generally supported and carried through at least a minimal notion of human rights in their pursuit of the war.<sup>7</sup>

In the instance of the Shoah, critics could certainly point to the manner in which the trials at Nuremberg, as well as the patient and long-lasting search for war criminals in the decades following them, has done much to restore a sense of decency to Germany and to the relationship between Christian Europe and its surviving Jewish population. While the innovations in international law that formed the basis of the Nuremberg prosecution may have seemed extraordinary at the time, they increasingly have become a part of the ordinary rule of international law, as the nearly successful attempt on the part of Great Britain and Spain to prosecute the seemingly impudic Augusto Pinochet, the former dictator of Chile, demonstrated in 2000. If anything, could it not be argued that rather than relenting and loosening the call for punishment and reparation, the insistence upon these measures at Nuremberg and afterward helped Germany to regain its status as a decent society, one that has gone and continues to go to great lengths to acknowledge its former injustices?

Perhaps it would be better argued, at least in situations of what Bhargava terms asymmetrical violence, that more good is accomplished by immediately imposing the sanctions of law upon an indecent society and rooting out its perpetrators. Still, as Levinas points out in his essay 'Transcendence and Evil,' humanity's legacy of violence leaves it mired in a justice that

necessarily fails to be just enough, no matter how assiduously it prosecutes the unjust and consoles the persecuted. The very sting of evil is how it leaves us burdened with the memory of 'the unjustifiable.'<sup>8</sup> For even if justice can serve to restore rights to peoples once afflicted and to put into proper historical and political perspective the arrogant self-aggrandizement of the unjust, justice cannot undo the most radical effects of violence. For those victims who survive, the memory of betrayal remains no matter how much the perpetrator may be punished, and for the victims who did not survive, the loss of their lives and of entire societies and their future descendants cannot be undone. No matter how much justice may strive to restore equity to political and historical life, the effects of violence will continue to be suffered. There is no meaningful way to command that suffering cease, no matter how much we may desire it so. The very scandal of evil, Levinas reminds us in yet another essay, is how it submits one to useless suffering, to a suffering for which no reason can be found that would justify its impact upon the other who faces me.<sup>9</sup>

How then should one remember the unjustifiable, the submission to suffering for which no remedy can truly be given? In his book of essays *Proper Names*, Levinas broaches this subject in one selection, simply titled 'Nameless,' a name which he paradoxically employs as the most (im)proper name of those who perished in the elemental violence of the Shoah.<sup>10</sup> In his invocation of this name without name is found a fundamental ambivalence. On the one hand, namelessness might signify for Levinas how my memory of the Shoah's particular victims calls me beyond their naming. I do not invoke the other, but instead I find I have always already been subjected to the other's invocation of me. For Levinas, memory of the other ultimately engages me in a past that could never have been mine, what Levinas, in *Otherwise than Being*, terms the immemorial. Before the nudity of the other's face, before his or her vulnerability to being wounded, I find myself traumatized by a suffering that calls me near but that I cannot really share. No matter how deeply I might empathize with the suffering of this other, my feeling of empathy is always interrupted by the realization that it is this other and not I who has undergone that suffering. For Levinas, the memory in which we are called to the other from out of the other's time is not in the first instance an engram, or some representation of the other in consciousness, but an enigma, a calling into proximity that cannot be represented, cannot be given in any presence at all, the immemorial. Memory at its heart is a being addressed, a being submitted to others in their vulnerability and in their faces. To remember in this mode is to be rendered humble – the other calls us to his or her face, before we could have ever had the means to name it, or to dispose of its pain.

In refusing to name the other directly, in referring enigmatically to the other as he or she who is without name, Levinas, it could be argued, gives witness to the transcendence of the other out of whom my memory

of her or him – in its more normal sense – has been given. In the background of such a gesture echoes the biblical refusal of The Name (*HaShem*), of G-d, to be named – ‘I AM THAT I AM.’ Following up this emptying out of G-d’s name in a more human vein, Levinas offers a notion of a transcendent yet human responsibility, in which I undergo its inescapable weight before the human other to whom I am responsible could even have been named. I do not name her or him but instead find myself named as a singular locus of responsibility, as the one for whom no one else can assume my burden of response.<sup>11</sup> To paraphrase the words of Hillel: *If not me, then whom? If not now, then when?* Further, for Levinas, my responsibility to the other, whether it be one of the Six Million<sup>12</sup> or a Nazi perpetrator, is not attendant upon my first determining whether she or he deserves my responsibility. Whether I find it reasonable or not, I have always already been elected to responsibility. Levinas goes so far to speak of this election as making me hostage to the other. Such is the situation in which a world of animate souls who are created, who are responsible in a manner that always already transcends their ability to account for their responsibility, find themselves. And such is the situation I would find myself in, if I am to hear the memory of each of the Six Million and more who call me into responsibility.

But, on the other hand, to be nameless can also signify to have been rendered faceless, to have been treated *as if* one had never been worthy of being responded to, as if the very naming of one’s name was beyond even the bother of having been acknowledged. One is treated *as if*, even if one had existed, one still would not have mattered enough to have engaged the other’s response to one’s existence.<sup>13</sup> Thus, Primo Levi finds himself violently shoved back into his barracks at the Monowitz Work Camp, not because he asked an inappropriate question of a Nazi guard but because any question at all on his part would have been inappropriate.<sup>14</sup> In this gesture of dismissal, his countenance is rendered without question, without address and so without face. Over and over in the death camps the strange game took place of treating its inmates *as if* they were not even capable of being addressed by those who were plainly ordering them about. It was *as if* orders were being given whose very order was to deny that they were an order. And that not even the air had heard them.<sup>15</sup>

The radical pitilessness of this rejection of the other, which calls to mind Levinas’s discussion concerning elemental violence, is stunning and weighs heavily in any remembrance of the Shoah. For beyond the damage inflicted in the act of physical violence, as Philip Hallie reminds us in his analysis of the Jews saved at Le Chambon, is the undermining of one’s very soul, of one’s animation, by the betrayal that occurs when the other gazes into one’s own face, *as if* it were no face at all.<sup>16</sup> Pitiless cruelty undoes the soul of the victim, as well as the victimizer, in a manner that should not be ignored. Levi makes this clear when he argues in *Survival in Auschwitz*:

In this Ka-Be, an enclosure of relative peace, we have learnt that our personality is fragile it is much more in danger than our life; and the old wise ones, instead of warning us 'remember that you must die,' would have done much better to remind us of this greater danger that threatens us.<sup>17</sup>

The memory of such betrayal is the greatest ill that is left in the wake of events of elemental violence. More disturbing than the undergoing of death is the suffering of deanimation, of becoming, against the very grain of one's will, one of those who were called the *Muselmann*, the 'Moslem' in the degenerate argot of the death camps,<sup>18</sup> or what Levinas more circumspectly terms the 'servile soul.'<sup>19</sup> It is not surprising that some of those who survived the Shoah and then dedicated their lives to writing about it and its attack upon the human face have committed suicide or wrestled with severe mental illness or both – the names of Primo Levi, Paul Celan, Nellie Sachs and Tadeusz Borowski come to mind.

The toxicity of such remembrances for the generations who follow should not be underestimated. Levinas himself speaks of them as a 'tumor in memory' and 'a gaping pit' that 'nothing has been able to fill, or even cover over.'<sup>20</sup> Not even the justice of Nuremberg, or the restoration of a Jewish state in Israel can sufficiently address the loss this memory entails. In regard to the power of such memories to demoralize humanity, Levinas asks:

Should we insist on bringing into this vertigo a portion of humanity whose memory is not sick from its own memories? And what of our children, who were born after the Liberation, and who already belong to that group? Will they be able to understand that feeling of chaos and emptiness?<sup>21</sup>

Those who would institutionalize such memories, Levinas warns, face a double bind: on the one hand, these memories can undermine the very will to live; on the other hand, those who live without these memories unwittingly participate in the perpetrator's injustice. In our forgetfulness of the Nameless, the persecuted are left faceless, *as if this had meant nothing at all*. Further, without being submitted to the memory of the persecuted with all its abjection, succeeding generations become inattentive of and inured to the very extremity of violence that is part and parcel of their historical situation. The memory of the Shoah, as the memory of other moments of elemental violence, is chastising – it reminds us that what is at issue within history is disrupted in a manner that justice itself cannot directly articulate. Beyond the logical confines of war, of pursuing destructive means for reasonable ends, lies the disaster of pitiless aggression, of a violence that is gratuitous and without precedent. How are we to live with its memory?



### III. *Otherwise than Being*: a strategy of remembrance

As Elizabeth Weber, among others, has suggested, the philosophical writings of Levinas continually evoke the plight of those suffering in the Shoah.<sup>22</sup> Levinas himself explicitly dedicated his last philosophical work, *Otherwise than Being*, to the 'memory of those who were closest among the six million' (my emphasis), as well as to the 'millions on millions' of other creeds and nationalities who were and continue to be 'victims of the same hatred of the other man, the same antisemitism.' The central theme of *Otherwise than Being*, which treats the question of *my* responsibility to the other, even the other who would murder *me*, can be argued to have stemmed directly from its dedication. In working out this theme, many of the book's most significant terms, notably those of the face, suffering, obsession, trauma, persecution and substitution find their sense through an analysis of paradigmatic scenes that each in turn recall the victims' being submitted to the violence of the Nazi interregnum.

To speak of this philosophical work as a remembrance of the Shoah may at first glance seem odd. For nowhere in the text of *Otherwise than Being* does Levinas directly give a factual or historiographical account of what occurred. As could be expected in a work of philosophy, his reference to the suffering undergone in the death camps, as well as in day-to-day life under National Socialism, is so circumspect that one might even be tempted to accuse him of having avoided memory rather than cultivated it. But in Levinas's defense, as well as in the defense of the poet most honored by Levinas, Paul Celan,<sup>23</sup> it can be argued that the responsible memory of radical suffering, of elemental violence, calls for reticence and discretion. Philosophy, or at least the sort of philosophy Levinas would write, it turns out, may provide an important mode of discourse for memory requiring these traits.<sup>24</sup> The danger of any remembrance of the other's suffering is that one might facilely appropriate it, making of it a fetish propping up one's own desires and projects, protecting one from, rather than exposing one to, the anguish that lies in the other's face. In its more normal and confident mode, as Levinas points out in *Totality and Infinity*, memory 'assumes the passivity of the past and masters it.'<sup>25</sup> Memory is capable of recapturing and reversing and suspending what is already accomplished – memory provides the ability of humans to put what seems doomed to be into question after all. But in being directed to the suffering of the other, memory now finds itself without its normal resources, without the confidence of its own assumption of time but attentive to a time that could never have been its own – the immemorial discussed above as it is revealed in the face of the other.

Attentive to the suffering of the victims of the Shoah, Levinas can be said to engage in a strategy of remembrance in *Otherwise than Being* that possesses at least the following elements:

- 1 The memory of the Shoah should emphasize not the unprecedented nature of the evil it involved (although this is not to be denied) but the unprecedented nature of the good it calls for.
- 2 The memory of the Shoah is in the first instance a witness, which is to say a suffering of memory for the sake of the other.
- 3 Theodicy that would justify the suffering of the afflicted is a blasphemy against the human.
- 4 Any political articulation of memory is always already under the burden of a prior commitment to goodness, to the fundamental inability to escape the face-to-face relationship in all human affairs.

In order to better understand how Levinas's work functions as an act of memory, these points will be treated in turn.

### *Accounting for goodness*

As Levinas puts it: 'when the perishability of so many values is revealed, all human dignity consists in believing in their return.'<sup>26</sup> Precisely the danger inherent in the memory of violence, as Levinas explains in his Preface to *Totality and Infinity*, is that it tempts one to believe one has been 'duped' by the very notion of morality.<sup>27</sup> Yet in his memory of the Shoah Levinas is most moved by how human beings remained who did not succumb to 'the virile virtues of death and desperate murder'<sup>28</sup> but continued to insist they were responsible *no matter what the consequences*. In their actions is revealed for Levinas a responsibility without precedence, a concern for others that is gratuitous and beyond any reasonable justification. In his argument, Levinas strives to make room within Western thought for the expression and memory of such moments of unequivocal responsibility. In doing so, Levinas insistently questions a tradition of virile virtues, and by implication, of a virile justice that remains inextricably linked with the world defined as *polemos*, of force contending with force.

In response to those who ask for some explanation of how people become murderous,<sup>29</sup> Levinas replies that this transformation is far more understandable than the one in which human beings are inspired by the other's face to non-violence even as they are tempted to violence, to a peace that is not equanimity but a cellular irritability for the sake of the other. The murderer accomplishes his or her deed within a working notion of empirical, measurable force. For her or him, history is reduced to an arena of competition between various powers, whose meaning lies in winning that competition. But those who refuse murder can only do so by moving beyond the inflicting of force in return for force to acknowledging that, in the first instance, they are called to an irenic order in which they are responsible for all others, regardless of how the other comports her or himself. Not competition but responsibility most truly denotes what is decisive

about being human. But humans must assume this responsibility, Levinas points out, in spite of the fact that in Auschwitz 'God let the Nazis do what they wanted.'<sup>30</sup>

At the core of Levinas's response to evil is an insistence not only upon the justice of goodness but also and in the first instance upon its gratuitousness, its transcendence of any reason that might be articulated for its having been given as the good. Responsibility for the other cannot be justified, *as if* I had the leisure to determine whether the other requires my attention, but is always already assumed. Responsibility would have no moral urgency, if it were merely the outcome of a rational deduction. Two important corollaries follow from this characterization of the good: First, that one is called to suffer 'uselessly', which is to say, without recourse to some rational scheme that justifies suffering, that gives me the reason why I and others must suffer; and second, that any political question that might arise concerning how the Shoah, the Nameless, the Six Million, the *Haftling* might be justly remembered can only be posed in the aftermath of a confrontation with one's singular responsibility to the other. Politics cannot take the place of ethics. One must remember that at the core of one's justice lies a resistance to injustice 'having no other source but one's own certainty and inner self.'<sup>31</sup>

### *Memory as witness*

Levinas's very approach of the other hints at a memory of the other, as discussed above, which begins with one's responsibility to the immemoriality of the other's face, the other's suffering. The truth elicited by the other's proximity cannot be met, in the first instance, by pointing out the other's qualities or substance or being, *as if* he or she were a merely a node of reality to be indicated, but by a radically subjective undergoing of one's exposure to the other to whom one responds. Echoing a core sense of the Hebrew *emet*, my saying of the truth must be *true* to the others I address – truth without the ethical relation is emptied of its animation, its honesty, its *sincerity*. Thus, truth requires in the first instance my *saying* to the other's face that I am sincere about what will be *said*. Levinas speaks of this saying as occurring before even a word could have been uttered, in the very sign of recognition that announces itself in the Hebrew *hineni*, 'here I am – for you.'<sup>32</sup> Put in other terms, I can only speak the truth if I become a witness to it. In Levinas's words:

The witness is not reducible to the relationship that leads from an index to the indicated . . . It [witness] is the bottomless passivity of responsibility and thus sincerity. It is the meaning of language, before language scatters into words, into themes equal to the words and dissimulating in the said the openness of the saying exposed like a bleeding wound.<sup>33</sup>

Truth can only be witnessed in sincerity, in an exposure of myself before the other to the point that I must expose even that exposure. Truth does not allow me the time to justify where I stand in regard to it but finds me already responsible to announce it to the other *and to continually be questioned by whether that announcement has been vigilant enough concerning its own self-imposed blindness, its own propensity to forget the face of the other in one surreptitious manner or another.*

It would seem then that the first responsibility of one who would remember the Nameless is not to point out where or how they suffered, to indicate their suffering *as if* it were a cipher to be named, but to be unconditionally disposed to rendering attentively one's account of this suffering to the very face undergoing it. As I have argued in *Suffering Witness*, the tone of one's witness, of how one's saying registers the proximity of her or him for whom one bears witness, is extraordinarily important.<sup>34</sup> But when those who would give witness are called to a face whose suffering has been undergone in the very act of its being rendered faceless by the perpetrators of the Shoah, the witness has a very difficult, exacting task to fulfill – in what tone should this witness be given? In shame for the face's degradation, or in awe of its transcendence?

One might say that finding the proper tone is impossible. Here the ambivalence referred to above in Levinas's very naming of the Nameless as such disorients the attempt to remember the Nameless. For the very face of the Nameless turns out to be the collapse of the face, a suffering of the blow of the persecutor to the point of becoming the servile soul, of dust and ashes rising up from the crematoria, of the hollow in time left by generations who will never have been born. What should be not forgotten in the suffering of the other is that there is no triumphant glory or dignity in that suffering that would somehow allow the witness to trivialize or turn away from the unrelenting passivity, the unrelievable impoverishment of suffering. Degradation of the other, particularly when it is not attended to as degradation, becomes scandalous.

In *Otherwise than Being*, Levinas's response to this ambivalence is to focus the very account of what it means to be a self – to be *myself* – on the moment of my being rendered faceless by the other who attacks me with pitiless aggression, the scene of what Levinas terms 'persecution'. In this pivotal analysis, Levinas strays as close to a deictic moment of memory as he allows himself, at least in his philosophical writings.<sup>35</sup> Levinas constructs the scene in a manner that inverts his widely discussed account of the face-to-face relationship in *Totality and Infinity*.<sup>36</sup> There the face of the other, who is vulnerable to my power and yet whose vulnerability precisely resists my power in a manner that transcends any force I might use against her or him, both tempts me to and yet prohibits me from murdering the other. It is, in that particular scene, *as if* I had been placed in the position of the Nazis manning the death camps. But in *Otherwise than Being*, the face of

the other is now revealed in the opposite position as the one who would persecute me, *as if* I were before the Nazi guards and other camp personnel who would render me faceless, who would strike me down to the point that it would deanimate my soul.

Levinas's analysis of this scene finds that my very undergoing of the other's blow resists the other's violence by calling attention to how that violence leaves not only my face but also the face of the other in disarray, consumed in violence, suffering beyond any possibility of relief. In this witness, the other is revealed as a perpetrator, as one who would deanimate others. But this revelation does not occur by any action on my part, such that I would point to the other's face in order to indicate to her or him, for instance, that it has become a pitiless mask. In fact, such an action would only return force for force. My pointing at the persecutor's face in this tone would only serve to render her or him as a cipher, a thing to be gawked at and mocked. But in undergoing the other's blow, in facing the other even as her or his blow leaves me suffering and in shame, I reveal for the other how what he or she would pretend is *pitiless* is in fact *pitiful*. In Levinas's words: 'The face of the neighbor in its persecuting hatred can by this very malice obsess as something pitiful.'<sup>37</sup>

For Levinas, pity does not imply condescension but compassion, a taking of responsibility for the irresponsibility of the other. In becoming pitiful, the face of the perpetrator no longer motivates me to outrage, to a returning of violence with violence, but opens up what Levinas terms 'expiation'. Yet, this move from outrage to expiation, from violence to peace, should not be interpreted as making of suffering 'some kind of magical redemptive virtue.'<sup>38</sup> My suffering does not cease in its revelation of my responsibility for the other's responsibility but is magnified in a manner that animates even as it burdens me. As Levinas puts it in another essay: 'The condition of being the victim in a world of disorder, which is to say, in a world where the good does not triumph, is suffering.'<sup>39</sup> I am revealed in this moment of suffering for the other not as 'a constituted, willful, imperious subject'<sup>40</sup> but as one who is impoverished and humbled. But I am also revealed as one who is called without reserve to the work of establishing justice upon the face of the earth, of sustaining a human order in which 'pity, compassion, pardon and proximity'<sup>41</sup> can find themselves at home. While I may not be captivated by a notion of goodness that triumphs, I am even more dedicated for that very reason to sustaining goodness in my treatment of others, to opening up the possibility of justice in spite of how Auschwitz cannot be undone.

### *Useless suffering*

To find oneself living in a world in which good is not triumphant is to find oneself tempted rather than consoled by theodicy. In theodicy, those who

would witness the suffering of others, particularly those submitted to elemental violence would provide some consolation for those who have suffered. But such consolation, Levinas warns, is always bought at the price of my indicating to the other how 'good' it was that he or she suffered. In this strategy, rendering the other faceless becomes somehow part of G-d's plan, of the scheme of the good, and so of my treatment of the other. To define goodness in this way no longer honors its height, its allergy to all moments of deanimation, to all acts that render humans as faceless and consume them 'as if they were bread.'<sup>42</sup> Suffering in the face of the other reveals theodicy to be a blasphemy against the human. Paradoxically to deny that good is triumphant in history is to argue for a goodness that is unprecedented in its scope, that is gratuitous, that is transcendent. Goodness is not the opposite of evil, is not at war with evil, but prior to it absolutely.

But to live in a world where goodness is without precedence also demands, as I have argued in *Suffering Witness*, that we live in quandary.<sup>43</sup> For our witness of those who have been submitted to consuming violence must suffer how their suffering cannot be undone, even if in goodness we would do whatever we might to be addressed by that suffering. No matter how much we witness the suffering of the other, that witness is not enough. And yet witness continues to be an urgent responsibility, *in spite of its failure*. And in giving witness to the insufficiency of our witness, we acknowledge how the unjustifiable has occurred and how we continue to offer ourselves as 'an imprudent exposure to the other.'<sup>44</sup>

#### IV. Justice and the memory of the nameless

But even if theodicy is morally repugnant, the struggle for a justice that would console the afflicted and call the perpetrator to account remains a reality for he or she who is elected to infinite responsibility within the conditions of the finite, mundane, historical world. Precisely because goodness is not triumphant in history but remains gratuitous and without precedent, it depends upon human communities called to unrelenting yet animating responsibility for the other to envision and carry out the social and political meaning of this call. The call to singular responsibility now finds the 'I' of Levinas's text before a multiplicity of faces. One must respond not only to *the other* but also to *all the other* others.

For Levinas, this movement from duality to plurality, or what he terms the 'third,' is synonymous with the movement from ethics to politics. In the political realm, one is called upon to address all the other others in order to make sense of how one might most fairly work out one's responsibility to the particular other. In becoming attentive to the various and competing claims to one's responsibility, one is brought to the question of how one is to be just. But the posing of this question is never relieved from the

insistent and unlimited election to responsibility for *the* singular other that characterizes the ethical relation. Justice cannot replace ethics but remains in an ambivalent and tense relationship with it. In Levinas's words:

Justice is impossible without the one that renders it finding himself in proximity [to the other's face]. His function is not limited to the 'function of judgment,' the subsuming of particular cases under a general rule. The judge is not outside the conflict, but the law is in the midst of proximity . . . This means nothing is outside the control of the one for the other.<sup>45</sup>

In the movement from ethics to justice, those issues raised in the early part of this essay concerning the adjudication of guilt, the punishment of perpetrators, the imposing of reparations and the restoration of victims to their full participation in the political and social order after times of elemental violence, now become preeminent. But for Levinas, as for Bhargava, the restoration of principled justice (of a justice that subsumes particular cases under a general rule) is itself always put into question by the overwhelming necessity that it occur in a social order in which attending to the other's voice is a preeminent part of the ongoing practice of that justice. For this reason, both thinkers in their own way envision a justice that is hyper-aware of the very manner in which language itself structures our social and political identities and commitments.

For what the victim, as well as the victimizer, confronts in a return to a world in which justice finally is to have its say, is that the very language in which justice's saying must be said is still under occupation by the tones of address, by the manners of approaching others – whether they be individuals or groups – that characterize elemental violence. The words inflaming hatred and imposing deanimation of the other, still circulate, still distort the manner in which persons take part in justice, no matter how principled it may strive to be. Those who survive their persecution need more than to witness the punishment of their perpetrators, or to be granted privileges or money by way of reparation. They also need to hear how the language that is spoken in the social order in which they participate now suffers to carry the tones of their speech as well.<sup>46</sup> For in opening up language to the voice of the victim, the victim is restored to a responsibility for how the social order as a community articulates truth and searches for the best response to it.

In the case of the Shoah, of the Nameless, the struggle to render justice demands that its subjects in some measure move from the traumatic memory of the immemorial found in writings of witnesses such as Primo Levi's *Survival in Auschwitz* to some form of more objective and indexical memory, such as that developed in Lucy Dawidowicz's historiographical work, *The War against the Jews*.<sup>47</sup> Most of the human community who now stands

ready to witness those who suffered in the Shoah, including the author of this essay, can only do so through the mediation of written or oral accounts from those who were there, or from those who would research and interpret the actions and documents left behind by those who were there. In passing on one's witness to the other others, the call to *point out* the other's situation, to tell the truth about perpetrators and victims in a manner that not only suffers the other's face but also indexes it, becomes inescapable.

Further, this indexing must take place within language of some sort. In the transmission of the other's face as it was revealed within the confines of the death camps, the immediacy of the impact of that face upon one's witness must now find a way to be said within the welter of intentions and tones that characterize language as a social, historical and political phenomenon. In responding to the call to point out injustice, to remember in empirical terms what occurred to the Nameless, one is also called to become attentive to the manner in which the very language one would use to characterize the suffering of the other is itself at times at issue. For, in spite of our best efforts, language remains under the thrall of antisemitism, of the hatred of the other human, of a violence that would render faceless the other's face.

In *Suffering Witness*, I raised briefly the specter of one such occupation of language by the persecutor, when I pointed out how the poetry of Paul Celan brings into question a Christian tone in regard to Jews, which peals throughout European languages and literatures and which continues to have its dehumanizing effect, even after the ending of the overt persecution of the Shoah.<sup>48</sup> For this very reason, religious institutions such as the Catholic Church have undergone a sea change in their thinking about Judaism and have begun a very laudable although wrenching process of becoming aware of the innumerable ways in which the Christian characterizations of Judaism throughout centuries of preaching and writing have contributed to outbreaks of persecution. Although controversial for some Christian scholars and believers, James Carroll's deeply troubled and troubling consideration of how Christianity developed the notion of the Crusade and how this notion contributed to centuries of violence against the non-Christian other provides a praiseworthy example of how the search for justice must go beyond the mere question of punishing guilty parties and providing reparations for the aggrieved.<sup>49</sup> We must learn to attend to the very words in which we speak our judgements, since these words and their tones become the building blocks for the construction of our own identities, of our own mode of articulating our singular responsibility for all else that exists.

Levinas, in *Otherwise than Being*, often supplements the philosophical point he is making by the use of a particular term, allusion or metaphor taken from the biblical and, in particular, the Jewish tradition. This gesture, in addition to hinting at uniquely Jewish resonances in the naming of the Nameless, also tacitly questions the continuing dominance of Christian tones



and themes within the language of thought, often to the exclusion of other voices. One example of this implied critique is found in the analysis referred to above of persecution. The theme of that discussion and the conclusion to which it leads could perhaps be said, at least at first glance, to have a particularly Christian 'ring' to it. Levinas's use, for instance, of how the victim's being struck by the perpetrator's blow resists the violence of the blow and the outrage it inspires, could remind one of Christ's own dictum that one should turn the other cheek, when the first is struck.

But Levinas both anticipates and detours this expectation of the Christian reader by citing not the Christian Gospels but the Hebrew Lamentations in his construction of the scene: 'To tend the cheek to the smiter and to be filled with shame.'<sup>50</sup> And, in quoting Lamentations, Levinas goes on to emphasize (by means of a parenthetical statement) that, in his analysis of being attacked by the persecutor, not 'the exposure of the other cheek' to the persecutor's second blow but one's already suffering the first blow is sufficient to offer expiation, to move from violence to peace, from murderous virtue to irenic submission to the other. Levinas further complicates his implied reference to Christianity by concluding his sentence, as noted above, with a rejection of suffering as 'some kind of magical redemptive virtue'.

In his manner of phrasing the argument, Levinas does not exclude the possibility of still reading his text in a Christian tone of voice. Levinas himself points to the work of Jean Luc Marion, as well as that of Philip Nemo, as exemplifying Christian readings of responsibility and suffering that would fit well with what Levinas's own work argues.<sup>51</sup> And the fact that Levinas has inspired a significant following of Christian philosophers and religious thinkers throughout the world testifies to his efficacy as a philosopher who speaks across confessional differences to a universal audience. But Levinas also constructs his text in a manner that continually puts into question the troubling presupposition that Christianity and not Judaism, or any other tradition beside Christianity for that matter, articulates the preeminent account of the full structure of the soul's interior life, of living a life that is inspired by G-d's (or should one write 'Christ's' here?) saving presence and (as often alleged by Christian apologists starting with Paul) not simply submitted to the letter of G-d's transcendent Law.<sup>52</sup>

Like Hermann Cohen before him, who authored a defense of Judaism as preeminently a religion of interiority, when pressed by German Christians to justify his adherence to Judaism or to admit the insufficiency of his religion and convert to theirs,<sup>53</sup> Levinas implies in his very manner of citation that, even if Christianity has its own manner of opening up the interior dimensions of the human soul, Judaism too is a religion of interiority. Levinas, in speaking more directly of how the memory of Shoah provokes Judaism into rethinking its significance, says the following:

We must – reviving the memory of those who, non-Jews and Jews, without even knowing or seeing one another, found a way to behave amidst total chaos as if the world had not fallen apart – remembering the resistance of the maquis, that is, precisely, a resistance having no other source but one's own certainty and inner self; we must, through such memories, open up a new access to Jewish texts and give new priority to the inner life. The *inner life*: one is almost ashamed to pronounce this pathetic expression in the face of so many realisms and objectivisms.<sup>54</sup>

Both Christian and Jewish thinkers have remarked upon the need for Christianity, particularly after the violence unleashed in the Shoah, to relent in its insistence upon reading Judaism, *as if* its every word were nothing other than a preparation for a revelation that Christianity embodies and that Judaism remains sadly incapable of acknowledging. Levinas, even as he seeks to make an argument that does not require belief in his particular religious affiliation on the part of his reader, still frames that argument in a manner that calls Christian readers to reconsider their presupposition that Judaism remains ignorant of the final truth concerning the expiation of human evil, the meaning of the soul's struggle for redemption and reconciliation.

### V. Justice and the politics of memory

In this manner, the very phrasing of Levinas's text becomes a mode of justice, although one not so much caught up in the articulation of the particular principles by which to judge human misdeeds as worried about how the impact of the other's face might find its way into both the interpretation and the application of those principles. In his articulation of a Jewish tone within his philosophical, as well as confessional work, Levinas makes room for his reader not only to remember but also to acknowledge the voices of the six million who succumbed to the Shoah, those among all the other others for whom his writing must inevitably offer its witness. And for this to occur, the impact of these other faces upon language itself, including the language of philosophy, as well as the stories we tell about our past, must be felt. Levinas's philosophical and confessional writing provide one approach, one philosopher's and talmudist's voice, in response to this work of justice.<sup>55</sup>

For Levinas, justice, if it is to be just, must become painfully aware of how its thematization of the unthematizable, its 'comparison of incomparables,' its pointing out the plight of the other's face to all the other faces, calls for 'an incessant correction' of precisely how it has come to terms with the other's face.<sup>56</sup> Ultimately, justice calls upon philosophy, as a part of its discourse, 'to conceive ambivalence, to conceive it in several times.'<sup>57</sup>

Philosophy, as it is practiced in a work such as *Otherwise than Being*, would offer counsel to those who would be just on how to hear in the accounts that become the text of justice how the unjustified still rings out within them, of how claims made in one voice might become problematic in another, of how suffering undergone is not a problem to be resolved but an enigma to be returned to incessantly, in cellular irritability, in non-indifference to the other, even if also in a critique given in disinterest, without regard for one's own advantage.<sup>58</sup> It is to have written one's history and one's justice in the tone of compassion, what Levinas would term 'the wisdom of love at the service of love.'<sup>59</sup>

In speaking of a discourse that becomes aware of times that cannot simply be reduced to one another, of voices that cannot simply be rendered in the same idiom, Levinas offers an implicit defense of the telling of the victim's and perpetrator's stories cultivated by the truth commissions springing up across the world's political landscape in response to all too many moments of elemental violence, of unconstrained indecency. In these acts of witness, as Bhargava, Minow and others have argued, justice is moved beyond notions of punishment and reparation (which are not given up but tempered<sup>60</sup>) to one of restoration.

What exactly is being restored remains an important issue in the elaboration of this concept. As Minow concludes in her description of that process:

The asking and the telling [which occur as truth commissions elicit the testimony of victims and perpetrators] unwind something more than complicity; a complicated process of identification and implication in the past must be confronted as part of the building of a new relationship between all citizens and the state.<sup>61</sup>

Restoration involves more than simply getting all parties to agree in principle that the principles of justice matter; it also asks that members of a society *acknowledge*<sup>62</sup> how the construction of a political memory responding to past injustices requires undergoing the impact of other voices, of other times, in a matter that fundamentally touches one's own outlook upon the world. One might say that what is restored here is the sociality of discourse, discourse in which each voice resonates with the voices of all the others with whom it shares its polity and so its political responsibility. In Levinasian terms, I am restored to a discourse in which the face of the other is already implicit in whatever I say. Phrasing it in this manner envisions restoration more asymmetrically than what is perhaps argued for by Bhargava or Minow: for Levinas, not just the interest of *all* persons but those of the *other* person must become my preoccupation, if justice is to become vigilant enough and wise enough to structure a society of peace.

To ask the victim, *as well as the perpetrator*, to speak his or her story within a forum designed to listen attentively and responsibly to it, resists

the dehumanization of all citizens that is at the core of violent regimes. It does so not only by restoring autonomy to former victims *but also their responsibility to all the other victims, as well as the perpetrators*. While Minow argues that the therapeutic outcome of letting victims speak, of bringing their memory back into the political discourse of the state, is of inestimable value,<sup>63</sup> Gutmann and Thompson point out there is strong empirical evidence that offering witness may not relieve the victim's trauma but actually leave her or him more burdened by it.<sup>64</sup> Here Levinas would intervene to remind us that the therapeutic effects of giving one's witness may not be as important to the witness as a renewed affirmation of how the suffering of the other's blows leaves the witness responsible – both to the perpetrator and to all the others with whom that perpetrator must now share a political order. As I have argued in another paper recently, truth commissions should not only hear the truth but also suffer it; to tell or hear the memory of wrongs suffered is not the relieving of a burden but the assumption of responsibility.<sup>65</sup> As George Kunz has argued, the integrity of one's psyche may have less to do with the restoration of power over its circumstances and more to do with the assumption of responsibility for the other's vulnerability than our current paradigms of mental health convey.<sup>66</sup>

Ultimately, if there is to be peace, the political memory of violence must move beyond merely expressing an outrage for wrongs suffered. Yet, in being so called, those who would be just cannot forget these wrongs but must be ever attentive to how the memory of them can devolve into yet again rendering the other faceless: on the one hand, by instituting a justice in which I remain at war with the unjust, *as if* their wrong could be utterly wiped out; on the other hand, by instituting a memory in which the cries of the victims are yet again extinguished, *as if* their suffering could somehow be mastered. In this impossible tension, which demands a discourse of incessant correction, of a wakefulness for the sake of the other's face for whose suffering I am always already responsible, justice must yet again mark out a course that leads to renewed listening to the other and to all the other others.

In the scene of persecution, Levinas names this new tone in my approach to the other as expiation. In it, justice fashions a response to violence that continues to suffer its injustice, even as it would call those who have participated in that injustice to acknowledgment of their role within it. The witness of the victim shatters the heart of the perpetrator and calls attention to those who would administer justice not only to the pitilessness of the perpetrator's face but also its pitifulness. In spite of 'so many realisms and objectivisms' that blanch at the call for repentance, for an imprudent turning that leaves the soul exposing its very exposure to others, to the articulation of a responsibility that transcends political and historical terms, justice must strive yet again to make room for the *inner life*.

## Notes

- 1 A name employed in this essay in lieu of the more widely used 'Holocaust.' Unlike the latter term, which implies a redemptive sacrifice, the former term, taken from the Hebrew for 'total destruction' emphasizes the suffering and degradation involved in the attack of National Socialism upon Jewish culture and life.
- 2 See Rajeev Bhargava, 'Restoring Decency to Barbaric Societies,' in *Truth v. Justice: The Morality of Truth Commissions*, eds. Robert Rotberg and Dennis Thompson (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000). While Bhargava employs the term 'barbaric,' I am more comfortable with his reference to 'indecent' as descriptive of societies in which violence is practiced with impunity.
- 3 For Bhargava, one such procedure could be a truth commission, a body whose charge would not be to determine guilt in order to punish the guilty but simply to listen attentively to the various parties involved in a time of endemic violence, in order to determine *and acknowledge* what actually occurred.
- 4 Emmanuel Levinas, 'Damages Due to Fire,' in *Nine Talmudic Readings*, trans. Annette Aronowicz (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), p. 187.
- 5 For a more detailed discussion of the dynamic see James Hatley, 'Beyond Outrage: The Delirium of Responsibility in Levinas's Scene of Persecution,' in *Addressing Levinas*, eds. Eric Nelson, Antje Kapust and Kent Still (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, forthcoming).
- 6 Bhargava, 'Restoring Decency to Barbaric Societies,' pp. 58–60.
- 7 But one should also be careful of making this distinction too facilely, too absolutely. For actions on the part of the Allies such as strategic bombing or the use of nuclear weapons, as well as the treatment of civilians by Russian troops during their sweep through central Europe, certainly leave in question whether indecency did not become after all symmetrical. Further, many citizens across the face of Europe who carried out or collaborated with Nazi violence remain forever uncharged and in many instances unremembered for what they did. The trials at Nuremberg could bring the worst perpetrators to justice but could hardly bring to trial, let alone imprison, entire neighborhoods and communities for their actions during the *Nazizeit*.
- 8 Emmanuel Levinas, 'Transcendence and Evil,' in *Of God who Comes to Mind*, trans. Bettina Bergo (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), p. 129.
- 9 See 'Useless Suffering,' in *The Provocation of Levinas*, Robert Bernasconi and David Wood, eds. (London: Routledge, 1988).
- 10 Emmanuel Levinas, 'Nameless,' in *Proper Names*, trans. Michael Smith (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996).
- 11 Levinas terms this mode of being named 'election' and contrasts it pointedly to the verbalization of Being that is characteristic of the thought of Martin Heidegger. 'The subject as a noun, a term, is someone . . . It is someone who, in the absence of anyone is called upon to be someone, and cannot slip away from this call. The subject is inseparable from this appeal or this election, which cannot be declined' (Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, or *Beyond Essence*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1999), p. 53). Rather than naming the other, we find ourselves named by her or him. (See also *Otherwise than Being*, fn. 38, p. 190).
- 12 Another name Levinas gives to those who suffered in the Shoah.
- 13 See discussions of this point in my 'Beyond Outrage: The Delirium of Responsibility in Levinas's Scene of Persecution,' in *Addressing Levinas*, eds. Nelson and Still.
- 14 Primo Levi, *Survival in Auschwitz*, trans. Stuart Woolf (New York: Collier Books, 1961), p. 25.

- 15 See the discussion of this point in James Hatley, *Suffering Witness* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2000), pp. 87–95.
- 16 See Philip Hallie, 'From Cruelty to Goodness,' in *Vice and Virtue in Everyday Life: Introductory Readings in Ethics*, eds. Christina Sommers and Fred Sommers (Fort Worth, TX: Harcourt Brace College Publishers, 1997 (4<sup>th</sup> ed.)), pp. 15 ff.
- 17 Levi, *Survival in Auschwitz*, p. 49.
- 18 See the glossary in Wolfgang Sofsky, *The Order of Terror: The Concentration Camp* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), p. 284. Primo Levi speaks of these figures as 'the drowned' (*Survival in Auschwitz*, p. 82).
- 19 See his essay 'Freedom and Command,' in *Collected Philosophical Papers*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Dordrecht: Martinus Nijhoff, 1987), p. 16.
- 20 Levinas, 'Nameless,' p. 120.
- 21 Ibid., p. 121.
- 22 See Elizabeth Weber, 'Persecution in Levinas's *Otherwise than Being*,' in *Ethics as First Philosophy*, ed. Adriaan Peperzak (New York: Routledge, 1995).
- 23 Levinas cites the following lines from Celan as an epigram for the chapter in *Otherwise than Being* in which the analysis of persecution discussed below is treated: 'Ich bin du, wenn/ ich ich bin' ('I am you, when/ I I am').
- 24 While this claim remains tentative and at the margins of the discussion in this paper, much more remains to be said about Levinas's own notion of what philosophy is and whether and how it might be called upon to give witness to and for others in the determination of justice.
- 25 Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969), p. 56.
- 26 Levinas, 'Nameless,' p. 121.
- 27 See Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, p. 21. The analysis of war in this particular piece of writing is, to my mind, revised by Levinas's later remarks in 'Damages Due to Fire.'
- 28 Levinas, 'Nameless,' p. 121.
- 29 See 'The Paradox of Morality,' Interview of Emmanuel Levinas by Tamara Wright, Peter Hughes and Alison Ainley, in *The Provocation of Levinas*, eds. Bernasconi and Wood, pp. 176–7.
- 30 Ibid., p. 175.
- 31 Levinas, 'Nameless,' pp. 121–2. One must keep in mind that what Levinas means by an 'inner self' in this statement is not an autonomous self focused upon its own Being but a suffering self, a self whose interiority is articulated only through its submission to the other's exteriority, to a singular responsibility I could never have articulated alone.
- 32 See Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, p. 149.
- 33 See Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, p. 151.
- 34 See Hatley, *Suffering Witness*, pp. 123–7.
- 35 See Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, pp. 109–13.
- 36 See Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, pp. 197–201.
- 37 See Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, p. 111.
- 38 Ibid.
- 39 These words come from Sandor Goodhart's translation of a passage from Levinas's 'To Love the Torah more than God.' His discussion of this text, as well as a translation of a large portion of it, can be found in his *Sacrificing Commentary: Reading the End of Literature* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), p. 180. Goodhart's comments there do much to fill out the notion of a non-magical suffering referred to above.
- 40 Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, p. 112.

- 41 Ibid., p. 117.
- 42 Psalm 14:4.
- 43 See Hatley, *Suffering Witness*, pp. 21–3.
- 44 Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, p. 151.
- 45 Ibid., p. 159.
- 46 It should be kept in mind that the entrance of the victim's tone of speech into the discourse of justice would not, for Levinas, be heard as a moment of perverse self-actualization, *as if* one's identity were now to be established in one's victimization, one's *own* being wronged. In justice, the victim is called upon to be a witness, to give his or her response to and for the face of the perpetrator, as well as the faces of fellow victims.
- 47 Lucy Dawidowicz, *The War Against the Jews* (Toronto: Bantam Books, 1976).
- 48 See Hatley, *Suffering Witness*, pp. 178–91.
- 49 See James Carroll, *Constantine's Sword: The Church and the Jews* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2001).
- 50 Lamentations 3:30.
- 51 See for example, Levinas's remarks in 'Transcendence and Evil,' p. 133.
- 52 See also Emil Fackenheim, *The Jewish Bible after the Holocaust* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), in which he discusses Jewish and Christian approaches to reading and understanding the Hebrew Bible and how, after the disaster of the Holocaust, Christians are called to a renewed appreciation of the efficacy of Jewish insights about Holy Scripture and its significance for Christians. In this regard, the testimony found in the book's appendix of Astrid Fiehland, a Christian minister, is particularly welcomed: 'The intensive study of Jewish sources has sharpened our insight into how shallow and often enough negative our textbooks and even more recent theological literature, are among us on "Jews", or "Pharisees" . . . It is a serious and necessary step to listen to how Jews themselves understand their faith and their religious traditions' (p. 105).
- 53 See Michael Zank, *The Idea of Atonement in the Philosophy of Hermann Cohen* (Providence, RI: Brown Judaic Studies, no. 324, 2000), especially 3.4 *T'shuva* as the Center of Gravity of Jewish Thought, especially p. 150.
- 54 Levinas, 'Nameless,' pp. 121–2.
- 55 In a similar vein, Saul Friedlander charges historians to cultivate a writing that is not only indexical in nature but also attentive to how the individual voices of victims (and, I would add, perpetrators) alter accounts of the Nazi epoch, whether they be of the every day life of the death camps, or of political views of the 'normal' citizen in the street, or of troop movements on the Russian front. In Friedlander's words:

The reintroduction of individual memory into the overall representation of the epoch implies the use of the contemporaries' direct or indirect expressions of their experience. Working through means confronting the individual voice in a field dominated by political decisions and administrative decrees which neutralize the concreteness of despair and death.

(Saul Friedlander, *Memory, History and the Extermination of the Jews of Europe* [Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993], p. 132)

This mode of doing history, in which facts are to be assiduously ascertained but must then be given their weight in regard to how they resonate in the voices of those who have suffered history, he terms 'commentary.'

- 56 Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, p. 158.

57 Ibid., p. 162.

58 For Levinas, 'disinterestedness' would imply the priority of the other's suffering to my intentions about her or him. My interests do not matter here, because before they could have been formed, I was already responsible for the other. The self, for Levinas, is not in the first instance sovereign or autonomous but a having-been-subjected, a for-the-other. 'Non-indifference,' on the other hand, would signify how the priority of the other's suffering to my intentions about that suffering leaves me already burdened with the other's suffering. I could not have ever not cared about whether the other suffers, of how he or she is vulnerable.

59 Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, p. 162.

60 For instance, Martha Minow argues that reparations remain a limited response to injustice, insofar as they 'elevate things over persons, commodities over lives, money over dignity', Martha Minow, *Between Vengeance and Forgiveness: Facing History after Genocide and Mass Violence* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1998), p. 131.

61 Ibid.

62 See Bhargava's discussion of this term in 'Restoring Decency to Barbaric Societies,' pp. 54–8.

63 Minow, *Between Vengeance and Forgiveness*, pp. 118–22.

64 See Amy Gutmann and Dennis Thompson, 'The Moral Foundations of Truth Commissions', in *Truth v. Justice*, eds. Rotberg and Thompson, p. 30: 'Officials for the Trauma Center for Victims of Violence and Torture, a nongovernmental group that provides services in the Cape Town area, reported 50 to 60 percent of the victims they had seen suffered serious difficulties after giving testimony' [Cited from Suzanne Daley, 'In Apartheid Inquiry, Agony is Relived but not put to Rest,' *New York Times*, July 17, 1997, A10].

65 James Hatley, 'The Malignancy of Evil: Witnessing Violence beyond Justice,' in *Studies in Practical Philosophy: Witnessing*, eds. Kelly Oliver and Shannon Hoff, vol. 3(2) (New York: Lexington Press, 2003).

66 See George Kunz, *The Paradox of Power and Weakness: Levinas and an Alternative Paradigm for Psychology* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1998).



## IS LIBERALISM “ALL WE NEED”?

Lévinas's politics of *surplus**Annabel Herzog*Source: *Political Theory* 30(2) (2002): 204–27.

## I

The recent interest in the interaction between ethics and politics in Lévinas's philosophy focuses on the shift from the binary relation between the Other (*autrui*) and I to the triangular relation among the Other, the third (*le tiers*), and I.<sup>1</sup> Lévinas seems to tell a story that starts with the “face to face” and then is theatrically modified by the entry of the third, but this narrative has no chronology. The third has always been there, according to Lévinas, not as an addition to the dual relation but as an appearance *in the face of the Other*. He writes,

The third looks at me in the eyes of the Other. . . . It is not that there first would be the face, and then the being it manifests or expresses would concern himself with justice. The epiphany of the face qua face opens humanity.<sup>2</sup>

Justice—or politics, or equality—consists in my taking the third into account, but it is not a supplement to my asymmetrical responsibility for the Other, to my bearing his or her “wretchedness and bankruptcy” (AE 185; OB 117), to what Lévinas calls my *substitution*. It is not the result of a comparison I would make *after* substitution between the Other and the third as similar and equal subjects, namely, a presence of sameness just at the moment that it seems that substitution has rendered symmetry and sameness impossible. The third is already there, and this is precisely why we need ethics.<sup>3</sup> However, ethics does not, of course, follow politics. As Derrida explains, there is no passage “following the order of a foundation, according to a hierarchy of founding and founded, of principal originarity and

derivation" between ethics and politics. Both are there together, disturbing each other according to what Derrida calls a "double bind"<sup>4</sup>: interrupting the ethical "face-to-face" and my substitution *for* the Other, politics exercises a violence. It demands sameness and, hence, "totalization." It develops in the manner of war (TEI 5; TI 21). However, there is another violence in the immediate "face-to-face" due to "the impossibility of discerning here between good and evil, love and hate, giving and taking, the desire to live and the death drive, the hospitable welcome and the egoistic or narcissistic closing up within oneself" (A 66; A' 33). We need ethics to counter the violence of politics; but, no less, we need justice to moderate ethics.

The double bind (to leave Derrida's expression as it is) somehow discourages us from going beyond it. On the one hand, the relation between ethics and politics is so essentially "complicated"<sup>5</sup> that its description seems endless. On the other hand, this "complication" comes precisely from what Lévinas calls ethics, namely, the rejection of the synchrony of representation and the egological gathering of concepts. The relation between ethics and politics is like a disturbance that, as such, cannot be synthesized into a concept. As Critchley writes, "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."<sup>6</sup> Therefore, at the moment that we seem to understand the mechanism of the double bind, a question appears that cannot even be asked: What "kind" of human relations emerges from the interaction of ethics and politics? How can it be defined? What should it be called? We fear becoming unbearably abstract when we tell ourselves that there is no answer to this impossible question—because a concept would annihilate the diachrony that constitutes the relation to the Other or, put differently, because there is no ontological foundation to human relations that immediately exist *for* the Other. The fear of becoming abstract may explain why some of Lévinas's readers conclude their discussions with the contention that Lévinas was a supporter of the liberal state, as if it were impossible to stay with the openness of the double bind, as if Lévinas had to accept a practical resolution to the intricacy of ethics and politics, as if the incommensurable tension of his whole philosophy had eventually collapsed into the consensus of liberalism due to the necessity of politics.<sup>7</sup> However, in a note written in 1990 to preface an article first published in 1934, "Reflections on the Philosophy of Hitlerism," in which Lévinas sums up his entire philosophy in few words, he writes, "We must ask ourselves if liberalism is all we need to achieve an authentic dignity for the human subject."<sup>8</sup> The "question" of philosophy combines ethics and politics (without identifying them)—but perhaps liberalism is not the answer.

The problem may not be as "complicated" as I have just suggested. We are talking about the relation between ethics and politics. Ethics with politics is certainly not politics "left to itself" (TEI 335; TI 300), nor is it ethics alone. When ethics produces an unknowable diachrony, politics imposes

synchrony. As a result, something can be "said" about the interaction of ethics and politics, because of politics. If human relations were only ethics—that is, if there were only two persons facing each other—philosophy would be impossible. Philosophy—essentially Greek according to Lévinas—emerges in society as a social activity, namely, as a process of knowledge, foundation, representation, comprehension, "totalization." Lévinas aims at showing that there is an "alternative [non-Greek] approach to meaning and truth," that is, at revealing *in philosophy* the irreducible otherness which resists the philosophical logos, the "ability of philosophy . . . to unsay itself."<sup>9</sup> Still, philosophy is essentially Greek: when he describes the dual relation, Lévinas proposes a *thought* about holiness, not holiness itself. The difficulty is "to *speak* of this alternative tradition given the essentially Greek nature of philosophical language" (EOI 55). "We can never completely escape from the language of ontology and politics. Even when we deconstruct ontology we are obliged to use its language" (EOI 58). Ontological reason is as necessary as politics, and both come together. The third is always there; we talk for humanity, and we talk with concepts.<sup>10</sup> Even when we show that the face of the Other escapes, traumatizes, and *transcends* reason and its conceptual attempts at totalizing, we do not escape reason.

Therefore, the double bind should, at least *in part*, be "thematizable." It should be possible to escape the reduction of the relation between ethics and politics to the liberal state *and* conceptualize some of the human relation to the Other and the third. Critchley tries to define the political that is disturbed by the ethical as a "democracy that does not exist," recalling Lefort's analysis of democracy as a regime where the place of power is an empty space<sup>11</sup> and Derrida's expression of "a democracy to come."<sup>12</sup> Lévinas himself uses the word *democracy*, and Critchley rejects the idea that such a conception of a "democracy that does not exist" apologizes for Western liberal democracy. However, it seems to me that Lévinas's philosophy yields more than this. To say that democracy is always incomplete, that it always has to come and be invented, is formal.<sup>13</sup> It negates questions that we are entitled to ask: What will come under the name democracy? Or, What does Lévinas's "beyond the state in the state"<sup>14</sup> mean, *actually*? Derrida proposes an answer to questions such as those in "A Word of Welcome" when he calls Lévinas's philosophy a "treatise of *hospitality*" as opposed to "thematization," that is, the totalizing action of ontology and conceptualization which reduces otherness to sameness (A 49; A' 21). He disturbs his own conceptualization of Lévinas's thought with a *performative* practice, an *experience* or a *transcendence*,<sup>15</sup> enunciating his text as words of welcome *for* the participants in a colloquium organized to mark the first anniversary of Lévinas's death. Hospitality here is a "saying" before it is being a "said"; hospitality here "takes time."

Derrida's elaboration on a politics of hospitality leaves two questions that could modify the idea of hospitality: 1. *Who* are the Other and the others,

the irreducible alterity that I always face in society? Who are the guests? Lévinas's answer is not "brothers" or "women" or "friends"—although all of these play a role in his philosophy—nor is it an all-embedding "everybody."<sup>16</sup> Lévinas's starting point is "the idea of extreme frailty, of demand, that the other is poor. It is worse than weakness, the superlative of weakness. He is so weak that he demands."<sup>17</sup> The guests are the stateless, the oppressed, the poor and the homeless, hungry widows and orphans. They are vulnerable people who are and always will be "possibilities that cannot be structured according to a political schema."<sup>18</sup> They are those people that Benjamin called "the defeated and the dead."<sup>19</sup> 2. *What am I to do*, then, when I face their transcendence in society? According to Lévinas, I cannot reduce their transcendence to a presence; I cannot *represent* them. Therefore, what action can I take? Or, what would be a "politics" that would face the poor without "representing" them? Doesn't the double bind lead to a radical modification of politics itself? Isn't this "modified" politics a "surplus," or a "utopia," as Lévinas calls it, that is, something other than a democracy to come? Indeed, would the poor be faced in a democracy that is always based on "representation"? Agreeing with Ricoeur that "one of the dangers of democracy [is] the permanent exclusion of a minority that always exists,"<sup>20</sup> doesn't Lévinas let us consider the possibility of a politics that would face but not represent the poor? What would this politics mean?

In this paper, I first recall the mechanism of interaction of ethics and politics in Lévinas's philosophy, indicating the centrality of poverty and misery in this process authoritatively described by Derrida. I then examine the possible political meaning of the double bind, shifting from Derrida's conception of hospitality to what I will call a politics of *surplus*: a politics of nonrepresentation that is opened to the irreducibility of the defeated and the dead.

## II

The interaction of ethics and politics involves the superposition of a *substitution* and a *question*. "Substitution" refers to the ethical relation between the Other and I; "question" refers to the interruption of substitution by the third. At the same "time," I am responsible *for* the Other, and I ask myself a question regarding my possible substitution for the third, who appears in the face of the Other; that is, I compare the third with the Other. My substitution for the Other cannot be known because it is an ethical practice in which I escape reason. At the same time, I demand a reasonable answer to help me solve a problem of comparison. I escape reason *for* the incommensurable infinity of the Other, and I ask reason to help me calculate my substitutions for the Other and the third, and to understand the relation between the Other and the third. In Lévinas's famous terms,

The responsibility for the other is immediacy antecedent to questions, it is proximity. It is troubled and becomes a problem when the third party enters.

The third party is other than the neighbor, but also another neighbor, and also a neighbor of the other, and not simply his fellow. What then are the other and the third party for one another? What have they done to one another? Which passes before the other? The other stands in a relationship with the third party, for whom I cannot entirely answer, even if I alone answer, before any question, for my neighbor. The other and the third party, my neighbors, contemporaries of one another, put distance between me and the other and the third party. "Peace, peace to the neighbor and the far-off" (Isaiah 57: 19)—we now understand the point of this apparent rhetoric. The third party introduces a contradiction in the saying whose signification before the other until then went in one direction. It is of itself the limit of responsibility and the birth of the question: What do I have to do with justice? A question of consciousness. Justice is necessary, that is, comparison, coexistence, contemporaneity, assembling, order, thematization, the visibility of faces, and thus intentionality and the intellect, the intelligibility of a system, and thence also a copresence on an equal footing as before a court of justice. Essence as synchrony is togetherness in a place.

(AE 245; OB 157)

In "Peace and Proximity," Lévinas comes back to the same sentences, with a slight change:

Doubtless, responsibility for the other human being is, in its immediacy, anterior to every question. But how does responsibility obligate if a third party troubles this exteriority of two where my subjection of the subject is subjection to the neighbor? The third party is other than the neighbor but also another neighbor, and also a neighbor of the other, and not simply their fellow. What am I to do? What have they already done to one another? Who passes before the other in my responsibility? What, then, are the other and the third party with respect to one another? Birth of the question.

The first question in the interhuman is the question of justice. Henceforth it is necessary to know, to become consciousness. Comparison is superimposed onto my relation with the *unique* and the incomparable, and, in view of equity and equality, a weighting, a thinking, a calculation, the comparison of incomparables, and, consequently, the neutrality—presence or representation—of being, the thematization and the visibility of the face in some way de-faced as the simple individuation of an individual; the burden of ownership and exchange . . . and, through this,

finally, the extreme importance in human multiplicity of the political structure of society, subject to laws and thereby to institutions where the *for-the-other* of subjectivity—or the ego—enters with the dignity of a citizen into the perfect reciprocity of political laws which are essentially egalitarian or held to become so.<sup>21</sup>

My responsibility for the Other comes before any question, but not as a ground for future questions. It is there *ethically*, before everything. I am responsible *before*, without knowing before what, without knowing that there will be such a “what,” such a *problem*:

Responsibility for another is not an accident that happens to a subject, but precedes essence in it, has not awaited freedom, in which a commitment to another would have been made. I have not done anything and I have always been under accusation.

(AE 180; OB 114)<sup>22</sup>

But problems of responsibility are inevitable because the third is already there. The third “troubles.” He/she introduces, superimposes a comparison, calculation, and so forth, to provide a necessary answer to a *question*. Therefore, we have at the same “time” (1) my responsibility for the Other, (2) a trouble: the third, (3) a question, and (4) an answer: comparison, essence, neutrality. We know what responsibility means; we understand the trouble and, even better, the answer. But what about the question? The question is the slight change that appears from AE (1972) to PP (1984). In AE, the question was, “What then are the other and the third party for one another?” This question limits my responsibility and generates *another* question: “What do I have to do with justice?” Indeed, what do I have to do with something that happens between the Other and the third, that is, *outside me*? The Other and the third *put distance* between them and me. Justice is necessary, but it is outside me: “What do I have to do with justice?” I would like to answer, “Nothing at all! I am only concerned about the Other,” but I cannot because, again, justice is necessary. We are all together “as before a court of justice.” I know that this is necessary, but does it really mean something to me?

Lévinas poses the question in a different way in PP: “What am I to do?” This, too, is a question of justice but one that now addresses me. It gives me something to do, creating a conception of justice and comparison that does not lead only to “a court of justice.” It names the political: “through this, finally, the extreme importance in human multiplicity of the political structure of society.” By giving me something to do, it enables me to receive the “dignity of a citizen.” To the best of my knowledge, this difference between the two “first questions” is always ignored. If, as Derrida recalls, “all the concepts that are opposed to ‘thematization’ are at once synonymous

and of equal value" (A 50; A' 22), it may seem that all the questions leading to thematization are synonymous. Indeed, these questions ("What then are the other and the third party for one another?" "What do I have to do with justice?" "What am I to do?" etc.) eventually frame the question of the relation between responsibility and justice. However, if we emphasize the direct link between politics and the question "What am I to do?" we get, I think, another clue to understand the meaning of this relation.

I have something to do for the Other and for the others, and it involves a question of weighing, calculating, and exchanging. Politics is a question of *giving* and *receiving* in a reciprocal and just manner. Is this only a conception of politics as distributive justice? Yes, and no. Yes, because Lévinas's definition of politics entails equality and fairness in exchanges. No, because *before* or *beyond* these exchanges, namely, before or beyond my duties and rights which form my "essence" as an intelligent being living in an intelligible system, I am absolutely responsible. That is, before or beyond a politics of distribution, I give everything. Not that I *have to* give everything: the "I have to" is part of the question, part of the exchange system, the system of "knowledge or (what amounts to the same things) powers" (AE 132; OB 83). What I "have to give" is not everything that I have or, at least, what I "have to give" has to be compensated by what I have to receive. However, before or beyond exchanges, I *do give* everything to the Other in a nonphilosophical and nonpolitical experience, and I welcome him or her "beyond the capacity of the I" (see A 55–60; A' 25–29. See also AE 138; OB 192) without thinking about it, without comparing and without justice, *because the Other is hungry*:

This gaze that supplicates and demands, that can supplicate only because it demands, deprived of everything because entitled to everything, and which one recognizes in giving . . . this gaze is precisely the epiphany of the face as a face. The nakedness of the face is destituteness. To recognize the Other is to recognize a hunger. To recognize the Other is to give.

(TEI 73; TI 75)

Hunger or destituteness (*dénouement*) are not formal structures to signify the radical and elusive alterity of the Other; they are not metaphors.<sup>23</sup> The Other is "[a] destitution and [a] hunger" (TEI 218; TI 200); he/she is concretely in danger of dying, and when I meet his/her "proletarian nakedness"<sup>24</sup> I could kill him/her by my indifference. The Other is a dying Other or the dying part, the most fragile part of the Other. Accordingly, I am responsible for his/her life:

He has no other place, is not autochthonous, is uprooted, without a country, not an inhabitant, exposed to the cold and to the heat of the

seasons. To be reduced to having recourse to me is the homelessness or strangeness of the neighbor. It is incumbent on me.

(AE 145; OB 91)

The Other's hunger is absolutely incumbent on me. I am guilty. I am an oppressor because every time I eat, the Other could die of hunger. However my guilt also defines my complete responsibility and solidarity with the Other.<sup>25</sup>

Therefore, says Lévinas, on an ethical level, the Other is the "richest": With a "right-to-be preceding mine," he/she comes before me and gets everything from me. However, he/she is the "poorest" and is "utterly vulnerable and exposed" in that he/she needs me, or in that he/she always needs *more* of me, because I cannot give him/her everything I have, which means that he/she stays hungry and dies of hunger. In other words, he/she is poor "at an ontological or political level" (EOI 63) when I cannot give him/her everything because there are other others, and I do not do more for him/her, although I could. The "problem" arises from the fact that many hungry people surround me (and also from the fact that my neighbors sometimes eat much better than I: I am part of these hungry people). To formulate the "problem," I necessarily enter the world of comparison and weighing, the world of politics. Here, says Lévinas, a paradox arises:

Indeed without these political and technological structures of organization we would not be able to feed mankind. This is the great paradox of human experience: we must use the ontological *for the sake of the other*; to ensure the survival of the other we must resort to the technico-political systems of means and ends.

(EOI 64)

The paradox of politics is that it is both the origin and the cure of hunger. The Other is dying because of politics, but he/she does not die automatically, thanks to politics. Strikingly, it is this paradox that reveals the ethical demand: it is through politics, or because of politics, that "the sake of the Other" appears as the first and the predominant concern. It does not follow that because of politics and the hunger that it creates, we need ethics as a solution. The solution is political! "Justice is necessary" ("*Il faut la justice*"), insists Lévinas. It is in a political context that I discover the misery in the face of the Other and my responsibility for him/her that comes before all politics. It is a political context that is needed to feed the Other, for whom I and only I am absolutely responsible. We have slipped into the spiral *mise en abîme* of the double bind—from primordial hunger in the face of the Other that demands my complete responsibility, to hunger as a political consequence appeased only by political means.



Hence, contrary to what Derrida suggests, there is no "leap without transition . . . rupturing mutation of the 'without question' at the birth of the 'first question'" (A 64; A' 31); there is no "lacuna" and no "hiatus" (A 46; A' 20) between ethics and politics.<sup>26</sup> There is a concrete *passage* between them: misery. Misery is the basis of ethics that, "in its immediacy, [is] anterior to every question." However, misery comes from politics. I am responsible for the Other because he/she is hungry. However, the solution to hunger will come from the state, not from me. I shall show now that in Lévinas's work, one can find two distinct expressions of the double bind and that these two expressions lead to two distinct conceptions of politics.

### III

The expression of the relationship between ethics and politics that Derrida analyzes in the second part of "A Word of Welcome" appears chronologically in Lévinas's work from TEI to AE and to PP. Lévinas first says "no" to the state and its ontological violence and then "yes" to the state and its necessary justice. He says "no" first to politics as war and to the misery that war generates (TEI 5; TI 21); "no" to politics that "deforms the I and the other who have given rise to it, for it judges them according to universal rules and thus as in absentia"<sup>27</sup> (TEI 335; TI 300); "no" to the state "which carries within it the seeds of the totalitarian state";<sup>28</sup> "no" to a system in which a civil servant cannot see the tears of the Other;<sup>29</sup> "no" to a

Peace on the basis of the Truth—on the basis of the truth of a knowledge where, instead of opposing itself, the diverse agrees with itself and unites; where the stranger is assimilated; where the other is reconciled with the identical in everyone. . . . Peace on the basis of the state, which would be a gathering of humans participating in the same ideal truths

and that in spite of its tranquility and solidarity generated "millennia of fratricidal, political, and bloody struggles, of imperialism, of human hatred and exploitation, up to our century of world wars, genocides, the Holocaust, and terrorism; of unemployment, the continuing poverty of the Third World" (PP 339–40; PP' 162–63). "No," therefore, to politics because of ethics, because "There is anxiety in committing the crimes even when the concepts are in agreement with each other. There is an anxiety of responsibility that is incumbent on everyone in the death or suffering of the other" (PP 341; PP' 164).

But then, and at the same time, Lévinas says "yes" to politics because the third is there and he/she is also dying: "What am I to do?" He says "yes" to politics because my infinite generosity for the Other is not enough for all the others, because there is *more* to do; "yes" to politics because ethics and its

disproportion contains a kind of violence toward the others.<sup>30</sup> “Yes” to politics precisely because ethics is unjust and must be moderated:

To the extravagant generosity of the for-the-other is superimposed a reasonable order, ancillary or angelic, of justice through knowledge, and philosophy here is a *measure* brought to the infinity of the being-for-the-other of peace and proximity, and it is like the wisdom of love.  
(PP 346; PP’ 169)

Without politics, ethics would perhaps forget, because of its extravagance, the concrete reality of hunger and its possible solutions.

In revealing hunger and demanding a solution for it, ethics both controls and appeals to politics. More precisely, ethics dominates politics because it requires justice. Ethics and politics come together, the former demanding of the latter to correct the hunger that politics itself creates; that is, ethics demands of politics something ethics cannot provide because of its extravagance. Ethics is anterior to all questions; justice is necessary. Politics must be shot through with ethical concern; it must not be left to itself and has to be interrupted or “disturbed (*troublé*)” (AE 160; OB 194) by ethics:

Nothing would be able to withdraw itself from the control of the responsibility of the “one for the other,” which delineates the limit of the State and does not cease to appeal to the vigilance of persons who would not be satisfied with the simple subsumption of cases under a general rule, of which a computer is capable.

(PP 346; PP’ 169)

The double bind consists of a relation between politics and its limit or disturbance, which Lévinas sometimes calls democracy. He sums up this relation in one sentence of AE, which shows the many passages between ethical and political levels:

The more I return to myself, the more I divest myself . . . of my freedom as a constituted, willful, imperialist subject, the more I discover myself to be responsible; the more just I am, the more guilty I am. I am “in myself” through the others.

(AE 177–8; OB 112)

A different expression of the double bind—or a double bind *beyond* the double bind—appears in Lévinas’s “confessional” texts, principally, “The State of Caesar and the State of David” or “Politics After!” in AV, some Talmudic commentaries of DL, and “Judaism and Revolution.”<sup>31</sup> In these texts, ethics and politics interact to first say “yes” to the state and then to that which is “beyond the State.”<sup>32</sup> Lévinas does not criticize politics from

the beginning because of its ontological totalization and blindness to misery; rather, he accepts politics as it is, which allows it to be first taken on and only then overtaken and exceeded by "beyond the State." This is not to say that Lévinas contradicts himself: His "yes" to the state already synthesizes the features of the double bind that I recall above, namely, the priority of ethics. As he writes, "What is most important is the idea that not only does the essence of the State not contradict the absolute order, but it is called by it" (AV 212; BV 180); and, "the Law entering the world requires an education, protection, and consequently a history and a State" (AV 211; BV 179). However Lévinas emphasizes the danger, or the weakness of pure ethics, which can lead to a "satisfaction found in dreams" and dwells on the importance that is attached to "the grasp on the real" (AV 215; BV 183), that is, on the importance of politics. In JR, he reads a part of the Talmud's *Tractate Baba Metsia* to suggest that politics disturbed by ethics may be called revolution because "revolution takes place when one frees man; revolution takes place when one tears man away from economic determinism" (JR 24; JR' 102). He contends that to be "revolutionary," political action "must seek . . . the reason for the absence or silence of God," that is, the reason for the persecution of the poor (JR 37–8; JR' 109–10). Continuing this line of thought in AV, he adds that politics disturbed by ethics leads to—or even constitutes—"messianic times":

the divine invests History and State rather than doing away with them. The end of History retains a political form. . . . The State of David remains in the final stage of Deliverance. The epoch of the Messiah can and must result from the political order that is allegedly indifferent to eschatology and preoccupied solely with the problems of the hours.

(AV 213; BV 180–1)

To that extent, messianic times become real "democratic times," when politics is constantly controlled by my responsibility for the Other.<sup>33</sup>

However, Lévinas does not suggest that such political "messianic times" will be the end of all our troubles. He asks,

Doesn't political action, be it revolutionary, turn against the people of God, against the persecuted, against the non-violence which it wishes for and for which a revolution is attempted? Doesn't political action turn against the non-violence which alone can end all persecution?

(JR 44; JR' 113)

In DL, he recalls a Talmudic controversy between the conception of Rabbi Johanan and that of Samuel. The former argues that in messianic times, political and social injustices will disappear, making room for intimate

harmony and contemplation, which characterize the contemplative life called “future world” (as distinct from historical and collective messianic times). Samuel contends that “the messianic era indicates only the end of political violence” (DL 92; DF 61). For Samuel, explains Lévinas, “spiritual life, as such, cannot be separated from economic solidarity with the Other—the *giving* is in some way the original movement of spiritual life, which cannot be suppressed by the messianic outcome” (DL 93, DF 62). The poor will not disappear, although we must keep in mind that there should be no poor among us (DL 93, DF 62). The concern for poverty and for hunger is not of a historical contingency. Only in messianic times will political conflicts disappear and, *accordingly*, only then will the concern for the hungry Other appear in its entirety.

Lévinas describes this “beyond the state” in the second part of “The State of Caesar and the State of David,” where he brings together the critiques of politics that he develops in both DL and JR. He allows for the possibility of a “deliverance that will come from God himself,” a “deliverance [that] does not enter into the idea of kinship” (AV 218; BV 185–86). Acknowledging that this situation “may appear utopian and, at any case, premature,” he advocates the “commitment [*l’engagement*]” (AV 220; BV 187) or direction toward this situation and names it “monotheistic politics.” In “Politics After!”<sup>34</sup> he attempts to develop this conception of politics, called thereafter “peace.” He focuses on an empirical political conflict, that of Arabs and Jews about the state of Israel, and recalls Sadat’s trip and the peace that followed it, concluding with these words:

For what is “politically” weak about [this peace] is probably the expression both of its audacity and, ultimately, of its strength. It is also, perhaps, what it brings, for everyone everywhere, to the very idea of peace: the suggestion that peace is a concept which goes beyond [*déborde*] purely political thought.

(AV 228; BV 195)

I will now attempt to identify the possible meaning of this *débordement*, called in PP a “*surplus* [*surcroît*] of sociality and of love” (PP 342; PP’ 165).

#### IV

Lévinas calls politics disturbed by ethics “democracy” and sometimes even “the liberal state”: “I was just talking now about the liberal state: isn’t it a permanent revisiting of the right itself, a critical reflection on political rights, which are only *de facto* laws?” (EN 224; EN’ 205). Going beyond the ethical criticism that troubles politics in democracy, “peace” describes a commitment toward a *utopia*.<sup>35</sup> It does not correspond to a further chronological

step of sociality, a historical situation that comes "after democracy"; rather, it indicates another *level* of sociality within the actual social world, a radical *débordement* that exceeds the critical disturbance of society. As such, it must be realized now (we are committed to realize the commitment that constitutes peace). The notion of surplus appears in this context, first at the beginning of TEI, where it is related to "religion." Lévinas writes, "We propose to call 'religion' the bond that is established between the same and the other without constituting a totality" (TEI 30; TI 40). Some pages later, he continues, "Politics tends towards reciprocal recognition. Religion is Desire and not struggle for recognition. It is the surplus possible in a society of equals, that of glorious humility, responsibility, and sacrifice, which are the condition for equality itself" (TEI 58; TI 64). In the case of peace, as in the case of religion, the surplus is related to *freedom* in society (a "bond . . . established . . . without constituting a totality" and a "deliverance"); but it is an infinite excess in a political situation that is "disturbed." It is the transcendence of desire or love "in a society of equals," that is, in a society that is properly conditioned and troubled by responsibility. Earlier in his work, in "Freedom and Command" (1953), Lévinas already distinguished tyranny (the truth of "politics left to itself") from a political order that is troubled by the face's "light," and he also distinguished this troubled political order from a third situation that he called "religion."<sup>36</sup> But what constitutes this situation, this religion, this peace, this surplus? Why should we tend toward such a surplus (a commitment toward a deliverance that will come from God himself)? What is lacking in democracy?

The problem of democracy is representation. I certainly do not suggest that Lévinas longs for a *polis* and its direct democracy. He assumes that the political itself is founded on representation, as it appears in his description of the entry of the third in "Diachrony and Representation":

But now the simplicity of this primary obedience is upset by the third person emerging next to the other; the third person is himself also a neighbor, and also falls within the purview of the *I*'s responsibility. Here, beginning with this third person, is the proximity of a human plurality. Who, in this plurality, comes first? This is the time and place of the birth of the question: of a demand for justice! This is the obligation to compare unique and incomparable others; this is the moment of *knowledge* and, henceforth, of an objectivity beyond or on the hither side of the nakedness of the face; this is the moment of consciousness and intentionality. An objectivity born of justice and founded on justice, and thus required by the *for-the-other*, which, in the alterity of the face, commands the *I*. This is the call to re-presentation that ceaselessly covers over the nakedness of the face, giving it content and composure in a world.

(EN 172–73; EN' 166–67)

Politics, even in the traumatized form (of democracy), originates in perception and presence, namely, in representation. The relation between I, the Other, and the third depends on our "seeing one another"; it demands a comparison between different but similar "objects"—objects that can be re-presented. Political situations, therefore, consist in "the egology of synthesis, the gathering of all alterity into presence, and the synchrony of representation" (EN 167; EN' 161). Politics is "the entry of each into the representation of the others," an "agreement [an agreement at all costs, we may add] between thoughts in the synchrony of the given" (EN 170; EN' 164). What this seems to mean, and what we already know, is that politics reduces the alterity of the Other to sameness through the process of representation. However, we have to go further. Egological representation<sup>37</sup> re-presents what is or was present. Politics is made for those who are or once were present. However, says Lévinas, something is lacking in this presence: the otherness of the Other, the dying of the hungry and persecuted Other. But the hunger in the face of the Other points to a broader *fact*, the fact that many other others lack the presence that is re-presented in politics. The death and hunger which I face in the Other and which demand my responsibility also demand my responsibility for the death of other people who have died; who actually die. Let us remember the dedication of AE:

To the memory of those who were the closest among the six million assassinated by the National Socialists, and of the millions on millions of all confessions and all nations, victims of the same hatred of the other man, the same antisemitism.

The misery of the Other traumatizes me on various levels that, in their interrelation, reveal the *multiple actual* forms of misery. It traumatizes me because it is the misery of a victim of man's hatred for the Other and, accordingly, also the misery of millions of victims of this hatred. It is at the same time the misery of the 6 million Jews assassinated by the Nazis and that of those I knew among them. The misery in the face of the Other is inseparable from the misery in the face of millions of people, close neighbors or unknown victims: "the contemporaneity of the multiple is tied about the diachrony of two" (AE 248; OB 159). Hunger in the face of the Other is not an anonymous and formal expression; it indicates the collapse of all formalism: *This* Other's hunger opens *this* humanity's hunger: there *are* poor ones and strangers in the world. The nonpresence of the Other, his/her otherness is meaningful *as* nonpresence of millions of other specific individuals. There are actual people who are not and cannot be represented, who stay outside representation.

The real *problem* is the absence of nonrepresented people. Hobbes most accurately described the nature and development of a politics without surplus, whether it is eventually a politics left to itself or a traumatized politics.

Such politics is made by and for people who are or were here, for political actors who see each other and fight against each other to achieve complete synchrony. What is *important*, however, is to know whether Hobbes described the entirety of sociality, or whether he left something out:

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.

(AE 248; OB 159)

Accordingly, Lévinas aims at no less than a radical reversal of the idea of a state: all through TEI (see EN 232; EN' 198), he claims that what has to be challenged is the traditional *conatus essendi* of being on which Hobbes's state (or Spinoza's state), and every actual state, is founded. The state, in Lévinas's mind, should be established *for* the sake of those who do not, or cannot, fight for their being, those who are defeated and cannot send representatives:

in opposition to the natural perseverance of each being in his or her own being (a fundamental ontological law), care for the stranger, the widow and the orphan, a preoccupation with the other person. A reversal of the order of things!<sup>38</sup>

The legitimacy of politics should not consist in its relation to its participants but, on the contrary, in its responsibility for its *interruption*, its *holes*, its *absentees*. Derrida writes, "The political dissimulates because it brings to light" (A 171; A' 98). Peace is concerned with the dissimulated part of the political. Man can find "fulfillment" in a state that does not only spring from a war—namely, from the extreme consequences of the gathering attempt of representation. Fulfillment depends on the state's openness to something that is absent from representation—something heterogeneous to the state itself. To clarify this point, let us turn to Lévinas's claim that the state becomes totalitarian when it does not respect its own limit (EN 115; EN' 105). Here, the notion of limit goes beyond the one usually applied in the comparison between totalitarianism and the liberal state. There is a limit to the state, not only because we should enjoy private freedom but because there *is* such a limit, a limit that separates the state from its "beyond." There is a limit to the state because the state does not represent everyone. Lévinas says, "So there is a limit to the state. Whereas, in Hobbes's vision—in which the state emerges not from the limitation of charity, but from the limitation of violence—one cannot set a limit on the state." In my reading, not only does this sentence formulate the double bind (reminding us that there is an ethical limit to the state but that the state is also a limit, that is, a limitation

of violence or of charity); it goes further. Remember that violence consists in ignoring the face that cannot be represented, in grasping reality “out of the relations which [reality] maintains with all the other elements of representation, within a representation which has already taken in the world” (LC 47–8; FC 20). Therefore, the confrontation of the “limit to the state” with the “limitation of charity” or the “limitation of violence” reflects the paradox of the idea of limit and, accordingly, the possibility of its existence: if the state emerges as a limitation of charity, doesn’t it mean that charity, on the other side of the limit, radically limits the state? And, conversely, if the state emerges as a limitation of violence, doesn’t it mean that violence, identical to the essence of the state, cannot impose any limit to the state?

The limit of the state is the sign of the existence of nonrepresented people. Fulfillment in the state takes place in an absent part of the state, the domain of the poor and of responsibility for the poor: Lévinas calls it surplus, religion, peace, or charity, a commitment toward a *utopia*—etymologically a nonspace:

The entire life of a nation—beyond the formal sum of individuals standing *for themselves*, that is to say, living and struggling for their land, their place, their *Da-sein*—carries with itself (concealed, revealed, or at least occasionally caught sight of) men who, before all loans, have debts, owe their fellowman, are responsible—chosen and unique—and in this responsibility want peace, justice, reason. Utopia!

(EN 243; EN’ 231)

The surplus of the state is the tension toward the utopia of nonrepresentation. The *important* part of politics is precisely what is not politics itself, its counterpart, the absentees. Fulfillment in the state consists in being related to those who are not represented. The relation of the state to its absentees is a political situation, distinct from the usual political relation based on representation. It is not that the state should “take care” of the poor—those who have no place in representation—what a welfare state or even a Hobbesian commonwealth is supposed to do.<sup>39</sup> Charity is not one of sovereignty’s numerous duties toward its subjects or citizens. A state with surplus or charity or peace would be erected for the poor, would exist for them. There would be first hospitality for the nonresidents, as Derrida suggested, or surplus for the poor, for those who do not produce. Justice would be this unjust practice: to provide for those who do not participate, to give to those who cannot give back.

Fulfillment in the state consists in the citizens’ ability to face the absence of the poor without constituting a totality with them. The poor cannot be made “present.” There is definitely a fatalism in Lévinas’s thought: death, sickness, hunger are irreducible. The commitment toward utopia will not transform the “human condition.” Yet this fatalism is overcome by the



impossibility to get any satisfaction from the "absence" of the poor: "Not that the poor should survive so that the rich have the messianic joy of nourishing them" (DL 94; DF 62); "No, one cannot wish for the existence of the poor to guarantee a place for charity" (EN 224; EN' 205). Critchley makes a connection between Lévinas's and Benjamin's concerns, arguing that "Lévinas's work attempts to rub history against the grain, to find the 'ruptures in history,' to produce a history for those without works or texts."<sup>40</sup> Indeed, Lévinas treats the poor exactly as Benjamin treats the "defeated and the dead" and comes up against the same difficulty: the point is not to attempt to transform the repressed into nonrepressed or to "celebrate" the poor as the authentic but unknown rich of history. It is not to exchange the roles between political actors, or even to give a role to nonrepresented people, because that would be a way to totalize them. We seem, therefore, to have reached a deadlock: it is impossible to make the absentees present (a represented poor person is not so poor anymore: s/he participates in the calculation of justice. But there will always be poverty in the world), and it is impossible to impassively enjoy the hunger in the face of the others that demands my help. This is a deadlock, but, at the same time, it is a possible fulfillment?

## V

The relation to what cannot be represented, the relation to a pure absence in which "the Other is not convertible into the same," is a relation to a *trace*:

And Sartre will say that the other is a pure hole in the world—a most noteworthy insight, but he stops his analysis too soon. The other proceeds from the absolutely absent. His relationship with the absolutely absent from which he comes *does not indicate, does not reveal* this absent; and yet the absent has a meaning in a face. The signifyingness is not a way for the absent to be given in a blank in the presence of a face—which would again bring us back to a mode of disclosure. The relationship which goes from a face to the absent is outside every relation and dissimulation, a third way excluded by these contradictories. How is this third way possible? . . . The beyond from which a face comes signifies as a trace.<sup>41</sup>

The trace is not a symbolic reference to this beyond, "it is not a form concealing, but thereby indicating, a ground, a phenomenon that hides, but thereby betrays, a thing itself." As Casey writes,

we are on the trail of a trace as non-phenomenal: that is as non-present (i.e., as *not* the empirical sign of an absence) yet not as fading presence either (i.e., as an evanescent sign) or even as sheer absence. We have to

do, rather, with a form of absence that has inscribed itself in material presence in such a subtle manner as already to have eluded its own presentation.<sup>42</sup>

The signifying of the trace places us in a relation “unconvertible into rectitude” to an immemorial past, a past that we cannot reach by memory or any other process of representation. “To be qua *leaving a trace* is to pass, to depart, to absolve oneself” (SS 66; MS 105). The trace plays the role of a sign, but a sign as total absence, as radical *non locus*, utopia.<sup>43</sup> Utopia is *here* “beyond the world” and not behind the world (we know how much Lévinas fears the faith in “worlds behind the world”), that is, as a diachronic transcendence: “A trace is a presence of that which properly speaking has never been there, of what is always past” (SS 68; MS 105). As such, it is a disturbance of the order of the world:

Someone has already passed. His trace does not *signify* his past, as it does not *signify* his labor or his enjoyment in the world; it *is* disturbance imprinting itself (we are tempted to say *engraving* itself) with an irrecusable gravity.

(SS 69; MS 106)

The “signifyingness” of the trace is that of “beyond being,” and, says Lévinas, “Beyond being is a *third person* which is not definable by the oneself, by ipseity” (SS 65; MS 103). This third person, this *illeity* is irreversible absence. Critics have asked, why does Lévinas use the same word “third” for the other of the Other and for the absent *illeity*?<sup>44</sup> The answer appears now: the notion of third articulates the two dimensions of politics, that of politics without surplus and that of commitment toward utopia, that of representation and that of disturbing absence. The disturbance, which *is* the trace of the Other and of the others, is the disturbance of hunger, of actual hungry people who never are, who cannot be taken into account. Politics and its surplus, its peace, appear together with the “entry” of the third.

Casey points out that Lévinas rejects any memory of the absolute past. He suggests that we have no referring vehicle of any kind to refer to it, that we are always in *déphasage*, diastasis, with the trace. Here, we come back to the deadlock we reached above. There is no memory, no representation, no possible taking into account of the “extreme frailty,” which disturbs but has always passed, which *I never see*. But at the same time, if I do not see the poor, if I do not do anything, the poor die, and I am responsible for their death. Then there is a need for memory: “to the memory of those who were the closest . . .” The only way to escape this deadlock, says Lévinas, is a *praxis*. When asked about the possible realization of utopia, he strikingly proposes as the only example Marx’s attempt to convert theory into “a concrete praxis of concern for the other” (EOI 69). Therefore, Marxism?

Marxism is concerned with the Other, but still, it is exclusively based on the *conatus essendi*, on the fight for survival of those who are supposed to be the genuine actors of society, on the fulfillment of the present *majority*. Lévinas's "beyond the State" is devoted to the trace of the Other, to the disturbance of nonparticipation, to the *minority* of totally excluded people.<sup>45</sup> Therefore, politics has to be practiced at two levels, a political and a utopian level. I have political and utopian duties, and both are "political," namely, related to the third (I am never in position of pure substitution<sup>46</sup>). My political duties are to be just, to allow survival, to feed. But what are my utopian *practical* duties? What am I to do for the poor in their radical absence, for the minority of totally excluded people? I have to do something more, something beyond, something infinite. And something that I am committed to do, because otherwise the others die. Lévinas says that this action is included in the very act of feeding. To feed is not only to care for survival. To feed has a *surplus* of meaning:

Food is not the fuel necessary to the human machine; food is a meal. . . . To feed another is to keep food in its nature as meal; it is never to transform it into subsistence fare. To a certain degree, when feeding another it is necessary to humor his fancy; otherwise it is a shipwreck.

(JR 16, 22; JR' 97, 100)

He adds, "Sleep and food. Sublime materialism! . . . Sublime materialism, concerned with dessert" (JR 16; JR' 97).<sup>47</sup> In utopia, I have to care for dessert for the poor.

Peace or utopia means to care for a surplus of food, and this surplus signifies the *minor* concern of life precisely for the "minority" of excluded others: dessert. The least important thing and the most "luxurious" thing for the least important people—a thing we would never "think" of when thinking of saving life—becomes *the* utopian practice. As a citizen, I have to do something for the hungry third who is both present and absent, but I must first attend to him/her as an absence. The first duty of feeding is to humor the fancy of the poor, even and especially when the poor die of hunger. We must care about dessert before bread, before survival, and this is a utopia that we should be *committed to realize*. Otherwise, says Lévinas, it is a shipwreck: the poor will be reduced to a machine, to an animal *conatus essendi*. The care for minimal survival is fulfilled by democracy, which recognizes the presence of the others but does not *anticipate* the infinite fancy of "a minority that always exists." Liberalism is not all we need to achieve an authentic dignity for the human subject because this dignity needs dessert. Democracy does not contain all the possible meaning and fulfillment of social life, which is still permeable to a "political invention." This political invention would be the commitment to establish a

sociality *for* the disinherited on earth because, claims Lévinas, the purpose of sociality is precisely to feed and to feed more. Therefore, the state has to risk its own *conatus essendi* by welcoming a *politically weak* peace or, as Derrida notes, by accepting the danger and “spectrality” of absolute hospitality (A 193; A’ 112). In parallel with its political practices—care for food and security—the state should open itself to utopian practices: endanger its borders and reserves, endanger its very definition for the sake of those who cannot provide the state with anything, who have nothing to give, who only suffer. It is of no help to conceive of democracy as “on process,” as a to-come entity that is always correcting itself. Dessert has to be offered now, and this contradiction must be realized in an *eschatological praxis*. “Of peace there can be only an eschatology” (TEI 9; TI 24). Eschatology, as Lévinas understands it, is a temporal category but not a historical one. Messianism will not be achieved in an always-postponed future; it is the conjunction of diachrony and our world.<sup>48</sup>

Eschatology institutes a relation with being *beyond the totality* or beyond history, and not with beyond the past and the present. . . . It is a relationship with a *surplus always exterior to the totality*. . . . 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. The eschatological, as the “beyond” of history, draws beings out of the jurisdiction of history and the future; it arouses them in and calls them forth to their full responsibility.

(TEI 7; TI 22–23)

As a citizen, I have an infinite but practical responsibility for the poor. I must not only feed them, but I must provide them with a surplus of food. This is a utopian but political duty. The state is responsible first for dignity, then for food, even if it means reversing an ancestral order of preferences, even if it means being “illogical.” I cannot content myself with the actual idea of the state and with a formal hope that the state will always try to realize better its own idea. Against the Hegelianism that still underlies our understandings of democracy, Lévinas claims that although the idea cannot be complete, the realization must be achieved.

### Notes

- 1 I translate “autrui” by “the Other” to distinguish it from the “others,” although the use of a capital letter is problematical. For “le tiers,” I use “the third” as more convenient than “the third party.”
- 2 Emmanuel Lévinas, *Totalité et Infini* (Paris: Livre de Poche, 1992), 234; trans. A. Lingis, *Totality and Infinity* (Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press, 1998), 213; henceforth, TEI and TI, respectively. In *Autrement qu’être*, Lévinas writes,

In no way is justice a degradation of obsession, a degeneration of the for-the-other, a diminution, a limitation of anarchic responsibility, a neutralization of the glory of the Infinite, a degeneration that would be produced in the measure that for empirical reasons the initial duo would become a trio.

- Autrement qu'être ou au-delà de l'essence* (Paris: Livre de Poche, 1990), 248; trans. A. Lingis, *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence* (Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press, 1998), 159; henceforth, AE and OB, respectively.
- 3 See Robert Bernasconi, "The Third Party: Lévinas on the Intersection of the Ethical and the Political," *Journal of the British Society for Phenomenology*, 30, no. 1 (1999); 77. Bernasconi argues elsewhere that in AE, the narrative order is contested already in the dual relation, which consequently affects the logic of identity: "One of the primary effects of the term 'substitution' is to combat the ingrained presumption that the story that must be told is that of how an already formed subject turns towards the neighbor." Robert Bernasconi, "'Only the Persecuted . . .': Language of the Oppressor, Language of the Oppressed," *Ethics as First Philosophy*, ed. A. T. Peperzak (New York: Routledge, 1995), 80.
  - 4 Jacques Derrida, *Adieu à Emmanuel Lévinas* (Paris: Galilée, 1997), 45–46, 67; trans. P.-A. Brault and M. Naas, *Adieu to Emmanuel Lévinas* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999), 20, 33; henceforth, A and A', respectively.
  - 5 Emmanuel Lévinas: "Visage et violence première (Phénoménologie de l'éthique)," *La différence comme non-indifférence*, ed. A. Münster (Paris: Kimé, 1995), 140.
  - 6 Simon Critchley, *Ethics-Politics-Subjectivity: Essays on Derrida, Lévinas and Contemporary French Thought* (London: Verso, 1999), 185.
  - 7 See William Paul Simmons, "The Third: Lévinas' Theoretical Move from An-archival Ethics to the Realm of Justice and Politics," *Philosophy and Social Criticism*, 25, no. 6 (1999): 98–99.
  - 8 Emmanuel Lévinas, *Quelques réflexions sur la philosophie de l'hitlérisme* (Paris: Payot, 1997), 26; trans. "Reflections on the Philosophy of Hitlerism," *Critical Inquiry*, 17, no. 1 (1990), 63.
  - 9 Emmanuel Lévinas, "Ethics of the Infinite," *Dialogues with Contemporary Continental Thinkers*, ed. Richard Kearney (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 1984), 58; henceforth, EOI.
  - 10 As Derrida notes, the status of philosophical discourse is governed by the "question" of the third: "almost the entirety of Lévinas's discourse, for example, almost the entire space of its intelligibility for us, appeals to this third" (A 64; A' 31).
  - 11 See Claude Lefort, *Essais sur le politique* (Paris: Seuil, 1986), 17–30.
  - 12 Simon Critchley, *The Ethics of Deconstruction: Derrida and Lévinas* (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1992), 212, 240. See also Thomas Keenan, *Fables of Responsibility* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1997), 2–4.
  - 13 Remember Critchley's own warning:

there is a need for a political supplement to deconstruction. . . . I believe that this supplement is necessary in order to prevent deconstruction from becoming a fail-safe strategy for reading—an empty formalism—which, as Rorty would have it, is a means to private autonomy that is publicly useless and politically pernicious.

(*The Ethics of Deconstruction*, 236–37)

- 14 Emmanuel Lévinas, "Au-delà de l'Etat dans l'Etat," *Nouvelles lectures talmudiques* (Paris: Minuit, 1996), 43–76; trans. R. A. Cohen, "Beyond the State in the State"

*New Talmudic Readings* (Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press, 1999), 79–107.

- 15 Derrida wrote that the messianic eschatology from which Lévinas draws inspiration “seeks to be understood from within a recourse to experience itself. Experience itself and that which is most irreducible within experience: the passage and departure toward the other; the other itself as what is most irreducibly other within in: Others.” *L’écriture et la différence* (Paris: Livre de Poche, 1997), 123; trans. A. Bass, *Writing and Difference* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), 83. However, Lévinas emphasized at the end of “Signature” that “the analyses themselves refer not to the experience in which a subject always thematizes what he equals, but to the transcendence in which he answers for that which his intentions have not encompassed.” *Difficile liberté* (Paris: Livre de Poche, 1988), 412; trans. S. Hand, *Difficult Freedom* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990), 295; henceforth, DL and DF, respectively. Let us agree with Bernasconi that Lévinas had in mind a “nonphilosophical experience,” namely, “not one of those experiences on which philosophy as constituted by the tradition has been based, such as *theoria* or *poiesis*.” Bernasconi, “Only the Persecuted,” 84.
- 16 In an interview with Jean-Luc Nancy, Derrida refers to these questions, but his answer is still formal: “What is still to come or what remains buried in an almost inaccessible memory is the thinking of a responsibility that does not stop at this determination of the neighbor, at the dominant schema of this determination.” “‘Eating Well,’ or the Calculation of the Subject: An Interview with Jacques Derrida,” *Who Comes after the Subject*, ed. E. Cadava, P. Connor, and J.-L. Nancy (New York: Routledge, 1991), 116.
- 17 Emmanuel Lévinas, “The Paradox of Morality: An Interview with Emmanuel Lévinas,” *The Provocation of Lévinas*, ed. R. Bernasconi and D. Wood (New York: Routledge, 1988), 170.
- 18 Emmanuel Lévinas, *L’Au-delà du verset* (Paris: Minuit, 1982), 218; trans. G. D. Mole, *Beyond the Verse* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), 185; henceforth, AV and BV, respectively.
- 19 On the link between Lévinas and Benjamin, see Rebecca Comay, “Facies Hippocratica,” *Ethics as First Philosophy*, ed. A. T. Peperzak (New York: Routledge, 1995), 223–34.
- 20 Emmanuel Lévinas, *Entre nous: Essais sur le penser-à-l’autre* (Paris: Livre de Poche, 1998), 224; trans. M. B. Smith and B. Harshav, *Entre Nous* (London: Athlone Press, 1998), 205; henceforth, EN and EN’, respectively.
- 21 Emmanuel Lévinas, “Paix et proximité,” *Les cahiers de la nuit surveillée*, no. 3 (Paris: Verdier, 1984), 345; trans. P. Atterton and S. Critchley, *Emmanuel Lévinas: Basic Philosophical Writings*, ed. A. T. Peperzak, S. Critchley, and R. Bernasconi (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996), 168; henceforth, PP and PP’, respectively.
- 22 The sentence ends as follows: “and I have always been under accusation: persecuted.” I do not consider here the relation persecutor/persecuted: see Bernasconi, “Only the Persecuted.”
- 23 Bernasconi already conducted this discussion about Lévinas’ notion of “persecution.” I agree with him that

if persecution is to be understood as a universal structure, it would be hard not to conclude that Lévinas had simply introduced an ontological language of his own. . . . But would Lévinas, looking for a purely formal notion, select the term “persecution,” when it is what defines his life . . . and the fate of so many members of his family? (“Only the Persecuted,” 81). I will not deal here with the possible differences between hunger and persecution.

- 24 Emmanuel Lévinas, "Idéologie et idéalisme," *De Dieu qui vient à l'idée* (Paris: Vrin, 1998), 33; trans. A. Lesley and S. Ames, "Ideology and Idealism," *Modern Jewish Ethics*, ed. M. Fox (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1975), 135.
- 25 As is well known, from TEI to AE the description of responsibility has changed: in TEI, the Other "appeals to me," he/she is a "solicitation that concerns me" (TEI 218; TI 200). In AE, I immediately affect myself for the Other, substitute myself to the Other: I am "expiation" (AE 187; OB 118). Derrida authoritatively analyzes this change as a "trajectory" between the assertions "the subject is host" and "the subject is hostage" (A 102–7; A' 55–58). See also note 3 above.
- 26 Derrida's radical emphasis on an irreducible hiatus between ethics and politics sustains the formalism of his "democracy to come:" formalism that, as I suggested above, is outstandingly reduced by his performative developments on hospitality. About Derrida's "democracy to come," see Slavoj Žižek, "Melancholy and the Act," *Critical Inquiry* 26 (summer 2000), 665.
- 27 However, Lévinas's criticism of the state is not based on individualistic revolt against universal rules but on ethical concern.
- 28 Emmanuel Lévinas, *Hors sujet* (Montpellier, France: Fata Morgana, 1987), 29; trans. M. B. Smith, *Outside the Subject* (London: Athlone Press, 1993), 15.
- 29 Emmanuel Lévinas, discussion of "Transcendence et hauteur" in *Liberté et commandement* (Paris: Livre de Poche, 1999), 97; trans. in *Basic Philosophical Writings*, 23.
- 30 As I suggested above, ethics also contains a violence toward the Other and maybe toward myself. My focus is not on the dual relation, and I will not come back to the ambiguities and narcissistic risk of ethics, which, moreover, are well known (see A 66; A' 33).
- 31 Emmanuel Lévinas, "Judaïsme et révolution," *Du sacré au saint* (Paris: Minuit, 1977), 11–53; trans. A. Aronowicz, "Judaism and Revolution," *Nine Talmudic Readings by Emmanuel Lévinas* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), 94–119; henceforth, JR and JR', respectively.
- 32 My argument is therefore parallel to that of Derrida, who turns to Lévinas's confessional texts after the presentation of the double bind. See also my *Penser autrement la politique* (Paris: Kimé, 1997), 255–58.
- 33 According to Critchley, "one can begin to construct a linguistic chain-aimance, justice, the messianic, *démocratie à venir*, unconditional hospitality—within which the terms seem to have a similar, but not identical, conceptual function" (*Ethics-Politics-Subjectivity*, 265).
- 34 Derrida understands this title as follows:

Followed by an exclamation point, the title "Politics after!" seems clear: let politics come after, in second place! . . . Politics or the political should follow, come "after"; it must be subordinated—whether in logical consequence or chronological sequence—to an injunction that transcends the political order. As far as the political order is concerned, we will see afterwards, it will come later; politics will follow, like day-to-day operations: "Politics after!"  
(A 149; A' 82–83)

The reading of "Politics After!" however, shows that its title only seems clear. What Lévinas describes as "political invention" (AV 227; BV 194) comes precisely after politics, or as a reaction to politics. Lévinas attempts to reveal a "meaning of the human" that would not be exhausted in "political necessities," and he aspires to a "reconciliation" that will occur "above and beyond" a political situation of peaceful neighborhood (AV 222; BV 189). He recalls the Bible as made up of "subversive discourse defying kings," namely, opposing a political

- situation already there (AV 223; BV 190). All through "Politics After!" Lévinas depicts an "after politics!" situation.
- 35 About Lévinas and utopia, see Miguel Abensour, "Penser l'utopie autrement," *Cahier de l'Herne: Emmanuel Lévinas* (Paris: Livre de Poche, 1993), 572–602.
  - 36 Emmanuel Lévinas, "Liberté et commandement," *Liberté et commandement*, 40–57; trans. A. Lingis, "Freedom and Command," *Emmanuel Lévinas: Collected Philosophical Papers* (Dordrecht, the Netherlands: Martinus Nijhoff, 1987), 17–23; henceforth, LC and FC, respectively.
  - 37 Therefore, a fortiori, representative political systems . . .
  - 38 Emmanuel Lévinas, *A l'heure des nations* (Paris: Minuit, 1988), 74; trans. M. B. Smith, *At the Time of the Nations* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), 61.
  - 39 See Hobbes, *Leviathan* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 230.
  - 40 Critchley, *Ethics-Politics-Subjectivity*, 155.
  - 41 Emmanuel Lévinas, "La signification et le sens," *Humanisme de l'autre homme* (Paris: Livre de Poche, 1990), 63–64; trans. "Meaning and Sense," *Collected Philosophical Papers*, 102–3; henceforth, SS and MS, respectively.
  - 42 Edward Casey, "Lévinas on Memory and the Trace," *The Collegium Phenomenologicum*, no. 105, ed. J. C. Sallis, G. Moneta, and J. Taminiaux (Dordrecht, the Netherlands: Kluwer Academic, 1988), 243.
  - 43 In my mind, Lévinas' notion of trace is identical to that of Benjamin, especially when Lévinas writes that "A trace is the insertion of space in time" (SS 67; MS 105) or when he speaks of passages. Moreover, both authors reject the possibility of referring to the trace through memory. Benjamin turns to *remembrance* (*Eingedenken*), whereas, as Casey notes, there is no name to the diachronic relation to the trace in Lévinas's work. See Casey, "Lévinas on Memory and the Trace," 247. However, much more could be said about the comparison between Lévinas and Benjamin.
  - 44 See Jean-Francois Rey, *Lévinas: Le passeur de justice* (Paris: Editions Michalon, 1997), 67.
  - 45 The term "minority" refers to the fact that the dying poor are not seen—not that they are the less numerous.
  - 46 As Diane Perpich argues, "the language of purity is at odds . . . with Lévinas's own language and descriptions." See "A Singular Justice: Ethics and Politics between Lévinas and Derrida," *Philosophy Today*, 42 (1998): 63.
  - 47 The concern for dessert is deduced from the respect for local customs, "But custom is already a resistance against the arbitrary and against violence . . . it is a notion of a general principle, the root of the universal and the Law" (JR 16; JR ' 97).
  - 48 Without doubt, Lévinas is very close to Rosenzweig's understanding of Messianism. Lévinas frequently acknowledged the influence of Rosenzweig on his work. See, for example, TEI 14; TI 28, where he says that Rosenzweig's *Stern der Erlösung* is "too often present in this book to be cited." He emphasizes Rosenzweig's revalorization of Judaism in philosophy ("Rosenzweig était aussi important que la visite du pape à la synagogue de Rome," *La différence comme non-indifférence*, 138) and Rosenzweig's criticism of Hegel, which underlies his own reading of political philosophy (see Emmanuel Lévinas, *Ethique et infini* (Paris: Livre de Poche, 1992), 70; trans. R. A. Cohen, *Ethics and Infinity* (Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press, 1985), 76. On the link between the two philosophers, their conception of messianism, and their criticism of politics, see Robert Gibb, *Correlations in Rosenzweig and Lévinas* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992), and my *Penser autrement la politique*, 211–33.



# REINHABITING THE HOUSE OF RUTH

Exceeding the limits of the feminine in Levinas

*Claire Elise Katz*

Source: T. Chanter (ed.) *Feminist Interpretations of Emmanuel Levinas*, University Park, Pa.: Penn State University Press, 2001, pp. 145–70.

A man's home is his wife  
(The house is Woman)  
—The Talmud

In a footnote to her introduction to *The Second Sex*, Simone de Beauvoir takes Levinas to task for what she sees as his attempts, like those of others who come before him, to posit woman as Other. She cites from *Time and the Other* the following passage:

Is there not a case in which otherness, alterity [*altérité*], unquestionably marks the nature of a being, as its essence, an instance of otherness not consisting purely and simply in the opposition of two species of the same genus? I think that the feminine represents the contrary in its absolute sense, this contrariness being in no wise affected by any relation between it and its correlative and thus remaining absolutely other. Sex is not a certain specific difference . . . no more is the sexual difference a mere contradiction. . . . Nor does this difference lie in the duality of two complementary terms, for two complementary terms imply a pre-existing whole. . . . Otherness reaches its full flowering in the feminine, a term of the same rank as consciousness but of opposite meaning.<sup>1</sup>

To understand de Beauvoir's criticism of Levinas, one must realize that de Beauvoir interprets this relationship of subject/other in its most disparaging

form. To be Other to the male subject is to be incidental, to be inessential to the essential.<sup>2</sup> De Beauvoir takes issue with what she sees as Levinas's disregard for reciprocity and his masculine privilege disguised as an objective position. According to de Beauvoir, Levinas assumes a masculine privilege when he maintains the subject/object dichotomy where he, Levinas qua male, occupies the position of subject, and the feminine, the "mysterious" feminine, occupies the position of object.

In a translator's note to *Time and the Other*, Richard Cohen takes de Beauvoir to task and defends Levinas by claiming that de Beauvoir has misunderstood Levinas's analysis and simplified the relationship between the subject (he) who is absolute, and the feminine other. Cohen's defense of Levinas reminds us that, for Levinas, the other has priority over the subject, and, thus, de Beauvoir was too quick to chastise Levinas for sexism. However, each of these notes—Beauvoir's criticism, which assumes the other as antagonistic, and Cohen's defense of Levinas—represents an extreme position, neither of which is accurate. De Beauvoir is right to raise this question to Levinas; that is, she is right to ask after the way in which the feminine is conceived by him. However, by attacking him for casting woman as other, she reveals her misunderstanding of what Levinas means by the other and the position the other holds in his analysis.<sup>3</sup> As a result, she also does not see the way Levinas's project radically departs from the philosophies that precede him.

Luce Irigaray is also critical of the conception of the feminine in Levinas's project, though her criticism differs from de Beauvoir's.<sup>4</sup> Where de Beauvoir worries that the Other is the feminine, Irigaray worries that Levinas, like the philosophers who precede him and despite appearances, did not take sexual difference into account with his conception of the Other. In addition, Irigaray is concerned that the role in which the feminine is cast, that is, as the Beloved, is a disparaging one. As the Beloved, the woman plays a transcendental role: she makes possible the man's transcendence to the ethical, while she is cast downward. Thus, Irigaray claims, the feminine in Levinas's project perpetuates the dominant story in the history of Western philosophy: the claim of neutrality in one's analysis, without acknowledgment of the sexual difference at work in the background.

I claim that Levinas's efforts to define and situate the feminine are differentiated from those of his predecessors, and even his contemporaries, in two significant ways: (1) the feminine plays a significant if not indispensable role in his philosophical work, and (2) his view of the feminine is informed by the strong influence of the Judaic on his philosophical thought. That the feminine is other is not the problem; rather, it is the particular role that the feminine plays, and what it means, specifically, for the feminine to be other, that is in question in Levinas's work. So while de Beauvoir's concerns are legitimate, and to be taken seriously, it is Irigaray's criticisms, which recognize Levinas's positive formulation of the Other, that are far more

penetrating. Moreover, because the role of the feminine is so intrinsic to Levinas's project, to criticize the way in which Levinas conceives the feminine opens up the possibility that an examination could, in the end, undermine the analysis, or put into jeopardy the project itself, a project that is not necessarily antifeminist, or antiwoman, in its aim. The significant role of the feminine and the Judaic influence on Levinas's thought, if taken together, reveal within Levinas's work a rich and complex view of the feminine, one that is both philosophically and religiously based, and one that can be read with both affirmative and negative attributes.

My focus in this chapter is twofold: (1) to examine the conception and work of the feminine in *Totality and Infinity* found in the sections titled "The Dwelling" and "The Phenomenology of Eros,"<sup>5</sup> and (2) to explore how the influence of Jewish thought on Levinas's work motivates this conception.<sup>6</sup> I turn first to Levinas's conception of the feminine, where I argue that he uses the feminine as a transcendental structure.<sup>7</sup> The feminine creates the dwelling, the welcoming, and habitation, thus providing the means of enjoyment and sensuality that are interrupted by the ethical. The dwelling provides the place from which the man transcends, in order to attend to his more important duties, but to which he returns for refuge. One of my primary goals in this section of the chapter is to problematize the easy characterization of the feminine as a metaphor. Although I admit that the feminine is used metaphorically, my claim is that the feminine is not merely a metaphor. I then turn to Levinas's discussion of love, as he describes it in the "Phenomenology of Eros," and to Luce Irigaray's comments on this discussion. I interrogate not only the way Levinas conceives love, but also the way Irigaray interprets Levinas on love. Finally, I turn to the biblical story of Ruth to illustrate Levinas's themes of love, fecundity, and the ethical. But it is through this examination of Ruth that I also offer a means to disrupt the Levinasian analysis. That is, I raise the question of the feminine not only as a transcendental condition for the ethical but as a figure of the ethical itself. Thus, my goal in this chapter is to draw out the Judaic elements of Levinas's thought and to use this influence in order to reexamine the feminine as conceived in *Totality and Infinity*.<sup>8</sup>

## A. The work of the feminine

### *Housework*

Levinas says in *Totality and Infinity* that in order for the ethical to arise, or for it to be possible, there must be an intimacy, a familiarity, an enjoyment that is disrupted. In habitation the "I" takes pleasure in the handling of a tool (over and against the mere instrumentality of tools as we see in Heidegger). Unlike the tool, however, habitation provides the condition from which the man<sup>9</sup> "enters" the world. The man goes into the world as

someone who is at home with himself and who can return to his home. The home, which provides the place to which the man can return for refuge, is thus characterized by intimacy. Hence, the man has a life that is both inside (his life of enjoyment), and outside (the ethical) the home.

The gentleness of habitation is the feminine presence.<sup>10</sup> The relation of I to the Other in the face-to-face is identified by language; and the face-to-face, though always eluding my grasp, is not hidden. In contrast to the Other, woman who is “discreetly absent” and “silent” accomplishes the task of making the home hospitable; the woman [*la Femme*] makes possible the “condition for recollection . . . and inhabitation” (TI 155/128).<sup>11</sup> Levinas tells us, “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: a language without teaching, a silent language, an understanding without words, an expression in secret” (TI, 155/129).<sup>12</sup> Thus, the feminine makes possible the subject, or the man’s, participation in the ethical; however, it does so without participating in the ethical relation itself.

Thus, to talk about the feminine as the condition for the possibility of the ethical raises a question about who is, or who can be, the ethical subject, and who is or can be the Other. The confusion that arises from Levinas’s use of the feminine has its roots in its ambiguous reference: does feminine refer to empirical women, or is it being used metaphorically throughout his work to refer to what would be taken as sex-stereotyped feminine attributes such as gentleness? And Levinas himself in this section equivocates between the uses of these two terms. Certainly, one could argue for the latter position, namely, that Levinas’s account of the feminine is merely metaphorical. Here, in *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas’s own claim to use metaphor is illustrated when he writes: “Need one add that there is no question here of defying ridicule by maintaining the empirical truth or counter truth that every home *in fact* presupposes a woman? . . . [T]he empirical absence of the human being of the ‘feminine sex’ in a dwelling nowise affects the dimension of femininity which remains open there, as the very welcome of the dwelling” (TI, 157–58/131). Commentators of Levinas also claim that the feminine is used by Levinas metaphorically. Adriaan Peperzak, for example, insists on interpreting Levinas as using the feminine metaphorically by equating “man, woman, and child” with Levinas’s use of “the stranger, the widow, and the orphan,” thus concluding that Levinas is not excluding woman (or women) from the ethical relationship.<sup>13</sup> Although I acknowledge the metaphorical use of this phrase, I also think that to interpret the feminine metaphorically may occlude the nuance of the text. Thus, I want to dwell on the biblical significance of this reference, since it is precisely the way that this reference appears in the Hebrew Bible<sup>14</sup> and the midrash that makes the phrase so powerful.<sup>15</sup>

In Malachi and Job, references are made to the stranger, the widow, and the orphan—a phrase Levinas appropriates—as those who are most helpless

and exposed to possible injury. Levinas employs the biblical command to be responsible to those who most need our help: "the stranger, the widow, the orphan, and the poor,"<sup>16</sup> in order to impress upon us the extremity of the ethical command of the other. All these individuals are for Levinas examples of the Other par excellence, and this view is supported by rabbinic interpretation. A rabbi in the midrash asks, "Why does God love the orphans and the widows?" "Because," he answers, "their eyes are raised to none but him."<sup>17</sup> The answer the rabbi gives is an interesting one, for it tells of the aloneness that characterizes the widow and the orphan. There is a special connection between the orphan and the widow, for they are defined in the absence of a male protective figure in the household.<sup>18</sup> They are both without a male person anchoring them to the home. And so, in the rabbi's view, they are left in God's care. But although the widow has a place in Levinas's conception of the ethical relation, we cannot ignore her status as such: she is defined in the absence of a man. Merely mapping "man, woman, and child" onto this biblical phrase covers over the nuance of the biblical expression. Moreover, the possibility that it refers to concrete women, a possibility that arises from Levinas's own equivocation of these terms, must be addressed.

Although the ambiguity of the "silent," feminine presence in "The Dwelling" is not resolved, we can see resonances of a more determinate position in Levinas's views on Judaism. In his essay "Judaism and the Feminine,"<sup>19</sup> Levinas tells us that "[t]he characteristics of the Jewish woman are fixed thanks to charming feminine figures of the Old Testament" (DF, 31/DL, 52). After listing the various wives of patriarchs and prophetesses, with their respective virtuous traits and noble deeds, Levinas claims: "But the world in which these events unfolded would not have been structured as it was—and as it still is and always will be—without the *secret presence, on the edge of invisibility*, of these mothers, wives and daughter; without their *silent footsteps* in the depths and opacity of reality, drawing the very dimensions of interiority and making the world precisely inhabitable" (DF, 31/DL, 53; emphasis mine).<sup>20</sup>

Throughout this essay, just as in *Totality and Infinity*, there is an equivocation between the "feminine" and "woman" that would indicate that *feminine* is not a mere adjective for female traits but also signifies the female sex. Here, as in *Totality and Infinity*, woman is described as a "strange flow of gentleness" and as "the one 'who does not conquer'" (DF, 33/DL, 55). The Talmud further tells us that "'[t]he house is woman' (DF 31/DL 53), and Proverbs tells us it is through woman as a keepsake of the hearth that the public life of man is possible" (DF, 32/DL, 53). Talmudic law, which excludes women from being judges and witnesses,<sup>21</sup> in effect keeps women from participating in the public realm. The Orthodox strains of Judaism affirm the public-man/private-woman opposition; that is, these branches affirm the traditional historical roles of men and women, where men were assigned roles that dealt with public life, while women were confined to those roles

that were associated with the home.<sup>22</sup> Thus, I want to stress the possibility that the characterization of the relationship between the feminine, or woman, and the home, as described in this essay in particular and in Judaism in general, is parallel to the description we find in “the Dwelling.” This similarity may confirm two points for us: (1) there is indeed a relationship between the ideas in Levinas’s confessional writings and the ideas in his philosophical writings; and (2) there is evidence to support the interpretation of the “feminine” as a reference to concrete woman.

For Levinas, the role woman plays in making possible man’s transcendence extends beyond the dwelling and into the erotic relationship. Moreover, even if we allow that Levinas is using the feminine metaphorically in the dwelling, he is clear that the erotic relationship is excluded from the ethical. As such, the beloved in the erotic relation is not an ethical other. It is at this point that we can raise questions not only about how Levinas understands the erotic relationship, that is, the love relationship between the man and woman, but also about how his conception of eros has been understood.

### The labor of love

According to Levinas, the erotic, conjugal relationship between a man and woman is not an end in itself; “[t]he meaning of love does not, then, stop with the moment of voluptuousness, nor with the person loved” (DF, 36/DL, 60). Further, he says, “[t]his dimension of the romantic in which love becomes its own end, where it remains without any ‘intentionality’ that spreads beyond it . . . is foreign to Judaism” (DF, 36–37/DL, 60). Levinas’s view of the erotic relation follows the Talmud. In Judaism the erotic relationship is not merely an end in itself; the relationship between lovers is directed toward the infinite. Yet, while fecundity is important insofar as it signifies the continuation of the Jewish people,<sup>23</sup> Judaism also emphasizes the role of sexual pleasure for its own sake.<sup>24</sup> Thus, these two views of sexuality, views Levinas himself accepts, need to be reconciled if we are to have an accurate conception of Levinas’s position. My intention is not to be an apologist for Levinas. Rather, I want to present him in the strongest light possible, so that whatever criticism I offer might provide leverage to rehabilitate some of his central insights, rather than forcing us to abandon them.<sup>25</sup>

Levinas identifies the love relationship, in contrast to the ethical relationship, as a return to the same. Following a structure that we also find in Sartre, Levinas describes the love relationship as a relationship wherein what the lover wants is not just to love the other, but to have the Beloved love him back.<sup>26</sup> The erotic relationship is not a relation of infinity in itself; the erotic fulfills the ethical, the reaching out toward infinity, through fecundity; specifically, through the birth of a son.<sup>27</sup> The erotic, or the relationship with “the Other as feminine, is required in order that the future child come to pass from beyond the possible, beyond projects” (TI, 267/245).<sup>28</sup> Since, for Levinas,

the erotic relationship culminates in fecundity, specifically in the birth of a son, and since Levinas, as the writer, assumes the position of the "I," one must conclude that the other is the "feminine sex", in other words, a woman.

According to Levinas, ambiguity characterizes the erotic. The relation with the other in love turns into a relation of need, while also transcending such a relation. Love both presupposes the exteriority of the other while also going beyond this exteriority of the other, of the beloved. Taking up the Aristophanes myth in Plato's *Symposium*, Levinas sees love as a mixture of immanence and transcendence (TI, 254/232). Although Levinas disagrees with the implication of fusion signaled by the myth,<sup>29</sup> he does find compelling the ambiguous notion of love as a relation in which there is a return to the self, but also as a relation in which the self is transcended. Love "is an event situated at the limit of immanence and transcendence" (TI, 254/232). The face of the other, of the beloved, reveals within it what is not yet. It reveals the future that is never future enough, a future that is "more remote than possible" (TI, 254–55/232–33). The ambiguity of love lies, finally, in the possibility of the Other to appear as an object of need and yet still retain its alterity, "the possibility of enjoying the Other, of placing oneself at the same time beneath and beyond discourse—this position with regard to the interlocutor which at the same time reaches him and goes beyond him, this simultaneity of need and desire, of concupiscence and transcendence, tangency of the avowable and the unavowable, constitutes the originality of the erotic which, in this sense, is *the equivocal* par excellence" (TI, 255/233). The beloved—who is situated both before the ethical, as a transcendental figure, and beyond the ethical, in the form of eros and the possibility of fecundity—appears as both need, or the present, and desire, or the future, that is, the exterior or the beyond. But regardless of how we situate the beloved in relation to the ethical, as either below, before, or beyond the ethical, the beloved remains outside the ethical. This view of the beloved as outside the ethical, as that which draws the lover "down," is further explicated in Levinas's "Phenomenology of Eros."

Levinas begins his phenomenology of eros by declaring that "[l]ove aims at the other; it aims at him in his frailty [*faiblesse*]" (TI, 256/233).<sup>30</sup> Love aims at the tenderness of the Beloved. For Levinas, the tenderness is not something added to the Beloved; rather, the Beloved "is but one with her *regime* of tenderness" (TI, 256/233).<sup>31</sup> Levinas's analysis continually uses language that presents the image of the Beloved cast below, while the lover is taken to new heights. The Beloved is "dark," "nocturnal," "clandestine," "deep in the subterranean dimension" (TI, 257/234). The Beloved equivocates between virginity<sup>32</sup> and profanation, between modesty and immodesty (TI, 257–58/234–35). The lover's movement before this frailty, which Levinas terms *femininity* (TI, 257/234), is "absorbed in the caress" (TI, 257/234). The caress, though it is like sensibility, transcends the sensible. It seeks the not-yet, a "future that is never future enough, in soliciting what slips away

as though it *were not yet*" (TI, 257; 258/235).<sup>33</sup> The caress both expresses love, and yet is inadequate to do so (TI, 258/235). The Beloved, characterized as "the virgin," is at once "violable and inviolable," the "Eternal Feminine" (TI, 258/236), "the future in the present" (TI, 258/236). That at which the caress aims is neither a person nor a thing (TI, 259/236). The future is an intangible, it is a *not yet*.

The relation with the Beloved resembles a relationship with a child, a child who does not have responsibility, who is carefree, coquettish, and "a bit silly" (TI, 263/241). To play with the Other in eros, resembles how one plays with a young animal (TI, 263/241). In this erotic relation, Levinas casts the woman, the Beloved, as somehow not human, and whatever the case, not an adult person engaged in the all-important task of ethical responsibility. She profanes because she does not participate in the ethical. Yet it is because of her that he, the lover, the man, can transcend. It is the woman who makes such transcendence possible. In the name of sexual difference and the preservation of alterity, Levinas has cast each player in this love scene in a different role. Thus, unlike the man, the woman is cast down into the abyss, into the darkness, into that which suggests a void of God and religion. But it is the *not yet*<sup>34</sup> with which Levinas is really concerned. The description of the feminine, of the Beloved, of voluptuousity in love, only serves to indicate the way in which the face in eros distinguishes itself from the face in the ethical relation. The couple, the lovers, are sealed as a society of two. Love excludes the third party. It remains outside the political, secluded in its intimacy, its dual solitude. It is closed; it is nonpublic (TI, 265/242–43).<sup>35</sup> While the language of justice identifies the ethical relationship with the other, language turns to cooing and laughter in the erotic relationship. The language that marks the ethical relation is absent from the erotic. Thus, for Levinas, the child, the future, the transcendence of love, redeems voluptuousity, the concern with itself, the sealed society the lovers construct. According to Levinas, love escapes itself, escapes a return to the same, when it is directed toward the future, when it engenders the child.

The focus on the future, on fecundity, frames "The Fecundity of the Caress,"<sup>36</sup> Irigaray's remarkable essay on Levinas's conception of love. Irigaray, though indebted to Levinas for the influence his ethics has had on her work,<sup>37</sup> still takes issue with the way in which Levinas's ethics, radical as it might be, nonetheless remains blind to its own faults. In particular, Irigaray takes Levinas to task for, and criticizes his conception of, the erotic, on the grounds that he frames voluptuousity within the confines of its utility—that it engenders a child. Irigaray takes issue with this problem on two counts: if she satisfactorily undermines the necessity of procreation as the end of voluptuousity, she (1) establishes the significance of eros as something that goes beyond the mere physical, as something other than that which leads to maternity; and (2) she undermines the heterosexual framework Levinas assumes.<sup>38</sup> Irigaray's style of writing, her repetitive use of key phrases, serves



to underscore the way in which these same themes, though inverted for her own use, play a significant role in Levinas's description of the erotic relation. In Irigaray's view, Levinas characterizes voluptuousity such that it can be redeemed only in the marriage bed with the intent to produce a child. And yet Irigaray also undermines this assumed relation, or unification, by recalling that when the erotic relation comes to an end, or rather, is fulfilled temporarily,<sup>39</sup> the lover is "left to his solitary call to his God," while "the beloved woman is relegated to an inwardness that is not one because it is abyssal, animal, infantile, prenuptial" (FC, 202). In Irigaray's analysis, the lovers are "withdrawn to opposite poles of life, they do not marry" (FC, 202). Thus, in spite of themselves, lover and beloved are not unified in life. Each plays a different part in the erotic drama. He, as lover, is the subject who acts on the beloved, the passive woman who waits and receives him. And while the woman gives to the man a son, it is he, the lover, who achieves transcendence. The birth of the son renders this return incomplete, but incomplete only for the man. The beloved woman, through eros, maternity, and birth, makes the son possible, but it is the man who reaps this benefit as "the seduction of the beloved woman serves as a bridge between Father and son."<sup>40</sup> Through her, the beloved, who is only an aspect of himself, the male lover goes beyond love and pleasure toward the ethical" (FC, 203). Thus, here again, the woman provides the means that make possible the man's entry into the ethical world. But, according to Irigaray, the entry comes at the expense of the woman. She is left without subjectivity, without access to the ethical, and outside any relation to God.<sup>41</sup> For the man to engage in voluptuousity and bring about the birth of a son, he, the lover, must mingle with the wrong side of transcendence (FC, 194); he must risk the "loss of self in the wrong infinity" (FC, 204).

We can take the focus of Irigaray's general project—the ethics of sexual difference<sup>42</sup>—as a clue to understanding her approach to Levinas. According to Irigaray, Levinas, in spite of himself, fails in his attempt to conceive radically enough an ethics that would take into account sexual difference but not reinscribe the same secondary role generally attributed to women in the history of Western philosophy. Why is the erotic relation, love, exempt from the ethical? It is clear that the beloved woman in Levinas's love scene plays a role that serves to aid her lover while she is cast back down into the abyss. With the emphasis on maternity and the birth of the child as the end of the voluptuousity, Levinas puts woman back into the one place that has always been assured her.<sup>43</sup> By making only the woman responsible for modesty, for profanation, for the secret of desire, Levinas assigns her to a place and to an unfair responsibility, both of which, he maintains, are outside the ethical. Thus, woman's relation as a sexual being, as lover and as mother, keep her confined to the erotic relation, a relation outside the ethical.<sup>44</sup> At the very least, Levinas's framework explicitly excludes the erotic from the ethical relation—the wife is not the ethical other to her husband.

In "Questions to Emmanuel Levinas,"<sup>45</sup> Irigaray echoes the critique found in "The Fecundity of the Caress" when she tells us, "[T]his non-definition of the other, when the other is not considered to have anything to do with sexual difference, gives rise to an infinite series of substitutions, an operation which seems to me non-ethical."<sup>46</sup> However, in "Questions to Emmanuel Levinas," Irigaray also attacks Levinas's conception of love at the core of its structure, something she does not do in "The Fecundity of the Caress." To critique Levinas's conception of love, it may not be enough merely to say he privileges the erotic relation that ends in fecundity over voluptuousity. It is significant that we recall how Levinas set up the ethical relation, that which is not a return to the same. The love relationship, according to Levinas, risks this return that is rendered incomplete by the birth of a child—a son. Thus, from Irigaray's analysis we can glean three ways in which to question Levinas's analysis: (1) through the structure of the ethical relation itself, as that which is projected toward the infinite; (2) in Levinas's claim that the love relationship is a return to the same; and (3) even if we grant that the love relationship is a return to the same, we can question if the birth of a child is the only way to render this return incomplete.<sup>47</sup>

Irigaray is correct, in my view, to claim that the Other cannot be thought of without thinking it in terms of sexual difference.<sup>48</sup> But I am less inclined to say that Levinas is unsuspecting of what he is doing, even though he does claim to want an ethics that will be neutral with regard to sexual difference.<sup>49</sup> By assuming the position of the "I" and assigning the feminine to the role of the beloved, Levinas accords a place to woman—though this place is squarely within the traditional space allotted her as lover and mother.<sup>50</sup> In light of her focus on Levinas's conception of love, I think Irigaray is right to point out the negative place in which Levinas has cast woman—the beloved, namely, that she is passive, without God, and unable to transcend (which Levinas, clearly, privileges). And I would even go so far as to say that Levinas is not aware of, or has not made explicit, the amount of work the feminine does for him in his analysis.

Irigaray's essay is at once philosophically compelling and aesthetically beautiful, and my remarks on Levinas are indebted to, among other things, her insight into the absent feminine voice and the question of sexual difference within Levinas's analysis of love. But while I am indebted to Irigaray's work, I also approach Levinas from a different perspective, a perspective that raises questions within Irigaray's reading of Levinas and leads to my second divergence from Irigaray's critique. There is no doubt that Irigaray's criticism that Levinas privileges the erotic relation ending in fecundity over the erotic relation ending in voluptuousity is warranted. But I also think elements of Levinas's analysis could be regarded as positive, even within the context of Irigaray's compelling critique. Thus, I want to push Irigaray's critique of Levinas in order to show the limitations of her critique but also to deepen it. I claim that Irigaray is right when she accuses Levinas of

reinscribing a traditional belief about eros, but I also think that his position is more complicated than one of merely reinscribing the traditional role of women. This complexity derives from the Judaic influence on Levinas's philosophical thought, which provides a larger context within which his work can be interpreted.<sup>51</sup>

In "Judaism and the Feminine," Levinas recounts a rabbinic commentary on love and conjugal relations:

[M]aternity is subordinate to a human destiny which exceeds the limits of "family joys": it is necessary to fulfil Israel, "to multiply the image of God" inscribed on the face of humanity. Not that conjugal love has no importance in itself, or that it is reduced to the ranks of a means of procreation, or that it merely *prefigures* its fulfillment, as in a certain theology. On the contrary the ultimate end of the family is the actual *meaning* and the joy of this present. It is not only prefigured there, it is already fulfilled there. This participation of the present in this future takes place specifically in the feeling of love, in the grace of the betrothed, and even in the erotic. The real dynamism of love leads it beyond the present instant and even beyond the person loved. This end does not appear to a vision outside the love, which would then integrate it into the place of creation; it lies in the love itself.

(DF, 37/59)

This passage provides us with a point of a departure by adding a dimension to Irigaray's analysis that is, for the most part, absent. There are two issues at stake here: (1) the significance of sexual relations in themselves; and (2) assuming an end to those sexual relations, it is not clear to what one is giving birth. Irigaray's criticism holds firm insofar as Levinas prioritizes one erotic relation—the one that ends in the birth of the child, over another—the one that seeks pleasure in itself. Yet Levinas makes explicit his view that conjugal relations are important in and of themselves. It is clear that in "Phenomenology of Love," the section on which Irigaray focuses, Levinas does emphasize the fecundity of the event. But I think it is important to distinguish between the priority Levinas gives to the erotic relationship that ends in fecundity, and the view that his analysis is blind to, or rejects, an erotic relationship that is, itself, its own end. For Levinas, there is no question, at least in his analysis in *Totality and Infinity*, that voluptuousness is redeemed, or rendered legitimate, if it issues in a child. Thus, we must reconcile these two analyses, the one in *Totality and Infinity* and the other in "Judaism and the Feminine," which, if read together, reveal a tension in Levinas's own view on love: on the one hand, the analysis in *Totality and Infinity* indicates that voluptuousness is redeemed only through the birth of the son. On the other hand, his remarks in "Judaism and the Feminine" indicate that he wants to affirm the value of the erotic relation independently of

the birth of the son. Thus, the disparity in his view necessitates that we investigate why Levinas might hold these two apparently opposing positions, and how these two positions might be reconciled with each other.<sup>52</sup>

As I mentioned earlier, according to Levinas, love desires the other such that the relation becomes a return to the same. This return is, in part, what distinguishes the erotic relation from the ethical. Thus, by adding the dimension of fecundity to the erotic relation, Levinas characterizes love as something that could aim at the future, as that which could aim at something beyond itself.<sup>53</sup> Fecundity, then, transforms the love relationship into an ethical relationship; voluptuousness is redeemed when it aims toward the future and issues in a child, a son. So, insofar as Levinas needs a discussion of fecundity, this discussion must take place within the context of a discussion of the erotic relation.<sup>54</sup> Nonetheless, we must remember that a transformation is required for the erotic to become ethical.

There is a sense in which Levinas sees each birth of the child as a birth of another member of Israel. In "Judaism and the Feminine," Levinas characterizes the birth of a child as that which signifies a projection toward the future in terms of fulfilling Israel, fulfilling a commandment that is older than history itself. Thus, here we get the religioethical significance of fecundity, and one cannot help but wonder what happens to the analysis if this part is excised from the analysis as a whole. What happens to the analysis if we remove that one feature? Can we still have a Levinasian ethic? What would it mean if woman did not occupy the place Levinas carved out for her? Is it possible for woman to occupy a place other than the one Levinas prescribes? Could woman be an ethical Other? Could she be an ethical "I"? The biblical story of Ruth, where we find a touching, intimate relationship between two women, Ruth and Naomi, opens a space for these questions to be explored. The narrative illustrates the lack in Levinas's analysis, a lack that recalls Irigaray's concerns about the place Levinas defines for woman; but by revealing this lack, we also show how woman exceeds the boundaries that define her. That is to say, the story of Ruth helps to illustrate how woman, as the very figure of hospitality and welcoming, exceeds her own limits outside the ethical relation and, thus, puts into question Levinas's analysis. In the section that follows, I turn to the Book of Ruth in order to illustrate further the way in which these Levinasian themes of alterity, the ethical, and fecundity are both demonstrated and disrupted. The story of Ruth opens a space for us in which to consider what it might mean to alter the role of woman and, thus, disrupt the whole.

### B. Dwelling in the house of Ruth

As the Book of Ruth opens, we learn that it is the time of the judgment of the judges, and there was a great famine in Bethlehem in Judah.<sup>55</sup> Elimelech, fearing that his family would starve, took his wife, Naomi, and their two

sons, Mahlon and Kilion, to Moab. After some time, Elimelech died, leaving Naomi widowed; Naomi's sons each eventually married Moabite princesses: Orpah and Ruth. That Elimelech took his family to Moab and that his sons married Moabite princesses is significant. Scripture tells the Jews that "an Ammonite and a Moabite may not join the congregation—or the assembly—of God." The commandment stems from a previous time in history when both of these nations were inhospitable to fugitive Jews who were in the desert. Living in Moab did not promise to be easy. After ten years of living there, Naomi's sons died, leaving their wives—Naomi's daughters-in-law—widowed, as she was. Some time later, Naomi hears that the Lord has come to the aid of the Jewish people by providing them with food. A stranger in Moab, Naomi, with no blood ties to the country, is uncomfortable there. So, she and her daughters-in-law prepare to go back to Judah. After a short time into their journey Naomi turns to her daughters-in-law and tells them to return to their home in Moab, where they may be more likely to find a husband. Each refuses, though Orpah eventually gives in and returns home.<sup>56</sup> Ruth, however, in her stubbornness and her loyalty to Naomi refuses to go back, and in her famous proclamation tells Naomi, "Where you go I will go, and where you stay I will stay. Your people will be my people and your God my God. Where you die I will die, and there I will be buried. May the Lord deal with me, be it ever so severely, if anything but death separates you and me."<sup>57</sup> Ruth travels to Judah with Naomi, and she takes it upon herself to glean in the fields, in order to feed both herself and Naomi. While Ruth is gleaning in the field, Boaz sees her and asks who she is. The foreman describes Ruth to Boaz as someone who "worked steadily from morning till now, except for a short rest in the shelter."<sup>58</sup> Boaz tells Ruth she must not glean in any other field, for he will take care of her and see that she drinks when she is thirsty and that none of his servants bothers her. "Why," Ruth asks him, "have I found such favor in your eyes that you notice me—a foreigner?"<sup>59</sup> Boaz answers her: "I've been told all about what you have done for your mother-in-law since the death of your husband—how you left your father and mother and your homeland and came to live with a people you did not know before."<sup>60</sup> Later, Ruth marries Boaz and gives birth to Obed, who becomes the father of Jesse, who is the father of David.<sup>61</sup>

The story of Ruth presents us with interesting questions for Levinas. How do we characterize the relationship between Ruth and Naomi? Is it ethical? Is it familial? Is it a friendship? Can it be discussed within the parameters of Levinas's analysis? Ruth, like Naomi, is both widow and stranger, and so in a more literal fashion we can say that both Ruth and Naomi fit squarely into the place of ethical other—each is a woman who only has God to look out for them. But if we only see Ruth and Naomi as two women who are otherwise helpless, we fail to see the richness of the relationship between them. Is Ruth's loyalty to Naomi to be forgotten so that all we remember or take notice of is the great-grandson, David, who is her descendent? Is the

significance of Ruth's actions limited to fecundity, to her destiny as David's great-grandmother? Let us begin by looking at Ruth, who is both the widow and the stranger.

Repeatedly in the Bible, the Jew is told of his obligation to the poor, the stranger, the widow, and the orphan.<sup>62</sup> *Stranger* is translated from the Hebrew *ger*, which can mean "convert," or simply "one who resides." Initially, according to the story, Elimelech and his family are the strangers, for not only are they living in a place that is not their original home, but it is a place that was inhospitable to Jews in the past. The stranger relation is reversed when Ruth, the Moabitess, marries one of Naomi's sons. Inhospitability of the past is transformed to hospitality through Ruth, that is, through the feminine. The focus here is on the family of Ruth's in-laws, not her own family, and by putting Naomi in the position in which she does, Ruth is putting her in-laws—her husband's family—above her own family. She is seen as part of Naomi's family both from the narrator's perspective and from Ruth's own perspective; hence, there is no question in Ruth's mind that she should leave Moab and go with Naomi back to Judah.

Whether Ruth has converted at this point is not clear, especially in light of the biblical injunction against such a conversion; nor is it clear what this conversion would mean. Nevertheless, Ruth is viewed and cited as the first convert. As such, who she is as stranger or convert is a complex problem.<sup>63</sup> In the land of Judah, Ruth is a stranger, but her *strangeness* is complicated by her presumed act of conversion. If we grant that Ruth's speech to Naomi constitutes a conversion, her alterity is eradicated.<sup>64</sup> Conversion can be seen as a drawing of the other into the same, not seeing the other as other. Since the stranger is the one to whom the Jew is most responsible, the conflicted identification of the convert, an individual who still retains some *strangeness*, or *otherness*, while having also been drawn into the same, problematizes the ethical relationship with the rest of the Jews. The convert raises a question for the Jew who is wholly obligated to the stranger. How is the born Jew to think of the convert: as Jew or as stranger? This question is raised again by Ruth herself, who, when wondering why Boaz has treated her so kindly, refers to herself as a foreigner. We do not know if Boaz was following the biblical command to the Jews that they "refrain from molesting the stranger or oppress him, for [they, the Jews] lived as strangers in the land of Egypt," or if he was abiding by the command that widows are to be allowed to glean in the fields. We do know from Boaz's own statement that he noticed the way in which Ruth treated Naomi after Ruth's husband (Naomi's son) died. Ruth's *strangeness* is further complicated by the midrash commentary on David. David asks God, "How long will they rage against me and say, 'Is he not of tainted descent? Is he not a descendent of Ruth the Moabitess?'"<sup>65</sup> The implication of David's question is that even David, King of the Jews (and maybe even those who descend from him) is touched by the strangeness of Ruth.

Can we not look at Ruth's response to care for Naomi as ethical? It is clear from Ruth's actions that the bond is actually quite strong. It is Ruth who goes out to find work, who gleans in the fields, and who brings home the food. Ruth and Naomi are, quite literally, two widows and two strangers who live together in their own dwelling. Ruth's choice to leave her mother, father, and homeland in order to follow Naomi and Naomi's God is seen as an act of loyalty by Kristeva, who describes Ruth's decision to follow Naomi as "show[ing] a devotion to Yahweh, but even more so a loyalty—that one might call passionate—between the two women."<sup>66</sup> Kristeva's view is supported by Elie Wiesel, who sees Ruth as "stubborn in her loyalty and her resolve."<sup>67</sup> Ruth, though she is now the stranger in the land of Judah, is the one who cares for Naomi. Ruth sees in the eyes of Naomi the other others. She recognizes that there are others who make a claim on her and to whom she is responsible. Ruth's act of conversion is ethical, but not only ethical. In the words of her own proclamation, her act of conversion reveals its political component. Ruth's response is not just to Naomi, but also to God and to a nation. Could we not say that it is precisely because of the character that Ruth embodies, that Judaism holds Ruth up as the first convert and that makes her worthy of being the ancestor of David? Moreover, is this character not the character that exemplifies the very attributes Levinas describes in "Judaism and the Feminine," and "The Dwelling"? That is, one might say that Ruth's behavior, while characteristically, or stereotypically, feminine, is also the exemplification of the ethical response to the Other. Thus, we can ask if there is not still an element of the relationship between Ruth and Naomi that exceeds Levinas's categories of the woman, or of the feminine. That is, the conception of the feminine, as the welcoming of habitation and the beloved, was understood to make the ethical possible, while not participating in the ethical. Yet it is precisely these attributes, which make the feminine a transcendental condition for the possibility of the ethical, that also appear to drive the feminine to participate directly in the ethical. One might even ask if the narrators of this story, in their efforts to put Ruth back into a traditional role of women by marrying her off to Boaz, are not aware of this excess.<sup>68</sup> One might say that Jewish culture could not incorporate into its thinking this family of two women.<sup>69</sup>

## Conclusion

As a result of Levinas's exclusion of the erotic from the ethical, the relationship between the feminine, the erotic, and the ethical remains problematic in his analysis, and the problematic of this relationship arises regardless of how we interpret the term *feminine* in "The Dwelling." The exclusion of the erotic from the ethical raises questions about the relation and responsibility between a husband and a wife. In the section of *Totality and Infinity* titled

"Ethics and the Face," Levinas tells us that "[t]he Other is the sole being I can wish to kill" (TI, 198/173). Thus, we can, and should, ask, "To whom does the commandment Thou shalt not kill, apply?" To whom need it apply? If the beloved is not an ethical other, then is Levinas claiming that the face of the beloved never poses a threat? Is it really the case that a man never wishes to kill his spouse, his lover, his beloved? Surely this cannot be true, given the numerous accounts of wives—those who are beloved—who are killed by their husbands and lovers. Surely these categories cannot be so exclusive of each other. If the beloved is not the ethical other, what ethical claim is made on her husband? What obligation is owed to her? If she is excluded from the discourse of the ethical and, thus, excluded from the action of the political, if she is silent but for her "laughter and cooing," how does she protest the violence that is done to her? If her only language is the language of lovers, how does she tell the public of such violence; how does she ask for justice? Clearly Levinas does not mean that women do not actually speak. Nonetheless, we must examine what relationship the erotic can have to the ethical within the analysis he gives us.

Levinas's Hebrew roots give him profound insight into the obligation and responsibility for the other, for those who are most vulnerable. And yet it is his Judaism that precisely allows his inadequate view of women to emerge and take hold. But we must bear in mind that Levinas's analysis is not just about the ethical. The feminine plays a fundamental role as the condition for the possibility of the ethical; and if that role is altered, we are required to investigate how, or in what ways, that alteration disrupts the analysis. Levinas has put women—both as a figure in his analysis and those who would read him—in a precarious place: the feminine is essential to his position, thus to disrupt its place is to disrupt the analysis. To read his text and question the place of women, raises questions about the entire analysis itself. At what point do we risk upsetting the whole analysis so that there is little left of what Levinas has said? Thus, Irigaray's criticisms are ultimately not just about the conception of the feminine; they go to the heart of Levinas's work.

There is a sense in which Ruth's actions indicate an excess that is present in the feminine. Within a Levinasian analysis, Ruth so fulfills the definition of hospitality that she exceeds the traditional definition of a woman and transforms her activity in the dwelling. By gleaning in the fields she feeds Naomi. Thus, one might say, if taken to its extreme within, and pushed to the limit of, the boundaries of the description Levinas gives us, the feminine has no choice but to become ethical, to respond to the Other ethically. That is, in spite of himself, Levinas, while using the feminine as a condition for the possibility of the ethical relation, creates the conditions by which the feminine itself can and must participate in the ethical. As a result of this formulation, woman, inevitably, participates in the ethical, a role I believe he explicitly gives to the feminine in *Otherwise Than Being*.



# Notes

- 1 Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans. H. M. Parshley (New York: Random House, 1952), xix. *Le deuxième sexe* (Paris: Gallimard, 1949), 15.
- 2 *The Second Sex*, xix/15.
- 3 De Beauvoir uses *feminine* and *woman* equivocally. This equivocation is problematic and is precisely what is at issue in Levinas's work.
- 4 Irigaray looks at both *Time and the Other*, trans. Richard Cohen (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1987); *Temps et l'autre* (Montpellier: Fata Morgan, 1979), hereafter cited as TO/TA followed by the respective page numbers, and *Totality and Infinity*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969); *Totalité et infini* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1961), hereafter cited as TI followed by the English translation and then the original French page numbers. De Beauvoir wrote *The Second Sex* prior to the publication of *Totality and Infinity*.
- 5 One might even find the format of the text interesting. The two sections that focus on the feminine "sandwich" the long discussion of the ethical relation. Thus, the feminine is not included in the discussion of the ethical, just as it is excluded from the ethical relation itself; the feminine is prior to the ethical in the sense that the feminine presence and the dwelling give rise to, or make possible, the ethical; and the feminine is after, or beyond, the ethical. The ordering of the discussions in this text is reminiscent of Hegel's structure in *The Philosophy of Right*, trans. Allen Wood (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), where the home gives rise to, or makes possible, the political. I think there is a strong resemblance to Hegel here, but I also want to claim that Levinas's conception of the feminine, the dwelling, and the erotic suggest that his Orthodox Jewish roots are at work in the background informing his description.
- 6 In an interview with Richard Kearney, Levinas tells us he wants to keep his philosophy and his confessional writings separate (Emmanuel Levinas and Richard Kearney, "A Dialogue with Emmanuel Levinas," in *Face to Face with Levinas*, ed. Richard Cohen [Albany: State University of New York Press, 1986]). Levinas's wish could indicate that, on the one hand, he does not want his religious writings subjected to philosophical interrogation, while, on the other hand, he does not want his philosophy to be thought of as mere religious musings. But Levinas's intention to keep these writings separate does not preclude his Judaism from influencing his approach to philosophy. In fact, Levinas's view of the feminine provides one point of contact where we can see the impact of Judaism on Levinas's philosophy. So, while the goal of this article is not to show, definitively, the relationship between Judaism and its influence on Levinas's philosophy, I do wish to draw on the Judaic influence that is present in his work. See, for example, Levinas's essays in *In the Time of the Nations*, trans. Michael Smith (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994).
- 7 My claim here is that the feminine in *Totality and Infinity* continues a use that Levinas began in *Time and the Other* and anticipates a conception of the feminine found in *Otherwise Than Being or Beyond Essence*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1981); *Autrement qu'être ou au-delà de l'essence* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1974). Hereafter cited as OB and AE followed by the respective page numbers in English and French. In *Time and the Other* the feminine plays the role of radical alterity and, as such, provides the motivation for the analysis itself. Levinas writes: "I think the absolutely contrary [*le contraire absolument contraire*], whose contrariety is in no way affected by the relationship that can be established between it and its correlative, the contrariety that permits its terms to remain absolutely other is the *feminine*" (TO, 85/TA,

- 77). So, here the feminine is described as absolutely other. But is this because the feminine is the ethical other, or merely because Levinas recognized the radical differences between the sexes? The feminine is then reconceived in *Totality and Infinity* to play the role of both the dwelling and eros, a transcendental condition for the man to participate in the ethical relation. In *Otherwise than Being* the feminine can be found within the metaphor of maternity—"the gestation of the other in the same" (OB, 75/AE, 121). To examine the feminine in *Time and the Other* and *Otherwise than Being* within this same chapter would be to do an injustice to these two other texts. However, I want to claim that the feminine in *Totality and Infinity* provides a bridge between the feminine in *Time and the Other* and Levinas's conception of maternity in *Otherwise than Being*.
- 8 To draw out this relationship, I look not only at Levinas's own writings on Judaism, for example, those in *Difficult Freedom: Essays on Judaism*, trans. Sean Hand (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990); *Difficile liberté*, 2d ed. (Paris: Albin Michel, 1976), hereafter cited as DF/DL followed by their respective English and French page numbers, but also at the rabbinic writings found in the *Midrash Rabbah*, translated under the editorship of Rabbi Dr. H. Freedman and Maurice Simon (New York: Soncino Press, 1983), hereafter cited as *Midrash*, followed by biblical book; and the Talmud, translated under the guidance of Rabbi I. Epstein (New York: Soncino Press, 1935). The reference is to the Babylonian Talmud. Hereafter cited as Talmud, followed by the tractate.
  - 9 I am retaining this language because I think the gendered language is significant.
  - 10 For an extended discussion of this theme see Catherine Chalié, "Ethics and the Feminine," in *Re-reading Levinas*, ed. Robert Bernasconi and Simon Critchley (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), 119–29.
  - 11 This point marks the change in the conception of the feminine from *Time and the Other* to *Totality and Infinity*. In the former, the feminine is conceived as Absolute Other, or radical alterity, hence the problem Simone de Beauvoir has with this text. However, in *Totality and Infinity*, the feminine is no longer the other, or at least not the Absolute Other, here referring to the ethical other. Moreover, we can also already see Levinas's equivocation between *feminine* and *woman*—he uses the latter explicitly in this section.
  - 12 Woman's silence is also emphasized by the rabbis, in response to their wonder about why Eve was created from Adam's rib: they surmise that God's other choices would have led to nonvirtuous traits in women. The midrash commentary tells us that woman was not created from God's eye, "lest she [woman] be a coquette; nor from the ear, lest she be an eavesdropper; nor from the mouth, lest she be a gossip." Despite all God's efforts to create a woman who had only virtuous traits, and much to the dismay of the rabbis, woman still managed to acquire all the qualities God tried to prevent. Besides giving us examples of the biblical woman who possess these nonvirtuous traits, the Talmud relates the less than positive view that "Ten measures of speech descended to the world; women took nine and men one" (Kid. 49b). Although woman, concrete woman, obviously, speaks, her silence is preferred.
  - 13 Adriaan Peperzak, *To The Other* (West Lafayette: Purdue University Press, 1993), 129.
  - 14 See Deut. 10:18 and 16:11, for example.
  - 15 My aim here is not to insist on the literal over the metaphorical; rather, I want to emphasize the *possibility* of the feminine as something other than metaphor, a possibility that many wish to ignore. As we will see when we get to Levinas's discussion of love and fecundity, it is difficult to have a son without a concrete woman!

- 16 See Levinas's discussion of this theme in his essay "Judaism," in *Difficult Freedom*, trans. Seán Hand (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990), 24–26; *Difficile liberté* (Paris: Albin Michael, 1976). Hereafter cited parenthetically in the text as DF followed by the English page number and DL followed by the French page number.
- 17 The rest of the reply is "A father of the fatherless and a judge of the widows (Ps. 68:6); hence he who robs them is like one who robs God." *Midrash Rabbah*, Exod. 30:7–8.
- 18 Levinas uses the French *l'orphelin* (orphan); the biblical passage translates the Hebrew as "fatherless," and the Hebrew root used in the Hebrew text also means fatherless.
- 19 Levinas, DF, 30–37/DL, 50–62.
- 20 Here Levinas's emphasis is both ambiguous and provocative. By emphasizing the silence of women's footsteps Levinas could be accused of reinscribing the sexist idea that women ought to be seen and not heard. Yet there is a sense in which Levinas is trying to reveal the power these women had to move history and destiny, even though that power was, and could only be, displayed through silent means. Rebecca, for example, is the manager of her household who deceives Isaac into giving the blessing intended for the firstborn to be given to her favorite—Jacob, the second born.
- 21 Talmud, Joma 43b.
- 22 In Judaism this split between public and private, man and woman, is emphasized so much that women are exempted from the positive precepts, namely, the timed commandments (commandments that must be done during certain times of the day, for example, the prayers in the morning), which may interfere with their obligations to the home. This exemption gives rise to the prayer men say in the morning when they thank God for not being born a heathen, a slave, or a woman. The prayer is not supposed to be inherently disparaging to women. The intended emphasis is that men were given the honor of the obligation to uphold all the 613 commandments. Positive or not, this view is similar to the one we find in ancient Greece. For example, in the ancient Greek vision of the world, women were responsible for burial rights while men are responsible for the state. See, for example, Sophocles' *Antigone*, trans. Elizabeth Wyckoff, in *Sophocles I* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1954).
- 23 For a more detailed discussion of this topic, see David Biale, *Eros and the Jews* (New York: Basic Books, 1992).
- 24 Although not commanded by the religion, the Talmud tells us that divorce is acceptable if a child is not born within ten years of marriage (Talmud, Jeb. 6:6). The relationship between the Jews and the erotic is a puzzling one, and it risks being characterized too simply by the passage cited earlier. It is not the case that sexual activity is always, at every moment, to be directed at having a child. There is a great emphasis on sexual pleasure in Judaism—the *Ketubah* (the marriage contract) explicitly states that the husband is responsible for the sexual gratification of his wife, and interestingly enough, some rabbinic commentaries do not reverse the obligation to extend to the husband. I think that Levinas and Talmudic law understand the romantic relationship in much broader terms. See David Biale, *Eros and the Jews*.
- 25 Ironically, use of the Judaic influence, while giving us a different framework in which to understand his position and appreciate the positive features of his analysis on the erotic, simultaneously opens up other avenues through which to criticize Levinas's work. Thus, this approach yields an account that further illustrates the complex relation between the feminine and the ethical.

- 26 Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, trans. Hazel Barnes (New York: Washington Square Books, 1953). *L'être et néant* (Paris: Gallimard, 1954). Specifically, this theme can be found on page 491 of the English text, although the theme is present in the entire subheading "First Attitude Toward Others: Love, Language, Masochism" contained within the larger section "Concrete Relations with Others."
- 27 Although we can wonder if the birth of a son is a reflection of the fecundity of a male writer, it seems more than coincidental that Judaism has a less than positive attitude toward the birth of a daughter. Even filial piety is more often talked about as that of a son to his parents, as if there is no daughter present.
- 28 It is ironic that Levinas, in light of his complaint that Heidegger overlooks the enjoyment of things as an end in themselves, would, in his phenomenology of love, gesture toward love as something directed toward a future (though it is a future that is "not yet") rather than allowing for love to be valued solely as an end in itself. Levinas does allow for the presence of pleasure—"voluptuosity"—for the sake of itself; however, he does so with a conditional insofar as he emphasizes the futural aspect of the relation. But I want to point out that it is precisely this ambivalence between pleasure for the sake of itself, something Levinas allows for explicitly, and the privileging of the love relation that ends in fecundity, that creates a tension in Levinas's analysis of love. On the one hand, Levinas should be lauded for recognizing the pleasurable element of eros; but on the other hand, he does privilege the erotic relation that, ultimately, ends in the birth of a son. It is this tension that I want to exploit in my exploration of his analysis.
- 29 For Levinas separation is actually better than the initial fusion, for it is only with the separation that one can be in relationship with another. See Levinas's discussion in *Time and the Other*.
- 30 It is not clear to me why Levinas writes with a masculine pronoun here. This section seems very clearly to be about erotic love, love that culminates in the birth of a child, and thus, for Levinas, the author, a love that is with a woman. There are places in the essay where he specifically refers to the feminine, and where language to describe the beloved seems to be feminine language. Thus, the ambiguity makes unclear whether Levinas intends this discrepancy.
- 31 We should be sure to note the similarity in the descriptions of the lover in the "Phenomenology of Eros" and the Feminine in "The Dwelling."
- 32 Although "virgin" and "virginity" are certainly correct translations of *vierge* and *virginité*, I think we could also think of these words in terms of their connotation of purity rather than of sexual inexperience.
- 33 This discussion of love resonates with the analysis Levinas gives of the feminine and the erotic in *Time and the Other*.
- 34 Levinas, reiterating Sartre, tells us that "if to love is to love the love the Beloved bears me, to love is also to love oneself in love, and thus to return to oneself" (TI, 266/244). Voluptuosity in love does not transcend itself. It is in this description, that we see what Levinas means by a return to the self. As a dual solitude it remains sealed unto itself. The love relationship in Levinas's analysis is directed toward a future. Levinas makes this point repeatedly. We find a similar analysis in *Time and the Other*: the love relation is the juncture between present and future. It is being that is also a "being not yet" (TI, 257/234). "It manifests itself at the limit of being and non-being" (TI, 256/233).
- 35 This characterization further removes the erotic from the ethical. Levinas is specific, even in *Totality and Infinity*, that the third, a signification of the political, always accompanies him. That is, though Levinas needs to separate the ethical from the political for purposes of the analysis, he acknowledges the intimate

- relationship that the ethical has to the political. In his description of the erotic, he is clear that the erotic is closed off from public space. As such, it would be difficult then to make the case that it, by itself, without the birth of the child, the son, is ethical.
- 36 Luce Irigaray, "The Fecundity of the Caress," in *An Ethics of Sexual Difference*, trans. Carolyn Burke and Gillian Gill (Ithaca: Cornell, 1993). Hereafter cited as FC followed by the page number.
  - 37 For a detailed discussion of Irigaray's relationship with and debt to Levinas, see Tina Chanter's book *Ethics of Eros: Irigaray's Rewriting of the Philosophers* (New York: London, 1995).
  - 38 Chanter, *Ethics of Eros*, 218.
  - 39 Irigaray also underscores the ambiguity of the erotic as a relation that is at once sated and insatiable and therefore resembles both finite need and the infinity of ethics.
  - 40 One cannot help but notice, with the capitalization of *Father*, the allusion to Christianity's trinity and the role Mary played as bridge between God, the Father, and the birth of Jesus Christ. And it is precisely this reading of Levinas, one that implicitly assumes a Christian perspective, that I want to confront. That is, I do not claim that Irigaray is necessarily mistaken in her criticism of Levinas. Rather, I want to call attention to the way Irigaray might be overlooking elements of Levinas's thought by viewing him through a Christian lens, even if this lens is unintended.
  - 41 One theme in Judaism claims that women are not required to study Torah because they are already ethical; they are already closer to God. (See Franz Rosenzweig, *The Star of Redemption*, trans. William Hallo [Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1970], 326.) One can see both the positive and negative in this view. Historically, women have been denied both rights and privileges because they (women) were thought to be more moral. Ironically, women were initially denied the U.S. vote because politics was deemed too dirty for them to touch; women then acquired the vote because it was thought their moral character would improve the lot of politics. Unfortunately, the nonrequirement to study Torah was transformed into a prohibition among the more Orthodox segments of the Jewish religion. One cannot help but wonder how the view that women are more ethical than men, are closer than men to God, informs Levinas's analysis. For a similar claim and women and the ethical, see Chalier's chapter, "Exteriority and the Feminine," from *Faces and the Feminine*, translated by Bettina Bergo and published in this volume.
  - 42 We could take Chanter's title, *Ethics of Eros*, also as a cue.
  - 43 Alison Ainley takes issue with this interpretation. She argues that the dwelling Levinas calls forth here is a more like a community of reconciliation. However, as I mentioned previously, one must still account for Levinas's explicit exclusion of the erotic from the ethical. As long as woman is in the role of the beloved she is excluded from the ethical—at least in relationship to her lover. See "Amorous Discourses: 'The Phenomenology of Eros' and Love Stories," in *The Provocation of Levinas*, ed. Robert Bernasconi and David Wood (London: Routledge, 1988), 70–82.
  - 44 I would actually claim that woman as mother is, for Levinas, the ethical relation par excellence, but this relation does not appear until *Otherwise Than Being*. However, I think the seeds of this relationship or this possibility are already present in his construal of the feminine in *Totality and Infinity*.
  - 45 In *The Irigaray Reader*, ed. Margaret Whitford (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991), 178–91.

- 46 Luce Irigaray, "Questions to Emmanuel Levinas," in *The Irigaray Reader*, 182.
- 47 Although I am in agreement with Irigaray's concerns and with her criticisms of Levinas's phenomenology of love, I also want to acknowledge the dilemma in which we find Levinas. He must write from his own point of view, that of a man, lest he be accused of trying to presume to know what love would be for a woman. So his analysis of love will clearly be lacking; if nothing else, it lacks the woman's point of view. In spite of this shortcoming, as well as others in his analysis, I do commend Levinas for recognizing the significant role women play in the birth of a child and for attaching that role to a concrete, intimate relationship with another human, rather than giving us an analysis that either describes women in terms of mere utility, that is, as someone who is only a vessel for the man's progeny, or that presumes that children just suddenly appear as if no mother was present or needed. That latter view is illustrated in Hobbes's comment that "men spring up from the ground like mushrooms." Cited from Seyla Benhabib, *Situating the Self* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 156. For the full citation, see Thomas Hobbes, "Philosophical Rudiments Concerning Government and Society," in *The English Works of Thomas Hobbes*, ed. W. Molesworth (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1966), 2:109.
- 48 And Derrida is correct that Levinas left us little choice but to think the Other as not woman—or at least not a woman anchored to a home and a man. See Derrida, "At This Very Moment in This Work Here I Am," in *Re-reading Levinas*, ed. Robert Bernasconi and Simon Critchley (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), 19–48, an essay devoted primarily to a discussion of *Otherwise Than Being*, though this problem is also commented on in *Totality and Infinity*.
- 49 For example, in *Time and the Other*, the feminine is claimed as radical alterity, and it is as the feminine, as this radical alterity, that the subject moves out of the *il y a* and contracts its existence. Sexual difference plays a fundamental role in providing the motivation for the ethical relation.
- 50 In Derrida's view, the assumed sexual difference, and demarcation, in this text is striking (Derrida, "At This Very Moment"). Derrida essentially asks, with regard to fecundity and the birth of a son, in particular, "Why should a 'son' better represent, in advance, this indifference? This unmarked difference?" Essentially, he is asking, why can the future not be a daughter? By organizing the analysis as he has, Levinas has assumed sexual difference and made it work as such. The future cannot be a daughter because the author writing the analysis is a man. In his own response to the question, Derrida notes parenthetically his comment, cited in a footnote to "Violence and Metaphysics," his essay on *Totality and Infinity*: "Let us observe in passing that *Totality and Infinity* pushes the respect for dissymmetry to the point where it seems to us impossible, essentially impossible, that it could have been written by a woman. The philosophical subject of it is man" (Derrida, "At This Very Moment," 40). In Derrida's view, Levinas assumes the stance of the male subject without acknowledging this position. Moreover, that Levinas subordinates an alterity marked by sexual difference indicates that Levinas thinks of himself as presenting a neutral Other, one not marked by sexual difference. Levinas claims in an interview with Bracha Lichtenberg-Ettinger that he is not subordinating woman, but sexual difference, to alterity (*Que dirait Eurydice? What Would Eurydice Say?* Emmanuel Levinas en/in conversation avec/with Bracha Lichtenberg-Ettinger [Paris: BLE Atelier, 1997]). However, in light of the stance Levinas takes as author, the other is marked by sexual difference and then disguised as a neutral other. The wholly other who is not supposed to be marked by sexual difference, is found already to be marked by masculinity (Derrida, "At This Very Moment," 40).

- 51 We cannot know for sure if Levinas accepts the Judaic view of love and sexuality, nor can we know for sure if this view is in the background of Levinas's analysis. I do think it is safe to say that Levinas would have been aware of these views. Levinas is no ordinary man, and he is certainly no ordinary Jewish man. He is heavily steeped in the Talmudic tradition. He was not merely raised in it, but he also actively studied it himself. Sexual relations within the Jewish tradition is not an obscure topic, not a topic that Levinas would have had to seek out in order to come across writings on it. Because the Talmud governs all aspects of life, discussions on marriage and family are not only included, but are discussed at length.
- 52 Given Levinas's own use of the word *conjugal*, one can presume, at least given the time he was writing, that he is referring to marriage; given Levinas's attention to fecundity, Irigaray's insight that Levinas focuses on a specifically heterosexual framework is affirmed. I do not think Levinas will be able to escape that charge against him. However, I do want to reexamine the erotic relation with an eye toward acknowledging two things that, for Levinas, are implicated in each other: (1) the role of pleasure in the relationship, and (2) the attention paid to the presence of a woman in the discussion of fecundity. Alison Ainley also takes up this point. She claims that while Levinas wants to give us an account of love that contains within it the "beyond it" and makes maternity possible, he does not want to make it a determining factor (Ainley, "Amorous Discourses," 76). However, Ainley also realizes and takes issue with the heterosexual framework Levinas assumes by taking such a position (Ainley, "Amorous Discourses," 78).
- 53 The *Ketubah*, the Jewish marriage contract, states that a husband is responsible to his wife for three things: food, clothing, and sexual gratification. Although a marriage that results in no children after ten years is grounds for granting an annulment, a childless couple is not required to dissolve their marriage. Levinas writes, "[L]ove [that] becomes its own end, where it remains without any 'intentionality' that spreads beyond it, a world of voluptuousness or a world of charm and grace, one which can coexist with a religious civilization, is foreign to Judaism" (DF, 36–37/60). This point, according to Levinas, is not intended to mean that woman are to be pregnant and confined to the home; nor is it about Judaism's prudish attitude toward sexuality. Rather, Levinas tells us, this view of love is due to "the permanent opening up of the messianic perspective—of the immanence of Israel, of humanity reflecting the image of God that can carry on its face" (DF, 37/60).
- 54 But Levinas's connection should not necessarily be an indication that he thinks every sexual act *ought to end* in maternity, or even be *intended to end* in maternity. We must be careful to avoid a logic that reverses the necessary relation between sexuality and fecundity. Factually, fecundity requires sexuality, though sexuality does not require fecundity. In terms of his ethical analysis, however, Levinas does privilege sexual activity that ends in fecundity. Yet, even if we acknowledge the privilege Levinas gives to love that results in a child, we must, also, acknowledge that Levinas allows for a sexuality that intends pleasure for its own sake; if we are to pay heed to Levinas's Jewish roots, then we must contend with the remarks that Judaism itself makes about sexuality.
- 55 I want to note here that there are shelters for battered women in Baltimore and in Washington, D.C., called The House of Ruth. They take their name from Ruth's character as a helper, particularly of other women. I also want to note that Ruth's name in Hebrew means "friend."
- 56 Midrash speculates that Goliath is the descendent of Orpah. Thus, the two grandsons meet as antagonists. Although Orpah is not viewed in the story as a traitor,

- to claim that her descendent is Goliath, who is eventually slain by David, the great-grandson of Ruth, does leave us wondering about Ruth's destiny.
- 57 Ruth 1:16–17.
- 58 Ruth 2:6.
- 59 Ruth 2:10.
- 60 Ruth 2:11.
- 61 It is interesting, in light of the Jewish view of sexuality, that it is not Boaz who approaches Ruth, but Ruth who seeks Boaz out, while he is sleeping. Moreover, it is Naomi who encourages her to do so.
- 62 “How,” it is asked in the midrash, “can one rob from the poor?” The answer is given that one robs from the poor when we do not give them what we are obliged to give them—gleanings, the forgotten sheaves, the corner of the field, and the poor man's tithe. We rob them when we fail in our obligation to them.
- 63 I am tracing a theme that can also be found in the work of Julia Kristeva, for example, “The Chosen People and the Choice of Foreignness,” in *Strangers to Ourselves*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991); and Elie Wiesel, in his essay “Ruth,” in *Sages and Dreamers* (New York: Touchstone, 1991), gives us an interesting discussion of the relationship between alterity and conversion.
- 64 The words of Ruth's speech, “I'll go where you go, your people will be my people, your God will be my God,” are the words that all converts to Judaism say.
- 65 *Midrash Rabbah*, Ruth 8.
- 66 Kristeva, “The Chosen People and the Choice of Foreignness,” 71.
- 67 Wiesel, “Ruth,” 53. Loyalty, according to Jewish faith, is a strong ethical duty. See, for example, George Fletcher, *Loyalty: An Essay on the Morality of Relationships* (New York: Oxford, 1993), 37. It is why the law forbids fathers from testifying against their sons in a court of law. It is precisely because of the role partiality plays, that of knowing someone, that gives rise to the ethical call to loyalty. We can see even in the Jews' relationship to God that the relationship is one of loyalty. Although it is questionable that the term *chosen people*, as it is applied to Jews, reflects the voluntary choice the Jews made to enter into the covenant, it seems clear that the fact they did enter into the covenant gives rise to their loyalty to God. God proclaims, “I am the Lord thy God which have brought thee out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage” (Exod. 20:2).
- 68 If Irigaray is right, then Levinas's analysis does not allow for a relationship between women—sexual or otherwise. Although Ruth appears to be in an ethical relation to Naomi, though she appears to have responded to Naomi, it is not clear that we can use such terminology in regard to that relationship. How, then, is it possible to think of woman as ethical other to woman, as in the relationship between Naomi and Ruth; and how can we account for the ethical within the family? What kind of space is there for woman outside the erotic? If the passage from the ethical to the political is immanent—that is, if the ethical and the political are inseparable such that the latter always already accompanies the former—and if woman is not part of the ethical, then what space is she accorded in the political?
- 69 For a detailed analysis of this theme, see *Reading Ruth: Contemporary Women Reclaim a Sacred Text*, ed. Judith A. Kates and Gail Twersky Reimer (New York: Ballantine Books, 1994).



## AM I OBSESSED BY BOBBY?

(Humanism of the other animal)

*John Llewelyn*

Source: R. Bernasconi and S. Critchley (eds) *Re-Reading Levinas*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991, pp. 234–45.

Who is my neighbor? The discussion of this question throughout the ages has ranged from asking whether my neighbor is the Jew, through whether he is any and every other human being including my enemy, to whether he is God. It may enable us to clarify what Levinas's answer to this question would be if we ask not only whether his concept of the neighbor includes God, a question that, in the light of one interpretation of the belief in the death of God, might be deemed by some to be purely academic, but also whether Levinas's concept of the neighbor includes the nonhuman animal. This must be a live question for anyone who does not like the climate of utilitarianism and asks whether an alternative to it might be reached by taking the metaphysical ethics of Levinas as a guiding thread. For one of the attractions of utilitarianism is that it requires, in determining the morality of an action, rule, or institution, that consideration be given to the welfare of *any* sentient being. Among classical utilitarian statements on this matter, nothing is more eloquent than the words in which Bentham declares his hope that

the day *may* come when the rest of the animal creation may acquire those rights which never could have been withheld from them but by the hand of tyranny. The French have already discovered that the blackness of the skin is no reason why a human being should be abandoned without redress to the caprice of a tormentor. It may one day come to be recognized that the number of legs, the villosity of the skin, or the termination of the *os sacrum*, are reasons equally insufficient for abandoning a sensitive being to the same fate. What else is it that should trace the insuperable line? Is it the faculty of reason, or perhaps

the faculty of discourse? But a full-grown horse or dog is beyond comparison a more rational, as well as a more conversable animal, than an infant of a day or a week, or even a month, old. But suppose they were otherwise, what would it avail? The question is not, Can they reason? nor Can they *talk*? but, *Can they suffer*?<sup>1</sup>

Is Levinas of the opinion that the question is, Can they talk? It is not easy to determine his opinion, because almost always when he touches upon the subject of animality he is thinking of the animality of man. There is, however, one place at least where he writes explicitly about a nonhuman animal. I am thinking of Bobby. Not Greyfriars Bobby of Edinburgh, the Franciscan Bobby, the terrier that mourned on his master's grave for fourteen years until he himself died, but the dog referred to in an essay entitled "Nom d'un chien ou droit naturel" published in 1975 in the collection *Celui qui ne peut se servir des mots* and reprinted in *Difficile Liberté*. No less eloquent than those words of Bentham's are those of the opening paragraph of this essay where Levinas mentions that according to Genesis Adam was a vegetarian and where he all but proposes an analogy between the unspeakable human Holocaust and the unspoken animal one. The reader of that paragraph may well feel his leather shoes beginning to pinch.<sup>2</sup>

I am thinking of Bobby in order to understand whom or what Levinas means by *Autrui*, the Other. Is *Autrui* a strictly personal pronoun? Can it stand for God? Can it stand for a dog? The question is not as rum as it may seem. Not as rum as the idea that occurred to George Borrow when, learning that the Romany word for God is *Duvel*, he mused in *Lavengro* "Would it not be a rum thing if divine and devilish were originally one and the same word?" We are not about to find Levinas arguing that the words "God" and "dog" have a common root. Although Bobby has his origins on the Egyptian side of the Red Sea, he is not a metaphorical Anubis. Throughout the entire essay about him Levinas tries to keep the metaphorical at bay, for the sake of the literal truth about the dog of the verse in Exodus 22 which his essay takes as its text: "neither shall ye eat any flesh that is torn of beasts in the field; ye shall cast it to the dogs." It is an uphill task, both for him and for the Talmudic interpreters of this text who explain what Levinas calls "the paradox" of a purely natural creature having a right, here the right of the dog to feed on this particular sort of meat, by referring to Exod. 11:7, which says that no dog shall move its tongue at the midnight when the first-born in the land of Egypt are threatened with slaughter and the Jews are about to be led into captivity. Threatened, be it noted, are the first-born not only of man, but of the chain of being "from the first-born of the Pharoah that sitteth upon his throne, even unto the first-born of the maidservant that is behind the mill; and all the first-born of beasts." But one of these beasts, the silent dog *sans* ethic and *sans* logos, by holding its tongue bears witness to the dignity of man. Man's best friend signifies a

transcendence *in* its animality, "*dans l'animal!*" For which service he has the everlasting right mentioned in Exodus 22.

It makes a nice story, Levinas seems to say, but have not the Talmudic exegetes lapsed into merely rhetorical figures of speech? He decides that they have, no less than Aesop and La Fontaine, but he goes on to tell of another dog, the dog that strayed into the German camp for Jewish prisoners where Levinas himself and his companions had become accustomed to being treated as less than human, sometimes subjected to looks that were enough, as he chillingly expresses it, to strip them of their human skin. Yet Bobby, during the few weeks the guards allowed him to remain, was there every morning to welcome them with wagging tail as they lined up before leaving for work and, unconstrained by the prohibition placed upon his Egyptian ancestors, was there waiting when they returned at night to welcome them one and all with an excited bark. The last Kantian in Nazi Germany, Levinas comments, and one wonders if he intends us to take that comment as nothing more or less than the literal truth. How can we? How, any more than Aesop, La Fontaine, and the Talmudic exegetes, can Levinas be speaking otherwise than figuratively? For in the very same breath he adds that Bobby lacks the brains to universalize his maxim. He is too stupid, *trop bête*. Bobby is without *logos* and that is why he is without ethics. Therefore he is without Kantian ethics; and so he is without Levinasian ethics, since the ethics of Emmanuel Levinas is analogous to the ethics of Immanuel Kant in that each is an ethics with a God within the limits of reason alone, but without a dog or any other beast, except indirectly, if we are to judge by reason alone.

To judge by reason alone, man has no duties except to men (himself or others), for his duty to any subject at all is the moral constraint by his will. Accordingly, a subject who constrains (obligates) must, first, be a person; and he must, secondly, be given as an object of experience, because he is to influence the purpose of a man's will; and such an influence can occur only in the relationship of two existing beings (for a mere creation of thought cannot become the cause of any purposive achievement). Since in all our experience we are acquainted with no being which might be capable of obligation (active or passive) except man, man therefore can have no duty to any being other than man. And if he supposes that he has such another duty, then this happens through an amphiboly of the concepts of reflection; and so his supposed duty to other beings is merely his duty to himself. He is led to this misunderstanding because he confuses his duty *regarding* other beings with a duty *toward* these beings.<sup>3</sup>

To judge by reason alone, Bobby cannot even say "Goodday," no matter how gaily he may wag his tail and how excitedly he may bark. If I think that

I have duties to animals it is because I am failing to distinguish direct duties to or toward (*gegen*) from indirect duties regarding (*in Ansehung*). "Even gratitude for the long-performed service of an old horse or dog (just as if they were members of the household) belongs indirectly to man's duty, namely his duty *regarding* these animals; but directly considered, such a duty is always only his duty *to* himself."<sup>4</sup> If a man is not compassionate in his relations with animals he is likely to become insensitive in his relations with other human beings. According to Kant a man can have obligations only to a being that has obligations, which means, on his account of human experience, that human beings have obligations only to other human beings. The argument turns on the difference between doing something which falls under a single law and doing something which falls under two laws. The concept of obligation is that of something which falls under two laws, the law of human animality and the law of human rationality, and it is this duality that gives rise to the experience of constraint and tension which is implied in the notion of being bound. So a being which is a purely animal nature will have no sense of obligation, of oughtness. Nor will a being that is purely rational. Hence, Kant maintains, we can have no moral obligations to God. We have, according to Kant, duties of religion, that is to say, duties "of recognizing all duties as (*instar*) divine commands." The duty of religion, however, is correlated with an Idea of Reason that, from a theoretical point of view, helps us to make sense of the apparent purposefulness of nature; and, from a practical point of view, Kant holds, this Idea is of the greatest moral fecundity in availing an incentive to virtuous conduct. Thus what we take to be a duty to God is a duty to man himself, namely a duty each man has to himself, the duty to make himself virtuous.

Does Kant think that a man cannot have a duty to a being he does not know exists? He writes: "we do not . . . have before us (*vor uns*) a given being *to* whom we are obligated; for the actuality of such a being would first have to be made known by experience." He also writes, in the paragraph already cited, that we can have no duties except to human beings because "we are acquainted (*kennen wir*) with no being which might be capable of obligation (active or passive) except man." We can be under an obligation only to a being with whom we can be, as we say, face to face. In the very human world of Immanuel Kant, the other man is the only being with whom I come face to face. So too in the very human world of Emmanuel Levinas. The only face we behold is the human face and that is the only face to which we are beholden. Ethically, that is all that matters. In this, despite their fundamental disagreement over what it is for two human beings to be face to face, there is a considerable area of agreement between Levinas and Kant. Just as Kant maintains that I can have obligations only to a being that has, or (to cover the infantile and the senile) is of the kind that can have, obligations, so Levinas seems to imply that I can have responsibilities only toward beings capable of having responsibilities.

We have explained why Kant thinks that God can have no obligations. He thinks this because he thinks that the notion of obligation carries with it the notion of constraint, of a tie. So although we may coherently think of God acting according to the moral law, that law is descriptive, not prescriptive, of his action, and it is not a law for which He can feel respect or by which He can feel obliged. He can command but cannot be commanded. And this is what Levinas says, speaking of *Autrui*. I do not judge the Other. The Other judges me. I do not categorize him. He categorizes me. He picks me out, identifies and accuses me. I do not simply appear, but am summoned to appear before him (DVI 117). And in this court of appeal it is he who does the calling, calling me to testify: to testify to my responsibilities even for his responsibilities. So that where Kant allows that I have responsibilities to myself, namely to make myself virtuous, my responsibility toward myself according to Levinas is mediated by my responsibility for the Other's responsibility toward me. Further, in contrast to Kant's view that I have a duty to promote the happiness but not the virtue of others, Levinas holds that *I* go bail for the Other's obedience to the Law. "His business is my business" (ADV 106). But, Levinas goes on to ask, "Is not my business his? Is he not responsible for me? Can I therefore be responsible for his responsibility for me?" To this last question Levinas answers, Yes. For every responsibility that the Other has toward me and others I have a metaresponsibility. Somewhat like the little boy who, in order to be always one up on his playmate, declares "Whatever you say plus one," I have the last word even if I do not have the first, the dreadful glory of being chosen to be more responsible than anyone else. Only somewhat like the little boy, because I do not need to have a first preemptive word. It has already been dictated.

Starting from below, as it were, my responsibility toward the other man, an infinite progress is generated, an infinite that is not to be confused with the agent's infinite progress toward his moral perfection as postulated in the ethical theory of Kant, even though both Kant and Levinas call what gives direction to this progress an Ideal. In the Kantian Ideal happiness is commensurate with virtue. It is an Ideal toward which one strives by exerting a good will, and the realization of the Ideal would be a fulfillment. The Levinasian Ideal, as viewed from my subjectivity, recedes immeasurably further and further away the more I take up my responsibilities. The realization of it would be a derealization of my self, an emptying of myself, but a *kenosis* that could never be complete. And this taking up of my responsibilities is not an exercise of power, not even a power of the good will. It is a being taken up by the idea of Infinity and Goodness, the idea which is presupposed by the infinite progression-regression and which prevents it becoming the bad infinite that it would otherwise be. This explains the structure of Levinas's important essay "God and Philosophy." The first part of this starts from above with the idea of God, *En Sof*, the topic of Descartes's

*Third Meditation.* Then, on pages 113–15 of *De Dieu qui vient à l'idée*, it starts again, this time from below, with the topic of the *First* and *Second Meditations*, subjectivity, and therefore in Levinas's text, since subjectivity is ethical subjection, with *Autrui*, the difficult pronoun that seems to do service for God in the meditations of Levinas rather as the name of God seems to do service for the scarcely mentioned "other minds" in the *Meditations* of Descartes.

Is God *Autrui*? Far from it, if by God we mean the God of positive or negative theology. The Other is not some Plotinian avatar of God. "The Other is not the incarnation of God, but precisely by his face, in which he is disincarnate, is the height in which he is revealed," revealed, that is to say, in discourse. "It is our relations with men . . . that give to theological concepts the sole signification of which they admit." "Everything that cannot be reduced to an interhuman relation represents not the superior form but the forever primitive form of religion" (TeI 51–52; TI 79). As indeed Hegel might have said, except that the infinity of the interhuman relation in his conception is an infinity that totalizes a symmetrical intersubjectivity. Hegel's God is beyond any gulf between subject and object, but it is, Levinas would contend, not beyond the participation of what according to Hegel too are primitive forms of religion, the mythological religions of faceless gods. The superior form of religion is one in which God is not numinous, and in which he is "in-himself," *kath auto*, only on the assumption of ontological atheism. Atheistic de-ontology, the atheism which results from the death of the pagan gods (TeI 115–16; TI 142) before which we are in danger of confusing God with the nocturnal stirring of the *il y a* (DVI 115). "The Other, in his signification prior to my initiative, resembles God" (TeI 269; TI 293). "The Other is the very locus of metaphysical truth, and is indispensable for my relation with God" (TeI 51; TI 78). But even when he is no longer conceived as the God of positive or negative theology, God is not the Other, *Autrui*. Far from it. He is closer to this farness. Not the impersonal *il* of the *il y a*, God is the third personal *Il* over and up there, *illic*, and, as Descartes says, echoing the *Symposium*, majestic, the eminence whose trace is inscribed in the face of the second person, the Thou or, more accurately and respectfully, the You, the Other, the idea of whom is the idea of Infinity thought by the first personal but never nominative me. The "in-" of this idea of infinity, Levinas comments, connotes both the being in me of the idea and the negation implied in the idea of my own finitude revealed to me a posteriori by my doubt and desire, and a priori by the immeasurable degree to which the "objective reality" of my idea of infinity falls short of the "formal reality" of its metaphysical and ethical origin. Infinity, the Desirable, God is the transcendence and holiness or distance that makes my nearness to my neighbor more than a relation of love, as for Kant, *mutatis mutandis*, love is that which unites while respect is that which sets a distance between us. "God is not simply 'the first other,' or 'the other par excellence' or 'the

absolutely other,' but other than the other, otherwise other, other with an alterity prior to the alterity of the other" (DVI 113–15).

Concerning Levinas's phenomenological analysis of love, it must suffice to say here that it is a reflection on Plato's *Symposium* and Rosenzweig's *The Star of Redemption*.<sup>5</sup> Love is ambiguous. On the one hand it points to the exteriority of the beloved and to an exteriority beyond that exteriority, beyond the face. On the other hand it enjoys the interiority of sensation and return to oneself (TeI 244; TI 266), to the concupiscence that Pascal describes with the help of the proclamation of the first Epistle of Saint John 2:16: "Everything in the world is lust of the flesh, or concupiscence of the eyes, or vaingloriousness of life," *libido sentiendi, libido sciendi, libido dominandi*, the very same *cupere* that throws us back from the Cartesian idea of God to the *cogito* that would like to have everything under its command. There is a touch of the erotic in all love, says Levinas on one page. True, on the next occurs the phrase "Amour sans Eros." The pagan god is left behind as Levinas's thoughts turn from Plato to Rosenzweig. Rosenzweig writes of the love of a nonpagan God, God's love for man and man's love for God. In a footnote Levinas says that "Franz Rosenzweig interprets the *response* made by Man to the love with which God loves him, as the movement towards the neighbour." He probably has in mind the following sentences: "Since love cannot be commanded except by the lover himself, therefore the love for man, in being commanded by God, is directly derived from the love for God. The love for God is to express itself in love for one's neighbour. It is for this reason that love of neighbour can and must be commanded."<sup>6</sup> In the spirit of these sentences the love without *eros* to which Levinas once refers—and which Rosenzweig champions (on p. 163), though in treating of God's love for man—gets referred to henceforth as responsibility in order to mark its difference from ego-based desire and to mark that it is indeed a response.

But why must responsibility be limited to responding to a being that has the gift of speech? Why can we not allow an ethical responsibility to dumb animals? Responsibilities are responsibilities *toward*, at the very least, but among them not all are responsibilities *to* in the strict sense of answerability or response to a question or command. They may be responsibilities *for*, and it is of responsibilities *pour* or *de* that Levinas mostly writes, taking the trouble only twice, as far as I have noticed, to make the distinction between them and responsibilities *à*.<sup>7</sup> Of course, we could take up the question whether animals and, if so, which animals, can talk and whether they can talk to us. There is reason to believe that Levinas would consider it a crucial question whether Bobby merely barks or whether in so doing he can say "Bonjour." When asked about our responsibilities toward nonhuman sentient creatures, he is inclined to reply that our thinking about them may have to be only analogical or that the answer turns on whether in the eyes of the animal we can discern a recognition, however obscure, of his own mortality—on

whether, in Levinas's sense of the word, the animal has a face. If this question is crucial, we may have to be satisfied with falling back on the need to appeal to spokesmen to speak on the animal's behalf, on analogy with what we do in the case of infants. However, the agent who speaks for the child says what he says on the child's behalf on the basis of something about which no one has any doubt: that the child does not enjoy being battered or starved. Is not the fact that this is also how it is with nonhuman animals enough to prove that I have responsibility for them? And that responsibility does not depend upon their having responsibilities, responsibilities, for example, to their offspring or to the humans they guard or guide. Let talk of their responsibilities be deemed anthropomorphism or rhetoric. As Bentham and other utilitarians say, the question is not, Can they reason? nor, Can they talk? but, Can they suffer?

We have seen that the first and perhaps second of these questions is all-important for Kant. However, the last is not for him morally irrelevant, as some of his readers infer. It is argued that Kant's concession that we have indirect duties to animals can be reduced to absurdity on the grounds that rationality is the only morally relevant characteristic that he can admit by which to distinguish animals from other nonhuman beings and that therefore, if we are to refrain from treating animals only as means because that is likely to lead us to treat fellow humans as means only, we should for the same reason refrain from treating only as means inanimate objects like hammers. This argument, I suspect, derives its plausibility from a failure to distinguish a necessary condition for moral agency, where the moral is opposed to the nonmoral, from a condition of the circumstances in which an action is performed that might determine whether the action is moral as opposed to immoral. The former condition is one that holds for any rational beings that may exist. The latter condition holds for the actions of those we know to exist, human beings. That Kant agrees that the animality of rational animals can be determinative of our duties toward them is implied by his claim that we have a direct duty to contribute to the well-being of other humans and to support them in distress, and an indirect duty to assure one's own happiness as far as one can consistently with one's other obligations.<sup>8</sup> The practical contradictoriness that makes some of my actions wrong depends on the fact that it is natural for men to seek their own happiness. The moral law is a test for practical, and that means teleological, consistency, and it applies to maxims prescriptive of how men can achieve that natural end. Since that natural end includes man's well-being as an animal, the maxim "Treat nonhuman animals as if they have no capacity for suffering" is not one that can be consistently conceived as a law of nature or willed to become one.<sup>9</sup> Such a conception is inconsistent with what one knows about animals from one's own experience of being one. This removes one obstacle preventing Kant from admitting that we have direct duties to brutes.



There remains the obstacle presented by Kant's doctrine that as far as we can tell on the basis of reason alone—by which I take Kant to mean that he is setting aside here matters based on feeling (other than the feeling of moral respect) and faith—man has no duties except to men because his duty to any subject is moral constraint by that subject's will. We should be well on the way to clearing Kant's path to admitting direct duties to animals if only this reference to the subject's will could be interpreted as what he wants or desires. If that were allowed, and if similar translations of the accommodating word *Wille* were permitted elsewhere in Kant's text, we should also be well on the way to converting Kant's theory of ethics into the tacit utilitarianism that Mill and others hold it to be. Kant himself is less accommodating than the word, taking pains to distinguish two of its primary senses. He remains adamant that we can have direct duties only to beings that have *Wille* understood as pure practical reason.

In the metaphysical ethics of Levinas I can have direct responsibilities only toward beings that can speak, and this means beings that have a rationality that is presupposed by the universalizing reason fundamental in the metaphysics of ethics of Kant. However, the protorationality of primary justice between two unequals anticipates the rationality of secondary justice among many, but without this entailing that I cease being more responsible than anyone else.

Both Kant and Levinas are so sensitive to the dangers of the *Schwärmerei* threatened by what Kant calls pathological love that they require an obligating being to be able to make a claim in so many words. No claim goes without saying, even if the saying is the silent saying of the discourse of the face—a silence not to be confused with the nocturnal silence in which the insomniac hears the menacing rustle of the anonymous *il y a* (TeI 236; TI 258–59). The Other only has to look at me. Indeed, what is expressed in his face may be expressed by his hand or the nape of his neck (TeI 240; TI 262). And for Kant at least the claim does not have to be a claim to a perfect right. I can have duties to others without any of those others having a right to require that that duty be exercised toward him by me. Levinas, however, seems to be far more demanding. The very *droiture* of the face-to-face, its uprightness or rectitude, is the expression of the other's *droit* over me (TeI 10; TI 40). And in one place, at least, he says “I support the universe,” “Je soutiens l'univers” (AE 152; OB 197). This might seem to augur well for Bobby. He is presumably part of the universe. So if supporting means being responsible for, I am responsible for, that is, obsessed by him. But Levinas distinguishes my support of the universe into two aspects. My support of the universe performs the role which Kant assigns to the transcendental unity of apperception, the role of giving the universe its unity. Prior to that transcendental unifying, Levinas says, is the unity of human society, the oneness of which is brought about by my responsibility. *Human* society. So there is no place for direct responsibility to Bobby

here. What about the other aspect in which the unity of the universe is due to me? The other aspect of my unifying support is that which has to do with the unity of being. But this second aspect is derivative from the first and would therefore appear to be no more capable than it of accommodating responsibility for the nonhuman animal. The one space of the universe is the space of secondary justice, justice in the proximity of the third party. It is the ubiquity not of the geometrical space of the things at which I look, but of the pregeometrical space from which I am looked at by the face, the face which *me regarde* in both senses of the word, the face that looks at me and the face that concerns me; the face that *m'accuse* in both senses of that word: the face whose look picks out and accuses me (AE 147; OB 116). The face that calls me into question is not the face of the animal. It is thanks to human faces, Levinas writes, that "Being will have a meaning as a universe, and the unity of the universe will be in me as subject to being. That means that the space of the universe will manifest itself as the dwelling of the others." The door of that dwelling would seem to be slammed in Bobby's face, assuming that he has one.

This impression is confirmed by Levinas's endorsement of much of what he finds in Rabbi Haïm of Volozhin's *Nefesh Hahaïm* (The soul of life). In the doctrine expounded in this book Levinas recognizes a basis for his own teaching that man is responsible for the universe. The soul of the universe, according to Rabbi Haïm, is man and, significantly for our present question, man defined not Hellenistically as a rational animal, but man understood biblically as the being created in the image of God and, more precisely, Levinas hastens to add, of God as Elohim, God as the principle of justice, not God as principle of mercy indicated by the Tetragrammaton. Elohim is also the soul of the world. *Nefesh Hahaïm* describes a cosmology, cabbalistic and Hellenistic, in which is postulated a hierarchy of worlds with God at the top. But this cosmology has to be read ethically. The principle of justice at the head of this hierarchy of worlds is the source on which feeds the root of the soul of man. Thanks to this, man in turn nourishes the intermediate worlds. Man is dependent on Elohim, yet Elohim is at the same time dependent upon man as mediator (ADV 190). In Rabbi Haïm's ethical cosmology, man is *homo Israelis* understood nonracially, and on the Israelite's obedience to the commands of the Torah depend the life and death of all the intermediate worlds, this "power" of life and death being man's responsibility or, as Levinas would say, his passivity more passive than the receptivity to which activity is traditionally opposed.

Does this responsibility include responsibility for the lower animal? The answer to this question would appear to be, Yes, if we are to go by the following statement cited by Levinas from *Nefesh Hahaïm*: "Just as the way in which the body moves depends on the soul that is interior to man, man in his entirety is the power and living soul of the innumerable worlds in his charge, above him and below" (ADV 194). And below. These two words get

lost in Levinas's interpretation. On the very same page on which he cites them he writes: "It is at the lowest level (*au plus bas*), in man, that the entire fate of the universe is decided," and on the next page he cites from the Talmudic treatise *Aboth* "Know what confusion your action brings about in the worlds above you." That is to say: "It is not by substantiality—by an in-itself or for-itself—that man and his interiority are defined, but by the 'for-the-other': for what is above oneself, for the worlds—but also, interpreting 'world' broadly, for collectivities, persons, spiritual structures. In spite of his creaturely humility, man is engaged in injuring them (or preserving them)." Is this broad definition of "world" not still too narrow to allow for responsibility to the lower animal? Where does he or she fit in? There is no sign that Levinas would place the lower animal "above oneself" among the collectivities, persons, and spiritual structures. It is as if the universe to which Levinas applies Rabbi Haïm's cosmology is the universe of discourse between the Creator and the human creature. The creatureliness of any creature more humble than man is a purely (or should we say "impurely"?) cosmological creatureliness, recalcitrant to production into ethics, whereas creation is the intake of ethical breath which Levinas calls *psychisme*: the reveille of the inner life by a *Wachet auf* that rouses it from the twilight of its dogmatic slumber, apparently re-creation but in fact older than cosmological creation as onto-logically understood—the very *pneuma* of the psyche.

In *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence* Levinas writes: "The soul is the other in me. The psyche (*psychisme*), the one-for-the-other, can be possession and psychosis; the soul is already the seed of folly" (AE 86; OB 191). Where the *conatus* of the synoptic ego is a desire to possess, ethical and metaphysical Desire is psychotic possession, possession not by being or language, but possession by God: sober (*dégrisé*) enthusiasm in which there is a response to the word of the Other. Levinas maintains that the first word addressed to me by the Other is "Thou shalt not murder/kill" where the oblique stroke signals the question, How are we to translate the Hebrew word *ratsah*? The answer to this question will have repercussions for the question whether I am obsessed by Bobby, whether I have responsibilities toward him. We have failed to discover any evidence that Levinas allows that Bobby and I can be face to face such that I could read in his own eyes "Thou shalt not kill." We must therefore retreat to the question whether in the face-to-face the other man addresses me not only on behalf of himself and other men, but also on behalf of the nonhuman animal; and to the question whether, if what the human face tells me is "Thou shalt not murder," the legal and quasi-legal connotations of the word "murder" prevent us saying that the commandment includes the nonhuman animal within its scope.

Commenting on Exod. 20:13, J. P. Hyatt states that *ratsah* refers to the murder of a personal enemy and that it is used much less frequently than two other words meaning to kill, *harag* and *hemît*. He adds: "It originally had nothing to do with capital punishment (administered by the avenger of

blood or by the community), killing in war which was certainly sanctioned by the OT, or the killing of animals. Careful studies have shown that it is not confined, however, to intentional murder, but is occasionally used of unintentional homicide."<sup>10</sup> When we turn to Levinas's statements of the commandment we find that he sometimes formulates it as "Thou shalt not kill," but other times replaces *tuer* by *meurtrir* with no contextual indication that he would not be willing to use the latter in all his mentions of the commandment. This must not be taken to imply, of course, that he is not more aware than most of the strict injunctions of the Torah against causing animals unnecessary pain. He also knows very well that the later Priestly sections of Genesis that speak of man's dominion over animals have alongside them sections from the earlier Jahwist sections that speak of animals as man's companions and affirm that God's covenant is made between him and man and every living creature.<sup>11</sup> But what sort of relevance is to be ascribed to this sensitivity and knowledge on Levinas's part or indeed to any of the citations he makes in the course of his more philosophical writings of texts from the Jewish Bible or the Talmud? The face-to-face faces us with a dilemma. If the first word addressed to me derives its authority from, say, Sinai, does that not prevent Levinas making his claim that metaphysical ethics makes no appeal to the content of any positive religion? And if we allow such an appeal, what is to prevent one appealing to another positive religion? Even if Levinas's ethics cannot be an ethics of the other animal, even if Bobby cannot be my neighbor according to that ethics, we must take him seriously when he insists that the ethics of which he speaks is a humanism of the other man. This means that we must now ask how in the face-to-face the other man can say *anything at all* and how, without the constraints imposed by the importation of commandments from positive religions, he can be prevented from saying *anything whatsoever*.<sup>12</sup>

### Notes

- 1 Jeremy Bentham, *An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1907, 311.
- 2 See on the subject of shoes Emmanuel Levinas, *Du sacré au saint*, Paris, Editions de Minuit, 1977, 117–18.
- 3 Immanuel Kant, *The Metaphysical Principles of Virtue* (part 2 of *The Metaphysics of Morals*), trans. James Ellington, New York, Bobbs-Merrill, 1964, 105.
- 4 *Ibid.*, 106.
- 5 Franz Rosenzweig, *The Star of Redemption*, trans. William H. Hallo, New York, Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1970.
- 6 *Ibid.*, 214.
- 7 Emmanuel Levinas, NP 108; Emmanuel Levinas and Françoise Armengaud, "Entretien avec Emmanuel Levinas," *Revue de métaphysique et de morale* 90 (1985): 302.
- 8 Immanuel Kant, *The Moral Law* (Kant's *Groundwork of the Metaphysic of Morals*), trans. H. J. Paton, London, Hutchinson, 1963, 67, 90–91.

- 9 Alexander Broadie and Elizabeth M. Pybus, "Kant's Treatment of Animals," *Philosophy* 49 (1974):376.
- 10 J. P. Hyatt, *Exodus* (New Century Bible), London, Oliphant, 1971, 214.
- 11 See Catherine Chaliel, "Torah, cosmos et nature," *Les Nouveaux cahiers* 79 (Winter 1984-85):3-13.
- 12 Levinas's remarks about animals made in the interview included in Robert Bernasconi and David Wood (eds.), *The Provocation of Levinas: Rethinking the Other*, London and New York, Routledge, 1988, published since this essay was composed, are taken into account in chapter 3 of my forthcoming *The Middle Voice of Ecological Conscience: A Chiasmic Reading of Responsibility in the Neighbourhood of Levinas, Heidegger and Others*.

## THINKING THE OTHER WITHOUT VIOLENCE?

An analysis of the relation between  
the philosophy of Emmanuel Lévinas  
and feminism

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The first note sounded in the Lévinas and feminism discussion was a critical one. Simone de Beauvoir, in her 1949 work *The Second Sex*, pointed to Lévinas's labeling of the male as subject and of the female as other and said that Lévinas "deliberately takes a man's point of view."<sup>1</sup> She concluded from this that Lévinas's philosophy is in continuity with traditional patriarchal thought in that it affirms "masculine privilege." In an attempt to rescue Lévinas from Beauvoir's attack and to show that Lévinas's ethical philosophy is actually an ally to feminism, Tina Chanter in a recent essay<sup>2</sup> goes so far as to say that Lévinas's ethical phenomenology of the other "provides feminism with a voice that many feminists have begun to seek."<sup>3</sup> The case she builds for Lévinas's contribution to feminism is so strong that she even feels the need to defend herself from the charge that she is "invoking a man to speak for us, as if we could not speak for ourselves."<sup>4</sup>

In this essay, I will stake out a position on the issue of Lévinas and feminism somewhere in between Beauvoir and Chanter, one that is both more supportive of Lévinas than is Beauvoir and more critical of him than is Chanter. I also hope to demonstrate that this issue of Lévinas and feminism can teach us something about the contributions, and about the limitations of these contributions, that men can make to feminist discourse. Finally, I will argue that this issue of Lévinas and feminism is important to the evaluation of Lévinas's work because it demonstrates that even such a thoroughly self-consciously ethical philosophy as Lévinas's still leaves part of our post-modern, post-patriarchal ethical project unthought. This issue

demonstrates, in other words, that even Lévinas's ethico-philosophical project of "ethics as first philosophy"<sup>5</sup> still is not ethical enough.

Considering the language that Lévinas employs in *Time and the Other*,<sup>6</sup> it is no wonder Beauvoir took Lévinas as just another example of the way men name and define women.<sup>7</sup> After all, Lévinas does refer to the feminine as "essentially other," and he even uses such traditional language as "mystery," "hiding," and "modesty." Lévinas himself later admitted that this language is "archaic."<sup>8</sup> Beauvoir is certainly correct when she insists that the upshot of what Lévinas is saying is that mystery, hiddenness, and modesty define the feminine according to men, i.e., according to a man's point of view. Beauvoir assumes that by describing the feminine in a certain way, Lévinas is claiming the right and the priority to define women rather than recognizing the right and the priority of women to define themselves. This is why, for Beauvoir, the fact that Lévinas "deliberately takes a man's point of view" through which he describes the feminine equals "an affirmation of masculine privilege."<sup>9</sup>

However, a close reading of *Time and the Other*, aided by knowledge of the further development of Lévinas's ethical philosophy (admittedly an advantage Beauvoir did not have), reveals that this labeling and defining of the feminine and this affirmation of masculine privilege over women is the opposite of what Lévinas is doing and is actually part of what he is opposing. We can understand this if we consider the larger context of the passage from *Time and the Other* which Beauvoir cites to show that Lévinas is asserting masculine privilege by labeling and naming women.

Lévinas's discussion of the feminine occurs in a section of *Time and the Other* wherein he attempts to explain how the self or the existent, the other person, and time are related. In an earlier work, *Existence and Existents*, Lévinas posited that the existent is initially isolated and solitary, without a relation to the other.<sup>10</sup> In this state, the existent is chained to its own Being and, consequently, to its own constant presence to its self, which is its present. Without the relation to the Other, the existent has no genuinely new moment, for without the Other every moment is merely an inevitable return to the same, an inevitable return to the present.

The presence of the present is "absolute" because it is an "inevitable return to itself," an "inability to detach itself from itself."<sup>11</sup> In this state, without the Other, since the existent has a present but doesn't have any genuinely new moment, s/he doesn't have time: "... the definitiveness which comes to pass in the present is not initially connected with time; it is an intrinsic mark of the present."<sup>12</sup>

For Lévinas, it is only the other person who can give to the existent a time that is genuinely new in the sense of genuinely different from and other than the present of the existent. Thus, it is only the relationship with the Other that can give to the existent time in its full sense. This is what Lévinas means by saying in *Time and the Other* that "the encroachment of the present on the future is not the feat of the subject alone, but the intersubjective

relationship. The condition of time lies in the relationship between humans, or in history."<sup>13</sup>

Lévinas insists that time can occur in the relationship between people only because the other person exists in an other present of his or her own, only because the other person is other, is absolutely other than the existent. This is the conclusion absolutely central to all of Lévinas's philosophy that he comes to in *Time and the Other* immediately before he begins to discuss the feminine:

The Other as Other is not only an alter ego: the Other is what I myself am not. The Other is this, not because of the Other's character, or physiognomy, or psychology, but because of the Other's very alterity. The Other is, for example, the weak, the poor, "the widow and the orphan," whereas I am the rich or the powerful.<sup>14</sup>

It is important for our purposes here to note that, in the above quotation, the Other Lévinas refers to is neither exclusively male nor exclusively female. Lévinas's designation of the Other as "the weak, the poor, 'the widow and the orphan'" certainly includes both male and female. Here the widow is the only exclusively female identity for the Other. Certainly the weak, the poor, and the orphan can be both female and male.

It is only at this point, after he has already posited the absolute alterity of every other, that Lévinas begins to discuss the erotic relationship with the feminine, and he does so by stating: "In civilized life there are traces of this relationship (meaning a relationship with the Other as Other) with the other that one must investigate in its original form."<sup>15</sup> He also asks if there is not a "... situation where alterity would be borne by a being in a positive sense, as essence."<sup>16</sup>

Clearly, Lévinas is not saying that the erotic relationship with the feminine other is the only relationship with otherness. He has already made clear that every other person is Other; every relation with an other person is a relation with otherness. In fact, he posits that the erotic relationship with the feminine is a "trace" of the relationship with the Other in general and offers a situation wherein the otherness of every Other can be experienced in a positive sense as the Other's essence.

This, he claims, is exactly what is experienced in eros. The otherness of the beloved does not disappear in eros, is not eliminated, but is actually intensified and becomes the essence of the relationship, precisely because the lover yearns to be totally united with the beloved and cannot be. Lévinas maintains that love involves pathos precisely because it is not fusion of two but is always desire of the one for the other, who always remains other.

The pathos of love, says Lévinas, "lies in the fact of being two. The other as other is not here an object that becomes ours or becomes us; to the contrary, it withdraws into its mystery."<sup>17</sup> In a later text, Lévinas repeats,



"the pathos of the erotic relationship is in the fact of being two, and that the Other is absolutely Other."<sup>18</sup>

When Lévinas refers to the mystery of the Other in his account of the erotic relationship, he is referring specifically to the feminine other. In this instance, Beauvoir is quite right when she says that Lévinas is writing as a man, and, we might hasten to add, as a heterosexual man. For Lévinas, the inexhaustible alterity of the Other he experiences in eros is the inexhaustible alterity of the feminine other. It must be understood, however, that according to Lévinas the alterity of the feminine other is grounded in sexual difference, which is a trace or a positive sense of the alterity of every Other. This means that not only is the feminine other for Lévinas, but Lévinas himself and every other man would be Other not only for every female, but also for every Other.

This is why, even before concluding the section on eros, Lévinas returns to discussing the Other not specifically as feminine but as Other in general, sexually undifferentiated Other, and says: "The Other bears alterity as an essence. And this is why I have sought this alterity in the absolutely original relationship of eros."<sup>19</sup> What makes eros an "absolutely original relationship" is not that the relationship between the sexes is the only relationship between the same and the absolutely Other, but that eros is that relationship wherein the absolute otherness of every Other is experienced in pathos as the very essence of the relationship.

This certainly undercuts Beauvoir's criticism that for Lévinas the male is the subject, the Absolute, and the female is the Other. Clearly, for Lévinas every one is Other, and the alterity of the female from the male perspective, and the alterity of the male from the female perspective, help us to see not only that every one is other, but that according to Lévinas the essence of every Other is alterity. Thus, Lévinas clearly does say that the feminine is other, but he is certainly not guilty of saying that the male is the subject and only the female is the Other.

But is Beauvoir correct when she criticizes Lévinas for seizing the right to say what the feminine is? It is true that Lévinas does use certain words to describe the feminine, but in Lévinas's case it makes all the difference in the world if one notices exactly what words Lévinas uses to describe the feminine and how he uses them. "Modesty" and "hiding" characterize the feminine, but this doesn't mean that for Lévinas femininity consists of being reticent, meek, humble, shy, cowed, timid, prudish, virtuous, quiet, etc.<sup>20</sup> Rather, Lévinas says, "what matters to me in this notion of the feminine is not merely the unknowable, but a mode of being that consists in slipping away from the light."<sup>21</sup> The quality of the feminine of "slipping away from the light" is what he means by saying "hiding is the way of existing of the feminine, and this fact of hiding is precisely modesty."<sup>22</sup>

It is crucial to note that Lévinas characterizes femininity in this way in the context of the erotic relationship. He concludes from the fact that the feminine

consists in “slipping away from the light” that there is a “communication,” a relationship between the man and the woman, which is not a “struggle,” nor a “fusion,” nor even, Lévinas claims, a “knowledge.” Eros is a relationship with, a communication with, and a love for an alterity that exceeds and contradicts any attempt at control, naming, or knowledge. Not only this, but Lévinas concludes from the erotic relation or communication what will be absolutely crucial to his polemic against Heidegger in *Totality and Infinity*.<sup>23</sup> and to his entire ethical philosophy—that to think one knows the Other is actually to grasp, to possess and, as such, is an act of power: “If one could possess, grasp, and know the other, it would not be other. Possessing, knowing, and grasping are synonyms of power.”<sup>24</sup>

Beauvoir is clearly mistaken when she accuses Lévinas of affirming “masculine privilege” by seizing the right to name and label what is female and feminine. This is, in fact, exactly what Lévinas’s idea of the absolute alterity of every Other, which he describes through the alterity and mystery of the feminine, is attempting to oppose. To label and to name the feminine, to think that one knows what the feminine is and has the right to say what the feminine is, is for Lévinas, just as it is for Beauvoir, an act of power and violence.

The mystery of what the feminine is for the male philosopher Emmanuel Lévinas opens up in Lévinas’s philosophy the possibility of a relationship and a communication wherein every possibility of possession and control and knowledge is denied, opens up the possibility of a relationship with the other person as Other, which is a relationship of peace. It is the possibility of peace not only with the female other, but with every Other, for in Lévinas the mystery of the feminine other does not, as Beauvoir maintains, enable us to identify the male as the subject and the female as the Other. On the contrary, the mystery of the feminine other in the erotic relationship opens up the mystery, the absolute alterity of every Other. In opening up the alterity of every other, the alterity of the feminine, which is the alterity of sexual difference, opens up the possibility of a relationship of peace with every Other, a relationship and a communication not based on controlling, or knowing, or naming, or any other “synonyms of power.”<sup>25</sup>

If we understand Lévinas’s philosophy in this way, we can see that Beauvoir is wrong in her accusations. Lévinas’s philosophy actually opposes every attempt to name and to know the Other, including every attempt to name the feminine Other. As such it is an ally in the ethical struggle against the oppression of women which is feminism. Beauvoir is correct when she says that Lévinas writes philosophy “deliberately from a man’s point of view,” but he does so deliberately exactly because he does not presume to know and to speak from the woman’s point of view.

In other words, Lévinas writes deliberately from a man’s point of view in order to avoid the type of violence in language that Derrida later claimed was implicit in every language and that Levinas, consequently, could never

possibly avoid.<sup>26</sup> Whether Derrida is correct or not on the inescapability of this violence, he is certainly correct in saying that Lévinas's philosophy hopes to be a purely nonviolent discourse.<sup>27</sup> One way in which he seeks to accomplish this is to use sexual difference to engender a philosophy of respect for and ethical responsibility toward every possible difference, and especially to that ultimate difference, that ultimate alterity, between the self and every Other.

Lévinas's philosophy is a male philosophy, written from a man's point of view (how could it be otherwise?), but perhaps it is the best kind of male philosophy in that in opposing all relations of power with every Other, it opposes every relation of power and oppression between men and women. Whatever the relation between Lévinas's philosophy and feminism, it must be admitted that they are both opposed to the oppression of persons.

Politics, they say, makes strange bedfellows. Feminism, above all else, is a political movement. Lévinas insists that ethics—meaning the establishment of relations between people not of power and control and comprehension, but of ethical responsibility and of peace—should not be considered a branch of philosophy, but must be considered “first philosophy.”<sup>28</sup> This demand for a change of priorities resembles nothing in philosophy so much as it does Engels and Marx's indictment of philosophy as merely interpreting the world, whereas the point is to change it. Lévinas's discourse is an exhortation aimed at changing things, just as is feminist discourse.

As we have seen, Lévinas and the feminists have much in common in the way they want things to change. Both protest violence—discursive and otherwise—against the other. But does this mean that Lévinas provides the feminist movement with a distinctively male voice, as Chanter suggests? Are the feminists and Lévinas, this so thoroughly Judaic philosopher, strange bedfellows dedicated to and joined in the very same political struggle against “the same hatred of the other man, the same anti-semitism?”<sup>29</sup> Can the feminists enlist Lévinas as an ally to their cause as confidently as Chanter does?

It is evident that the passage in *Time and the Other* cited by Beauvoir exonerates Lévinas from her accusations. Other parts of Lévinas's philosophy are indeed troubling to feminists, however, and these should cause anyone concerned with feminism to look with a certain suspicion on Lévinas's philosophy. I refer specifically to Lévinas's use of the masculine language “paternity” and “father” and “son” within his concept of fecundity.

The concept of fecundity is central to Lévinas's interpretation of time in both *Time and the Other* and *Totality and Infinity*. Arguing against Heidegger's concept of time as necessarily finite because it is the structure of finite being, Lévinas seeks to interpret time as infinite. He finds the time of infinity beyond the finite time of the ego in fecundity. Fecundity expresses the fact that the ego, which he calls the “father,” can become both itself and its other through the birth of the child, which he calls the “son.”

The relationship wherein time is infinite, in the sense that it is continually rejuvenated through the regeneration of the father through the son, Lévinas calls "paternity." Paternity accomplishes the return of the masculine ego to itself "through the son."<sup>30</sup> "Paternity," says Lévinas, "is not simply the renewal of the father in the son and the father's merger with him, it is also the father's exteriority in relation to the son, a pluralist existing."<sup>31</sup> Lévinas continues to employ this masculine language in his 1961 work *Totality and Infinity*:

The son resumes the unicity of the father and yet remains exterior to the father: the son is a unique son. Not by number; each son of the father is the unique son, the chosen son. The love of the father for the son accomplishes the sole relation possible with the very unicity of another; and in this sense every love must approach paternal love.

(279)

Lévinas's use of this traditional, patriarchal language is, more than anything else, what makes his philosophy disturbing and problematic to feminism. Two important qualifications must immediately be understood. First, Lévinas would certainly insist that the continuation of the father's ego in the son means also the continuation of the mother's ego in the daughter. All that Lévinas says about the father applies to the mother, and all that he says about the male child also applies to the female child.

Chanter says that "... there is no reason to suppose that paternity implies the empirical presence of a human being of the masculine sex."<sup>32</sup> Not only is there no reason to think that paternity has to involve the male, but this is ruled out by the second qualification—that paternity doesn't refer only to biological fecundity. Lévinas makes this clear every time he writes of fecundity: "Biological fecundity is but one of the forms of paternity. Paternity, as a primordial effectuation of time, can, among men, be borne by the biological life, but be lived beyond that life."<sup>33</sup>

Lévinas distinguishes between the "biological fact of fecundity" and "fecundity in general,"<sup>34</sup> the latter referring to the relation between any two persons wherein a bond is established such that the identity of the ego is maintained and regenerated through the Other. Any relationship of this type is fecund, so that paternity is both a biological fact and, as Lévinas calls it, a "metaphor":

The fact of seeing the possibilities of the other as your own possibilities, of being able to escape the closure of your identity and what is bestowed on you, toward something which is not bestowed on you and which nevertheless is yours—this is paternity.<sup>35</sup>

Granted that Lévinas's designation of this type of relation as "paternity" is only metaphorical and thus does not refer exclusively to "father" and

"son." However, this does not change the fact that Lévinas is employing the patriarchal language of masculine privilege. Although it doesn't trouble Chanter, who seems to be satisfied that this patriarchal language doesn't refer exclusively to men, it would and should cause many feminists to criticize and be suspicious of Lévinas.

It is difficult, if not impossible, to separate Lévinas's religion from Lévinas's philosophy. There is, of course, a certain body of Rabbinic commentaries and essays on the meaning of Judaism that is clearly distinct from his philosophical works. Lévinas himself insists on this distinction,<sup>36</sup> but never does he claim that he leaves religious ideas at the door when he enters into his philosophical writing. Lévinas certainly merits the term philosopher in his philosophical writings, and I do not agree with Derrida's suspicion that the religious themes in Lévinas's work make questionable the identity of his work as philosophy.<sup>37</sup> But it is equally true that Lévinas's philosophy is always Jewish philosophy, is always philosophy written by someone who is deeply informed by and who writes out of the Jewish tradition.

This means that Lévinas writes out of a profoundly sexist and patriarchal tradition,<sup>38</sup> out of a tradition that has perpetuated the evil of the oppression of women. How can we not hear in Lévinas's patriarchal language of "paternity" and of "father" and of "son" an echo of that same evil even in the language of someone who is trying to refute it? Is it mere coincidence, or a matter of innocence, that someone who writes from a tradition that has continually subordinated wives and daughters to the status of second-class citizens refers to the relation of "paternity" wherein the ego of the "father" is perpetuated through the "son"?

In echoing the patriarchal words of the tradition, Lévinas is guilty of at least a certain chauvinistic blindness: he fails to see that it is women who in childbirth have risked and often lost their very lives to ensure that time continues, to ensure that through the child time may achieve the element of infinity Lévinas calls the time of paternity. Lévinas's use of the patriarchal language of "paternity" and "father" and "son" shows a certain forgetting, a certain blindness, and a certain insensitivity. More than this, it makes his philosophy guilty of a certain violence it is constructed to avoid.

The violence implicit in Lévinas's language is not exactly the type of violence that Derrida says Lévinas can never avoid—the violence Derrida says is inescapably in language itself because it is a process of designation, of representation, of naming. The violence implicit in Lévinas's own language of paternity and fecundity is not Derrida's anonymous violence of language itself. It is, to the contrary, the violence Lévinas's own discourse desires most to avoid—violence before the face of an Other. It is the violence embedded not in an anonymous language itself, but in language traditional, patriarchal, and violent.

The example of Lévinas's philosophy shows that male voices have something to contribute to feminism, as Chanter proposes. But it also demonstrates

that feminism always has to be on its guard, always suspicious of even the best male voices, for feminism knows that sexism is still "the gag even the best voices have had to mumble through."<sup>39</sup> Feminism also knows that sexism is an insidious evil that often goes undetected.

Ironically, the question of the relationship between Lévinas's philosophy and feminism may show the truth of Lévinas's own words: "The diabolical is endowed with intelligence and enters where it will. To reject it, it is first necessary to refute it. Intellectual effort is needed to recognize it."<sup>40</sup> One of feminism's responsibilities is to undertake that intellectual effort to recognize sexism. That feminism needs to apply this effort to even the most ethically concerned of contemporary philosophers shows how tireless and vigilant this effort must be.

As we have seen, Lévinas's use of traditional, patriarchal language means that we need to be wary and cognizant of the "echo of evil" within Lévinas's own philosophy. But what does this say about the validity of Lévinas's ethical philosophy? Lévinas, perhaps more than any other contemporary philosopher, has stressed the importance of ethics. Ethics, Lévinas insists, is not a branch of philosophy, but first philosophy, the first issue and the first concern of philosophy and of thought. Lévinas knows better than others that ethics is not merely a concern. It is an agenda.

Lévinas certainly has his own agenda of establishing the primacy of ethical, nonviolent relations between persons. The issue of Lévinas and feminism makes clear, however, that Lévinas's own formulation of his ethical agenda is inadequate. Like Gadamer and the Greek tradition, Lévinas is perhaps too close to and too firmly rooted in the Jewish tradition to be sufficiently critical of it, to hear not only its protests against evil, but also the echoes of evil within it.

This means, at least, that even Lévinas's ethical agenda is not ethical enough. The relation between Lévinas's philosophy and feminism shows that Lévinas's own ethical project of recognizing, refuting, and rejecting evil is at best only half finished, at best only half translated into language and its thought, let alone into action.

## Notes

- 1 Simone de Beauvoir, *Le Deuxième Sexe* (Paris: Librairie Gallimard, 1949) Vol. 1:15; *The Second Sex*, trans. H. M. Parshley (New York: Vintage Books, Random House, 1974), xix.
- 2 See Chanter's essay "Feminism and the Other" in *The Provocation of Lévinas*, Robert Bernasconi and David Wood, eds. (London: Routledge, 1988), 32–56.
- 3 *Ibid.*, 52.
- 4 *Ibid.*
- 5 See Lévinas' major work, *Totality and Infinity* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969 [1961]), 304.

- 6 Emmanuel Lévinas, *Time and the Other* (Paris: Quadrige/Presses Universitaires de France, 1947, 1983).
- 7 Chanter says (36) that "a catalogue of the attributes ascribed to the feminine by Lévinas only serves to reinforce the impression that Lévinas' attitude to women is reactionary.
- 8 Emmanuel Lévinas, *Ethics and Infinity*, translated by Richard Cohen (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1985), 68.
- 9 *The Second Sex*, 15.
- 10 Emmanuel Lévinas, *Existence and Existents*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1978).
- 11 *Ibid.*, 79.
- 12 *Ibid.*
- 13 *Time and the Other*, 79.
- 14 *Ibid.*, 83.
- 15 *Ibid.*, 84.
- 16 *Ibid.*, 86.
- 17 *Ibid.*
- 18 *Ethics and Infinity*, 66.
- 19 *Time and the Other*, 88.
- 20 In fact, in *Time and the Other* (p. 93) Lévinas criticizes Plato for thinking the feminine "within the categories of passivity and activity" instead of in its "specifically erotic notion."
- 21 *Ibid.*, 87.
- 22 *Ibid.*
- 23 Emmanuel Lévinas, *Totality and Infinity*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969).
- 24 *Time and the Other*, 91.
- 25 *Time and the Other*, 90.
- 26 See Jacques Derrida's essay on Lévinas entitled "Violence and Metaphysics" in *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1978).
- 27 Derrida says Lévinas wants a language of "pure invocation, pure adoration, proffering only nouns in order to call to the other from afar." According to Derrida, this would amount to a language not only without "rhetoric," but also without "verb" and "phrase" (*ibid.*, 147).
- 28 *Totality and Infinity*, 304; *Ethics and Infinity*, 97.
- 29 This quotation is taken from Lévinas's dedication to *Otherwise Than Being*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1978), vi. He dedicates this work to the memory of those "who were closest" among the Nazi victims, which would include almost all of his family members in Lithuania, and to all those of all confessions and nations who were victims "of the same hatred of the other man, of the same anti-semitism."
- 30 *Time and the Other*, 92.
- 31 *Ibid.*
- 32 *The Provocation of Lévinas*, 47.
- 33 *Totality and Infinity*, 247.
- 34 *Ibid.*, 306.
- 35 *Ethics and Infinity*, 70.
- 36 See "Ethics of the Infinite" in *Dialogues with Contemporary Continental Thinkers* by Richard Kearney (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984), 54.
- 37 Derrida suggests that Lévinas's entire discourse would collapse "independent of its theological context" (*Writing and Difference*, 103). He also says that Lévinas's

philosophy is really an empiricism and that empiricism "has ever committed but one fault: the fault of presenting itself as a philosophy" (ibid., 151).

- 38 This in no way implies that Christianity is any less a sexist tradition than is Judaism.
- 39 See Adrienne Rich's "Twenty-one Love Poems" in *The Dream of a Common Language* (New York: Norton & Co., 1978), 27. I certainly include my own male voice as something feminism should be suspicious of, especially because I too speak from within a deeply sexist tradition, the Christian tradition.
- 40 See Lévinas's essay on Heidegger's relationship to the Nazis, titled "As If Consenting to Horror," in *Critical Inquiry* (Winter 1989) 15 (2):488.



## FATHERHOOD AND THE PROMISE OF ETHICS

*Kelly Oliver*

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Both Paul Ricoeur and Emmanuel Levinas reject the Freudian/Lacanian association of father with law and instead associate fatherhood with promise. For Ricoeur, fatherhood promises equality through contracts, while for Levinas, fatherhood promises singularity beyond the law. The tension between equality and singularity, between law and something beyond the law, is what is at stake in Derrida's *The Gift of Death*. There, Derrida describes ethics as a paradox between the universal and the individual, between equality and singularity. Kierkegaard's reading of the story of Abraham and Isaac from Genesis is the centerpiece of Derrida's analysis. If we read *The Gift of Death*, with its focus on this story of father and son, in relation to Ricoeur and Levinas on the question of fatherhood, it reads as the culmination of a dialectical tension between the two. And if we read the Abraham story as a legend about father-son relations rather than just a parable of faith, *The Gift of Death* appears to uncover not just the paradoxical logic of ethics but also the uncompromising logic of patriarchy and paternal authority.

### **Paternity begets fraternity**

In "Fatherhood: from Phantasm to Symbol" Ricoeur describes fatherhood as a battle of wills struggling for recognition. He brings together what he calls the different perspectives of psychoanalysis, phenomenology, and religion in order to rearticulate the oedipal situation as a *process* of recognition (rather than a *structure*) which moves from the father as phantasm to the father as symbol and replaces images of real murder with symbolic sacrifice. Through his dialectical analysis, Ricoeur himself attempts to articulate a recognition of fatherhood that moves us away from the phantasm of the

father as castrator to the symbol of the father as compassionate. Relying on Hegelian dialectics, Ricoeur outlines a movement from psychoanalysis's fantastic image of an omnipotent father who must be killed so that the son might live, through *Phenomenology of Spirit's* master-slave dialectic, to the Christian religious representation of the loving father sacrificing Himself through His son for the sake of all His children. In this higher stage of the dialectic of paternity, the murder of the father is replaced by his sacrifice. Oddly, however, Ricoeur's dialectic remains at the level of the master-slave fight to the death, where—without the Hegelian resolution—the only options available to insure the recognition of the father by the son (or the son by the father) are murder or suicide. For Ricoeur, recognition requires death, symbolic if not imaginary, whereas Hegel insists that recognition comes only when the master and slave are willing to risk death but also realize the necessity of avoiding it; mutual recognition cannot be maintained if one of the parties is dead.

For Ricoeur, recognition does not necessitate avoiding death but rather moving away from the realm of the family and the body to the level of the social and the law. In order for the father-son relationship to be one of mutual recognition, the father must sacrifice his absolute authority so that the son might also participate in it. The goal of recognition is equality, which can be achieved only through social contracts that abstract from the particulars of embodied familial relations. One such social operation is designation, which is removed from the realm of the bodily drives that motivate the oedipal scenario. Designation requires the sublimation of bodily drives into abstract laws that can equalize bodies by turning them into symbols.

The move from psychoanalysis to Christianity is a move from a domestic family to a social family: through God the Father's sacrifice of His son, we all become members of the Christian family; we all become children of God. For Ricoeur, it is not that God is the Father because He gives the Law. Rather, the law, the covenant or contract, enables Him to be recognized as father [490]. Ricoeur implicitly rejects the Lacanian association of the Father with the Law or the Name. He claims that there is no Name of the Father. "Father" is not a name but a designation [Ricoeur 485]. And the father's proper name is of little significance to his function as father. So, too, the father is not the Lacanian "no" or the Freudian prohibition. Rather, the law or covenant is a promise and not a prohibition. Moreover, law does not originate with the father but makes his recognition possible. The father is not father before the son, but due to the designation *father* by the son. The father becomes father only in answer to the call of his son.

For Ricoeur, God is not properly designated as *Father* until he is called by the son. It is only after Christ calls Him Father that God is frequently referred to as Father in a significant way in the Bible. Ricoeur points out that God is referred to as Father not in the typical narrative sagas of the Old Testament but in prophetic texts which announce something. He suggests

that in the Old Testament God can be identified as the Father of Israel through God's covenant with Israel. The covenant, that Israel is chosen by God, is both Law and promise. The covenant is a divine contract of sorts. In the New Testament, allusions to God the Father are allusions to the promise of eternal life and the kingdom of heaven. Christ calls to God his Father as a reminder of this covenant with God. God is the Father as the keeper of the covenant; He is promise. Ricoeur argues that in this sense, it is not that the biblical God is a Father because He begets man or creates man or because He is an origin; rather, He is a Father because He is a promise. He is the promise of compassion.

Only after Christ calls to his Father does God become Father. The father-son relationship becomes one of mutual knowledge and recognition when in Matthew 11:27 Christ says, "All things are delivered unto me of my Father: and no man knoweth the Son, but the Father; neither knoweth any man the Father, save the Son, and *he* to whomever, the Son will reveal *him*." Ricoeur interprets this passage as the articulation of the mediation necessary for the recognition of the father: "there is fatherhood because there is sonship, and there is sonship because there is community of spirit" [491]. The father is recognized by the son *through the laws of the community*. The son's designation, "father," is made possible by those laws that promise the end of murder. In Matthew 11:27 Christ articulates his relationship to his Father in terms of the community and a promise of revelation. The son reveals his father *to the community*, and it is this designation by the son that institutes fatherhood.

We might wonder about the mother of God, Mary. Is she mother only when recognized by the son? Or is she mother when recognized by the Father, God? Who recognizes her? Her pregnant body suggests motherhood prior to the son's designation. And if the Father is not father until designated by the son, who is the father of her child before the son's acknowledgment? Is her designation and recognition of the child's father irrelevant?

For Ricoeur, the institution of fatherhood requires the sacrifice of the son for the sake of the Father's other children. Mediated by contracts, the unique relationship between father and son can be annulled such that the force of that relationship applies equally to all other children. Paternity gives way to fraternity. Ricoeur's essay suggests that God's promise, his covenant or law, is fulfilled with the sacrifice of His son, which in turn equalizes all God's children in His eyes. Through the fulfillment of the covenant, through Christ, all of God's children are brothers. In other words, the contract takes priority away from the bond between father and son; that bond is sacrificed for the sake of equalizing relationships. The father promises that law will replace blood and that the law will make all men brothers. Ultimately, then, God's law is the promise of equality guaranteed through contracts, both divine and social.

The marriage contract acts as the link between the divine and the social. Sanctioned by God, the marriage contract is recognized by the larger secular social community. The father is part of a family, which is first recognized as a community by the larger community through the marriage contract [480]. The marriage contract mediates the father-son relationship, makes it social, and promises equality through contracts.

But Ricoeur overlooks the failure of contracts to provide equality. While Ricoeur moves the recognition of fatherhood from the family into the social in order to formulate a notion of recognition between father and son as equals that does not reproduce the power hierarchy of the oedipal scenario with its murderous revenge, he does not analyze the inequities in these legal and social contracts that might make this type of recognition impossible. In order to claim that contracts insure equality, Ricoeur must assume that all of the parties to a contract enter the agreement as equals.<sup>1</sup> For although contracts attempt to insure equality on some levels, they cover over inequalities on many other levels. For example, the marriage contract (not to mention the social contract in general), which for Ricoeur is the contract that defines fatherhood, has a history of defining its parties unequally. Men and women have not been equal parties to the marriage contract or the social contract in general. When Ricoeur discusses mutual recognition and equality, they are always only between fathers and sons, fathers and sons who become brothers through the social contract which excludes full participation by or recognition of their mothers and sisters.

It is ironic that Ricoeur defines the father-son relationship in terms of symbolic contracts when we consider that the child-custody contracts that mediate many father-child relationships in the United States do not necessarily result in equality or recognition.<sup>2</sup> In the United States, state welfare agencies spend much of their time trying to track down fathers in order to collect child support. In fact, the legal and economic mediation in the relation between father and children can lead to further alienation and resentment.

Finally, Ricoeur denies the significance of embodiment or physical generation in favor of abstract law/promise. Ricoeur adds that to recognize the father and the mother through their contractual union is also to recognize them through their sexual union. For Ricoeur, sexuality that conceives the family is recognized as the "carnal dimension" of the contract [480]. Although he acknowledges the "carnal dimension," he insists that it can only lead to murder. To prevent murder, we must move beyond bodies and fantasies to symbols. "Begetting is a matter of nature, fatherhood of designation. It is necessary that the blood tie be loosened, be marked by death, in order that fatherhood be truly instituted" [471].

But Ricoeur overlooks that even God's law is founded in blood. God's promise, the covenant, is a promise made on the basis of blood and constantly reaffirmed through blood, as a sign of generation and of fertility. There is

no law, no covenant without blood. The story of Moses, the receiver of the law, is full of blood—the Passover blood, Zipporah's circumcision of Greshom, the ox blood after the tablets are given. The promise that Ricoeur identifies with Christ and God's sacrifice, which replaces murder, is marked by Christ's blood, symbolized by wine in the Eucharist. Law, especially as promise, cannot be separated from the body and its blood.

For Ricoeur, the dialectic of fatherhood reaches its highest stage when the body becomes symbol, when blood becomes wine. Then fatherhood is no longer the murderous oedipal fantasy but a symbol mediated by social laws that guarantee the equality of brothers. Murder gives way to sacrifice, hatred to compassion. Paternity begets fraternity. But isn't this just another repetition of the psychoanalytic story? In *Totem and Taboo*, Freud describes social fraternity as the result of brothers banding together to murder their father, eat his flesh, and stay together through their shared and repeated guilt. The oedipal situation inaugurates the social, which makes sublimation and repression through guilt possible and necessary.

Christian compassion and its foundation in promises, laws, and contracts take on a different hue when viewed in the light of Nietzsche's *On the Genealogy of Morals*. There Nietzsche describes Christian compassion as the ultimate cruelty, beginning with legal contracts and ending with the unpayable debt and eternal guilt that result from God's sacrifice. On his analysis, the sacrificial economy produces more guilt than murder ever could. Rather than equalize the father-son relationship or make all men brothers equal to Christ, God's sacrifice increases the paternal authority that commands the sons' obedience and guilt. The promise of equality is nothing more than the bloody ransom offered in exchange for a body already become corpse.

### Paternity as infinite singularity

Like Ricoeur, Emmanuel Levinas proposes a notion of paternity that cannot be reduced to law or threats but must be a promise. Like Ricoeur, he proposes an ontology of paternity that takes us beyond the Freudian psychoanalysis of paternity, which he claims reduces sexuality and paternity to pleasure and egology. Unlike Ricoeur, however, for Levinas, the promise of paternity is a promise not of recognition but of nonrecognition, of strangeness, of an open future, of infinity, of singularity. The promise of paternity is not Ricoeur's promise that from a dead father the son will inherit his designation, that the son will also be recognized by his son as father, or the Freudian promise that the son will inherit his power. It is not a promise from the past, a promise that returns to itself. Rather, the promise of paternity, as Levinas describes it, is a promise of an open future, the promise that the son is to his father. Although on Levinas's analysis there is an analogy between death and paternity, fatherhood requires neither murder

nor sacrifice. Paternity is a special case of alterity that can inform all other relations. It is the only relation in which the self becomes other and survives.

For Levinas, paternity does not reestablish the Hegelian battle of the wills, each seeking recognition from the other. Ricoeur's notion that it does takes us back to a tragic egoity that enables unity at the expense of multiplicity: there is only one king, father or son. For Levinas, paternity does not return us to a battle of wills that reinscribes the subject and turns the self back onto itself even in the operation of self-dispossession and abandonment, which Ricoeur calls sacrifice. Rather, paternity opens up a different structure of subjectivity that opens the self onto the other. The structure of the subject in an erotic relationship moves the self beyond the ego and its exclusivity.

Paternity begins with Eros and fecundity. Yet Eros and fecundity are ontologically anchored in paternity. For Levinas, Eros and fecundity have their telos in paternity. Eros is possible because of sexual difference, which is neither a contradiction between two nor a complementarity between two. Eros is an event of alterity, a relationship with what is absent in the very moment at which everything is there. Even in an experience that seems to completely fill the universe with itself, the caress seeks something other. The caress is directed not toward another body but toward a space that transcends through the body and a time that Levinas describes as a future never future enough [254]. In the erotic relationship the caress is directed toward the future, *the forever and always of promises of love*, a future that is never future enough to fulfill such promises.

The relationship with the other is such a promise, a promise that cannot be fulfilled, a paradoxical promise whose fulfillment would destroy the promise. And this promise is time. For Levinas, time is not constituted as a series of nows; it is not constituted in the present or by an ego. Rather, time is the absent promise in the relation with the other; it is the not yet, the always still to come. It is the time of love, the infinite engendered through finite beings coming together. "Love seeks what does not have the structure of an existent, the infinitely future, what is to be engendered" [Levinas 266]. Love seeks what is beyond any possible union between two. Love seeks the "transubstantiation" which engenders the child [266]. Engendering the child is an inherent element in the structure of the erotic relationship; the erotic relationship is defined as fecundity. Paternity, made possible through a relationship with the feminine, opens the masculine subject onto infinite time and returns him to the ethical relationship.

For Levinas, in the masculine erotic relationship, the other beyond the subject's control is the feminine other; fecundity necessitates a relationship with a feminine other. This feminine other is a prerequisite for moving outside of oneself: "But the encounter with the Other as feminine is required in order that the future of the child come to pass from beyond the possible, beyond projects. This relationship resembles that which was described for

the idea of infinity: I cannot account for it by myself, as I do account for the luminous world by myself" [Levinas 267]. The transubstantiation of the father by the son is possible only by virtue of the feminine other. Man needs woman to beget a son. More than this, it would seem, the infinite time opened up between father and son through paternity is possible by virtue of the movement through the cyclical, nonlinear, time of the feminine. Paternity moves the (male) subject outside of time through the mediation of another time, the cyclical time of life. Paternity conquers "father time" by moving through the feminine.

Paternity opens the subject onto infinite time in various ways. The discontinuity of generations brings with it inexhaustible youth, each generation replacing the one before it. In addition to this chronology, which stretches indefinitely through time, the ontology of paternity sets up the subject within infinite time. The space between the father and the son opens up infinite time. Not only the discontinuity of generations which promises continued youth, but also the transubstantiation of the father in the son, opens the subject to an other. "[T]he father discovers himself not only in the gestures of his son, but in his substance and his unicity" [267]. In this way the father discovers himself in the son and yet discovers that his son is distinct, a stranger.

Through the transubstantiation of the I, Levinas says that paternity accomplishes desire. It does not satisfy desire, which is impossible, but accomplishes it by engendering it and by engendering another desiring being, the son. Paternity engenders desire, which is the infinite time of the absolutely other. The time of the other is infinite as compared to the finite time of the self. In relationship with the child, the subject is opened onto infinity: "The relation with the child—that is, the relation with the other that is not a power, but fecundity—establishes a relationship with the absolute future, or infinite time" [Levinas 268]. Paternity, with its generation and generations, literally opens onto infinite time, a time beyond death. That future is the infinite desire which is present as a desire for desire itself infinitely extended into a future that is never future enough. What Levinas calls goodness is associated with the infinity of desire engendered by paternity. In paternity desire maintained as insatiate desire, that is, as goodness, is accomplished" [272]. Paternity is the link between desire and goodness, Eros and ethics. Since unlike need, it can never be satisfied, erotic desire is accomplished in engendering a son, a son who embodies desire. In this sense, desire engenders itself [269]. For Levinas, the desire of the caress in the erotic relationship is ultimately resolved in paternity: "This unparalleled relation between two substances, where a beyond substances is exhibited, is resolved in paternity" [271]. From the beyond, from desire, two substances create another desiring substance, the son.

More than the continuation of the substance of the father in the son, as the word *transubstantiation* might suggest, paternity is a transubstantiation

of subjectivity itself. Paternity transforms subjectivity from the subject as "I-can," who sees himself as the center of meaning and values—the constitutor of the world—to a subject beholden to and responsible for the other. This form of transubstantiation takes us beyond substance. The subject or I is not a substance but a response. The paternal subject is not Husserl's, Sartre's, or Ricoeur's virile "I-know," "I-can," or "I-will" but a response to the other who opens up a radically different time, a time beyond the "I-know," "I-can," or "I-will." Levinas says that the relationship with the son through fecundity "articulates the time of the absolutely other, an alternation of the very substance of him who can—his transubstantiation" [269].

The relationship of paternity is unique in that the I breaks free of itself without ceasing to be I; it is the only relationship in which the self becomes other and survives [278]. The I breaks free of the ego, of what ties it to itself, so that it can reach out to another, even become another, become other to itself. This process of becoming other to itself opens up the possibility beyond its own possibilities, an openness to an undetermined future. "Fecundity is part of the very drama of the I. The intersubjective reached across the notion of fecundity opens up a place where the I is divested of its tragic egoity, which turns back to itself, and yet is not purely and simply dissolved into the collective. Fecundity evinces a unity that is not opposed to multiplicity, but, in the precise sense of the term, engenders it" [273].

On Levinas's analysis the father discovers himself in the gestures, the substance, the very uniqueness of his son. This discovery of himself in the son is not Ricoeur's recognition; the father does not recognize himself in his son, but *discovers* himself, finds himself for the first time. Paternity engenders the father as much as it does the son. Fecundity gives birth not only to the son but also to the father. In relation to his son, who is both himself and not himself, the father discovers his own subjectivity. As he realizes that his son is distinct, a stranger, he discovers that he too is distinct, even a stranger to himself.

Rather than establish the equal and mutual recognition of father and son, or brothers for that matter, Levinas's notion of paternity establishes the uniqueness of the subject in relationship with an other. The father/son relationship is characterized not by law-bound recognition but by outlaw singularity. What Levinas calls "paternal election," which chooses from among equals, makes the subject unique precisely by recalling the nonuniqueness of the equals from which this one was chosen. The father chooses the son after he has had no choice. His love *elects* this particular child in his uniqueness as the loved one, the one meant to be. In this regard, Levinas suggests that all love for another person must approach paternal love insofar as it elects the loved one from among all others. Because this love makes the loved one unique, it is necessary rather than contingent.<sup>3</sup>



And this love is not for a limited time only, but for all time, for a future never future enough, for infinite time.

At this point, we might wonder why the relationship with a lover does not provide the same kind of uniqueness as the father-son relationship. Strangely enough, it seems that for Levinas the feminine lover is neither radically other nor the same, and both conditions are required for the uniqueness identified with the father-son relationship. It is as much the son's sameness as the son's difference that engenders the uncanny otherness experienced by the father in this relationship. While the feminine lover may be unique and chosen by her lover, she is neither other nor the same because she is not fully human. For Levinas, the fecund relationship with a woman has its goal in the child, more particularly, a son. The paternal relationship, however, is higher than the lover's relationship because it is social. The lovers' relationship takes place at the level of laughter and caresses and not language proper. Levinas describes the beloved woman as "silly" and "infantile," her face fading into animality; making love with her is like playing with a "young animal" [263].

For Ricoeur and Levinas, paternity is always described as a father/son relationship. Even for Derrida in *The Gift of Death*, the paradox and promise of ethics is represented in the story of a father/son relationship, the story of Abraham. But, if fatherhood is a promise for the future, could this future be a daughter? Or does this future have to be a son? Three-quarters of the way through *The Gift of Death*, Derrida makes a short detour through woman that suggests these questions. He comments on the absence of women:

*It is difficult not to be struck by the absence of woman in these two monstrous yet banal stories [Abraham and Bartelby]. It is a story of father and son, of masculine figures, of hierarchies among men (God the father, Abraham, Isaac . . . ). Would the logic of sacrificial responsibility within the implacable universality of the law, of its law, be altered, inflected, attenuated, or displaced, if a woman were to intervene in some consequential manner? Does the system of this sacrificial responsibility and of the double "gift of death" imply at its very basis an exclusion or sacrifice of woman?*

[75-76]

Derrida raises these provocative questions about woman as if to trouble his own text, which (apart from these questions) avoids woman. . . . Even Kierkegaard worries about Sarah.

Recall that for Levinas the father discovers himself in the son, who is both himself and a stranger. Through the son, the father becomes other and yet survives as himself. He discovers himself in his son's gestures, substance, and uniqueness. His subjectivity itself is transformed through this

relationship with an other who is him and not him. But could the father discover himself in the daughter? Could she be the future promised by paternity?

Levinas emphasizes that it is the otherness of the son that pulls the father out of himself toward infinity. Yet it is the *sameness* of the son that allows the movement without shattering the father's subjectivity altogether. Ultimately, it is the sameness between father and son that allows for the father to discover himself and his uniqueness through his son. The father identifies with his son. And paternal love is the father's election of this son from among equal "brothers." Paternal election makes biology irrelevant. So, it is not just the biological substance of the son that makes him like and unlike his father; it is something about the son *qua* son. The father chooses this son, and that election makes him unique; in turn the son's uniqueness makes the father unique. Through their relationship, both are singular, yet the discovery of their singularity has its basis in their sameness.

Levinas suggests that paternity opens onto infinity because it is a relationship with an absolute other in which the I survives. But the I survives because paternity is also a relationship with the same. The father is his son, and yet the son is a stranger to the father: the paternal relationship makes him a stranger to himself. Yet how can the son be an absolute other if he is also the same? Is it the son's difference or his sameness that restructures the I through paternity? Wouldn't a daughter be a stranger child? Because of sexual difference and the nonlinear, cynical effects of feminine time, wouldn't the daughter be other enough to open up an infinite future? For Levinas desire is possible only in a relationship with an absolute other. Paternity engenders desire and thereby returns the erotic relationship to the ethical. Yet doesn't this paternal desire fall back into need if the son returns the father always to himself?

If, however, it is otherness that opens onto infinity and the possibility of radical surprise and the rupture of linear time, then couldn't, shouldn't, the future be a daughter? If paternal election is what makes the son unique and therefore what makes the father unique, then could the father choose a daughter? Should we interpret Levinas literally in his discussion of the paternal election of a son? If so, paternal election provides an image of the father's choice not only of a particular child but also of a son in particular. Unless the daughter cannot be other because like the feminine in the erotic relationship she is subhuman, more like an animal, then the paternal discovery in her *could* be based on the otherness that opens the future to possibility.<sup>4</sup>

For Levinas, it seems to go without saying that the father chooses a son rather than a daughter. The fact that he is a son is not what makes him unique; he is unique because he is *this* son chosen from amongst *brothers*. All children are brothers, but only this one is my son. Could the transubstantiation of the father take place in relation to a daughter? Would the

father discover himself in his daughter's substance, gestures, and uniqueness? And if the father does not, or cannot, elect a daughter, then doesn't the fantasy that she is unwanted, an accident, unloved, should-have-been-otherwise, become devastating for her? If the father cannot elect a daughter, then we always get more of the same and never anything/anyone different. The singularity engendered by paternity is the singularity of the masculine. In spite of the illusion that the same can maintain itself, ultimately, without difference, without daughters, mothers, wives—it cannot.

### **The paradox of ethics uncovers paternal authority**

*But the distance of the commentary is not neutral. What he comments upon is consonant with a whole network of affirmations which are his, or those of him, "he."*

—Jacques Derrida, "At This Very Moment Here I Am"

Negotiating sameness and difference or equality and singularity is at the center of Derrida's *The Gift of Death*. Whereas Ricoeur presents the father/son relationship as a relation of mutual recognition through law that insures equality, and Levinas presents the father/son relationship as a discovery of oneself through a relation to the other that insures singularity, Derrida discusses a father/son relationship that puts equality and singularity into conflict. While for Ricoeur, relations are necessarily mediated by contracts, laws, and ethics, for Levinas, ethics is prior to the law and makes law possible. But for Derrida, ethics is a paradox between law and the impossibility of law. Derrida suggests that the father has a duty to his son through the law, which allows for designations as well as names; but the father also has a duty that cannot be named or designated, an absolute duty unmediated by law. These two duties—the duty to respect the equality before the law and the duty to respect the singularity of the individual—conflict. This conflict is the heart of the story of a father caught between his Father and his son, the biblical story of Abraham.

Although it remains in the background of Derrida's analysis, it is significant that Abraham is *promised* a son, Isaac, in his old age. Since his wife Sarah is too old to conceive, Isaac is a miracle. God promises that Abraham will have a son who will be the father of many generations of Israel. For Abraham, Isaac holds out God's promise of generations to come. So why does God ask Abraham to sacrifice Isaac? Does the promise of fatherhood, the promise of generations, require sacrifice? God, the Father, asks his son for a sacrifice. On Kierkegaard's analysis in *Fear and Trembling*, Abraham must give up the ethical or the law for the sake of a higher religious realm. Abraham is in the paradoxical position of believing in the promise of Isaac and believing that he will kill Isaac. Abraham believes the impossible; he believes in what Kierkegaard calls the paradox of faith. So, Abraham is the

father of faith. For Kierkegaard this paradoxical belief moves Abraham out of the realm of ethics and into the realm of religion or faith. For Derrida this paradoxical belief is the core of ethics, which necessarily straddles the universal and the individual.

In the background of both Kierkegaard's and Derrida's texts is another crucial factor: there are at least two father/son relationships in this story, Abraham/Isaac and God/Abraham. When we see the relationship between God and Abraham as another father/son relationship, we read a different story. Derrida reads Abraham's relationship to God as a relationship to the wholly other, while he reads Abraham's paternal relationship to Isaac as a relationship of duty to family and law. This is Abraham's conflict. Derrida characterizes the dilemma in terms of an absolute duty to God which conflicts with an ethical duty to Isaac, Abraham's family, and society.

*The Gift of Death* is about the aporia of ethics, responsibility, secrecy, sacrifice, death, gift-giving, and faith. At the beginning of the book, Derrida uses Jan Patočka's *Heretical Essays on the Philosophy of History* to link secrecy and responsibility. Following Patočka, Derrida concludes that "the history of the responsible self is built upon the heritage and *patrimony* of secrecy, through a chain reaction of ruptures and repressions that assure the very tradition they punctuate with their interruptions" [7, my emphasis]. The secret is a secret inherited from the father, the patrimony of secrecy. The secret is the mystery of orgiastic practices that are repressed and incorporated by/into philosophy. And, as Patočka makes it out, the secret or mystery itself is maternal. Describing the way in which Plato incorporates the mystery, Patočka says, "the cavern is a vestige of the subterranean place for gathering of mysteries; it is the lap of the earth-mother. The new thinking inaugurated by Plato involves the desire to forsake the lap of the earth-mother in order to set out upon the pure 'path of light,' hence to completely subordinate the orgiastic to responsibility" [qtd. in Derrida 11]. The earth-mother, it turns out, is kept secret by the patrimony from fathers and sons.

Derrida tells us that for Patočka the demonic mystery is hidden within responsibility and that this mystery is associated with "orgiastic irresponsibility" [20]. The awakening from the mystery is the ability to keep a secret. The idea is that if one is to keep a secret, one needs to have a sense of responsibility and conscience. Now, if the mystery and orgiastic irresponsibility are associated with the earth-mother and the secret is a patrimony, then the awakening is the ability of fathers to keep the maternal element a secret. The secret of life is that it originates with mothers and the earth. The secret passed down from father to son is the secret gift of life given by the mother and the earth. But this secret is not articulated. Rather, this is the type of secret rendered invisible through practices of repression and incorporation within the patriarchy. In order for fathers and sons to take responsibility, the mother's gift of life must not be spoken. In order for

fathers and sons to become responsible subjects, they must forget that the earth-mother is responsible for their very lives. Only if "she" is irresponsible, can they be responsible.

In Derrida's text, the father (Abraham/God) gives the gift of death, which turns out to be the same as the gift of life. The gift of death is the willingness to sacrifice that which one loves for an other, to give up one's own life or the life of one's son, in this case, for an other. Abraham is willing to sacrifice Isaac, whom he loves (as Genesis reminds us several times), to God. And God sacrifices his son, Christ, for the lives of all of His children. In Christ's case, the gift of death is put forth as a gift of life.<sup>5</sup> Still, to equate giving one's life for another, or dying so that another might live, or sacrificing that which one loves for the other, with the maternal gift of life is to incorporate and repress that fundamental gift. The rituals and ceremonies of sacrificial sons render invisible the secret maternal sacrifice. But there is no gift of death without the gift of life. In this story, as in many others, the power to give death is the father's. The father can believe that the gift of death, within *his* own power, is the same as the gift of life. He can believe that by giving death it is HE who gives life. But as Irigaray says, this belief covers up the truth.<sup>6</sup>

In order for the father to be responsible, the mother cannot be. But, as Derrida maintains, the father's responsibility is a paradox. Because of the contradiction at the core of responsibility, he is always guilty and never responsible enough.

*Guilt is inherent in responsibility because responsibility is always unequal to itself: one is never responsible enough. One is never responsible enough because one is finite but also because responsibility requires two contradictory movements. It requires one to respond as oneself and as irreplaceable singularity, to answer for what one does, says, gives; but it also requires that, being good and through goodness, one forget or efface the origin of what one gives.*

[Gift of Death 51]

Responsibility requires that one respond as one's finite self and as infinite singularity; responsibility requires both confessing that one's actions originate with oneself and forgetting that one's actions originate in oneself.

Of course, if we reinterpret Derrida's remarks in light of my hypothesis that the secret of responsibility is the life-giving mother, they take on a new meaning. The life-giving mother is the secret origin of the gift of life which must be forgotten. The guilt inherent in responsibility could be the guilt involved in the matricide which makes it possible for the father/son to claim responsibility (for life). He must respond as if he alone is responsible; he is singularly responsible (otherwise the responsibility is not his). Yet he must forget or efface the origin of that which he gives because that which he

gives, the gift of life/death, is also from the mother; he must forget that at its origin he alone is not responsible (for life). Within the frame of Derrida's text, this contradiction is the aporia of responsibility. Responsibility requires both substitution and nonsubstitution: "For responsibility . . . demands on the one hand an accounting, a general answering-for-oneself with respect to the general and before the generality, hence the idea of substitution, and, on the other hand, uniqueness, absolute singularity, hence nonsubstitution, nonrepetition, silence, and secrecy" [61].

In other words, responsibility has two sides which come into conflict with each other. On the one hand, to hold someone or yourself responsible is to account for and justify his/her/your actions. On the other hand, to be absolutely responsible implies that you alone are responsible, that you have a unique relationship to your obligation which cannot be accounted for, justified, or explained; your responsibility, if it is truly yours, is unique and cannot be understood in terms of any universal laws, principles, or language. Absolute responsibility requires secrecy because the "secret" obligation defies words; it cannot be spoken even if one were to try.

When Abraham is called by God, he answers, "here I am," presenting himself to do God's bidding.<sup>7</sup> His words say everything and nothing about his response to God. Because he is answering to God, the Absolute, out of an absolute responsibility, the appropriate response for Abraham is silence. If, however, he were testifying in a court of law, out of a general responsibility Abraham would be required to speak. In one case the appropriate response is to speak, while in the other the appropriate response is to remain silent.

This is why when Abraham speaks, he does so (according to Kierkegaard) ironically. When Isaac asks his father, "where is the ram for the sacrifice?" he replies, "God will provide." He neither lies nor justifies the situation to Isaac—he both says something and says nothing at the same time. Irony is what is said and not said at the same time. So it is not by accident, in an apparent digression on woman in the middle of this text, that Derrida quotes Hegel, saying, "woman is the eternal irony of the community"—she is what is said and not said.

Ethics is "an insoluble and paradoxical contradiction between responsibility *in general* and *absolute* responsibility" [*Gift of Death* 61]. General responsibility requires the sacrifice of absolute responsibility, and absolute responsibility requires the sacrifice of general responsibility. And various philosophers have told us that *both* require the sacrifice of women. Hegel, for example, describes how general responsibility, or ethics, requires the sacrifice of the family, including woman, wife, and sister:

*Human law in its universal existence is the community, in its activity in general is the manhood of the community, in its real and effective activity is the government. It is, moves, and maintains itself by consuming and*

*absorbing into itself. . . families presided over by womankind, and by keeping them dissolved in the fluid continuity of its own nature . . . it creates for itself in what it suppresses and what is at the same time essential to it an internal enemy—womankind in general.*

[Hegel 288]

And, for Freud, women are opposed to civilization and any sort of general responsibility or law of society:

*women soon come into opposition to civilization and display their retarding and restraining influence . . . [t]he work of civilization has become increasingly the business of men . . . His constant association with men, and his dependence on his relations with them, even estrange him from his duties as a husband and father. Thus the woman finds herself forced into the background by the claims of civilization and she adopts a hostile attitude towards it.*

[Freud 50–51, my emphasis]

In these scenarios, duties to law, ethics, and society conflict with duties to women and families.

With Derrida's reading of the Abraham story (following Kierkegaard), we have another conflict: between duties to women and family—now seen as part of the law or ethical—and duties to the Absolute, God. Abraham must leave his family behind. He must be willing to destroy his family for the sake of his absolute responsibility to God. It is almost as if generalizing a law of family relations or sexual relations requires reinstating a higher duty so that women and families will once more be sacrificed. If man's first duty is not to his society, then it is to his God, and both require the sacrifice of women.

Yet, in Derrida's reading of (Levinas's reading of) Kierkegaard's reading of Genesis, God is not outside of the family scene. Rather, in Derrida's text God is also figured as a father. The duty to God as father is not a duty to an absolute and wholly other. Abraham is also a father and through fatherhood he shares something with God. In fact, Abraham inherits the patrimony of secrecy, which he must pass on to his own son, from God.

According to the story told by Derrida, repeating Kierkegaard, Abraham's duty to God the Father is absolute and needs no justification. Why? Why can the Father command without justification? Why is the Father's authority without question or accountability? Within patriarchy, isn't it always the father's prerogative to issue commands without justification? When the son happens to talk back and ask why, as in the case of Moses, his Father threatens him with death. The father doesn't have to justify himself. When the child asks "why?," it is enough for the father to say "because I am your father, that's why." Is the command from the Patriarch really the command

from the wholly other that resonates from Levinas's texts through Derrida's? Insofar as God is figured as Father, he is not wholly other; rather, he is essentially the same in his relation to his son.

Abraham's conflict is not only a conflict between general responsibility to all others and absolute responsibility to the wholly other God. It is a conflict between duties to Father and son. He has a duty to protect and love his son. He has a duty to obey and love his Father. His Father commands him to sacrifice his son. And ultimately it is for the sake of his son, for the sake of his patrimony, that Abraham obeys God the Father. If the son obeys the father's absolute, yet outlaw, authority it is because one day he will be the father and inherit that authority. This is the promise of paternity within patriarchy. Once we read God as a father, isn't the Abraham story another version of Freud's oedipal drama where the son must defer to the father's authority, must castrate himself, in order to avoid castration? This autocastration is the ceremony which seals the promise that the father's omnipotence be passed on to his son. As Kierkegaard says, Abraham is "great by reason of his power whose strength is impotence" [31]. The son's impotence is demanded in the face of the Father's potency; but the son's impotence buys him the patrimony of potency.

Derrida indicates at one point that Abraham's sacrifice of law and family, of everything that is his own, moves him outside of economy. But if his sacrifice is made at the command of the ultimate Patriarch, God the Father, then the son is only protecting what is his own by giving in. His sacrifice is made in the name of fatherhood, for the sake of preserving the authority of fatherhood. He sacrifices the present for the future, his own future and the future of his son. The paradox is that God asks Abraham to sacrifice his son, his heir, for the sake of paternal authority and his/His heirs. The paradox is that Abraham is both father (to Isaac) and son (to God) at the same time. He has the authority to take Isaac up Mount Moriah, bind him, and raise the knife over his head. Isaac goes along with it because Abraham is his father, whom he obeys and loves, just as Abraham goes along with his Father, God, whom he obeys and loves. So Abraham is the father of faith. But Isaac, the son, also has faith in his fathers. He is the one who lays his life on the line with his obedience and faith. The Abraham story is a lesson in the son's obedience to paternal authority. The father's responsibility for the gift of life, his authorship, is acknowledged through the son's obedience.

Derrida can suggest that the gift of life and the gift of death amount to the same thing because ultimately it is the father's gift of the death of the mother that promises life to the son. The son submits to the father because of the promise that someday he will inherit everything and take over the position of patriarch. The promise of fatherhood is made through the sacrifice of mothers and their daughters.<sup>8</sup> We hear the echo of Derrida's haunting questions: "Would the logic of sacrificial responsibility within the implacable



universality of the law, of its law, be altered, inflected, attenuated, or displaced, if a woman were to intervene in some consequential manner? Does the system of this sacrificial responsibility and of the double 'gift of death' imply at its very basis an exclusion or sacrifice of woman?" [76].

### Notes

- 1 Brenkman points out that Ricoeur assumes that contracts take place between equals [45].
- 2 Although I cannot develop issues around child custody laws here, I present a more detailed analysis of child custody laws in this same context in *Family Values, Subjects between Nature and Culture*.
- 3 In *Family Values, Subjects between Nature and Culture*, I diagnose the attempts of both Ricoeur and Levinas to cover over the contingent and chance aspects of paternity as a fear of what I call an *abject father*.
- 4 Some of his contemporaries have criticized Levinas for sacrificing the feminine for the masculine subject's ascent into the ethical relationship through paternity. See Catherine Chaliel, *Figures du féminin: Lecture d'Emmanuel Levinas* (1982); Luce Irigaray, "The Fecundity of the Caress" (1993), and "Questions to Emmanuel Levinas" (1991).
- 5 In the last section of *Marine Lover of Friedrich Nietzsche*, "When the Gods are Born," Luce Irigaray argues that Christ's suffering on the cross and his bleeding side are masculine appropriations of the mother's suffering and the blood of childbirth through which she gives life.
- 6 Irigaray makes this argument in "Belief Itself."
- 7 Responsibility is a matter of response. In both German (*Verantwortung*) and French (*responsabilité*) the words for *responsibility* have a stronger connotation of "response" than in English. The Latin *respondeo* means "to answer" and in the legal sense means "to answer one's name or be present before the law."
- 8 One of *Diacritics's* reviewers made the interesting comment that if fatherhood is defined in terms of exogamic rather than endogamic relationships then the feminine circulates differently and mothers and daughters have different exchange values.

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## A SINGULAR JUSTICE

## Ethics and politics between Levinas and Derrida

*Diane Perpich*Source: *Philosophy Today* 42, Supplement (1998): 59–70.

The problem of the relation between ethics and politics in the philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas is, above all, the problem of a singular justice: can there be an abstract principle or law that does justice to the absolute singularity of the other who faces me? Levinas has often suggested that, left to itself, politics becomes tyranny insofar as it is an impersonal justice which judges according to universal rules, without regard for the singularity of *this* other. Justice, he argues, is able to retain a meaning—that is, to remain just—only where it is oriented to and by the ethical relationship, only where it is checked and criticized starting from the ethical relation to a face.<sup>1</sup> But is such an ethically informed politics possible if “ethics” indicates a relation to transcendent alterity, or to unmediated singularity, and “politics” refers to a relation under the law, necessarily mediated, abstract, and universal? Can there be an ethical politics, or do the terms of this relation exclude one another with a rigor and systematicity whose logic would be unbreachable?

In *Adieu à Emmanuel Levinas*,<sup>2</sup> Jacques Derrida extends his recent reflection on the political (undertaken in such works as *Of Spirit*, *Specters of Marx*, and *Politics of Friendship*) through a consideration of the problem of ethics and politics in Levinas’s thought. The volume is composed of two essays: the first, titled simply “Adieu,” was delivered at Levinas’s funeral in December of 1995; the second, “A Word of Welcome,” was the opening address one year later at a conference in homage to Levinas held at the Sorbonne. In this latter address, Derrida proposes a re-reading of Levinas’s ethics as a meditation on “hospitality” and “the welcome,” and takes as his guiding concern the relation between an “ethics of hospitality” and a “law or a politics of hospitality” (*Adieu* 45). As is well-known, Levinas’s thought devotes far less attention to the problem of the political than it does to the question of the meaning of the ethical. While a redescription and

reinterpretation of the ethical relationship as a relation to absolute alterity is undeniably central to Levinas's two major works, comparatively little is said in these same texts about the political relation *per se*, or about the central themes and questions of political theory. It is often asked, in consequence, whether Levinas's ethics can serve as the ground for politics, and what sorts of determinate political institutions and systems would be consistent with or derivable from his description of the relation to the Other. The originality of Derrida's manner of posing the question of the relation of ethics to politics consists, first of all, in abandoning this canonical form of the question and the figure of a "legitimizing foundation" on which it depends (*Adieu* 45). Derrida writes,

Let us assume, *concesso non dato*, that there is no assured passage, following the order of a foundation, following the hierarchy of founding and founded, of principal originarity and derivation, between an ethics or a first philosophy of hospitality, on the one hand, and a law or politics of hospitality on the other. Let us assume that one cannot *deduce* from Levinas's ethical discourse on hospitality a law and a politics.

(*Adieu* 45–46)

The idea here is not simply to dismiss the possibility of grounding politics in ethics; nor is it to claim that Levinas's rethinking of the ethical, in particular, cannot serve as the ground for a determinate politics or political theory. Indeed, Derrida admits that the question of such a foundation in relation to Levinas's thought is "surely serious, difficult, and necessary" (*Adieu* 45). However, he also argues that in this canonical form, the question is overdetermined, since it occludes any understanding of the relationship between politics and ethics in terms other than those of a foundation.

Derrida's suspension of the question of a foundation is effectively an attempt to see the question of the relation of ethics to politics as itself "suspensive" (*Adieu* 45), that is, as permitting no resolution that would establish the primacy of one term over the other. Assuming further that this impossibility is not merely a failure, in the sense of an omission or lack that could be made good through the restoration of a missing link, or through an extension or expansion of Levinas's ethics, the question for Derrida becomes how to interpret the "hiatus" or "lacuna" between the ethical and the political (*Adieu* 46). In what sense is this hiatus constitutive for the relation of politics to ethics, and in what way does it transform our understanding of the political? What would this impossibility of a resolution, this impossibility of founding, deducing, or deriving the political from the ethical *mean*? "If there is no lack here," Derrida writes, "would not such a hiatus in effect require us to think law and politics otherwise?" (*Adieu* 46).

In pursuing the meaning of the hiatus, Derrida traces the complex logic of a "double-bind" in which the demand for justice originates necessarily from

within ethical responsibility and the relationship to the Other even as it betrays and suborns that very relationship. It is this paradox, of a necessity inscribed within an impossibility, that Derrida invites us to think and that I want to examine here. My discussion will proceed through a consideration of three figures—the third, the feminine, and the friend—which together, I argue, unfold the meaning of the political in its relation to Levinasian ethics. Although I take issue with a certain aspect of Derrida's description of the paradox—arguing that it conflicts both with Levinas's descriptions and with key elements of Derrida's own interpretation of hospitality—I am in broad agreement with the main lines of the latter's reading. What I want to show here is that, when it is suitably reformulated, Derrida's paradox, far from leaving the relationship between ethics and politics at an impasse, yields a deeper understanding of the sense in which, for Levinas, ethics is already, at its inception, non-identical, open, and thus "hospitable," and politics is always already "beyond politics," as a "justice beyond justice" which is radically futural or "messianic."

### The third

The problem of the relation of ethics to politics is announced in Levinas's texts by the entrance of the third party, *le tiers*. The third is defined as, "other than the neighbor, but also another neighbor . . . a neighbor of the other and not simply his fellow [*semblable*]" (OB 157). The third is not a mirror-image or copy of the other; he is not merely another other, a new instantiation of the same kind or genus. Consistent with Levinas's claims about absolute alterity, the third is conceived as other than the Other, the other of the Other, in a redoubling of asymmetrical, irreducible alterity. However, according to Levinas, the appearance of the third introduces a certain disorder or difficulty into the original ethical relationship of responsibility:

If proximity ordered me only to the other alone, there would not have been any problem, in even the most general sense of the term. A question would not have been born. . . . The responsibility for the other is an immediacy antecedent to questions, it is proximity. It is troubled and becomes a problem when a third party enters.

(OB 157)

At first it may seem that the trouble arises because the third is also an other, a face who calls me to responsibility, and who thereby makes new demands on me. In one sense this is indeed true: as infinitely responsible for the other, I would seem to have nothing left for a third, even though she has an equal claim on my attention. With the emergence of the third, who is also my neighbor, I seem forced to split my energies between these two

others, indeed between an infinitely proliferating multiplicity of others, making it impossible for me to be wholly devoted to any one in particular.<sup>3</sup> However, it would be a mistake to understand the difficulty described here only as that of an ego who is suddenly overburdened with extra responsibilities, or who experiences a kind of divided loyalty; after all, the ego's responsibility to and for the other was already *infinite*, "increasing in the very measure it is assumed" (TI 244), responsible even for the other's responsibility, thus already responsible to and for the other of the other.<sup>4</sup> In *Otherwise than Being*, the problem that emerges with the third is specified more precisely when Levinas suggests that the appearance of the third "interrupts" (OB 150) the face to face relationship. The third is said to introduce a "contradiction in the Saying," producing a kind of detour or rerouting within the "one-for-the-other" of ethical responsibility: "The third party introduces a contradiction in the Saying whose signification before the other until then went in one direction. It is of itself the limit of responsibility and the birth of the question: What do I have to do with justice?" (OB 157).

In the ethical relationship, I am subject to the neighbor, responsible for him or her prior to any action or decision that would commit me to this relationship (OB 102); it is a relation prior to my freedom, and thus equally prior to any questions about what I am to do, or whether I am truly responsible. In being for the other, the ego is responsible in "an immediacy antecedent to questions" (OB 157). The third, however, represents the birth of the question, not only because I find myself infinitely responsible for infinitely many others, but because the relations between these others are hidden from me: "What are the other and the third for one another? What have they done to one another? Which passes before the other?" (OB 157), and especially, "Who passes before the other in my responsibility?"<sup>5</sup> Even if I alone answer for my neighbor, I cannot entirely answer for the relation of the neighbor with a third party. I am infinitely responsible to each of them, and also responsible for each one's responsibility for the other; the position is untenable. In contrast to the exorbitant, asymmetrical responsibility of the face to face relationship, which "runs" only in one direction or has, as Levinas suggests, a *sens unique*, with the appearance of the third party it becomes incumbent upon the ego to compare incomparables (OB 158), to ask "What ought I do?" to institute justice, which weighs and measures the claims of parties constituted as equal before the law. Thus, according to Levinas, the third brings about the instauration of relations of equality and reciprocity, of a political rationality which questions and compares, assembles and thematizes, making all the others, all the neighbors, visible and contemporaneous within the intelligibility of a system. As Levinas admits:

Justice is necessary, that is, comparison, coexistence, contemporaneity, assembling, order, thematization, the visibility of faces, and thus intentionality and the intellect, and in intentionality and the intellect,

the intelligibility of a system, and thence also a copresence on an equal footing as before a court of justice.

(OB 157)

Here, too, for the first time, there is the possibility of justice for the ego, who becomes another like all the others: "The ego can, in the name of this unlimited responsibility, be called upon to concern itself also with itself. The fact that the other, my neighbor, is also a third party with respect to another, who is also a neighbor, is the birth of thought, consciousness, justice and philosophy" (OB 128).

But is the beginning of justice the end of ethics? As a contradiction in the Saying—which Derrida writes "ContraDiction"—the third appears to "reintroduce us, as if by force, into the place that ethics should exceed: the visibility of the face, thematization, comparison, synchrony, system, copresence" (*Adieu* 63). Moreover, when we consider that the third does not happen by chance upon the scene of the ethical, but is there, "from the first" in the epiphany of the face, the full extent of the contradiction, and its full weight, become apparent. In *Otherwise than Being*, Levinas maintains that the entry of the third is not a contingent "empirical" fact. Already in proximity, "all the others than the Other obsess me, and already this obsession cries out for justice" (OB 158). The same point is emphasized in the references to the third in *Totality and Infinity*: "The third party looks at me in the eyes of the Other. It is not that there first would be the face, and then the being it manifests or expresses would concern himself with justice; the epiphany of the face qua face opens humanity" (TI 213). Thus, the relation with a face—the ethical relation par excellence—is already a relation with the third and with politics and the law. In accomplishing the relation with a face, language would thus already contain the demand for justice; indeed, Levinas will write, "language is justice" (TI 213).

What are the consequences of this "copresence" of the third and the other in the face? As Derrida himself makes clear, if the third is there from the first, the "interruption of ethical immediacy is itself immediate" (*Adieu* 66). The implication is that the infinity of ethical responsibility is interrupted and compromised from its inception; that the ethical relationship fails from the first to be unified or protected in a "pure" moment of "pure" proximity; that the presence of the third "violates the purity of the ethical desire devoted to the unique" (*Adieu* 66). For Derrida, the promise of ethics is *breached* by the very words that enunciate it. To be sure, as Derrida is well aware, Levinas himself does not describe the ethical relation in terms of a promise or oath made to the other; however, he does speak in *Totality and Infinity* of a "primordial word of honor," and of an "attestation of oneself" (TI 201–02), and in *Otherwise than Being* of an "allegiance before any oath" (OB 150). As such, we might be warranted, Derrida maintains, in speaking of a kind of "oath before the letter," or of a "debt before every contract or loan:"

if the face to face with the unique engages the infinite ethics of responsibility for the other in a sort of *oath before the letter*, a sort of unconditional respect for fidelity, then the ineluctable emergence of the third, and, along with it, of justice, would signal a first breach or perjury [*parjure*]. Such a breach, while silent, passive, and painful, is also inevitable; it is not accidental and secondary but is as originary as the experience of the face.

(*Adieu* 67)

According to Derrida, the “intolerable scandal” of justice lies in this inaugural perjury, in which fidelity to the other is breached even as it is sworn. If “language is justice,” as Levinas claims, then language—and justice, too—are constituted by “compulsive” perjury (*Adieu* 68). It is no doubt in facing this “ineluctability,” says Derrida—giving a very different reading of the sense in which the third is also the birth of the question—that Levinas imagines the “sigh” of the one who wants to be just: “What do I have to do with justice?” (*Adieu* 68). With the entry of the third, ethics is thus joined, prior to every origin, to everything that would betray it: thematization, universality, ontology, totality, the State.

And yet, this is only half of the double-bind that, on Derrida’s reading, constitutes the meaning of the political. If there is a kind of violation or breach marking the entrance of justice into the ethical relation, the absence of justice from the face to face relation is equally a kind of violence. As we remarked at the outset, Levinas often claims that if politics is constituted elsewhere than in the asymmetrical relation of infinite responsibility, if, for example, it were to begin in the sovereignty of individual freedom, it could unfold only as tyranny, as the subjection of one freedom to another, or a war of all against all. However, Levinas rarely admits that the inverse is at least as true: that left to itself, the ethical relation risks a certain violence.<sup>6</sup> It is this that Derrida emphasizes: obsessed by the neighbor, subject to him to the point of substitution, of becoming hostage, the subject of ethics risks a kind of vertigo, which might express itself in “the impossibility of discerning . . . between good and evil, love and hate, giving and taking, the desire to live and the death drive, the hospitable welcome and the egoistic or narcissistic closing up within oneself” (*Adieu* 66). Derrida stresses that the third who interrupts the relation with a face protects against this vertigo, preventing the relation to the Other from collapsing into a solipsism which is no longer capable of distinguishing I from Other, justice from injustice.

We are now in a position to formulate in full the “double-bind” brought about by the entry of the third party: insofar as the absence of the third would be the absence of justice, an ethics of the I-Other relation alone would be constituted as violence; however, in its juridical-political role, the presence of the third violates the purity of ethical desire, converting fidelity into perjury, and thus instituting yet a different violence.



The inevitability of violence, and the impossibility of an ethics outside of every violence, are themes familiar from Derrida's first essay on Levinas and are worth noting here in connection with the discussion of politics.<sup>7</sup> In "Violence and Metaphysics," Derrida begins from the claim that "Ethics, in Levinas's sense, is an Ethics without law and without concept, which maintains its non-violent *purity* only before being determined as concepts and laws."<sup>8</sup> But as Derrida points out, Levinas also maintains, at least in *Totality and Infinity*, that ethics is accomplished "only by language" (TI 195). The two claims conflict: since language is inescapably conceptual, any relation accomplished in language will be subject to conceptuality, including the ethical relationship. In one of the more striking formulations of Derrida's essay, he writes that there is no "language without phrase," and "no phrase . . . which does not pass through the violence of the concept."<sup>9</sup> Thus, the "non-violent purity" of the ethical relation is compromised by the very means that institute it. According to Derrida, then, violence is inevitable and the best one can hope for is to admit the violence of discourse as "the least possible violence, the only way to repress the worst violence."<sup>10</sup> At a point very near the end of "Violence and Metaphysics," Derrida characterizes Levinas's rethinking of the ethical relation and responsibility as an impossible "dream" which strives for a "*pure* thought of *pure* difference."<sup>11</sup> As we have seen, the same tone, and essentially the same line of thought, is present as one element of the interpretation in "A Word of Welcome." To be sure, the line of argumentation pursued in the latter essay brings new dimensions to Derrida's reading of Levinas, but it is also remarkably consistent with the earlier essay: the purity of ethical desire is compromised or inverted, even "perverted," according to Derrida, from the first moment, but this potential "hospitality to the worst" is a necessary risk if there is to be hospitality, and a welcome of the other, at all (*Adieu* 69).

Could not a critical voice object here: where was ethics, for Levinas, ever a question of *purity*? Given that the violence Derrida finds ineluctable in both commentaries is a violence against the purity of a presumably virginal ethics, we may well wonder if this "purity" is also Levinas's theme. While I am in substantive agreement with Derrida's reading of the relation between ethics and politics, as I will show below, I want to argue, first, that the language of purity is at odds not only with Levinas's own language and descriptions (and for reasons that are necessary rather than contingent), but also with the very structure of hospitality and welcome that Derrida himself identifies as central to Levinas's conception of the ethical.

Nothing in Levinas's descriptions in either of his main works necessitates our reading these texts as vested in conserving the "purity" of the ethical. In *Totality and Infinity*, the metaphysical desire that welcomes the other is described as "inordinate," "beyond satisfaction" (TI 34), "perfectly disinterested" (TI 50), synonymous with "goodness" (TI 39) and "generosity" (TI 47). This desire is said to be the mark of a non-allergic relation to the

other (TI 47); a “contact with the intangible” that “does not compromise the integrity of what is touched” (TI 50); and a “relation with a reality infinitely distant from my own reality” (TI 41). Now, to be sure, Levinas does speak of the “integrity” (TI 50), “remoteness” (TI 34), and even the “holiness” (TI 291) of the other in his attempt to describe the relation to absolute alterity. Moreover, as is well-known, he denies that the relation to the other begins or has its basis in knowledge, or the intentional structure of consciousness, inasmuch as this would reduce the alterity of the other to a merely relative rather than absolute alterity. There is distance, transcendence, and separation here, but is it in the name of preserving or expressing the *purity* of ethical desire and the ethical relation? The face commands, “you shall not kill,” but it is also the only being who provokes my murderous intent: “the Other is the sole being I can wish to kill,” according to Levinas (TI 198). In *Otherwise than Being*, Levinas further describes the relation to the other in terms of proximity, obsession, vulnerability, outrage, wounding, witness, and prophecy, but not, to my knowledge, in terms of purity, and certainly not consistently or predominantly so. Indeed, this latter notion is one that Levinas would have good reason to steer clear of, both on theoretical and political grounds. Politically, the desire for purity has expressed itself in policies of apartheid and genocide; theoretically, it belongs to an ontology of substances, conceived as pure, unmixed essences. Both the political and the ontological projects connected with purity are explicitly rejected by Levinas.

Perhaps even more importantly, the language of purity, with what it suggests of the hermetic, seems directly at odds with the structure of the welcome and hospitality. Although the word “hospitality” appears somewhat infrequently in Levinas’s work, Derrida suggests that *Totality and Infinity* can be read nonetheless as a “vast treatise” on hospitality (*Adieu* 49). In particular, he notes that “in the concluding pages, hospitality becomes the very name of what opens itself up to the face, or more precisely of what ‘welcomes’ it.”<sup>12</sup> The welcome of the other is conveyed by the structure of the infinite in the finite which Levinas derives from Descartes:

This relation of the same with the other . . . is in fact fixed in the situation described by Descartes in which the “I think” maintains with the Infinite it can nowise contain and from which it is separated a relation called “idea of infinity.”

(TI 48)

This situation, in which the I receives more than it can receive, that is, in which it receives beyond any capacity, is identified in *Totality and Infinity* with the relation to the face and with the welcome: “The way in which the other presents himself, exceeding *the idea of the other in me*, we here name face” (TI 50); and on the next page: “To approach the Other in conversation

[*discours*] is to welcome his expression, in which at each instant he overflows the idea a thought would carry away from it. It is therefore to receive from the Other beyond the capacity of the I, which means exactly: to have the idea of infinity" (TI 51).

This "dissymmetrical disproportion"—in which to welcome the face means, for the one who welcomes, to receive more than it can receive—constitutes what Derrida calls the "law of hospitality" (*Adieu* 55). At one point, Levinas explicitly identifies the welcome with generosity, and with being "incapable of approaching with empty hands" (TI 50); but there is a sense in which this generosity is inverted or turned around, since the one who gives or welcomes in generosity is precisely the one who *receives*. In welcoming the face, the ego opens itself, or is opened [*s'ouvre*] to the infinity of the other; this undecidability between the active and the passive sense is constitutive for Levinas's analysis—and for Derrida's interpretation. As the latter makes clear, if "to welcome" means "to receive," there is an important sense in which the welcoming *of* the other (objective genitive) will already be a welcoming *of* (subjective genitive), that is *by* the other: to welcome the other, to say "yes" to the other, is, thus, not to say the first word, to open the discourse, but already to respond to the "yes" of the other, to be welcomed oneself in discourse:

the welcoming *of* the other (objective genitive) will already be a response: the *yes* to the other will already be responding to the welcoming *of* the other (subjective genitive), to the *yes* of the other . . . This responsible response is surely a *yes*, but a *yes to* that is preceded by the *yes of* the other. One should no doubt extend without limit the consequences of what Levinas asserts in a passage where he repeats and interprets the idea of infinity in the Cartesian *cogito*: "It is not I, it is the other that can *yes*."<sup>13</sup>

When he rewrites this structure of welcome and welcoming explicitly as the "law of hospitality," Derrida employs the figure of the *hôte*,<sup>14</sup> both host and guest:

the *hôte* who receives (the host), the one who welcomes the invited or received *hôte* (the guest), the welcoming *hôte* who considers himself the owner of the place, is in truth a *hôte* received in his own home. He receives the hospitality that he offers *in* his own home; he receives it *from* his own home—which, in the end, does not belong to him. The *hôte* as host is a guest.

(*Adieu* 79)

Although the point cannot be argued at length here, Levinas's conception of subjectivity in both *Totality and Infinity* and *Otherwise than Being*—though

more obviously in the latter—conforms to this model of the “host as guest.” The Levinasian subject is one who is at once unique, identical, irreplaceable and also expropriated, dis-possessed, dis-located. In *Totality and Infinity*, the welcome of the face is not an external relation or event that accrues to the subject when he or she happens to come face to face with an other; the structure of the infinite in the finite, of an I receiving beyond its capacity to receive, is a constitutive feature of subjectivity. In *Otherwise than Being*, the subject is able to posit or constitute itself as a subject only in being de-posed, ceding its place to the other: “The I approached in responsibility is for-the-other, is a denuding, an exposure to being affected, a pure susceptibility. It does not posit itself, possessing itself and recognizing itself; it is consumed and delivered over, dis-locates itself, loses its place, is exiled, relegates itself into itself . . . exposed to wounds and outrage, emptying itself in a no-grounds, to the point of substituting itself for the other, holding on to itself only as it were in the trace of its exile.”<sup>15</sup> Thus, in both texts, the I who welcomes the Other is already an I open to the other, an I constituted within the ethical relationship.

The claim that I want to pursue, in opposition to the logic of purity employed by Derrida, is that just as the I is always already open to its other (indeed, is constituted by this paradoxical opening) so too with ethics itself. Ethics can be ethical only by being “impure,” or rather—since our aim is to abandon the rhetoric of purity—ethics is ethical only where it is always already dispossessed of what is proper to it, already open to its other in calling for universality, thematization, law, justice. This reading of the ethical opposes the “letter” of Derrida’s interpretation, but is quite in keeping with its spirit since, on this understanding, ethics exhibits precisely the structure that Derrida identifies with hospitality and the welcome.

Is this openness to the other—to the other of the neighbor, and to the other of ethics—adequately characterized as a betrayal or a “perversion”? One could complain, and quite rightly, that these terms are too rhetorical, too “loaded,” but in itself this is a minor point. More significant is that the logic of betrayal or perjury seems to imply a linear temporal development and, consequently, a determinate hierarchy in which one moment is accorded an unimpeachable primacy. For politics to be conceived as a betrayal of ethics, it must be assumed that the ethical relation occurs in a first time or instant that would then, in a subsequent moment, be overturned or perverted. Moreover, this hierarchical organization militates against thinking of the two moments as simultaneous and the betrayal as instantaneous. Politics can betray ethics, can suborn its testimony, only if ethics is logically or chronologically first, even if only by a split second. But what Levinas describes as the “diachrony” of the ethical relation indicates a structure that overflows both chronology and logic, and the ontological commitment of these terms.<sup>16</sup>

True diachrony, for Levinas, cannot be equated simply with the temporal flow, because in this flow or temporalization of time “nothing is lost” (OB 9).

Thanks to retention and memory, which moves back along the trajectory of temporal moments, retracing the steps of consciousness, everything can be made present again, represented and assembled in a synchronic system. But neither is the diachronic a time “extracted from time,” existing in such a way as to “somehow command the temporal series” from a point altogether outside of it (OB 9). To posit diachrony in this way as a time outside of time is to fall into the confusion that Kant already warned us of in the Antinomies. For Levinas, diachrony—which is associated with proximity, responsibility, the ethical relation, etc.—must be “signaled” *within* the temporalization of time as a “lapse of time that does not return,” refractory to all recuperation, retention, synchrony (OB 9). To be sure, such diachrony is paradoxical. The tension which defines and constitutes this concept is the familiar “unrelating relation” or “binding separation” of Levinasian transcendence. Diachrony is a rupture within the temporal flow, a past that would remain “foreign to every present” (OB 9), and yet which would be “signaled” in the present without thereby becoming re-present. In this idea there is a contradiction and a betrayal—even Levinas speaks of it in this way—but not of one moment by the next. The contradiction “does not break out between two simultaneous statements, but between a statement and its conditions, as though they were in the same time” (OB 156). In the case of ethics and politics, the contradiction is thus *not* between a demand for justice, which would originate within the ethical relation (and thus within a radical commitment to the absolute singularity of the face), and the meaning of justice, which requires universality and the subsumption of particular beings under abstract concepts and laws. Rather, the contradiction is between the “statement” of politics—its demand for universal justice—and its “condition,” the ethical relation to the other. Moreover, it is a contradiction only insofar as the statement and its condition are conceived as being “in the same time.” It is now possible to reformulate the paradox of the relation of ethics to politics in the following manner: the contradiction arises because ethics is simultaneously the condition of the political, and its interruption; it is interruption *as* the condition of politics and justice. Let me try to say briefly what this means.

First, the word “condition” is not to be understood here in the sense of a ground or foundation; nor does it indicate a logical condition of possibility. What is indicated by this term is very close to what Levinas himself specifies in the introduction to *Totality and Infinity* in commenting on the method of that book. Speaking of the Husserlian reduction and intentional analysis, Levinas writes that it is “the search for the concrete. Notions held under the direct gaze of the thought that defines them are nevertheless, unbeknown to this naive thought, revealed to be implanted in horizons unsuspected by this thought; these horizons endow them with a meaning—such is the essential teaching of Husserl” (TI 28). For Husserl, as Levinas points out, the horizon was treated in an intellectualist fashion, since these unsuspected horizons were

in their turn “interpreted as thoughts aiming at objects” (TI 28). However, what matters especially for Levinas is simply “the idea of the overflowing of objectifying thought by a forgotten experience from which it lives” (TI 28).

On the reading advanced here, ethics would be the forgotten experience, the unsuspected horizon from which the political *lives*. It is the condition of justice and political institutions, not in the sense of being a cause, ground, or logical fundament but in the sense that it is ethics that endows justice with meaning: “Justice, society, the state and its institutions are comprehensible out of proximity. This means that nothing is outside of the control of the responsibility of the one for the other” (OB 159). The political, with all that it implies of justice, equality, law, and the like, is comprehensible only on the basis of the ethical relation. But even though it lives from ethics, Levinas is clear that justice is not thereby absorbed into ethics as a sub-species or leveled off form—a pale copy—of the ethical relationship. Justice is neither a degraded form nor a degenerate offspring of ethics; it is in no way a “diminution,” “limitation,” or “neutralization” of anarchic responsibility (OB 159). The third looks at me in the eyes of the other, “but the contemporaneousness of the multiple is tied about the diachrony of the two: 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” (OB 159).

Ethics calls for justice, but itself interrupts this demand, interrupts the complacency of “good works” and economic justice, in order to hear the cry of the one close by, the neighbor, this singular being to whom it cannot be indifferent. Ethics is always already open to its other, to the demand for universality, totality, visibility, presence, representation, law—in other words, to everything that it would appear to exceed. Ethics calls for justice, but the justice it demands is a justice interrupted, a justice beyond justice. “Justice summons me to go beyond the straight line of justice, and henceforth nothing can mark the end of this march” (TI 245). It is only as infinitely interrupted in the name of the singular other, and of the other of the other, that justice is meaningful.

### The feminine

I want to turn briefly to the figures of the feminine and the friend as concrete instances of the interruptive relation just outlined. It will be my contention that whereas the third represents the call for politics from within the ethical, the feminine can be read as the inverse (though not merely the reverse) relation: the feminine marks the re-irruption of the ethical within politics, re-establishing the gap or hiatus between them. Just as the third represents the ethical demand for justice and the abstract equality of all, the feminine calls for politics to recognize the irreducible specificity of the other—not a generic, but a gendered other. This interpretation departs significantly

and self-consciously from Levinas's use of the feminine, and equally from Derrida's own treatment in "A Word of Welcome." However, such a reading is suggested by the way in which the feminine comes to be at issue in Derrida's text and, I would argue, accords deeply with the interpretation of the welcome suggested by his analysis.

It is a striking feature of Derrida's discourse on the third and on the politics and ethics of the welcome that it is interrupted at several key junctures, without preparation or forewarning, by the feminine. Why does the question of the feminine insert itself, and by what route, into this discourse on the relation of ethics to politics? The feminine first appears as a full theme as Derrida follows a "chance" path afforded to Levinas, as he says, by the idiom of the French language (*Adieu* 70). As justice is traced back to the welcome [*l'accueil*], it comes upon the gathering or recollection [*le recueillement*] that Levinas assigns to the feminine welcome in the home or dwelling: "the other whose presence is discreetly an absence, with which is accomplished the *hospitable welcome par excellence* which describes the field of intimacy, is the Woman."<sup>17</sup>

For Levinas, recollection designates "a suspension of the immediate reactions the world solicits in view of a greater attention to oneself, one's possibilities, and the situation" (TI 154). Recollection in this sense is associated with a capacity for reflection and contemplation; it implies the ability to take a certain distance from oneself and from the pressing, material and animal needs of one's situation. Levinas describes recollection as that which makes habitation, labor, and representation possible, and thus as that which "completes the structure of separation" and subjectivity (TI 154). But recollection, in its turn, has its own condition; it does not arise "magically" or "chemically" (TI 153), a kind of natural product of dwelling in the home. As the passage quoted by Derrida already suggests, recollection is said to be possible only on the basis of the feminine welcome. We read first:

The familiarity of the world does not only result from habits acquired in this world, which take from it its roughness . . . ; familiarity and intimacy are produced as a gentleness that spreads over the face of things. . . . The intimacy which familiarity already presupposes is an *intimacy with someone*. The interiority of recollection is a solitude in a world already human. Recollection refers to a welcome.

(TI 155)

And then, "The woman is the condition for recollection, the interiority of the Home, and inhabitation" (TI 155).

Derrida's commentary on this passage proceeds in two stages, the first of which recalls the burgeoning complex of problems associated with Levinas's use of the term "feminine" both in *Totality and Infinity* and in earlier texts. In particular, Derrida emphasizes the difficulties, both as regards the feminine

and the welcome, of making out Levinas's claim that the feminine welcome in the dwelling is at once a "welcoming par excellence"—thus the ethical relation par excellence—and not yet the accomplishment of the transcendence of language. The danger here is not, as it was in the case of the third, of a slippage or an exclusionary logic between the ethical and the political; rather, the difficulty is that of determining, or even of making sense in Levinasian terms, of the idea of a limit between the ethical the pre-ethical, "as if there could be here a welcoming 'par excellence,' 'in itself,' *before* ethics" (*Adieu* 78). If the ethical relation is, as Derrida has shown, synonymous with the welcome and hospitality, what is the meaning of this welcoming *before* ethics? And further, how is this feminine welcome related to the discussion of *Eros* and voluptuousity in the section entitled "Beyond the Face"? Whatever one's ultimate interpretation, Derrida points out that "all the threads" of this analysis of the feminine, the dwelling, and eros, must "pass through the knot of hospitality," where they are first tied together, but also where they begin to come undone (*Adieu* 78).

Having staked his claim for the centrality of hospitality in the passages on the feminine, Derrida moves on, in a second stage or moment, to argue for the indissociability of the feminine and sexual difference from any thought of the welcome. In the first place, the very structure of the feminine welcome recalls (though, as we will show, it does not exactly repeat) that of the welcome of the face and the idea of infinity. In the latter case, the host who would welcome or receive the other (the face, the guest), is paradoxically made welcome by the other insofar as the very first "yes" to the other is always already a response, a "yes" to the "yes" of the other. With the discussion of recollection, we discover that this welcome of the face is itself possible only on the basis of the feminine welcome in interiority. Thus, the host who would welcome the other (and be welcomed by the other) can do so only if he is first welcomed, in his own home, not by the face, but by the feminine "presence" whose welcome is not spoken or expressed, but conveyed in a "language without teaching, a silent language, an understanding without words" (TI 155). Derrida concludes:

The head of the household, the master of the house, is already a *received hôte*, already the *guest* in his own home. This absolute precedence of the welcome, of the welcoming, of welcoming [*accueilance*], would be precisely the femininity of "Woman," interiority as femininity—and as "feminine alterity." The experience of pervertibility of which we spoke above, which at once calls for and excludes the third, here appears indissociably linked to sexual difference.

(*Adieu* 81)

But is this link one of repetition, as Derrida's text suggests (even if he does not say this in so many words)? Does the feminine repeat the structure of



pervertibility, or does she interrupt it and invert it? Does not the feminine appear rather to render the exclusion impossible? If the “site” of the opening of ethics cannot be appropriated or possessed, if it is a non-site inhabited only through dispossession, continual ex-appropriation which welcomes the other (who is other than the feminine), then is it not already a site without any possibility of being closed up, as a secret society whose ins and outs all run through the hands of the master?

To approach this from another direction, is it just a matter of chance that the feminine interrupts Derrida’s consideration of the political, justice, and rights? Does not the feminine insert itself between ethics and politics, not as their common ground, but as the very “unrelating relation” between them? In the figure of the feminine, and by its invocation, doesn’t Derrida force us to take seriously the incommensurability between ethics and politics with which his text began? The figure of the feminine is not just another other, another third. She is a supplement to the third, becoming in her way the figure of a certain hesitation, a hiatus, or a silence<sup>18</sup> in which, nonetheless, a command comes to be heard: the paradoxical demand that there be equality not only in the abstract, but in the particular.

### The friend

A similar trajectory marks Derrida’s discussion of the friend in the final chapter of the *Politics of Friendship*.<sup>19</sup> In this work, whose rich, historical elaboration of the problem of friendship calls for a more prolonged and careful reading than I can give it here, the problematic of friendship mirrors in certain essential respects the paradoxical structure of the ethical-political relation described above. Tracing the history of the concept of friendship in Western philosophy, Derrida notes that in its canonic representations friendship has been understood on the model of brotherhood: the friend is “like” a brother. However, as Derrida convincingly argues, this conception of the friend runs all the risks of tyranny and totality that Levinas identifies with traditional politics. As a principle of fraternity, the political bond would be forged by what is shared in common: interests and mutual affection, but also, and less innocently, ties of blood, race, sex, nature, and nation—categories which typically maintain their coherence not on the basis of what they include, but by means of exclusion. Turning again to the feminine, Derrida remarks the double exclusion of women from this history of the fraternal bond insofar as friendships between women and men but also between one woman and another are rendered invisible.<sup>20</sup> And, we might add, recalling the analyses of the previous section, even if the sister could become a brother, that is, even if she shares in the ideals of “liberty, equality, fraternity,” it must be at the price of her singularity and specificity.

Will it suffice, in order to bypass the potential tyranny of fraternal politics, to recall that the friend, after all, is not just anyone, not a friend

in general, but this absolutely particular, irreplaceable companion (as Montaigne, for example, reminds us)? Though suggestive, this possibility is ultimately rejected by Derrida for reasons already made clear in "Violence and Metaphysics" and now repeated in the work on friendship: "the relation to the singularity of the other also passes through the universality of law."<sup>21</sup> Nor will it suffice to claim that the relation to the singularity of the other is required or effected by the law. To his own question—"does not the law command me to recognize the transcendent alterity of the other who can never be anything but heterogeneous and singular?"—Derrida replies that such an understanding would not dissolve the antagonism between singularity and universality, ethics and politics; it "only aggravates them—and at the heart of friendship. The singularity/universality divide has always divided the experience, the concept and the interpretation of friendship."<sup>22</sup>

The negotiation of this impasse, between the singularity of the friend and the universality implied by friendship as a model of politics, follows the lines already projected above in the discussion of ethics and politics in Levinas. An opening beyond "mere" aporia and impossibility can be glimpsed in the phrase that serves as the refrain of Derrida's text: "O my friends, there is no friend."<sup>23</sup> In the heterogeneous time of this phrase, there is an address to friends that states the absence of any friend. I suggest that we can read Derrida's elucidation of this saying in terms of an opening to the future. The absolute singularity of the friend requires that the friend, in fact, not be *there*, that is, not be present (assembled, known, her measure taken) but always "to come." The friend is always a future friend; the friend is the opening of a future.

In the closing pages of *Adieu*, Derrida suggests that if the "formal injunction" or imperative of a deduction of politics from the ethical remains irrecusable, the political or juridical content of the deduction cannot be specified in advance, cannot be made fully present, but will always be "to come." This is not a politics based on tradition, on what we hold in common, on past narratives—whether local or global.<sup>24</sup> It is a futural politics—or if we could risk this phrase with Derrida, a "messianic" politics. Only as a justice "to come" can it maintain itself in justice. This point is crucial. As the condition of politics, the ethical interruption is always broached in the name of the singular, of this other as yet unrecognized, in danger of being passed by. It is not forever the same singular, but ever new indigent voices, ever new excluded faces, genders, friends. Justice is just only as long as it recognizes its own constitutive incompleteness. Speaking eloquently to this point, it may be fitting to allow Derrida the closing—though if we are right, then not the final—word:

For democracy remains to come; this is its essence in so far as it remains: not only will it remain indefinitely perfectible, hence always insufficient and future, but belonging to the time of the promise, it will

always remain, in each of its future times, to come: even when there is democracy, it never exists, it is never present, it remains the theme of a non-presentable concept.<sup>25</sup>

### Notes

- 1 Works by Levinas cited in the text are as follows: *Totality and Infinity*, trans. A. Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969), cited as TI; *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*, trans. A. Lingis (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1981), cited as OB. On the idea of politics as tyranny see TI, p. 300, and also Emmanuel Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity: Conversations with Philippe Nemo*, trans. R. Cohen (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1985), pp. 80–81 and 99–100.
- 2 Jacques Derrida, *Adieu à Emmanuel Levinas* (Paris: Galilée, 1997). Translated by P.-A. Brault and M. Naas as *Adieu to Emmanuel Levinas* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, forthcoming). All passages cited in the text are from the Brault-Naas translation, but refer to the French page numbers.
- 3 Adriaan Peperzak interprets the problem introduced by the third in much this way: "For me (the subject of a relation to the infinite in the other *and* of a relation to the one who is the infinite for this other), the emergence of a third means that my infinite responsibility for the other makes it impossible to concentrate on the needs and desires of the third, although this virtual and as yet still anonymous other is already calling for the 'same sort of' responsibility. I cannot be infinitely responsible for the third because I am infinitely responsible for the other. . . . I cannot identify myself with the other's responsibility for his/her other unless I let my care and attention for so many others be divided and, thus, limited by their multiplicity." *To the Other: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas* (West Lafayette: Purdue University Press, 1993), p. 181.
- 4 See Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity*, p. 96.
- 5 Emmanuel Levinas, "Peace and Proximity," in *Emmanuel Levinas: Basic Philosophical Writings*, Adriaan T. Peperzak, *et al.*, eds. (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1996), p. 168.
- 6 In all fairness, Levinas does suggest something like this himself in at least two key passages, though it is not formulated as explicitly as one might like. In *Totality and Infinity*, in the passage that introduces the notion of the third, he suggests that the third prevents the I-Other from lapsing into the closed society of the couple in love: "Language as the presence of the face does not invite complicity with the preferred being, the self-sufficient 'I-Thou' forgetful of the universe; in its frankness it refuses the clandestinity of love, where it loses its frankness and meaning and turns into laughter or cooing. The third party looks at me in the eyes of the Other" (TI, p. 213). In *Otherwise than Being*, the text is equally suggestive, though again not completely explicit on this point: "The relationship with the third party is an incessant correction of the asymmetry of proximity in which the face is looked at" (OB, p. 158). As Derrida notes, "Levinas surely does not say it in exactly this way, but what is he doing when, beyond or through the dual of the face to face between two 'uniques,' he appeals to justice, affirming and reaffirming that justice 'is necessary,' that the third 'is necessary'? Is he not trying to take into account this hypothesis of violence in the pure and immediate ethics of the face to face?" (*Adieu*, p. 66).
- 7 Jacques Derrida, "Violence and Metaphysics," in *Writing and Difference*, trans. A. Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978).
- 8 *Ibid.*, p. 111, emphasis added.

- 9 Ibid., p. 147.
- 10 Ibid., p. 130.
- 11 Ibid., p. 151, Derrida's emphasis.
- 12 *Adieu*, p. 49. The passage from the end of *Totality and Infinity* that Derrida refers to here is as follows: "To metaphysical thought, where a finite has the idea of infinity . . . we have reserved the term intentionality, consciousness of . . . It is attention to speech or welcome of the face, hospitality and not thematization" (TI, p. 299).
- 13 *Adieu*, pp. 51–52. The quote at the end of this passage is from *Totality and Infinity*, p. 93.
- 14 In French, the word *hôte* can mean either "host" or guest." In the following passage, the words "host" and "guest" appeared in English in the original.
- 15 OB, p. 138. A very similar passage occurs in *Dieu, la mort et le temps*, ed. J. Rolland (Paris: Editions Grasset et Fasquelle, 1993), p. 181.
- 16 The criticism here is not that Derrida fails to recognize this; indeed, he raises this point himself with respect to Levinas's notion of recollection [*recueillement*] (cf. *Adieu* 59). I only want to draw out how this insight may be at odds with the attribution to Levinas's ethics of a desire for purity.
- 17 TI, p. 155, Derrida's emphasis; quoted in *Adieu*, p. 71.
- 18 A fuller account of this reading of the feminine would have to include a consideration of the relationship in Derrida's essay between the silence of the feminine and the silence which is the theme of the last pages of the text (e.g., from p. 187 with its invocation of "the feminine figure of Jerusalem," and including especially pp. 194ff. where it is a question of the silence of the promise of Jerusalem).
- 19 Jacques Derrida, *Politics of Friendship*, trans. G. Collins (London: Verso, 1997).
- 20 Ibid., p. 277.
- 21 Ibid., p. 276.
- 22 Ibid., p. 276–77.
- 23 Derrida reports that this phrase is originally found in Diogenes Laertius, who attributes it to Aristotle.
- 24 And in this it poses a substantive challenge to the form taken by contemporary debates between liberals and communitarians.
- 25 *Politics of Friendship*, p. 306.

# REPEATING THE PARRICIDE

## Levinas and the question of closure

*John Protevi*

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In his 1961 work *Totality and Infinity*,<sup>1</sup> Emmanuel Levinas states that his positions “oppose the ancient privilege of unity which is affirmed from Parmenides to Spinoza to Hegel” (TI, 102). He also writes in the same work that: “Since Parmenides across Plotinus we have not succeeded in thinking otherwise” (TI, 104). Thus we have two ways of characterizing the relation between Levinas and the tradition gathered under the name “Parmenides”: a) opposition and b) the pointing out of the failure to think otherwise. What does “opposition” mean here? Is not the tradition to which Levinas would oppose himself the tradition of attempts at totalizing whatever is under an ontology that would brook no opposition and that would do so precisely by overcoming any opposition? Furthermore, what is the relation of the failure to think otherwise to this opposition? And what role does Parmenides play as the founder of the tradition that is to be opposed?

As a way of thinking about these questions, let me recall that some years before *Totality and Infinity*, in 1947, Levinas complained in *Time and the Other* that Parmenides has been allowed to escape every parricide his descendants have been tempted to commit against him.<sup>2</sup> The parricide of Parmenides will then be the figure in which I examine the seeming paradoxes of opposition to a tradition characterized as the overcoming of all opposition. I must point out here at the outset that Levinas never claims to have succeeded in this parricide, even in his wish to oppose the tradition that fails to kill Parmenides.

The paper has three parts. Part I is a preliminary sketch of the issue. Part II asks three questions: How does the name “Parmenides” function in the text of *Totality and Infinity*? How does the name “Plato” function in that text? How does Levinas think Plato tries and fails to kill Parmenides? Part III concludes the essay by asking: How does the figure of the parricide

of Parmenides function in Derrida's "Violence and Metaphysics"<sup>3</sup>? Following Derrida, I show why such attempted parricides have always failed, and indeed why they must always fail. Far from showing an ultimate failure on the part of Levinas, however, demonstrating the necessary failure of the parricide is the very mode of "thinking otherwise." Such a "thinking otherwise" shows the inscription in the Levinasian text of the question of the closure of the field of Western philosophy. Such an inscription of the closure of a field is not to be judged in terms of success or failure in escaping that field, but in terms of disruption of the field, of the disruption of the self-evidence, the totalizing self-assurance, from which the field lives.

A parricide needs a father and a murder. What would it mean to name Parmenides the father of Western philosophy, and then to kill him as that father? Why Parmenides, and why not Plato? Why is Plato only the first of the rebellious sons and not himself the father? Parmenides is he who forbids a *logos* about not being, who first links philosophy to being. If Levinas were to develop a philosophy, it would be a discourse about the ethically infinite, the radically other, that which cannot be enveloped by the horizon of being. Thus this naming and murder would seem to be for the sake of founding a discourse that does not philosophize within a horizon of being. But what could this mean, a "discourse" that is not a *logos*?

To start along the answer to this question, we need to ask how Levinas characterizes Western philosophy and its *logos*. We begin by noticing that for Levinas Western philosophy strives after totality by reducing separation to immanence. Now for Levinas in *Totality and Infinity* there are two types of separation, the first being separation from the elemental, in which the ego finds itself involved in reducing the otherness that confronts it. The paradigm case of eating as an assimilation of alterity comes to characterize the philosophic relation to alterity.<sup>4</sup> Thus separation from the elemental, separation that is to be overcome by physical work, becomes the philosophical model for the overcoming of all separation by spiritual work. What appears as separation to philosophy must then be overcome by a return to a source that shows the appearance of separation to have been illusory. As Levinas puts it in a striking phrase, "As a stage the separated being traverses on the way of its return to its metaphysical source . . . metaphysics would be an Odyssey, and its disquietude nostalgia" (TI, 102). Here we see separation as relative alterity. The separated is a negative moment in an economy of the same, that which is to be reduced.

The reduction of separation from the elemental by work is, however, not the primary model of separation for Levinas. Separation from the elemental functions as an economy of the same which is only first made possible by the separation from the other person. Thus subjectivity and its labor of reducing alterity, physical and philosophical, are founded, secondary, and accessible only by abstraction. As Levinas puts it: "Doing, labor, already implies the relation with the transcendent" (TI, 109); the "transcendent" in

this case refers to the infinitely other face of another person. The separation from the other person is thus prior to, opens the space for, the separation from the elemental. Levinas' metaphysics, as opposed to—or otherwise than (we have not yet worked out this relation)—traditional philosophical metaphysics, would then be born from a desire for the infinitely other as the alterity of the other is revealed in the face of another. This desire must be unsatisfiable, for it is a desire for the other *qua* other, for the other as the positive pole in an ethical relation, rather than to the other as merely a negative moment within a totalizing system. Here we see separation as radical, ethical alterity, and the separated being as the other person.

Let us continue with Levinas' characterization of his relation to the tradition. I will first take up the oppositional characterization. Levinas states that his adoption of the positions sketched out above "oppose the ancient privilege of unity which is affirmed from Parmenides to Spinoza to Hegel" (TI, 102). Now, throughout *Totality and Infinity* Levinas uses the phrases "Parmenidean philosophy" or "the Eleatic notion of being" in order to characterize "Western philosophy" as the insistence on, or the drive toward "totality." What is at stake in these characterizations? In Levinas' text, the general term "Western philosophy" serves to unify a variety of attempts at unification. In other words, the phrase "Western philosophy"—in naming the tradition by a general term—gathers together or totalizes the many attempts at guaranteeing a totality of being that ostensibly make up that tradition. (In the same way, the term "tradition" accomplishes a similar gathering in this text.)

Here two questions arise: How can Levinas oppose what he recognizes as a system that overcomes all opposition? How can he establish his opposition to the tendency to totalize by a totalizing characterization of all philosophy as totalization?

## Part II. The figure of the parricide

### A. How does the name "Parmenides" function in the text of *Totality and Infinity*?

After having unified and named the tradition of Western philosophy as the drive for totality, Levinas can then metonymically name it after its "father," Parmenides. In this section I examine some of the fragments of Parmenides to see why Levinas accords to his name the honor of serving as a metonym for the tradition. My task is difficult here, since Levinas does not spend any time in textual study of Parmenides in *Totality and Infinity*. This absence of attention lends a flatness to the textual function of the name "Parmenides" that contrasts, as we will see, with Levinas' doubled relation to the text signed by the name "Plato". Levinas will read in the text of Plato, as he does in that of Descartes as well, a trace of the infinite alterity he names the

ethical relation. He does not do so for Parmenides; he uses his name solely as a metonym, as if the text that bears his name was flat, univocal, carrying no trace of infinite alterity—worthy of attention only for its being the first to limit alterity to relative alterity.

To make up somewhat for this flatness I turn to Heidegger for a clue in beginning a reading of Parmenides. In the essay “Moirā”<sup>5</sup> Heidegger sketches three interpretations of Parmenides’ writings, all of which concern fragment 3, *to gar auto noein estin te kai einai*, “thinking and being are the same.” As can be expected, Heidegger contemptuously dismisses the first interpretation, that thinking is present-at-hand as psychic activity just as other things. The third interpretation is the neo-Platonic, which stresses the super-sensibility of being and thinking. The second interpretation brings us close to what must be Levinas’ assessment of Parmenides as the father of Western philosophy. Heidegger calls this interpretation the “modern” one, in which being is seen as objectivity. Thus Parmenides is seen as forecasting Berkeley’s *esse est percipi*. This formulation, continues Heidegger, is brought to its “unconditioned realization” in Hegel, where being is the thinking of (double genitive) Absolute Spirit. Heidegger quotes Hegel’s *Lectures on the History of Philosophy* to the effect that Hegel recognized in Parmenides the seed of the philosophy he, Hegel, completes. Anything that is can at least be brought under what Hegel calls the emptiest concept, being. Being is thus for Hegel the horizon for *logos*. The unfolding of this most empty concept is the unfolding of the science of logic.

Heidegger’s second characterization seems close to what Levinas must hold if he is to see Parmenides as the first to affirm a privilege of unity that will stretch (at least) to Hegel. In the next few paragraphs I will sketch a possible “flat” Levinasian reading of Parmenides that shows the latter’s reduction of alterity in an economy of the same. To take up our previous schema, in order to name Parmenides the father of philosophy Levinas seems forced to read him as the founder of the relation to separation as mere relative alterity.

In fragment 2, Parmenides’ goddess tells him how noetics are limited, explaining “What routes of inquiry [*dizēsios*] there are for thinking [*noēsai*].”<sup>6</sup> The first route of inquiry for noetics is necessarily bound with being, although we are not explicitly told here what this path opens for thinking: “The first path is [*estin*] and is not not to be [*ouk estin mé einai*].” The second path, however, does have a specific object, “not being” [*to mé eon*], and this makes it “wholly unlearnable” [*panapeuthea*]. As aiming at what is separated from being, the second path is proscribed by the goddess; she tells how it “is not and must not be [*he d’ hōs ouk estin te kai hōs chreōn esti mé einai*].” Here what is not is called unknowable, even unsayable; one can neither “know” [*gnoiēs*] nor “point out in words” [*phrasais*] to *mé eon*. Thought is thus bound to being; the second path is no path at all.<sup>7</sup>



Parmenides states such a binding of being with thought and speech in fragment 3: *to gar auto noein estin te kai einai*. This must represent the beginning, for Levinas, of what he calls “formal logic,” the “purely formal necessity” which is the “force of Parmenidean philosophy” (TI, 104). Formal necessity is the power of tauto-logy, the *logos* of the same. For Levinas, formal logic is another name for the economy of the same in which separation is reduced to immanence and the infinitely other to the other as mere moment. Now we might recall that for Heidegger, *to auto* is also the key word of Parmenides, the puzzle which calls for our meditation on its enigmatic granting of thinking and being in their belonging-together. For Levinas, on the other hand, *to auto* must be the limit within which philosophy has let itself think. Within the strictures of the tautology that is Parmenidean, i.e., Western, philosophy, we can only think about what can be thought about, know what can be known, say what can be said—and all this falls within being, for thinking can only think what is, *as* something that is.

From this coincidence of being and thinking flows Parmenides’ affirmation of immanence. Whatever we look upon must, tautologously, be present to the mind; it cannot be outside being, outside what is there for thought. Fragment 4 begins: “Look upon [*leusse*] things which, though far off [*apeonta*], are yet firmly present to the mind [*noōi pareonta*]. For you shall not cut off [*apotmēzei*] being [*to eon*] from holding fast to being [*tou eontos*].” Thus even with a prefix of distance, “*ap-*” affixed to that which is, and thus are our objects [*apeonta*], we can never sever them from the binding of beings into a totalizing unity of being.

This is the flat reading of Parmenides, which identifies Parmenides as the first to claim the necessity of thinking separation as relative alterity. The flat reading of Parmenides must be attributed to Levinas for him to be able to name Parmenides as the father of the tradition, or to use his name metonymically to name the entire tradition. What are the consequences of such a flat reading? Is *to mé eon* what Levinas means by “separation”? Yes, but only in the first sense of separation we isolated above, that of separation as relative alterity. That which is opposed to being, *to mé eon*, cannot really be thought outside the horizon of being, Parmenides claims; it must always be able to be reduced to being.

If opposition to being fails, the second sense of separation, radical or infinite alterity, cannot be opposed to being but must be thought otherwise than being. The separated being is to be im-comprehensible, that is, literally, not able to be brought under a concept. To be im-comprehensible, then, the separated being cannot even be said to be in this sense—it must be separated even from being, thought otherwise than by means of being.

If Levinas would identify the ethically, infinitely separated being—and not just the relatively other being—with Parmenidean not-being, then he would be simply opposed to Parmenides. He would simply think Parmenides wrong, and simply want to develop an opposed discourse, one that could

say that which is not. He would simply then have to kill Parmenides. But Levinas is the one who points out to us the repeated failure of the parricide, and, most significantly, Levinas does not claim to have succeeded in the parricide. Indeed he cannot simply claim success; his supposed successful opposition would be simple *fiat* then, for Levinas does not argue, does not provide a counter-*logos* to Parmenides. He cannot really then be in opposition to Parmenides. He must have to distinguish between opposition and "thinking otherwise," must develop a sense in which the ethically separated being is beyond the opposition being/not-being. Ethical separation would then be "otherwise than being."

Thus on one reading, which identifies all separation with opposed not-being, one must say that Levinas attributes to Parmenides the beginning of what becomes the traditional metaphysical concept of being as the *sine qua non* of thought and speech. But is there no trace of radical alterity to be found in the way Levinas uses the name "Parmenides"? Is the text that bears the name "Parmenides" flat? Is the separation which is therein thematically limited to relative alterity its only sense of separation, or does it carry a trace of ethical separation? At this point I would hazard the suggestion that such a trace might be found in the fact that although the first person narrator describes his journey, he is *taught* by an other, by the goddess. When we turn to Levinas' treatment of Plato we will see the importance of teaching, the way teaching can be read as a trace of the ethically infinite, of another who teaches.

### ***B. How does the name "Plato" function in the text of Totality and Infinity?***

In *Totality and Infinity* Levinas uses Plato both as a resource in finding ways to develop a non-totalizing discourse, and as a villain, one of the prime examples of a totalizing philosopher. Both these attitudes can be expressed in a single phrase: Levinas uses Plato to think otherwise about the very tradition he helped found in his role as successor to Parmenides. He finds a trace of infinite alterity interspersed with Plato's thematic reduction of separation as relative alterity. This mixed approach is evident in Levinas' reading of Plato's texts on *logos*, in which the other person is always ready to come to the aid of his or her speech. In this way the other person manifests himself or herself, reveals himself or herself in a surprising epiphany, rather than being disclosed in the neutral light of the horizon of being.

In support of both of these possibilities, epiphanic revelation and neutralizing disclosure, Levinas cites a Platonic text. In the case of the other person coming to the aid of his or her discourse, Levinas cites *Phaedrus* 276a, where Socrates gets Phaedrus to describe the superior heritage and power of speech as opposed to writing:

S: Now tell me; do we not see another *logos* which appears as the legitimate brother of this one, both in the manner of its begetting and in its better and more powerful nature?

PH: What is this, and how is it, as you say, begotten?

S: The one written with *episteme* in the soul of the learner, with the power to defend itself, knowing when to speak and when to keep silent.

PH: You are speaking of the *logos* of the knower, living and breathing, of which we may rightfully call writing the image.<sup>8</sup>

As is well known, this passage plays an important role in Derrida's "Plato's Pharmacy,"<sup>9</sup> to which I will return. For Levinas, the other person must be able to attend his or her speech, to come to its aid with further speech. In a brilliant explication of Descartes, Levinas calls a world in which the other could not come to the aid of speech with more speech a world solely made up of appearance, a world in which the Evil Genius withholds the helping discourse and leaves us stranded in a world of appearance so flat that the possibility it is all a dream surges forth ever and again. The infinite otherness of the face of the other person, lying behind all speech, enables speech to escape the economy of the same, to banish the Evil Genius. Levinas writes of:

... the presence of the other in the proposition, the presence of him who can come to the assistance of his discourse, the teaching quality of all speech. Oral discourse is the plenitude of discourse. Signification or intelligibility does not arise from the identity of the same who remains in himself, but from the face of the other who calls upon the same.

(TI, 96–97)

The mention of teaching brings us to the other side of Levinas' Plato. The teaching of the other is opposed to Socratic maieutics throughout *Totality and Infinity* as the opposition between the placing within one of a lesson taught by the infinitely other person and Platonic anamnesis, the recalling of a content always already asleep within the pupil. In Levinasian teaching, the other person manifests him or herself in an epiphany; he or she is not, by way of contrast, disclosed by a vision illuminated by the neutral light of being. This last characteristic move of Western philosophy, the predominance of theory, is attributed by Levinas to Plato in his role as founder of philosophy: "Plato, who identifies knowledge with vision . . ." (TI, 64).

When we consider the most obvious source for Levinas' claim about Plato and theory, *Republic* 506–509, we are able to see the full contours of Levinas' dual relation to Plato. Here we see totality, the neutral light of being, with the infinite, beyond being, at its very source. The light of being

would threaten any break in the economy of the same accomplished by the discourse of another person, for as a neutral third term it threatens to encompass the face to face relation, destroying the infinite singularity of the ethical encounter. However, the Good, in whose granting of being streams the neutralizing light in which the *psyché* sees its objects, is itself beyond being, *epekeina tés ousias*. As beyond being, the Good is beyond any measure by beings, and is thus infinite in its remove, or better, operates in the space opened by the infinite relation with the other person. Levinas writes: "Infinity opens the order of the Good. It is an order that does not contradict, but goes beyond the rules of formal logic" (TI, 104).

Here we see a clue to working out the relation of opposition to that of thinking otherwise. The clue concerns the question of the closure of the field of philosophy. What discourse is open to Levinas to use in describing the operation of the Good, the ethical, the infinitely other, "beyond the rules of formal logic," beyond the Parmenides of the "flat" reading? We have seen that saying the Good is beyond being cannot be the same as saying it is non-being. If ethical separation is not non-being, then to allow a discourse of ethical separation perhaps Parmenides need not be killed.

The question of a discourse of not-being is precisely the point in Plato's *Sophist* at which the parricide of Parmenides is mentioned by the Eleatic stranger. Let me now turn to the *Sophist* to elucidate Levinas' reading of the relation between Plato and Parmenides

### C. How does Levinas think Plato's parricide fails?

In Section I of *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas cites Plato's dialogue *Parmenides* 133b–135c and 141e–142b as evidence of Plato's outlawing of *logos* about the infinitely other. In Levinas' words, Plato teaches us that "the relation with the Absolute would render the Absolute relative" (TI, 50). When we turn to the *Parmenides* at the passages cited by Levinas, we find the old sage interrogating Socrates about his preliminary characterization of the ideas as totally separate. Such a position leads into almost insuperable difficulties, Parmenides continues. Only a man of wide experience and fine natural gifts, willing to undergo remote and laborious demonstrations, could refute the thesis that the ideas, as separate, are unknowable. Thus the Platonic Parmenides seems to hold the door open for the discourse on non-being that would be his death. We will see whether the Eleatic stranger of the *Sophist*, who is precisely a man of wide experience and fine natural gifts, willing to undergo long demonstrations, does in fact succeed in inaugurating a discourse of non-being, that is, succeed in the parricide.<sup>10</sup>

Parmenides appears in the latter part of the *Sophist*, as the Eleatic stranger and Theaetetus find that the sophist has taken refuge in non-being when they attempt to pin him down with a *diæresis* that distinguishes between icons and phantasms. All images appear, we are told, but are not (the original),

so we seem to be affirming non-being when we discuss images. At this point the Stranger brings up Parmenides' warning against thinking not-being by citing what we know as fragment 7, lines 1–2: "Never shall this prevail that not-beings are; / But keep your thought from this path of inquiry" (237a). The Stranger continues his argument, in the name of the sophist, by claiming that we cannot look for correct *logos* about not-being [*mé skopômen tén orthologian peri to mé on*], because even calling it "without *logos*" addresses it as a singular, that is, possessing number, one of the things that are (239a–b).

Significantly for us, this argument is so strong that even Parmenides must be included among those with incorrect *logos* about not-being, for he does indeed address it as "*alogon*." The Stranger does not explicitly draw this conclusion, but the extreme abstractness of his argument enables us to draw Parmenides under its scope. Such extreme abstraction, however, leaves the Stranger no room for continuing his hunt for the sophist, so he soon leaves this approach behind. His next step is to guide Theaetetus into acknowledging the strange interweaving of not-being and being [*sumplokén to mé on tôi onti, kai mala atopon*] that follows from the status of an icon, which is not (the original), at the same time that it is (itself—an icon) (240 b–c).

At this point the Stranger pauses and asks Theaetetus not to assume that he is becoming a sort of parricide (241d). Theaetetus does not understand him, so the Stranger explains that they will now have to test the *logos* of father Parmenides and declare that not-being somehow is, and that being somehow is not. Only on the condition of this interweaving can one speak of images, icons, imitations, or phantasms, and their respective arts, without being ridiculous and contradictory (241e). Thus the Stranger binds serious *logos* to non-contradiction, though this very seriousness brings the danger of appearing mad [*manikos*] (242a).

Thus the question of the parricide of Parmenides is opened. Why does Levinas feel that Plato's attempt at the parricide fails? What does this failure mean: the inability to develop a *logos* of not-being? Or the failure to come up with a discourse on ethical separation? To answer these questions let us recall how the Stranger uses the paradigm of the alphabet to discuss the mingling of the five greatest kinds: being, same, other, rest, change (253a). Thus he claims that what we have been calling not-being now becomes the "other" of being, not its opposite: "hopotan to me on legomen, hôs eoiken, ouk enantion ti legomen tou ontos, all' heteron monon." Now, this "other" is only so relative to another "other"; we cannot think of an "other by itself," but "an other always refers to an other": "to d'heteron aci pros heteron" (255d). With this move we bring not-being within being, saying that it assuredly "is," and has a *phusis*: "hoti to me on bebaiôs esti ten autou phusin echon" (258b–c).

The Stranger now claims his *logos* about not-being shows Parmenides more than he forbade us to seek (258c). But does this count for Levinas as

a successful parricide? No. We must say that the Stranger pays the price for his discourse on not-being by limiting discourse on alterity to relative alterity, the "other" of being. In the Platonic text *to mé on* slides from "opposite" to "other." The other of being—*to mé on* as radically separated, as carrying what Levinas might read as the trace of infinite alterity—must be given up in favor of relative alterity. The Stranger soon admits "we long ago gave up speaking of any opposite of being" (258e), exactly as Parmenides commanded. The Stranger then acknowledges his continued allegiance to Parmenides by forbidding, just as does the Parmenides of Plato's dialogue, absolute separation at the pain of losing *logos*: "The complete vanishing [*aphanisis*] of all *logos* is the separation [*to dialuein*] of each from all" (259e).

Thus the Stranger has saved a *logos* of not-being, but only at the cost of reinforcing the tautology of Parmenides: anything we can say about not-being must be said in terms of being. He thus forbids a discourse on ethical, infinite alterity. He speaks of the other of being, not otherwise than being. So the break alluded to in the dialogue *Parmenides*, which seemed to hint at the possibility of a knowledge of the infinitely separate—even though this break, this parricide, is attempted by a man of "wide experience and great gifts"—is never completed. In this way Levinas can hold that the Stranger's parricide attempt, and all the others that follow, have failed. For the Stranger alterity is always merely relative alterity, an otherness always encompassable in an economy of the same.

Now we can ask to what extent we can consider Levinas' project a parricide attempt. Levinas wishes to think an alterity that is concrete and infinite, a human alterity, not one that is merely "purely formal and logical": "Human alterity is thought not from the purely formal and logical alterity . . ." <sup>11</sup> What thought is this that Levinas proposes, beyond the tautology of Parmenides which hides beneath the *logos* of the Stranger? Does "beyond" here then have to entail the death of father Parmenides? To answer this question I turn to Derrida's treatment of the parricide in "Violence and Metaphysics."

### Part III. How does the figure of the parricide of Parmenides function in Derrida's "Violence and Metaphysics"?

Derrida takes up the figure of the parricide in noting Levinas' call in *Time and the Other* for a break with Parmenides. Derrida writes: "Thus, Levinas exhorts us to a second parricide. The Greek father who still holds us under his sway must be killed; and this is what a Greek—Plato—could never resolve to do . . ." (VM, 89). We have seen why Levinas feels the first attempt, by the Stranger, failed; Derrida shows why such attempts must always fail.

For Derrida, the father is never reached because he was never there in the first place: the order of discourse is founded by what he calls an "originary

repetition," in which a series of images supplements the always already absent origin. In "Plato's Pharmacy," Derrida cites "the good-sun-father-capital" as names of the origin, which has always already withdrawn to leave behind the play of differences which forms our *logos*. Thus father Parmenides is only the function of the flat reading of his text necessary for his being named the father, for his being nominated for parricide. The flat reading, which names Parmenides as he who has bound *logos* to a totalizing plenitude of being, produces a figure of the impossible desire for a totality that excludes not-being. The text of Parmenides, the mark of the desire for plenitude, carries with it—because it is made possible by—the interweaving of not-being and being, as the Stranger shows.

Thus the parricide of Parmenides is no more possible than a description of the Good in itself, which as we know is always deferred by Socrates. *Logos* can never reach the condition of *logos*—conceived as origin, as father—in order to kill what limits its discourse to relative alterity, what commands it to interweave being and not-being, because *logos* is only made possible by the withdrawal of that condition conceived as origin. For Derrida, the Good beyond being is the inscription in the text of Plato of the always absent origin:

The absolute invisibility of the origin of the visible, of the good-sun-father-capital, the unattainment of presence or beingness in any form, the whole surplus Plato calls *epekeina tés ousias* (beyond beingness or presence), gives rise to a structure of replacements such that all presences will be supplements substituted for the absent origin, and all differences, within the system of presence, will be the irreducible effect of what remains *epekeina tés ousias*.

(PP, 167)

In Derrida's view, then, the failed parricide is itself only a figure; it marks the withdrawal of the father before we could ever have laid hands on him. Plenitude is then not sundered by an act of ours, for the demand for plenitude in a text is only the mark of an impossible desire for grasping what is an origin only through repetition, a repetition that founds an order of relative alterity. As Derrida puts it, the first parricide is "deferr[ed] into a hallucinatory murder. A hallucination within the hallucination that is already speech" (VM, 89). For Levinas to call for another parricide would then be only the call for founding another order of repetition, and how could this "new" *logos* be any less relative than the "first"? So the parricides have always failed, must always fail. But is it not just the very necessity of the failure that we should notice here? As I mentioned earlier, naming Parmenides as the target of the parricide attempts, a naming that requires several totalizing moves, brings Levinas to the question of the closure of the philosophical field. The very calling for a parricide, a calling that is a

totalizing, would entail its failure then, if “parricide” means escaping totalizing metaphysics by founding a *discourse* of infinite alterity. Now one could claim at this point that Levinas, in enabling us to thematize how totality serves as the medium for the metaphysical tradition, opens us to thinking alterity otherwise. But if we also wish to deny any existence to thought prior to language, even the thinking otherwise, the thought of a concrete and human infinite alterity, would have to be expressed in a discourse limited to relative alterity.<sup>12</sup>

Thus we must also say that if “parricide” means the questioning of the self-evidence of the classical demand for totality, then the call for a parricide attempt, in the obviousness of the necessity of its failure, at least *points* toward a “beyond” of philosophical discourse.<sup>13</sup> Thinking otherwise would then consist in pointing out the failure of simple opposition. Therefore, by reading Levinas’ complaint about the failure of past parricide attempts ironically, we can be brought to see how the parricide of Parmenides can function as a “graphic” inscribing the closure of philosophical *logos*. That we are led to name Levinas’ project, *qua* philosophy, as another necessarily failed parricide is thus not a complaint against Levinas, a mark of the failure of his project, but the mark of its success.<sup>14</sup>

### References

- 1 Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, tr. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969). All future page references will be given in the text.
- 2 Emmanuel Levinas, *Time and the Other*, tr. Richard A. Cohen (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1987).
- 3 Jacques Derrida, “Violence and Metaphysics,” in *Writing and Difference*, tr. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978).
- 4 One can see this inflation of the structure of elemental separation to cover all relation to alterity in Hegelian terms. Servile labor in the *Phenomenology of Spirit* is a moment of the movement of spirit in which the subject recognizes itself in the world it changes, thereby reducing the alterity of its worked-over materials. The important point for Levinas is that servile labor is what it is for Hegel only in so far as it is a moment in the movement of spirit. As a moment, it reveals in small script, as it were, to those who know how to read it, i.e., those who have completed the journey that is the *Phenomenology* and are on the way back through again, the movement of spirit as the reduction of difference to identity (ultimately, of course, speculative identity). The absolute standpoint is precisely the achievement of the speculative identity of opposites, in which concrete difference is indeed retained in the system, but only retained in the system, as a moment.
- 5 Martin Heidegger, *Early Greek Thinking*, tr. David Farrell Krell and Frank Capuzzi (New York: Harper & Row, 1975).
- 6 *Parmenides of Elea: Fragments*, tr. David Gallop (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1984). Due to the limits of my wordprocessing system I will transliterate all Greek terms, using “é” for “eta” and “ô” for “omega.”



- 7 See Reiner Schürmann, "The Law of the One and the Law of Contraries in Parmenides," *Graduate Faculty Philosophy Journal*, Vol. 13, No. 1 (1988).
- 8 I use the translations in the Loeb Classical Library editions for the Platonic texts dealt with here. In some cases I silently modify the translation.
- 9 Derrida, "Plato's Pharmacy," in *Dissemination*, tr. Barbara Johnson (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981).
- 10 My reading of the *Sophist* is heavily influenced by Stanley Rosen's *Plato's Sophist: The Drama of Original and Image* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983).
- 11 Levinas, *Time and the Other*, p. 14.
- 12 Thus Levinas' thought of language moves toward the distinction between "saying" and "said," as it is developed in *Otherwise than Being*.
- 13 As Derrida puts it:

... the attempt to achieve an opening toward the beyond of philosophical discourse, by means of philosophical discourse, which can never be shaken off completely, cannot possibly succeed *within language*—and Levinas recognizes that there is no thought before language and outside of it—except by *formally* and *thematically* posing the question of the relations between belonging and the opening, the question of closure. Formally—that is by posing it in the most effective and most formal, the most formalized, way possible, not in a *logic*, in other words, in a philosophy, but in an inscribed description, in an inscription of the relations between the philosophical and the nonphilosophical, in a kind of unheard of *graphics*, within which philosophical conceptuality would be no more than a function.

(VM, 110–11)

- 14 Many people have helped me with this essay: Robert Bernasconi, Reginald Lilly, Paul Davies, Adriaan Peperzak, Dennis Keenan, and the anonymous reader for *JBSP*. My thanks to all of them.

# AESTHETIC TOTALITY AND ETHICAL INFINITY

Levinas on art

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Emmanuel Levinas describes ethics as a radical putting into question of the self in the presence of the face of the other. The guiding question in this essay is: does the work of art give access to the ethical, as Levinas understands it? The answer that Levinas most often provides to this question *in his work* is a resounding *no*. But this is also a question that we put *to* Levinas and his work, attending not just to the constative level of his statements about art, but to their performative dimension as well. I will begin with the view of art in the 1961 *Totality and Infinity*—the work which represents Levinas's mature ethical philosophy—then consider the way in which similar preoccupations emerge in a cluster of his texts from the late forties: “The Other in Proust” (1947), “Reality and its Shadow” (1948), and “The Transcendence of Words” (1949).<sup>1</sup>

To recapitulate one of *Totality and Infinity*'s central emphases: the *nontotalizing* relation to the face of the other, the relation (without relation) that is capable of preserving absolute separation, distance, and the radical asymmetry between parties, may be produced in two ways, in generosity and in “discourse.” Levinas understands discourse not as any kind of communication but as interlocution, as interpellation, in which ethics in its most originary sense—the ethicity of ethics—comes to the fore. In Levinas's descriptions, the face of the other signifies as *expression*—namely, as a speaking that surmounts and exceeds the other's plastic manifestation and that calls me to responsibility, even commanding me, “thou shalt not kill.” Levinas calls the link between expression and responsibility “the ethical condition or essence of language” (TI 200).

This ethical language is repeatedly characterized as having an exceptional *droiture*, that is, straightforwardness, uprightness, justice; he also calls it “sincerity,” “frankness.” In privileging such an ethical language, Levinas quite explicitly, as I have demonstrated elsewhere, excludes rhetoric—as a form of language that is devious, that is not straight, that does not face—and with it, implicitly, any language that is figured or troped; he denounces rhetoric as violent and unjust. The ethical language relation is to be found only in a vocative or imperative discourse, face to face. It is not then surprising that Levinas excludes from his conception of ethical language all forms of poetic speaking.

In the opening section of *Totality and Infinity* (IA.2) which is concerned with the economy of the Same—that is, with the concrete egoistic exchanges that characterize the self’s very being in the world—Levinas discusses the identification of the Same in the I:

The I that repels the self, lived as repugnance, the I riveted to itself, lived as ennui, are modes of self-consciousness and rest on the unrendable identity of the I and the self. The alterity of the I that takes itself for another may strike the imagination of the poet precisely because it is but the play of the Same: The negation of the I by the self is precisely one of the modes of identification of the I. [*Le moi qui repousse le soi, vécu comme répugnance, le moi rivé à soi, vécu comme ennui—sont des modes de la conscience de soi et reposent sur l’indéchirable identité de moi et de soi. L’altérité du je, qui se prend pour un autre, peut frapper l’imagination du poète, précisément parce qu’elle n’est que le jeu du Même: la négation du moi par le soi—est précisément l’un des modes d’identification du moi.*]

(TI 37)

Levinas’s covert allusion to Rimbaud’s “Je est un autre” serves to exemplify the relation to a spurious or finite alterity that characterizes the I in identification. He will contrast it to transcendence, the relationship with the infinitely other. But Levinas does not, in this exemplary gesture which includes using the literary text *as* an example, merely use Rimbaud’s text as an example of a spurious alterity; he renders Rimbaud a figure for the poet in general, whose “imagination” is incapable of recognizing ethical transcendence.

Levinas’s exclusion of the work of art from the possibility of ethnicity is again apparent in *Totality and Infinity*’s discussion of works—including artistic productions—and expression. Having asked in effect if the Other’s *works* can attest to the Other, Levinas says that, with the work,

A separation opens up between the producer and the product. At a given moment the producer no longer follows up, remains in retreat

(*reste en retrait*). His transcendence stops mid-way. In contrast with the transcendence of expression, in which the being that expresses himself *personally attends* the work of expression, production attests the author of the work in his *absence*, as a plastic form.

(TI 227)

In the work, the other's transcendence is somehow blocked, stopped, turned into immanence. The producer is no longer present; the *décalage* or lag in self-presence turns the producer's presentation into a trace structure (he is *en retrait*). Levinas further contrasts the transcendence of expression and the blocked or failed transcendence of the work as the difference between the author's "attending personally" his expression and the author's absence from his work.<sup>2</sup> There is indeed a certain phonocentrism, a complicity with the metaphysics of presence that emerges here and elsewhere in Levinas's ethical discourse.<sup>3</sup> Suffice it to state that, if the work, in Levinas's view, *cannot* present or signify the other, that is precisely *because* it signifies; it signifies with the referrals inherent in sign systems and the constitutive absence it implies. The necessary *indirection* of a work's mode of signification falls short of the *directness* of the discourse of the face.

Finally, notable in *Totality and Infinity* is the way in which poetry is troped. It often appears within a chain of terms which are negatively charged—intoxication, ritual, the sacred, magic, witchcraft, incantation, play, participation—a terminological cluster that is familiar enough from Levinas's earlier work, where the work of art is something of a preoccupation. The Levinas of *Totality and Infinity* is more restrained in his polemic against poetry, less concerned with it. Nonetheless, the following passage from that work (IIB.3) concisely lays out the set of terms with which Levinas has always understood the aesthetic.

The ethical relation, the face to face, also cuts across every relation one could call mystical, where events other than that of the presentation of the original being come to overwhelm or sublate the pure sincerity of this presentation, where intoxicating equivocations come to enrich the primordial univocity of expression, where discourse becomes incantation as prayer becomes rite and liturgy, where the interlocutors find themselves playing a role in a drama that has begun outside of them. Here resides the rational character of the ethical relation and of language. No fear, no trembling could alter the straightforwardness of this relationship, which preserves the discontinuity of relationship, resists fusion. . . . To poetic activity—where influences arise unbeknown to us out of this nonetheless conscious activity, to envelop and beguile it as a rhythm, and where action is borne along by the very work it has given rise to . . .—is opposed the language that at each instant dispels the charm of rhythm and prevents the initiative from becoming a role.

Discourse is rupture and commencement, breaking of rhythm which enraptures and transports the interlocutors—prose.

(TI 201–02)

What is referred to here as *the mystical* represents a threat to the basic principles of the ethical. Levinas had previously described *discourse* as the relation to the face of the other which respects and maintains separation and distance. The discourse with the face is one of *straightforwardness*, and an original *sincerity*, a sincerity that precedes the opposition between veracity and deceit (TI 202). The face's distinctive mode of signification was described as expression, a way in which the face *undoes* the ambiguity or equivocation of its manifestation by speaking. The autosignification and auto-attendance of facial expression are how the fact decisively calls upon me, obligating me, opening the dimension of the ethical. But the mystical relation would prevent the ethical from even arising, “overwhelming” sincerity and straightforwardness, introducing “equivocation” into the “primordial univocity,” “transporting” the interlocutors of ethical discourse, turning discourse into “incantation,” turning “prayer” (which is ultimately, as will be shown, the essence of ethical discourse) into sacred rite and liturgy, turning what is rational into a “fear and trembling,” and turning the respectful discontinuity into “fusion.” All of this is how Levinas always describes the false transcendence of *participation*, defined in *Totality and Infinity* as a being's “submergence in the being toward which it goes, which holds the transcendent being in its meshes, as to do it violence” (TI 48). One of the peculiarities of Levinas's discourse on the aesthetic is his consistent tendency to think poetry together with participation (and I will return to this point). Note simply here that, at the passage's end, Levinas grafts the term “poetry” onto the set of oppositions which have governed its logic thus far. He opposes poetic activity to ethical discourse, in the process asserting that (1) poetic activity possesses or dispossesses the subject: hence the work carries away not only its producer but also its audience; and (2) the manner in which poetry “charms,” “enraptures and transports” its audience is *rhythm*.

The full significance of these assertions will be determined only when they have been brought into relation with the earlier texts by Levinas which theorize the work of art. Note simply that the term *poetry* denotes not a genre of art but the work of art in general. The distinction between poetry and prose that Levinas proposes at the passage's end, and that lines up with the oppositions equivocation/sincerity, sacred ritual/prayer, fusion/discontinuity, should be understood as a genre distinction on the hither side of genre distinctions. Neither poetry nor prose represents for Levinas a genre of art but originary experiences, for the prose in question is nothing other than the sobriety, the gravity of ethical language.<sup>4</sup>

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In "The Other in Proust," published in 1947, the first of his essays devoted to the interpretation of a literary work, Levinas states that, while the theory of the philosopher refers "unequivocally" to its object (*sans équivoque*), that of the poet

harbors an ambiguity [*une ambiguïté*], for it is concerned not to express but to create the object. Like images or symbols, reasoning is called on to produce *a certain rhythm* in which the reality that is sought will appear by magic. The truths or errors articulated are of no value in themselves. They are *spells* and *incantations*.

(OP 161)

The contrast is not merely, as one might expect, between the philosopher's denotative language and the poet's metaphorical language, between a language of communication and a language that suspends the communicative function, between a presumably single versus a multiple meaning. It concerns the way in which their theoretical statements relate to their objects, the difference between a descriptive relationship to the object and a creative, or even a performative, one. The philosopher is said to "express" the object; the poet "creates" it. Moreover, the poet is described as one who by magic, spells, and incantations "produces a certain rhythm." The centrality of the term *rhythm* to Levinas's aesthetic theory will soon become clear, as will the way in which a terminology of the *supernatural* invariably arises in all of his writings on art: at the essay's beginning Levinas had called Proust "the magician of inexpressible rhythms" (OP 161).<sup>5</sup>

The central argument of the essay is that in Proust's world there is an indeterminacy, in which "one course of action does not preclude other possibilities," in which "acts are shadowed by unpredictable 'counteracts' and things by 'counter-things.'" This eventuates in "a compossibility of contradictory elements," in which "everything is vertiginously possible," and thus, "a nullification of every choice," an "amorality." It is as if "magic begins . . . when ethics is finished" (OP 162). But—the question arises—ethics in what sense? The essay's references to choice and amorality imply a subject who would choose or initiate a particular ethical action. In other words, they belong to a traditional conception of ethics that is derivative from the way in which the ethical is thought in Levinas's mature work. They belong to *an* ethics rather than to the *ethicity* of ethics, the reinscribed ethics. The passage about poetry from *Totality and Infinity* also made reference to a loss of initiative, indeed, a loss of subjecthood, as if Levinas, when faced with poetry, to some extent reverts to a vocabulary belonging to a conception of ethics that he himself has rejected.

But perhaps the magic of the Proustian art does *not* spell the end of ethics. Levinas goes on to say: "The mystery in Proust is the mystery of the other (*le mystère de l'autre*)" (OP 163). And also, "It is not the inner event

that counts but the way in which the self seizes it and is overwhelmed by it, as though it were encountered in another [*comme s'il le rencontrait chez un autre*]. It is . . . the dialogue in the self with the other [*le dialogue en soi avec l'autre*]” (OP 163). These statements are not without a certain “ambiguity,” because the inner life as it will be described in Levinas’s work of ten years later is invariably closed off to the other<sup>6</sup> and the term “mystery” will also, by that time, lose all its prestige.<sup>7</sup> But Levinas argues not only that there *may be* an ethical dimension in Proust’s work, he builds up to saying that Proust’s work is totally ethical, that it marks out “a direct relation with that which gives itself *in* refusing itself, with the other as other” (OP 164). (And here Levinas uses the alterity-word, *autrui*, again in lower case.) Levinas ends up calling Proust “a poet of the social,” even though he stops short of calling him a poet of the ethical.

But Levinas’s ambivalence about the question of art is preserved in the essay’s last sentence, in the hesitation in its punctuation.

Proust’s most profound teaching—if poetry can contain teachings—consists in situating reality in a relation with something which forever remains other, with the Other as absence and mystery [*avec ce qui à jamais demeure autre, avec autrui comme absence et mystère*], in rediscovering this relation in the very intimacy of the “I,” and in inaugurating a dialectic that breaks definitively with Parmenides.

(OP 165)

The hesitation is important, the qualifier is enormous. For it is not at all clear that poetry—Proust’s or anyone else’s—*can* contain teaching. Teaching is an ethical relation, a paradigm of the ethical relation in *Totality and Infinity* (see TI 204)—and *this* teaching that Proust’s work is said to accomplish involves no less than an (impossible) break with Parmenides, namely, with the governing conceptuality of philosophy in the West. Levinas says that Proust teaches the ethical—if poetry *can* teach—but we know that he knows that it cannot, or we know that he has grave doubts about this possibility, because magic and ethics are incompatible, or, in the terms of *Totality and Infinity*, poetic rapture interferes with the straightforwardness of ethical discourse. In short, in the Proust essay Levinas seems to want to have it both ways. Poetry does and does not give access to the ethical. By the time of the publication of “Reality and its Shadow” the following year, Levinas’s ambivalence towards the work of art would seem to have become an outright dismissal.

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“Reality and its Shadow,” the only place in Levinas’s work where he theorizes the work of art in a sustained way, was published in 1948 in *Les temps*

*modernes*. The essay is severe in its denunciation of the work of art and the work of criticism as well. Its tone with regard to Sartre's idea of "committed literature" is polemical enough to have necessitated an editorial preface that states that perhaps Levinas has not examined Sartre's theory fully enough.<sup>8</sup> There is something aberrant about both the essay's tonality and its theoretical stance—namely, that art is the worst kind of irresponsibility, that it is a type of death, an idolatry—which can't be explained away simply by saying that it's an early piece, that Levinas's attention will later shift away from aesthetics, and so on. The essay was published in the same year as two of Levinas's important phenomenological analyses, *Existence and Existents* and *Time and the Other*, and it has continuities with all of Levinas's future discussions of art. Moreover, John Llewelyn suggests, Levinas's assertions that art is "disengaged," without "utility," "outside 'being in the world'" can be situated within a tradition of the thinking of the aesthetic, in Kant and Heidegger.<sup>9</sup> Another indispensable point of reference would be Plato's criticism of mimesis and rejection of poetry in the *Republic* and elsewhere.<sup>10</sup>

Levinas begins by describing criticism as "parasitic" upon the work of art, i.e., as having a secondariness. He says that while criticism "may seem suspect and pointless"—and he hereby introduces this judgment under the guise that it be avoided (a rhetorical pattern often found in his discourse on art)—it can be "justified," even—as he asserts at the essay's end—"rehabilitated." A rehabilitated or what he calls a philosophical criticism would represent "the intervention of the understanding necessary for integrating the *inhumanity* and the *inversion* of art into human life" (RO 2).

What is it about art that for Levinas makes such an intervention necessary? Art, as he conceives it, substitutes for the object its *image* and in the process "neutralizes" the "living" and "real" relationship with that object (RO 3). Specific to the image is that it relates to its object by resemblance, a resemblance which is "not the result of a comparison between an image and the original, but the very movement that engenders the image" (RO 6). He asserts:

Reality would not be only what it is, what it is disclosed to be in truth, but would be also its double, its shadow, its image. . . . Thus a person bears on his face (*sur sa face*) alongside of its being with which he coincides, its own caricature, its picturesqueness.

(RO 6)

Levinas thinks the work of art as outside, or on the hither side, of truth and disclosure. But there is something about the analogy that Levinas proposes—reality is to image as face (*face*, not yet *visage*) is to caricature—that, especially from the vantage point of *Totality and Infinity*, gives pause. The face, as Levinas will define it, is never reducible to its plastic image: it gives itself as form *and* also exceeds the form. *To miss* the way in which the face also



exceeds its form, to have an image of the face, *to image* a face, is to turn it into a caricature, frozen, petrified, a mask. The whole possibility, indeed, the very temptation, of violence is inscribed in the face's presentation as form or image: "The contours of its form in expression imprisons this openness [which breaks up form] in a caricature. The face is at the limit of holiness and caricature" (TI 198). In short, the analogy suggests that no aesthetic approach to the face could also be ethical. There is no *ethical* image of the face; there is no ethical image. And the substitution of an *image* for an object is what Levinas calls "the most elementary procedure of art" (RO 3).

Indeed, Levinas ultimately sees this substitutive procedure itself as illegitimate, as amounting to idolatry: "evil powers are conjured by filling the world with idols which have mouths but do not speak."<sup>11</sup> And in this substitution there is an utter evasion, an abdication of responsibility, indeed an elision of the ethical dimension of experience: "We find an appeasement [*un apaisement*] when, beyond the invitations to comprehend and act, we throw ourselves into the *rhythm* of a reality which solicits only its admission into a book or painting. Myth takes the place of mystery" (RO 12).

How exactly does art take us away from the grave and difficult freedom which is responsibility to the other? The answer is to be found in the *musicality* of the image and in this key category of *rhythm*, which is *the mode of the image*: "The image," writes Levinas, "is musical. Its passivity is directly visible in magic, song, music, and poetry" (RO 3). Levinas detaches the terms *rhythm* and *music* "from the arts of sound" in order to "draw them out into a general aesthetic category. . . . To insist on the musicality of every image is to see in an image its detachment from an object" (RO 3). In Levinas's definition, rhythm is not primarily an *intrinsic* feature of the work of art; it "designates not so much an inner law of the poetic order as the way the poetic order affects us, closed wholes whose elements call for one another like the syllables of a verse, but do so only insofar as they impose themselves on us" (RO 4). That is, it is pragmatically concerned with the effect of the work on its audience.

That effect could not be more negative. In rhythm, the elements of the poetic order are said to "call for one another . . . insofar as they impose themselves on us. *But,*" Levinas continues:

*They impose themselves on us without our assuming them.* Or rather, our consenting to them is inverted into a *participation*. . . . Rhythm represents a unique situation where we cannot speak of consent, assumption, initiative or freedom, because *the subject is caught up and carried away by it*. The subject is part of its own representation. It is so not even despite itself for in rhythm there is no longer a oneself, but rather a sort of *passage from oneself to anonymity*. This is the *captivation or incantation* of poetry and music. . . . The particular automatic character of a

walk or a dance to music is a mode of being where . . . consciousness, paralyzed in its freedom, *plays*, totally absorbed in the playing . . . the subject . . . is exterior to itself.

(RO 4)

This passage makes reference to the now familiar themes—the loss of initiative, loss of selfhood, the subject's being carried away by the work—and some new emphases, the subject's exteriority to itself, anonymity, automatism, play. Levinas's aversion to play is often evident—just one example is found in the passage in *Totality and Infinity* where the poet's imagination is caught by and caught up in the *play* of the Same. It is one of the most negatively charged terms in his work. This becomes all the more significant when we realize that play is a central category of aesthetic experience and for Gadamer the clue to the ontology of the work of art. But the category which seems most destructive of the possibility of ethicity and toward which Levinas aims his greatest polemic is *participation*. He states above that in the mode of absorption characteristic of the aesthetic state of mind, "consent is inverted into a participation," or, as he also says, there is a "reversal of power into *participation*" (RO 4).

Levinas derives the term and concept from the ethnologist Lucien Lévy-Bruhl, who describes primitive mentality's mystic belief in unseen, supernatural forces, its emotional and affective relation to collective representations, which are perceived as having a transitive influence—through "transference, contact, projection, contamination, defilement, possession" (HNT 99).<sup>12</sup> This belief structure functions concretely in magic and in religious practices and "accounts for the place of dreams, omens, divination, sacrifices, incantations, ritual ceremonies and magic" (PM 488).<sup>13</sup> Lévy-Bruhl calls the law or logic governing these connections *participation*, a way of thinking which is indifferent to the law of contradiction, "which finds no difficulty in imagining the identity of the one and the many, the individual and the species, of entities however unlike they may be" (HNT 135–36). The conceptual structures which characterize participation are, in short, utterly heterogenous to our own way of thinking, and constitute, for the evolutionist Lévy-Bruhl, an earlier prelogical stage of modern mentality.

There is a contingent reason for Levinas's interest in this ethnologist's ideas, namely, that two of Levinas's most important teachers at Strasbourg—Charles Blondel and Maurice Halbwachs—were themselves students of Lévy-Bruhl.<sup>14</sup> But Levinas's own 1957 essay on Lévy-Bruhl makes explicit the deeper reasons for his interest. Lévy-Bruhl's ideas about primitive mentality have marked and influenced the orientation of contemporary philosophy, specifically the work of Husserl, Bergson, R. Otto and, in particular, Heidegger's philosophy of existence. Levinas writes that in Heidegger "the existence of a being (of *Dasein*) does not happen as the tranquil subsistence of substance, but as hold and possession, as a field of forces in

which human existence is held, or is engaged, or in Lévy-Bruhl's terms, "participates" (LB 56–57). The originality of Lévy-Bruhl's thought, according to Levinas, is that it allows us to think the intentionality of affective states: "emotion, which, according to classical psychology, closes us up within ourselves, here acquires *a certain transcendence*" (LB 58). The fetish-objects of primitive mentality are like the "tools" in the Heideggerian analysis of world, not first things and then usable, but usable things whose significance is a *practical conjuncture*. Hence, ultimately, Lévy-Bruhl's thought "puts into question the privilege of theoretical thinking" (LB 65), the legislative function of reason, the unity of spirit and the subject (LB 54). But, if Lévy-Bruhl's analyses "have helped to forge" central concepts of modern thought, they—and this is Levinas's sole expressed reservation in this essay which will in time accumulate into the force of a polemic—have also come "to flatter a nostalgia for outmoded and retrograde forms," in particular a renewal of mythology and a kind of elevation of myth and a tolerance for "the cruelties which myth perpetuates in morality" (LB 67).

Lévy-Bruhl's ideas also have influenced Levinas's descriptions (although Levinas doesn't mention this in his essay on Lévy-Bruhl), for example, of the *il y a* in *Existence and Existents*, in conjunction with which participation is named, and in *Difficult Freedom*, where primitive mentality's law of participation is to some extent assimilated, anachronistically, to the (pagan) religions of the Ancient Near East from which Hebraic monotheism separated itself. But the most prominent and most important usage is in *Totality and Infinity*, where ethics is consistently thought of as "a break from participation." "A separated being maintains itself in existence all by itself, *without participating* in the Being from which it is separated" (TI 58). As Adriaan Peperzak observes, for Levinas even the philosophy of the Same "has had the merit of protesting against participation." But "the error of this philosophy was to identify the separate existence with the existence of an egological I, integrating all beings as subordinate moments of the Same."<sup>15</sup> In other words, there is a sense in which ethics can be thought of as a break *from* the break from participation. For Levinas it is in *ethical* relations that philosophy is decisively "purified of everything with which an imagination . . . victim of participation charges our concepts. . . . Everything that cannot be reduced to an interhuman relation represents not the superior form but the forever primitive form of religion" (TI 79). And, of course, we have already analyzed the passage in *Totality and Infinity* where poetry is thought together with participation, *where poetry is described as and aligned with everything that ethics must struggle against*.<sup>16</sup>

In closing, some brief questions: How does Levinas come to see *aesthetic* experience in this way? An answer to this question might go by way of passages from Levinas's 1949 essay on Leiris, which describe ethics as a kind of waking up from aesthetic existence, with its primacy of vision and "the visual experience to which Western civilization ultimately reduces all

spiritual life" (TW 147). In other words, it has to do with the way in which Levinas conceives of the relation or divide between aesthetics and ethics. He also writes: "The use of the word wrenches experience out of its aesthetic self-sufficiency. . . . To speak is to interrupt my existence as a subject and a master. . . . The subject who speaks does not purely and simply situate himself at the heart of his own spectacle, as an artist does . . . but in relation to the Other . . . By proffering a word, the subject putting himself forward lays himself open and, in a sense, prays" [*Par la parole proférée, le sujet qui se pose s'expose et, en quelque manière, prie*] (TW 148–49). In these passages Levinas associates the dimension of the aesthetic not only with a reversion to participation, but with what he will call in later work, the totality.

But are we sure we can keep participation and ethics apart? We have already pointed to the puzzle in which the dissolution of the subject—condemned in the case of participation—is also positively valorized by Levinas's ethics, in which there is formal or structural similarity between something that is ethical and its opposite. There is such a similarity between the subject's exteriority to itself in the mode of aesthetic absorption, and the exteriority of the face of the other which speaks infinity, and which commands me.<sup>17</sup> Are we to think this as bad versus a good exteriority? a false versus a true transcendence? Can we be sure that the two don't communicate with each other, interpenetrate and contaminate each other, according to a "necessary general contamination" in order to be thought of as two distinct and irreducible poles of experience?<sup>18</sup> That would be to say that there is also the possibility of thinking the ethicity of poetry, or of thinking the ethical and aesthetics together, of thinking in a literary text, as Levinas himself also does in the *Leiris* essay, the transcendence of the other in "the proffered word," the word of the Other that *teaches* us. And if this interlocutory orientation, this pure vocativity of speech that is a quasi-prayer (or, if you will, a literary prayer, a literary ethical discourse) and that is the essence of ethical language, can be thought together with aesthetics, perhaps this will be an aesthetics, as Levinas also asserts in "Reality and its Shadow," based on neither perception nor cognition. But that would be an other story.

### Notes

- 1 This essay will refer to the following works by Emmanuel Levinas, abbreviated in the text as indicated:

"Lévy-Bruhl et la philosophie contemporaine," in *Revue Philosophique de la France et de l'Étranger* 147 (1957); rpt. in *Entre Nous* (Paris: Grasset, 1991): 53–67. [LB]

"The Other in Proust," trans. Sean Hand in *The Levinas Reader* (London: Blackwell, 1989): 161–65. "L'autre dans Proust," in *Deucalion* 2 (1947): 117–23. [OP]

*Totality and Infinity*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1963). *Totalité et infini* (The Hague: Nijhoff, 1961). [TI]

- "The Transcendence of Words: On Leiris' *Biffures*," trans. Sean Hand in *The Levinas Reader*: 145–49. "La transcendance des mots: A propos des 'Biffures' de Michel Leiris," in *Les Temps Modernes* 44 (1949): 1090–95. [TW]
- "Reality and its Shadow," trans. Alphonso Lingis in *Collected Philosophical Papers* (Dordrecht: Martinus Nijhoff, 1987): 1–13. "La réalité et son ombre," in *Les Temps Modernes* 38 (1948): 771–89. [RO]
- 2 By the time of "The Trace of the Other" (1963) and "Meaning and Sense" (1964), there are at least two conceptions of the work, one which returns to the same and one which goes out to the other.
  - 3 Cf., "Unlike facial expression," where a being "attends to his own manifestation," in the work a being "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" (TI 178). A similar dyadic hierarchy of speech and writing, conceived as the difference between presence and absence, is evident in the 1949 Leiris essay where Levinas opposes "the living word, which is destined to be heard," to written works, which he characterizes as "disfigured words, 'frozen words' in which language becomes document and vestige" (TW 148–49). Again, by the time of "The Trace of the Other," it is precisely this vestigial, or trace-structure, of language that will be privileged for the signification of alterity.
  - 4 In *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas refers to "the order of responsibility, where the gravity of ineluctable being freezes all laughter" [*l'ordre de la responsabilité où la gravité de l'être inéluctable glace tout rire*] (200).
  - 5 Cf., "The exceptional structure of aesthetic existence invokes this singular term magic" (RO 3).
  - 6 The difficulty here lies in the extent to which the inner life's relation to the other (*l'autre*) (written in lower case), resembles the relation to the kind of *finite* alterity that the self encounters as a detour on the way to itself, that Levinas will later call "identification," and that is described in the Proust essay as a structure in which "everything that encounters me exists as coming *from me*" (OP 164).
  - 7 In his 1961 "Heidegger, Gagarine, et nous," Levinas writes: "Le mystère des choses est la source de toute cruauté à l'égard des hommes." *Difficile liberté: essais sur le judaïsme* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1963) 301.
  - 8 This preface was probably authored by Merleau-Ponty, surmises Salomon Malka, no doubt on the basis of the dates of MP's editorship of *Les temps modernes*. Salomon Malka suggests this as well in *Lire Levinas* (Paris: Cerf, 1984) 32.
  - 9 John Llewelyn, *The Middle Voice of Ecological Conscience* (New York: St. Martins Press, 1991) 89–113.
  - 10 This classical theme might have already been detected in Levinas's doubts about whether poetry can teach. Levinas's critique of art in RO should be thought together with his denunciation of rhetoric. For these and other Platonic motifs in Levinas's discourse on the aesthetic, see *Die Passion des Sagens* (Freiburg/Munich: Karl Alber, 1988) 315–46.
  - 11 A covert citation of the Psalter: "Their idols are silver and gold, the work of men's hands. They have mouths but do not speak; eyes but do not see. They have ears, but do not hear; noses, but do not smell. They have hands, but do not feel; feet, but do not walk; and they do not make a sound in their throat. Those who make them are like them; so are all who trust in them" (Ps. 115:4–8). Like the Bible's discourse against idolatry, Levinas's description of art is polemical and one-sided. "Essentially disengaged, art constitutes, in a world of initiative and responsibility, a dimension of evasion. . . . The world to be built is replaced by the essential completion of its shadow. This is not the disinterestedness of

- contemplation, but of irresponsibility. . . . There is something wicked and egoist and cowardly in artistic enjoyment" (RO 12).
- 12 Lucien Lévy-Bruhl, *How Natives Think* (1910), trans. Lilian A. Clare (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1926) 99. Subsequent references will be given in the text as HNT.
  - 13 For example, Lévy-Bruhl writes concerning wizards who are believed to turn into crocodiles: "Between the wizard and the crocodile the relation is such that the wizard becomes the crocodile, without, however being actually fused with him. Considered from the standpoint of the law of contradiction, it must be either one of two things: either the wizard and the crocodile make but one, or they are two distinct entities. But prelogical mentality is able to adapt itself to two distinct affirmations at once." See *Primitive Mentality*, trans. Lilian A. Clare (Boston: Beacon Press, 1923) 55. Subsequent references will be given in the text as *PM*.
  - 14 Levinas has recounted this in numerous interviews, as in one with Myriam Anissimov in *Nouveaux Cahiers* (1985), 31.
  - 15 Adriaan Peperzak, *To the Other* (West Lafayette, IN: Purdue University Press, 1993) 49. The quotation is from Levinas's 1957 "Philosophy and the Idea of Infinity." Cf. TI 48, one of numerous references in that work: "And to have substituted for the magical communion of species and the confusion of distinct orders a spiritual relation in which beings remain at their post but communicate among themselves will have been the imperishable merit of the 'admirable Greek people' and the very institution of philosophy."
  - 16 There is not space here to discuss the full significance of the concept of participation in Levinas's work. Such a discussion would not only have to take in Lévy-Bruhl's position in French intellectual life, it would also have to consider the very diverse usages in Levinas's *œuvre* of the term *participation*, which denotes variously (1) the belief structure of "primitive mentality," as Lévy-Bruhl describes it; (2) the mythical monism from which Greek philosophy separates itself; (3) the idea in Christian theology that the being of the creation partakes in the being of the Creator; (4) the Canaanite and "pagan" religions of Israel's neighbors in the Ancient Near East. This latter target of Levinas's polemic often stands in for what he calls, in *Difficile liberté*, "the contemporary religious revival" represented by Louis Lavelle, Simone Weil, and Rudolf Otto. Above all, participation serves as a buzzword for meteorological aspects of Heidegger's philosophy from which Levinas wishes to escape.  
 In a forthcoming work on Levinas and literature, of which this essay forms part, I discuss the signification of participation, as well as a number of the above-mentioned topics—Levinas's conception of ethical language, his exclusion of rhetoric, his intertextual engagement with Rimbaud and other writers, and, ultimately, what is at stake in Levinas's repression of the ludic.
  - 17 I am influenced here by Llewelyn's discussion of Levinas and the aesthetic. Another valuable discussion is in Jean-Luc Lannoy, "D'une ambiguïté," *Etudes phénoménologiques* 6 (1990): 11–44.
  - 18 Jacques Derrida, "Some Statements and Truisms about Neologisms, Newisms, Postisms, Parasitism, and Other Small Seismsisms," trans. Anne Tomiche, in *The States of "Theory": History, Art and Critical Discourse*, ed. David Carroll (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1990), 78.

# WRITING AS A MAN

## Levinas and the phenomenology of Eros

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In the philosophical works of Emmanuel Levinas's early career, it is in a phenomenology of Eros that he claims to have uncovered the site of what he calls 'transcendence'. This is no small claim. According to the argument of the later *Totality and Infinity* (1961),<sup>1</sup> the history of Western philosophy is to be thought as the history of the 'philosophy of the same'. Within this polemical generalization almost the whole of Western philosophy is characterized as a totalizing discourse which aims to reduce everything to the categories of a thematizing consciousness. Conceptual structures are employed (or presupposed) in order to make diverse phenomena commensurable within a system, and according to Levinas this operation always constitutes a reduction of what is 'other' to the order of the 'same'. In agreement with a certain transcendentalism which is itself implicated in Levinas's critique, these structures of thought are then equated with consciousness itself; the thematizing project is one of mastery in which *noemata* will of necessity conform to *noesis*, in which the object is constituted for and by the subject. The experience of transcendence, so rare in this version of philosophy's history, is the experience of whatever is and truly remains *other* than me,<sup>2</sup> recalcitrant to mastery through conceptualization and to the transcendental project of the subject to construe everything as originating from within itself.

If, then, it is first of all in the erotic relation that the possibility of the experience of transcendence is said to arise, Eros can in no sense be dismissed as an unimportant or peripheral theme for Levinas, and a full investigation is warranted, especially given the current interest in Levinas's work, interest which is not limited to the discipline of philosophy. Furthermore, as the notion of Eros is closely associated, textually and conceptually, with what Levinas calls 'the feminine', critical attention has been excited amongst feminist scholars of various persuasions, with claims – both positive and negative

– being made for Levinas's significance as a resource for feminist philosophy and feminist politics. If assertions of a 'Levinasian' feminism, no matter how qualified, tend to rest on the idea that Levinas's phenomenology of Eros, and analyses of 'the feminine' mark a break in or a new departure from a 'masculinist' tradition, this article seeks, in part, to argue to the contrary.

### Eating/loving

It is in *Existence and Existents* (1947)<sup>3</sup> that Eros first surfaces as a philosophical theme, described there by Levinas as the primordial relation with the Other (*Autrui*). It is the fact of this relation, the presence of the Other in this relation, that opens up the possibility of transcendence, because it is, primordially and paradigmatically, the experience of the other person, radically inaccessible to comprehension, that breaks the cycle of the return to self, the circle of the selfsame. In order to explain the specificity and the extraordinary potentiality of Eros, Levinas distinguishes between the two pleasures of eating and love (*amour*), where the latter is characterized by an essential and insatiable hunger. Unlike the desire to eat, amorous desire is not merely an agitation (*trouble*) that precedes the attempt at gratification, but is a desire *augmented* by such an attempt. Being mistaken about the nature of amorous desire, confusing it with a hunger able to be satisfied by the possession of an object, gives rise to what Levinas poignantly describes as 'the ridiculous and tragic simulation of devouring in kissing and biting'.<sup>4</sup> This misunderstanding also accounts for the tendency to see the impossibility of the full possession or incorporation of the beloved as a *failure* inherent in love. On the contrary, for Levinas the very positivity of love lies in its negativity:

Intersubjectivity . . . is brought about by Eros, where in the proximity of another the distance is wholly maintained, a distance whose pathos is made up of this proximity and this duality of beings. What is presented as the failure of communication in love in fact constitutes the positive character of the relationship; this absence of the other is precisely his presence qua other.<sup>5</sup>

It is important that in *Existence and Existents* the face-to-face relation, that which later *is* ethics, is explicitly thematized as Eros, that all relations of 'civilization' are said to refer back to this relation of Eros in which the Other is first encountered.<sup>6</sup> There is, however, another important structural dimension to Eros as thematized in *Existence and Existents*, and one which Levinas castigates his philosophical forebears for having overlooked. For Levinas, the experience of the otherness of the Other appears paradigmatically in love as a *sexed* otherness: 'the plane of *Eros* allows us to see that the other *par excellence* is the feminine.'<sup>7</sup> Levinas returns to these thoughts in a



series of lectures given in 1946–7, published under the title of *Time and the Other*,<sup>8</sup> where Eros and the feminine function as *uniquely* paradigmatic for the possibility of thinking transcendence, and therefore as the very essence of the critique of the philosophy of the same. Echoing the philosophical investigations of *Existence and Existents*, Levinas describes the birth of the subject *qua* subject as ‘hypostasis’, the event of taking up a position in anonymous Being. What is new, however, is the language used to describe the subject or the self which thus appears. Hypostasis, an evanescent and solitary moment of beginning, a rupture in the infinite fabric of existence, actually constitutes a *mastery* of Being: ‘The existent is *master* of existing. It exerts on its existence the *virile* [*viril*] power of the subject. It has something in its power.’<sup>9</sup> The key word is ‘*viril*’. Capable of being translated into English as both ‘virile’ and ‘masculine’, rooted in the Latin for ‘man’ (*vir*), the meaning of the French word retains its sexuate origin explicitly. When, therefore, Levinas constructs the subject as ‘a virility, a pride and a sovereignty’,<sup>10</sup> he constructs the solitary subject as in some sense ‘masculine’, a tendency which persists throughout the whole of his career. Power (*pouvoir*), mastery, conquest, sovereignty, virility, activity and heroism are all attributes of the subject which also characterize the intellectual and practical processes proper to it and its economy of the same: knowledge, comprehension, possession, incorporation, seizure, and so on. The subject is the beginning and the end of all these operations, transforming everything that is other into itself by imposing its own thematizing categories and sucking the world back into itself as elements of its own perception or intellection. Physical incorporation provides the model for these processes, analogously described, therefore, as ‘alimentary’.<sup>11</sup>

Also familiar in *Time and the Other* is the counterpoint to the above, the assertion that any true transcendence can only be accomplished in an event which interrupts this circular return to the self, and the assertion that such an event is uniquely the face-to-face relation with the Other. In *Time and the Other* the phenomenon of death is also discussed as that which is in one way the most refractory for any knowledge, that which puts an end to the virility and heroism that constitute the subject. And yet death can tell us nothing about the event of transcendence, as death is an event of annihilation in which the subject is crushed, wiped out (*écrasé*). In the face-to-face relation with the Other the subject is similarly out of power, but its integrity as self is nevertheless maintained, and in *Time and the Other*, as in *Existence and Existents*, the erotic relation is prototypical. Furthermore, as it is also through the relation with the Other that the subject’s relation with the future is made possible, this relation is the very accomplishment of time.<sup>12</sup> It is, then, all the more remarkable that for Levinas the erotic relation is the ‘original form’<sup>13</sup> of the relation with the Other, as this gives to Eros an exalted philosophical importance not attempted since the time of Plato, and no less audacious. For Levinas, however, this does not mitigate the philosophical abyss between

them. Elaborating on the earlier passages in *Existence and Existents*, he again suggests that the originality of Eros lies in the experience of the *sexed* alterity of the Other. The passages are worth quoting in full:

Does a situation exist where the alterity of the other appears in its purity? Does a situation exist where the other would not have alterity only as the reverse side of its identity, would not comply only with the Platonic law of participation where every term contains a sameness and through this sameness contains the other? Is there not a situation where alterity would be borne by a being in a positive sense, as essence? What is the alterity that does not purely and simply enter into the opposition of two species of the same genus? I think the absolutely contrary, whose contrareity is in no way affected by the relationship that can be established between it and its correlative, the contrareity that permits its terms to remain absolutely other, is the *feminine*.

Sex is not some specific difference. It is situated beside the logical division into genera and species. This division certainly never manages to reunite an empirical content. But it is not in this sense that it does not permit one to account for the difference between the sexes. The difference between the sexes is a formal structure, but one that carves up reality in another sense and conditions the very possibility of reality as multiple, against the unity of being proclaimed by Parmenides.<sup>14</sup>

Searching for the possibility of transcendence, of a relation with the Other in which the subject is neither returned to itself nor annihilated, *the erotic relation is posited as primordial because the erotic relation is hetero-sexual*. The Levinasian subject, coded as masculine (or male; the Anglo-American sex/gender distinction is blurred in French), finds himself in the erotic relation face to face with alterity itself, the feminine. Any thinking of absolute alterity – of ‘difference’, one might be tempted to say – therefore owes its possibility to the recognition of an originary sexual difference.

According to another history of Western philosophy, this may be interpreted as a very radical move indeed; it is, most famously, Luce Irigaray who has pointed this out.<sup>15</sup> Very briefly, it is argued that it is precisely the alterity, or alternatively the specificity, of the feminine that has suffered most from a reduction to the economy of the same. The grammatical subsumption of the feminine gender into the allegedly universal generic masculine would be only one very obvious example in a tradition full of very obvious examples. The apparent opposition of two equal terms – the masculine and the feminine – is revealed instead as the domination of a standard over one of its inferior (Plato, Aristotle, Aquinas), castrated (Freud) specifications. As the not-masculine, the copy of the original masculine, the pathologized masculine, the feminine, it is claimed, is not thought *qua* feminine at all.

In this context, Levinas's attempt to think the feminine, revealed in Eros, as alterity itself seems to be a wholly new and welcome departure.

### The ambiguity of love

Levinas's phenomenology of Eros is, however, most fully elaborated in *Totality and Infinity* (1961), and this text begins to tell a different story. In accordance with his method of declarative renaming (speculative assertion or provocation as the beginning of philosophical discussion), the face-to-face relation – 'ethics' – is now referred to as 'metaphysical desire', 'discourse' ('language'), or 'religion', and the way is opened for a more complex and ambivalent account of love which becomes progressively less positive. For Levinas in *Totality and Infinity* erotic love is profoundly and essentially *ambiguous*.<sup>16</sup> The French noun '*ambigu(ë)*' has two main senses, the second of which is less evident in the English usage of 'ambiguous', but is probably the most important here. In both languages it refers chiefly to linguistic expression and means the possibility of having more than one interpretation, or uncertainty in interpretation. In French the word also means that in which two opposing qualities are united, or that which participates of two different natures. For Levinas, the ambiguity of love lies not in the possibility of more than one interpretation, but in the necessity of simultaneous and contradictory ones which are not, however, synthesized or united. 'The metaphysical event of transcendence', he says, 'is not accomplished as love. But the transcendence of discourse is bound to love. We shall show how in love transcendence goes both further and less far than language.' True, love is directed towards the Other, but there is also the inevitability that love 'throws us back this side of immanence itself'; love is thus an event situated at the limit of transcendence and immanence.<sup>17</sup>

The aspect of immanence is attributed to the fact that in love, now characterized as voluptuosity (*la volupté*) and Eros, 'Voluptuosity . . . aims not at the Other but at his voluptuosity: it is voluptuosity of voluptuosity, love of the love of the other. . . . If to love is to love the love the Beloved [*l'Aimée*] bears me, to love is also to love oneself in love, and thus to return to oneself.'<sup>18</sup> In love both desire and need, metaphysical desire and erotic desire, transcendence and concupiscence, coexist. Furthermore, the suggestion is not that now one, now the other, prevails but that both prevail and that this ambiguity and simultaneity is the very essence of love, 'constitutes the originality of the erotic which, in this sense, is *the equivocal par excellence*'. The aspect of transcendence, on the other hand, is attributed to the fact that love is a relation which also goes beyond the Other to 'the infinitely future, which is to be engendered',<sup>19</sup> fulfilling itself in fecundity, the sense and implications of which remain to be explicated.

This story is also told in another way. The ambiguity of love is also the ambiguity of the love object, *l'aimé*, or rather '[e]piphaney of the Beloved,

the feminine': *l'Aimée*. Love, Levinas says, is directed at the Other 'in his frailty. . . . To love is to fear for another, to come to the assistance of his frailty. . . . The epiphany of the Beloved [*l'Aimée*] is but one with her *regime* of tenderness. The *way* of the tender consists in an extreme fragility, a vulnerability.' The Beloved manifests herself 'at the limit of being and non-being, as a soft warmth where being dissipates into radiance . . .'<sup>20</sup> But at the same time, *L'aimée*, or the feminine, is something gross, an 'exorbitant ultramateriality', or non-signifying raw being.<sup>21</sup> She is at once too frail for this world and yet too much (a part) of it. She is a mystery, hidden, modesty itself, but also openly displayed in 'the exhibitionist nudity of an exorbitant presence . . . profaning and wholly profaned',<sup>22</sup> immodesty and indecency *par excellence*. The erotic caress also reveals the ambiguity of love, or reveals *l'aimée* in her ambiguity. Never catching hold of anything, the caress has its correlate in the carnality of femininity:

The Beloved, at once graspable but intact in her nudity, beyond object and face and thus beyond the existent, abides in virginity. The feminine essentially violable and inviolable, the 'Eternal Feminine', is the virgin or an incessant recommencement of virginity, the very contact of voluptuousness, future in the present. . . . The virgin remains ungraspable, dying without murder. . . . The caress aims at neither a person nor a thing. It loses itself in a being that dissipates as though into an impersonal dream without will and even without resistance, a passivity, an already animal or infantile anonymity, already entirely at death.<sup>23</sup>

These descriptions appear in section IV of *Totality and Infinity*, 'Beyond the Face', and it is not always easy to grasp where the erotic relation is situated *vis-à-vis* ethics or religiosity. But beyond the face is effectively, in Eros, a movement beyond *l'aimée*, one in which the face of the beloved gets lost or shadows over: 'In the feminine face the purity of expression is already troubled by the equivocation of the voluptuous. Expression is inverted into indecency, already close to the equivocal which says less than nothing, already laughter and raillery.' Elsewhere, the feminine is described as effecting an 'inversion of the face', a 'disfigurement'.<sup>24</sup> Because the feminine does not signify as face, the relation of the lover towards her is then not, apparently, one towards an adult human being at all. This is made particularly clear in the following extraordinary passage:

The beloved is opposed to me not as a will struggling with my own or subject to my own, but on the contrary as an irresponsible animality which does not speak true words. The beloved, returned to the stage of infancy without responsibility – this coquettish head, this youth, this pure life 'a bit silly' – has quit her status as a person. The face fades, and in its impersonal and inexpressive neutrality is prolonged, in

ambiguity, into animality. The relations with the Other are enacted in play; one plays with the Other as with a young animal.<sup>25</sup>

Now for some, it is clearly tempting to dismiss these particularly unpalatable passages as philosophically unimportant, an embarrassing intrusion, say, of Levinas's sexual fantasies into an otherwise respectable philosophical text. Yet this is precisely a *phenomenology of Eros*, a philosophical elaboration of what Levinas takes to be the everyday experience of a heterosexual erotic encounter. The phenomenology of Eros is nothing without its details, and the role and character of 'the feminine' are surely amongst the most important of these. Furthermore, the role of Eros, the character of the feminine and the theme of sexual difference more generally are not secondary aspects in Levinas's philosophical schema. The erotic relation was first introduced as the originary relation with the Other in which the subject remains intact whilst also being afforded an experience of transcendence. As such, the erotic relation is the answer to the leading question not only of *Existence and Existents* and *Time and the Other*, but of *Totality and Infinity* too. Sexual difference is also explicitly signalled as the originary difference that 'conditions the very possibility of reality as multiple';<sup>26</sup> in so far as Levinas's project is pitted against a supposedly Parmenidean ontology of totality, sexual difference is the difference that makes ethical resistance possible. Even if in *Totality and Infinity* the interruption of the totality or 'oneness' of Being is ultimately tied to the analyses of fecundity and paternity – elaborated according to a masculine metaphoric – these latter are crucially dependent on the phenomenology of Eros and the role of the feminine that appear in close textual and conceptual proximity.

The phenomenology of Eros and the role and character of the feminine are, then, amongst the most philosophically important aspects of Levinas's work up to and including *Totality and Infinity*. Accordingly, it ought not to be ignored that here Levinas endorses some very reactionary themes indeed, in particular the familiar characterization of woman as virgin/woman as sexual object or whore; in Levinas's words, woman as inviolate, woman as violated.<sup>27</sup> In a sense, as a purely descriptive psychology or sociology there may be some truth in this dichotomy; it is, after all, consonant with the representation of women behind the two 'currents' (affectionate and sensual) described in Freud's 1912 essay 'On the Universal Tendency to Debasement in the Sphere of Love'.<sup>28</sup> Still, the question of the consequences of this wholly uncritical reproduction of certain ideological assumptions needs to be investigated.

### De Beauvoir and the masculine standpoint

Possibly the first and certainly the most famous feminist criticism of Levinas appears as a footnote to the Introduction of Simone de Beauvoir's 1949 text

*The Second Sex*.<sup>29</sup> Early on, the frank assertion that 'He is the Subject, he is the Absolute – she is the other'<sup>30</sup> is justified and illustrated with reference to Levinas, quoting those passages from *Time and the Other* in which the prototypical alterity of the feminine is affirmed.<sup>31</sup> Now at first sight this would seem to be a criticism easily dismissed by pointing out that de Beauvoir has made a gross error of interpretation in failing to see that what Levinas means by the term 'Other' is not at all what de Beauvoir or Sartre mean by it. But the resonances of her quarrel do not end here, and these seemingly naive complaints in fact touch at the very heart of the most convincing and devastating feminist critique that it is possible to make of Levinas. De Beauvoir's criticism is in fact twofold. First, she takes issue with Levinas for writing from an explicitly masculine standpoint, 'deliberately taking a man's point of view', such that his description, which is intended to be objective, is in fact an assertion of masculine privilege. Second, and which she also takes to be 'an assertion of masculine privilege', she thinks that the role into which he has cast 'the feminine' denies 'woman' a full subjectivity. A slightly later passage from *Time and the Other*, also quoted in *The Second Sex*, is de Beauvoir's evidence for this second argument: 'The existent is accomplished in the "subjective" and in "consciousness"; alterity is accomplished in the feminine. This term is on the same level as, but in meaning opposed to, consciousness.'<sup>32</sup>

What de Beauvoir means by Levinas's 'masculine standpoint' is perhaps not immediately clear. For some critics – and this would include Levinas's advocates on this point – de Beauvoir was mistaken in assuming that Levinas could have done anything other than 'speak from a masculine standpoint', or 'take a man's point of view'. For has not the phantasmic ideal of a pure stance of objectivity, uncontaminated by history, personality or prejudice, itself been revealed as perhaps the greatest of the prejudices of the philosophers? Yet while history, context and tradition, to name but a few, are readily avowed as essential to any understanding of any given philosophy, it is not therefore the case that philosophical discourse today is willing and eager to consider the gender of a text's author as a necessary, if not sufficient, condition for understanding – that is, when that author is not a woman. That much philosophy has been written from 'a masculine standpoint' has been covered over by the tendency of the masculine to represent the absolute human type from which the feminine is thought to be a deviation or upon which she is parasitic. Of course, de Beauvoir herself was not slow in recognizing this:

A man never begins by presenting himself as an individual of a certain sex; it goes without saying that he is a man. The terms masculine and feminine are used symmetrically only as a matter of form, as on legal papers. In actuality the relation of the two sexes is not quite like that of two electrical poles, for man represents both the positive and the neutral . . . it is understood that the fact of being a man is no peculiarity.<sup>33</sup>

Masculinity is allowed to remain largely unmarked precisely because 'he' represents an alleged neutrality or universality. A woman philosopher, on the other hand, is a different thing (as is a feminist one). Thus François Mauriac, on reading *The Second Sex*, was apparently able to remark to an author from *Les Temps Modernes*, 'I have learned all about your boss's vagina',<sup>34</sup> while Sartre's misogyny and/or gynophobia in *Being and Nothingness* presumably did not warrant remark. Sartre's 'masculine point of view' is rarely mentioned (not even by de Beauvoir) as it is presumed to be everyone's point of view, whereas de Beauvoir's 'feminine point of view' is evidence enough of the partiality (non-universality) of her text.

These comments, then, point to a double fault: both the failure to remark on the specificity of the masculine, and the failure (shared by de Beauvoir) to see specificity as anything other than a regrettable failure of objectivity. De Beauvoir performs a necessary service when she points out the masculine specificity of Levinas's text (would that she had also turned her critical eye on Sartre), but for some she is not on strong ground in supposing that it could have been otherwise. Indeed, *contra* de Beauvoir, it has been argued that the obviousness of this specificity in Levinas's work (and not just in *Time and the Other*) marks him out as an honourable exception in a dishonourable and dishonest tradition. Jacques Derrida, for example, in his first and most famous essay on Levinas ('Violence and Metaphysics', 1964), asks the reader to note, 'in passing', that

*Totality and Infinity* pushes the respect for dissymmetry so far that it seems to us impossible, essentially impossible, that it could have been written by a woman. Its philosophical subject is man (vir). . . . Is not this principled impossibility for a book to have been written by a woman unique in the history of metaphysical writing?<sup>35</sup>

This and other questions, held in abeyance in 'Violence and Metaphysics', were to be taken up again by Derrida in his second essay on Levinas, 'At This Very Moment in This Work Here I Am' (1980).<sup>36</sup> For if this later piece is much more critical of Levinas *vis-à-vis* 'the feminine', the comments in the last footnote of 'Violence and Metaphysics' could be read as praise. If it was possible that any other book in the history of metaphysical writing could have been written by a woman, that would be because those books appear to be written from the objective, that is 'neutral', standpoint that de Beauvoir apparently demands. But this would be deceptive; the appearance of neutrality would in fact be the elision of the 'masculine standpoint' and the assumption of a false sexual neutrality. Because of the treatment of the feminine as a mystery to him, Levinas, however, leaves us in no doubt that these books were written by a man, from a masculine standpoint, which is altogether more honest.

On the other hand, perhaps that is not what Derrida meant at all. It is hard to attribute such an unpersuasive argument to the author of the sophisticated and critical 'At This Very Moment'. It would have taken a profoundly inattentive reader not to have noticed, until 1964, any other single text in the history of metaphysical writing that bore the stamp of its masculine provenance. To persist with a 'positive' reading of Derrida's last footnote, the best that one could say is that Levinas is not concerned to dissimulate the position from which he writes, to hide the fact that he is writing from 'a masculine standpoint'. But this would be an unreservedly positive move in only two scenarios: either if 'a masculine standpoint' was in itself a good thing, or if it was as well that the reader be warned about this 'masculine standpoint' because there was something further to say about it.

On balance, then, if it is impossible that either *Time and the Other* or *Totality and Infinity* could have been written by a woman, this is a matter deserving fuller investigation rather than congratulation. The obviousness of Levinas's masculine specificity in his philosophical writing would then indeed make him something of an exception (though by no means as unique as Derrida suggests), but not necessarily an honourable one. Accordingly, de Beauvoir's first criticism of Levinas still remains to be explored. Granted that he could not have written as if in a social-sexual vacuum, granted that he does write (amongst other things) as a man (this man), what is it that he says 'as a man'? Are there different ways to write 'as a man'? And what is the significance of his 'writing as a man' to his philosophy quite generally?

### Sex/sexual difference: a simple reversal of terms?

One structural or formalistic response to these questions would be to ask whether Levinas's 'masculine standpoint' and textual heterosexuality are essential or simply expedient. Suggestions that a simple reversal of terms would suffice to make this philosophy universally applicable, rather than descriptive of only a masculine, heterosexual subjectivity,<sup>37</sup> take inspiration from the horse's mouth. In the Preface added to the 1979 edition of *Time and the Other*, Levinas reflects on his own work and emphasizes the importance given to the notion of the feminine in this early text. In a passage perhaps containing a veiled nod in the direction of his feminist critics (perhaps even a nod to Simone de Beauvoir?), Levinas says of *Time and the Other*:

The notion of a transcendent alterity – one which would open time – is first of all sought starting with an *alterity-content*, starting with femininity. Femininity – *and one would have to see in what sense this can be said of masculinity or of virility; that is, of the differences between the sexes in general* – appeared to me as a difference contrasting strongly



with other differences, not merely as a quality, different from all others, but as the very quality of difference.<sup>38</sup>

Here Levinas himself suggests that the possibility of a reversal of terms would universalize his phenomenology of Eros. But even overlooking the surely not minor detail that this would be to ascribe to the relation with the Other a symmetry and a reciprocity that Levinas again and again denied, the strategy of reversal simply will not work. In the first place it will not work because of the very specific role and character of 'the feminine' within the bounds of Levinas's philosophy. The textual proximity of the notions of 'Eros', 'sexual difference' and the 'feminine' itself suggests that they are intimately, even essentially, connected, particularly in *Totality and Infinity* where the discussion of the ambiguity of love slides ineluctably into a discussion of the feminine as the epiphany of the equivocal. Similarly, the discussion of Eros in *Time and the Other* glides from alterity to the feminine to sexual difference and back to the feminine with no change of register. The whole account of the phenomenology of Eros in *Totality and Infinity* depends on the description of the ambiguity of love, and this ambiguity is crucially manifested in the ambiguity/equivocality of the feminine said to be the epiphany of the beloved. The particular details of the account of the feminine cannot be excised, whether through embarrassment or dishonesty, as they are indispensable to the argument. Unless everything pertaining to the description of the feminine ('essentially violable and inviolable') could be transferred to a description of the masculine from a (heterosexual) 'feminine point of view', there would be no account of Eros left. But the feminine is not a separable element that can be taken out and replaced by something else. What is ascribed to the feminine, both its role and its attributes, is ascribed precisely to the *feminine*, and it would clearly be artificial and awkward to replace all references to the feminine with, say, the masculine ('The masculine essentially violable and inviolable, the "Eternal Masculine" is the virgin or an incessant recommencement of virginity . . .'). Alterity is attached to the feminine as an essential attribute, and as such (in her alterity) she is given an ontological status. In 'Judaism and the Feminine Element' (1960) a similarly uncompromising language is used: 'Woman is *complete* immodesty, down to the nakedness of her little finger. She is the one who, *par excellence*, displays herself, the *essentially* turbulent, the *essentially* impure. Satan, says an extremist text, was created with her.'<sup>39</sup>

The effect of this and other texts is also the figuring of the feminine or of woman as sexual difference.<sup>40</sup> But like the various other characteristics assigned to the feminine, 'essentially violable and inviolable', this is not Levinas's innovation. The notion of 'the feminine' with its attendant qualities is already available for Levinas and his phenomenology of Eros. The association of the feminine with sexual difference is one already in circulation,

and one which makes the argument of *Time and the Other* possible. This coils back to a point that has been made before. If 'the feminine' is here marked as sexual difference, 'the masculine' must be sexually unmarked – that is, neuter; 'man' can lay claim to the universal representation of the human, while 'woman' is marked as a particularity. Thus it is not only 'the feminine' which carries with it the weight of accumulated associations, but 'the masculine' as well, and when it is said that, bravo, Levinas 'writes like a man', this does not necessarily mean, as Derrida suggests it could, that '[h]is signature thus assumes the sexual mark, a remarkable phenomenon in the history of philosophical writing, if the latter has always been interested in occupying that position without re-marking upon it or assuming it on, without signing its mark.'<sup>41</sup> In writing like a man in *Time and the Other* Levinas takes his cue from the history of philosophical writing and, in sliding together the feminine and sexual difference, in fact assumes the position of the unmarked, allegedly neuter 'man', in which there is no peculiarity. Man or the masculine, which bears the burden of the association with the universal, could never play the role of the sexual Other in a Levinasian account of Eros precisely because for Levinas man or the masculine is sexually unmarked.

The second part of de Beauvoir's complaint, that Levinas denies 'woman' a position of subjectivity, is also pertinent to his phenomenological description of the self and its being in the world *before* the irruption of the Other in the ethical relation. In the discussion of the dwelling in Section II of *Totality and Infinity* Levinas describes a self happy to exist in a dependent relation with the world because of its own needs, but also compelled to provide for an uncertain future through its labour, through the gathering of possessions. At the same time, this engages the self in relations with the world that afford it the opportunity to rise from the condition of the beasts.<sup>42</sup> In order to labour, however, the self 'must be able to recollect itself [*se recueillir*] and have representations' and 'recollection and representation are produced concretely as *habitation in a dwelling* [*une demeure*] or a Home',<sup>43</sup> which is a dwelling or a home precisely because it is the site of the welcome of the Other. In allowing for what Levinas calls the 'separation' of the self,<sup>44</sup> the dwelling and the welcome of the Other are what make the constitution of the self as a self-reflecting human being possible.

Now this appears to be something of a contradiction, because elsewhere in *Totality and Infinity* the presence of the Other is, on the contrary, that which *disrupts* the self-reflecting self with the demand constitutive of the ethical relation. The apparent contradiction is resolved, however, with the description of a welcoming Other whose presence is qualified with a certain absence, whose face is discreetly hidden:

And the other whose presence is discreetly an absence 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: a language without teaching, a silent language, an understanding without words. . . . [T]he discretion of this presence includes all the possibilities of the transcendent relationship with the Other. It is comprehensible and exercises its function of interiorization only on the ground of a full human personality, which, however, in the woman, can be reserved so as to open up the dimension of interiority.<sup>45</sup>

The woman (*la Femme*, also therefore the wife) is thus peculiarly able to forgo her full human subjectivity in order to function as the condition for man, presumably, to accede to his – and de Beauvoir's twofold critique rings in the ears.

In an attempted defence of Levinas on this point, some commentators have focused on the first half of his assertion that the feminine 'is comprehensible and exercises its function of interiorization *only on the ground of a full human personality*, which, however, in the woman, can be reserved so as to open the dimension of interiority.'<sup>46</sup> Edith Wyschogrod, for example, tries to insist on a reading in which the feminine would appear as both feminine and human being, but in fact points to what makes this reading fail:

Levinas's intention, in my view, is not to divide humanity so that one sex retains human status while the other fades into the infra-human which is neither expression nor reason. His effort is directed not to reducing the human status of woman, but to separating the feminine element from the pure humanity of women in order to bring to light the meaning of the erotic. Woman can be 'interlocutor' and teacher; but in her feminine role she is disingenuous, elusive, seductive and dangerous. The failure is not hers but belongs to the infra-ethical status of the erotic itself.<sup>47</sup>

In fact, I agree with Wyschogrod in so far as it would be ludicrous to ascribe to Levinas, the man, the view that he does not believe women to have human status. Neither is this what de Beauvoir meant to imply in *The Second Sex*, where she makes a point of saying, 'I suppose that Levinas does not forget that woman, too, is aware of her own consciousness or ego.'<sup>48</sup> Nevertheless, and perhaps despite himself, the implication of Levinas's philosophical writings is indeed that the feminine is opposed to the human in a way that the masculine is not.<sup>49</sup> 'The human' in Levinas is ostensibly sexually neuter, and is separated out from the being of the human in his or her sexuate incarnation or from the human being under the mark of sexual difference. However, it is the case that it is only the feminine being which appears in her sexuate incarnation or under the mark of sexual difference. As a consequence 'the human' and the masculine are conjoined in such a way that the former

actually loses all claim to neutrality; it is the mask of the masculine. I think Wyschogrod's remarks actually underscore rather than refute this.<sup>50</sup> The attempted defence of Levinas on this point, the idea that the feminine only performs her function on the basis of a full human personality (a face, in Levinas's sense), is repeatedly gainsaid in the Levinasian texts themselves. In her capacity as feminine, signifier of sexual difference, woman is opposed, in some sense, to the human, in a way that man, *qua* masculine, is not. Once again, the impossibility of any reversal of terms is tied to details of the text itself, and while this *may* be an effect – contingent and historical – of his 'speaking as a man', it is by no means a necessary consequence of it.

### Engendering fecundity

Despite the shift to a masculine metaphoric, these conclusions are affirmed in the themes of fecundity and paternity. In *Time and the Other* it becomes clear that the true solution to the problem of transcendence does not lie with the feminine at all: 'I am going to return to the consideration that led me from death to the alterity of the feminine. . . . How, in the alterity of a you, can I remain I, without being absorbed or losing myself in that you? . . . This can only happen in one way: through paternity.'<sup>51</sup> This is confirmed in *Totality and Infinity*. Transcendence is not achieved in the ambiguous erotic relation with the feminine because of its compromising aspect of immanence, but Eros functions as *the way to* fecundity in which transcendence is achieved.

The idea of transcendence is connected to the need to abandon a certain thinking of Being which Levinas calls 'Parmenidean'.<sup>52</sup> According to the logic of this thinking, Levinas says, 'we always imagine existing in an existent, one existent. Being *qua* being is for us monadic. Pluralism appears in Western philosophy only as a plurality of subjects that exist. Never has it appeared in the existing of these existents. . . . Unity alone is ontologically privileged.'<sup>53</sup> In other words, unity and multiplicity are always thought as logically incompatible, hence the opposition dramatized in antiquity as the feud between the schools of Parmenides and Heraclitus. The radicality of fecundity, or the relation of paternity – for Levinas quite explicitly the engendering of a son<sup>54</sup> – lies not in an overcoming of this opposition, nor in a simple refusal of it. Rather, paternity introduces a plurality into being that cuts across this opposition: fecundity 'evinces a unity that is not opposed to multiplicity, but, in the precise sense of the term engenders it'.<sup>55</sup> The son is other than the father and yet he *is* the father, or is of the father. In the son the father both remains himself and becomes other than himself. 'I do not have my child, I *am* in some way my child.'<sup>56</sup>

In the text of *Totality and Infinity* it is not always easy to distinguish between fecundity and Eros. The trajectory of the analyses makes it clear, however, that Eros without issue is fatally infected with the threat of immanence which is only overcome in a fecund resolution,<sup>57</sup> when the father

has a son. This limitation is one side – the negative side – of the ambiguity of love. The positive aspect of Eros, its relation to transcendence, is precisely its relation to fecundity. Even in *Existence and Existents* and *Time and the Other*, where the possibility of transcendence in the erotic relation is spoken of most warmly, as it were, Levinas always has an eye on the future of Eros in fecundity. As one consequence of this, Levinas's Eros is a rather tame animal. Eros as pure gratuitous expenditure, exhaustion, that which does not produce (engender) but rather uses up, is never really considered. Even that which is most carnal in erotic nudity – voluptuousity, the caress – always transcends the flesh and ends not in physical gratification but in a future possibility for ethics. This is a curiously 'moral' and law-abiding Eros, which would in part explain its trenchant heterosexuality. Tina Chanter rightly speaks of the eclipse of Eros in Levinas's last major work (*Otherwise Than Being*, 1974),<sup>58</sup> but in a sense Eros – mucky, perverse, unruly, amoral Eros as an end in itself – was already banished from *Time and the Other* to make way for the teleology of reproduction inherent in its better-behaved cousin.<sup>59</sup>

In later years, love (*amour*) is dissociated from Eros, and remarks on the latter become more and more negative. Eros comes to mean sexual or romantic love, while the word 'love' itself begins to take on a whole new role. 'Love' becomes a new way of describing the ethical relation, or religion, to which 'Eros' is progressively contrasted, almost to the point of opposition.<sup>60</sup> Even if this linguistic distinction is not made in the earlier texts – and it is certainly not consistent even in the very latest<sup>61</sup> – the effect that it later describes is already visible. In 1953, for example, in an essay entitled 'Freedom and Command',<sup>62</sup> two crucial aspects of 'love' are emphasized: first that the duality of the lover and the beloved is a closed couple, admitting no third party; and second that love obeys its own laws, not those universal or logical laws that for Levinas make up the realm of political sociality. This is echoed in 'The Ego and the Totality',<sup>63</sup> published in 1954, where it is said that in love all my relation is exhausted in the beloved; nothing is 'left over' for anyone else.

The worst that can be said of the lovers of these early texts, however, is that they are asocial or amoral, creatures lost in voluptuousity and carnality – lost in themselves – precisely because they are lost in love. By 1974, on the other hand, there is a suggestion of Eros as almost evil. Ethics, now more commonly called 'responsibility', is explicitly aligned with 'non-erotic proximity': 'It is outside of concupiscence, which for its part does not cease to seduce by the appearance of the Good. In a Luciferian way it takes on this appearance and thus claims to belong to the Good, gives itself out to be its equal, but in this very pretention which is an admission it remains subordinated.'<sup>64</sup> No doubt the reference to Lucifer is hyperbolic, but one takes the point whilst being reminded of another such comment, on woman, in 'Judaism and the Feminine Element': 'Satan, says an extremist text, was created with her.'<sup>65</sup> Despite these diabolic references, however, Levinas's

main point is, once again, not that Eros is *bad* in itself, but that it is, contrary to 'the simplicity of contemporary paneroticism',<sup>66</sup> not primary. Such remarks are consistent with the trajectory of Levinas's entire oeuvre, in which Eros, associated with the feminine, is subordinated to the various terms, either overtly masculine or masculine by association, which characterize ethics, the most-high, the humanity of the human.

It is possible to build a structural picture of the place and the role of the feminine and Eros in Levinas's work because, despite changes of emphasis and vocabulary, the configuration of these themes is remarkably consistent over many years of writing. In Levinas's later work, the subordination of Eros or sexual difference (marked as feminine) to the human or ethical relation becomes plain, but from the very first introduction of these themes in *Existence and Existents* there is a progressive subordination of Eros to fecundity in which the former, tainted with immanence, functions only as a conduit to the transcendence of the latter. As Eros is associated with the feminine it is no surprise to find that fecundity is elaborated in explicitly masculine terms. Furthermore, as the feminine bears the ideological mark of sexual difference, it is no surprise to find the masculine account of fecundity associated with the supposedly sexually neutral ethical space of fraternity, and social space of the nation.<sup>67</sup> Perhaps the only thing that is surprising is the failure of most commentators to acknowledge this. Perhaps, on the other hand, that is the least surprising thing, for what would it mean to acknowledge this? If the supposedly gender-neutral relation of ethics as described by Levinas is, in some sense, masculine, and has only been possible, *structurally*, because of a philosophical subordination of the feminine; if these words – 'masculine' and 'feminine' – are not discrete and interchangeable linguistic elements but ideological signs with a history and which exert an influence; if these things are true, what must one say about Levinas's philosophy? If it is significant that Levinas 'writes as a man', this fact can now appear divested of any essentialism; that is, can now appear as an ideological question connected very intimately with Levinas's philosophical project, rather than with his sex. What is important is not *that* it is written 'as a man', but *what it is* that this man writes, although defenders of Levinas have tended to wash over the latter by diverting attention to the obvious textual fact of the former.<sup>68</sup> Regrettably, and of more general significance, the same must also be said of those 'Levinasian' feminisms which laud the position of alterity that Levinas affords 'the feminine' in relation to his own position. English-speaking readers need to understand that the metaphysics of the 'masculine' and the 'feminine' – the assumption of the fixity of sexual difference and its determining role – is perhaps a move more easily made in French where *le féminin*, for example, is both feminine and female. Nevertheless, such a metaphysics ought not to go unchallenged or uninvestigated, and its role in Levinas's phenomenology of Eros might serve as a salutary warning.

# Notes

- 1 *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority* [TI], trans. Alphonso Lingis, Duquesne University Press, Pittsburgh, 1992; *Totalité et infini: essai sur l'extériorité* [TeI], Nijhoff, The Hague, 1971.
- 2 'Philosophy and the Idea of Infinity', trans. Alphonso Lingis, in E. Levinas, *Collected Philosophical Papers*, Nijhoff, Dordrecht, 1987, p. 47; 'La philosophie et l'idée de l'infini', in *En découvrant l'existence avec Husserl et Heidegger*, Vrin, Paris, 1994, p. 165.
- 3 *Existence and Existents* [EE], trans. Alphonso Lingis, Kluwer Academic Publishers, Dordrecht, 1988; *De l'existence à l'existant* [DEE], Vrin, Paris, 1993.
- 4 EE, p. 43; DEE, p. 66.
- 5 EE, p. 95; DEE, p. 163.
- 6 EE, p. 96; DEE, p. 164.
- 7 EE, p. 85; DEE, p. 145.
- 8 *Time and the Other* [TO], trans. Richard A. Cohen, Duquesne University Press, Pittsburgh, 1987; *Le temps et l'autre* [TA], Quadrige/Presses Universitaires de France, Paris, 1994.
- 9 TO, p. 54; TA, p. 34, my emphasis.
- 10 TO, p. 55; TA, p. 35.
- 11 See, for example, TI, p. 111; TeI, p. 113.
- 12 TO, p. 78; TA, p. 67. TO, p. 79; TA, p. 69.
- 13 TO, pp. 85–6, 87–8; TA, pp. 77, 80.
- 14 TO, p. 85; TA, pp. 77–8. See also EE, pp. 85, 96; DEE, pp. 145, 164.
- 15 Luce Irigaray, 'The Fecundity of the Caress', trans. Carolyn Burke, in Richard A. Cohen, ed., *Face To Face with Levinas*, State University of New York Press, Albany, 1986; 'La fécondité de la caresse', in *Éthique de la différence sexuelle*, Minuit, Paris, 1984. See also 'Questions to Emmanuel Levinas', trans. Margaret Whitford, in R. Bernasconi and S. Critchley, eds, *Re-Reading Levinas*, Athlone, London, 1991.
- 16 Subsection A, section IV is called 'The Ambiguity of Love', TI, pp. 254 ff.; TeI, pp. 284 ff.
- 17 TI, p. 254; TeI, pp. 284, 285.
- 18 TI, p. 266; TeI, p. 298.
- 19 TI, p. 255; TeI, p. 286. TI, p. 266; TeI, p. 298.
- 20 TI, p. 256; TeI, p. 286. Lingis's translation of this passage begins with masculine pronouns, which is a perfectly proper rendering of the French (for example, 'L'amour vise Autrui [masculine pronoun]; il le vise dans sa faiblesse.' Love aims at the Other; it aims at him in his frailty.) It is after the introduction of 'the feminine' and of the feminine form of the Beloved [*l'Aimée*] that the equally correct feminine pronoun is used.
- 21 TI, p. 258; TeI, p. 289.
- 22 TI, p. 256; TeI, pp. 286–7.
- 23 TI, pp. 258–9; TeI, p. 289.
- 24 TI, p. 260; TeI, p. 291. TI, p. 262; TeI, p. 294.
- 25 TI, p. 263; TeI, p. 295.
- 26 TO, p. 85; TA, pp. 77–8.
- 27 In *Totality and Infinity* 'the feminine' and 'Woman' [*la Femme*] are often used interchangeably; for example, TI, pp. 154–6, TeI, pp. 164–7.
- 28 S. Freud, 'On the Universal Tendency to Debasement in the Sphere of Love' (1912), in *On Sexuality*, trans. J. Strachey et al., Pelican Freud Library, vol. 7, Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1977, pp. 247 ff.

- 29 Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans. H. M. Parshley, London, Picador, 1988; *Le deuxième sexe*, Gallimard, Paris, 1949.
- 30 De Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, p. 15; *Le deuxième sexe*, p. 16.
- 31 *TO*, p. 85; *TA*, p. 77.
- 32 *TO*, p. 88; *TA*, p. 81.
- 33 De Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, p. 14; *Le deuxième sexe*, p. 15.
- 34 Quoted in Michèle le Doeuff, *Hipparchia's Choice*, trans. Trista Selous, Blackwell, Oxford, 1991, p. 98.
- 35 'Violence and Metaphysics', trans. Alan Bass, in J. Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, Routledge, London, 1990, p. 315; 'Violence et métaphysique', *L'écriture et la différence*, Éditions de Seuil, Paris, 1967, p. 228.
- 36 'At This Very Moment in This Work Here I Am', trans. Ruben Berezdivin, in Bernasconi and Critchley, eds, *Re-Reading Levinas*; 'En ce moment même dans cet ouvrage me voici', in François Laruelle, ed., *Textes pour Emmanuel Levinas*, Éditions Jean-Michel Place, Paris, 1980. With regard to the relationship between 'Violence and Metaphysics' and 'At This Very Moment', see Simon Critchley, *The Ethics of Deconstruction*, Blackwell, Oxford, 1992, pp. 132–3.
- 37 See, for example, Tina Chanter, 'Feminism and the Other', in R. Bernasconi and D. Wood, eds, *The Provocation of Levinas*, Routledge, London, 1988, p. 46; and R. J. S. Manning, 'Thinking the Other without Violence? An Analysis of the Relation between the Philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas and Feminism', *Journal of Speculative Philosophy*, vol. V, no. 2, 1991, who cites Chanter's essay on this point.
- 38 *TO*, p. 36; *TA*, p. 14, my emphasis.
- 39 'Judaism and the Feminine Element', trans. Edith Wyschogrod, *Judaism*, vol. 18, no. 1, 1969, p. 37, my emphasis; 'Le judaïsme et le féminin', *Difficile liberté*, Albin Michel, Paris, 1976, p. 61.
- 40 See especially 'And God Created Woman', trans. Annette Aronowicz, in *Nine Talmudic Readings*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington, 1990; 'Et Dieu créa la femme', in *Du sacré au saint: cinq nouvelles lectures talmudiques*, Éditions de Minuit, Paris, 1977.
- 41 Derrida, 'At This Very Moment', p. 40; 'En ce moment même', p. 52.
- 42 *TI*, p. 149; *TeI*, p. 159.
- 43 *TI*, p. 150; *TeI*, p. 161.
- 44 *TI*, p. 151; *TeI*, p. 161.
- 45 *TI*, p. 155; *TeI*, p. 166.
- 46 *TI*, p. 155; *TeI*, p. 166, my emphasis. Similar avowals are also to be found in section IV; for example, 'The non-signifyingness of erotic nudity does not precede the signifyingness of the face. . . . Only the being that has the frankness of the face can be 'discovered' in the non-signifyingness of the wanton' (*TI*, p. 261; *TeI*, p. 292); 'It is necessary that the face has been apperceived for nudity to be able to acquire the non-signifyingness of the lustful' (*TI*, p. 262; *TeI*, p. 294).
- 47 *Emmanuel Levinas: The Problem of Ethical Metaphysics*, Nijhoff, The Hague, 1974, p. 120. See also Alphonso Lingis, 'Emmanuel Levinas and the Intentional Analysis of the Libido', *Philosophy in Context*, vol. 8, 1978; and Chanter, 'Feminism and the Other', p. 46.
- 48 De Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, p. 16; *Le deuxième sexe*, p. 15.
- 49 This is one of the conclusions in Catherine Chaliel's *Figures du féminin*, La nuit surveillée, Paris, 1982; for example, p. 93.
- 50 The same argument can be made with regard to two of Levinas's religious texts written around the time of *Totality and Infinity*. In 'Judaism and the Feminine Element' Levinas again ostensibly affirms the humanity of the feminine, this time



speaking particularly of the Jewish tradition: 'In one sense, woman in Judaism will have the destiny of human being, in which her femininity will merely figure as an attribute. . . . The femininity of woman can neither deform nor absorb her human essence' (p. 34; 'Le judaïsme', pp. 56–7). However, Levinas's explanation of this is explicit in aligning 'human essence' with the masculine and the arrival on the scene of sexual difference (the creation of Eve) with the feminine. In 'And God Created Woman' he makes a similar point: 'The meaning of the feminine will . . . become clear against the background of a human essence, the *Isha* [woman] from the *Ish* [man]. The feminine does not derive from the masculine; rather, the division into feminine and masculine – the dichotomy – derives from what is human' (p. 170; 'Et Dieu', p. 137). This would only be right, however, if it were indeed the case that *Ish*, man, really did refer to the neutrality of the human, and was not compromised by the rather obvious fact that, being also the designation of the masculine man, it did not attest to a certain priority of the masculine.

- 51 *TO*, pp. 90–91; *TA*, p. 85. See also *EE*, p. 96; *DEE*, p. 165.
- 52 *TI*, p. 269; *TeI*, p. 301.
- 53 *TI*, p. 274, translation modified; *TeI*, pp. 306–7.
- 54 See, for example, *EE*, p. 96; *DEE*, p. 165; *TI*, p. 278; *TeI*, p. 310.
- 55 *TI*, p. 273; *TeI*, p. 306.
- 56 *TO*, p. 91; *TA*, pp. 85–6.
- 57 *TI*, p. 271; *TeI*, p. 304.
- 58 *Otherwise Than Being or Beyond Essence* [*OB*], trans. Alphonso Lingis, Nijhoff, The Hague, 1981; *Autrement qu'être ou au-delà de l'essence* [*AE*], Nijhoff, The Hague, 1974. Tina Chanter, *Ethics of Eros: Irigaray's Rewriting of the Philosophers*, Routledge, London, 1995, pp. 198–9.
- 59 This is the essence of Irigaray's critique of Levinas in her 'The Fecundity of the Caress'.
- 60 See, for example, *OB*, pp. 89, 177; *AE*, pp. 143, 273; E. Levinas, 'God and Philosophy', trans. A. Lingis, in *Collected Philosophical Papers*, pp. 164–5; 'Dieu et la philosophie', *Le nouveau commerce*, Spring 1975, vol. 30–31, pp. 115–17; E. Levinas, with Guy Petitdemange and Jacques Rolland, *Autrement que savoir*, Éditions Osiris, Paris, 1988, p. 64.
- 61 See, for example, *Dieu, la mort et le temps*, Grasset, Paris, 1993, p. 252, where concupiscence is spoken of as love.
- 62 'Freedom and Command', trans. Alphonso Lingis, in *Collected Philosophical Papers*; 'Liberté et commandement', *Revue de métaphysique et de morale*, July–September 1953.
- 63 E. Levinas, 'The Ego and the Totality', trans. Alphonso Lingis, *Collected Philosophical Papers*; 'Le moi et le totalité', in *Entre Nous: essais sur le penser-à-l'autre*, Grasset et Fasquelle, Paris, 1991.
- 64 *OB*, p. 123; *AE*, pp. 195–6.
- 65 'Judaism and the Feminine Element', p. 37; 'Le judaïsme', p. 61.
- 66 *TO*, p. 36; *TA*, p. 15.
- 67 See, for example, *TI*, pp. 214–15; *TeI*, pp. 235–6.
- 68 Even then, however, *contra* 'Violence and Metaphysics', there is no impossibility that women should write such things, as Derrida well knows, even trying to demonstrate the principle of its possibility in 'At This Very Moment', dividing the text between a masculine and a feminine 'voice'.

# FACELESS WOMEN AND SERIOUS OTHERS

Levinas, misogyny, and feminism

*Craig R. Vasey*

Source: A. B. Dallery and C. E. Scott (eds), with P. H. Roberts, *Ethics and Danger: Essays on Heidegger and Continental Thought*, Albany, State University of New York Press, 1992, pp. 317–30.

I had read Levinas's work, and worked hard at understanding it, long before I heard of Dorothy Dinnerstein or Nancy Chodorow.<sup>1</sup> Today, when I read Levinas, I sometimes feel like I am reading Dinnerstein in French, written by a man, and by a man who does not realize that the philosophy he is putting forth is, and needs to be, feminist. In fact, he has so little sense of this that his text frequently employs traditional patriarchal images and assumptions. In this chapter I will exhibit the misogyny of Levinas's text and suggest that it undermines or counters itself by containing a feminist vision or argument, albeit in ignorance. I believe that Levinas's basic categories (the face, the idea of the infinite, language as the relation to the Other, separation, enjoyment and living from, and proximity) and the use he makes of them in his phenomenology of interiority and exteriority—namely, to show the primarily totalitarian and violent nature of Western philosophy and to articulate an alternative to it—define a theoretical position that is practically indistinguishable from feminism. Yet, as I will also show, he has apparently no inkling of this and actually proceeds to repeat certain claims that are fundamental to the violence of patriarchal philosophy. It is my contention that the anti-totalitarian spirit of his thought is more central and indispensable to it than is the misogyny of his imagery.

My title, "Faceless Women and Serious Others," gives a first indication of his allegiance to patriarchal values. In Levinas's work, woman is distinguished as the "*tu*" (not the "*vous*", which for him indicates the moral relationship marked by distance, separation, and language); and whereas "apparition in the face" is the key to ethics and responsibility, Levinas

virtually defines woman in terms of makeup and hair style, as the being with a face manipulated or transformed, already by the hand of God, into an object. There are two kinds of personal otherness in Levinas's thought, and the *serious* Other is the "*vous*." I contend that the reason why women are not serious others in Levinas's work is precisely that they are "unfaced" (de-faced?)—at any rate faceless.

### Levinas's critique of Western ontology

*Totality and Infinity* begins with the assertion that when the meaning of individuals is derived from their place within a totality, one is talking about the state of war, which Levinas describes as a positioning of individuals from which there is no escaping, and as establishing an order among things "from which no one can keep his distance."<sup>2</sup> In war, nothing is exterior: "War does not manifest exteriority and the other as other; it destroys the identity of the same" (TI 21).

Levinas holds that Western ontology perceives Being as war, which means that it always treats Being as the totality within which or in terms of which individuals can be what they are, and also that it necessarily excludes the reality of otherness. Furthermore, Western philosophy understands *knowing* to be the privileged mode of access to things, and knowing is totalizing—bringing all together into a totality or system. If we accept that reality is traditionally only discussed in terms of Being, then Levinas says we need another concept, the idea of the infinite to express the reality of that which transcends totality. But Levinas does not make the move of conceiving the infinite as something additional, outside of totality, for this sort of move is a repetition of the totalizing gesture; rather, he finds that the infinite can be described paradoxically as *within* the totality, *within* experience (TI 23). It can be described this way, however, only if it can be thought in a way that is not a matter of representation, only if it can be thought in a way that is not objective.

Like Descartes, Levinas asks about the origin of the idea of the infinite, and he contends that it is in the encounter with the Other. Specifically: "The idea of the infinite is produced in the *opposition* of conversation, in sociality" (TI 197). "The idea of the infinite, the infinitely more contained in the less, is concretely produced in the form of a relation with the face" (TI 196).<sup>3</sup> I think that the intuition here is fairly obvious: to recognize the genuine otherness of the Other is to encounter him on his own terms (in his face), and not in terms of some third thing (e.g., a clear and distinct idea of him). If in Western philosophy the Other is not immediately encountered, if the Other is encountered always through a representation, through an idea, through a noema, or through a world, then the otherness of the Other is not genuinely encountered. The entire "problem of other minds," as it is called in professional philosophy, presupposes that the real otherness of the Other

is not, to a sufficient degree, directly encountered but has to be corroborated by some kind of inspection of evidence and inference. But I think Levinas would agree that one will never "solve" the problem of other minds if one can actually start out from the position that the reality of others is not already revealed from the beginning (and, for Levinas, it is revealed from before the beginning).

Levinas contends that Western philosophy is allergic to the otherness of the Other; if, before it will believe in the reality of the thing encountered, philosophy always requires a kind of evidence that direct encounter does not provide, then philosophy has an allergy to that thing. Western philosophy does *not* seem to be allergic to ideas, sense data, universal forms, representations, and so on, but does seem to have an allergic reaction to anything that does not come packaged in some such capsule. By implication, Western philosophy's attention to ethics has inevitably been a waste of time: for if the concern of ethics is the relation to the Other in his otherness, then it cannot be grounded upon an ontology that keeps the Other inaccessible.

### Levinas's basic categories

Like Martin Heidegger, Levinas does not proceed through argumentation but through proposing a description. Also like Heidegger, Levinas's description is produced from the standpoint of a guiding question of oblivion or forgottenness. However, it is not the forgetting of Being that Levinas seeks to remedy; it is *forgetting the Other*.<sup>4</sup>

Levinas makes the case that the otherness of the Other is forgotten, by generating a description of our being-in-the-world that centers on concepts I will divide up into three sets: (a) the face and the infinite, (b) enjoyment and living from, and (c) separation and language. To say that the otherness of the Other is forgotten is to imply that it was, in some sense, known at some time; by summarizing certain features of the sense of these basic categories of his thought, we can indicate, at least in a rudimentary way, what this means.

### *The face and the infinite*

The idea of the infinite is the idea of what cannot be brought within the totality, but also of something of a completely different order from any possible "outside." In Levinas's vision of things, faces are particularly important because a face only is *as* a face if it presents itself as one, and this is done through expressing. There is something enigmatic in the thing that presents itself as a face: it commands one's attention just because one is not able to get what it is into one's grasp or under one's control. In the face, a being presents itself and eludes being taken, because what it presents signifies it or gives meaning to it.

The way in which the other presents himself, exceeding *the idea of the other in me*, we here name face. . . . The face of the Other at each moment destroys and overflows the plastic image it leaves me. . . . It *expresses* itself. . . . To approach the Other in conversation is to welcome his expression. . . . It is therefore to *receive* from the Other beyond the capacity of the I, which means exactly: to have the idea of the infinite. But this also means: to be taught. The relation with the Other, or Conversation, is a non-allergic relation, an ethical relation.

(TI 50–51)

### *Enjoyment and living from*

It is clear that not everything we encounter in the world has a face. The relation to a face is a relation across a certain distance and is accomplished in language. We will return to this in a moment. What is the relation to those faceless things in the world, what Heidegger calls the ready-to-hand? Levinas does not appropriate the Heideggerian account but introduces the notion of *enjoyment* into his account of being-in-the-world. It has frequently been remarked that Heidegger does not give explicit consideration to the body in his account of Dasein; Levinas does, however, and for him being a body is enjoyment.

The body is a permanent contestation of the prerogative attributed to consciousness of “giving meaning” to each thing; it lives as this contestation. The world I live in is not simply the counterpart or the contemporary of thought and its constitutive freedom, but a conditioning and an antecedence. The world I constitute nourishes me and bathes me.

(TI 129)

For Levinas, enjoyment is an intentionality, but one that is quite different from, and more fundamental than, the *consciousness of* or representational intentionality emphasized by Husserl. Whereas *consciousness of* is an objectifying intentionality (consciousness of this or that determinant thing), enjoyment is an immersion in what Levinas calls the elemental: “Things come to representation from a background from which they emerge and to which they return in the enjoyment we can have of them” (TI 130). The element is the milieu within which one always is and which one can in a sense “overcome,” by creating a separation from it within it, by getting a foothold, by carving out one’s own space, a dwelling, through labor and possession (TI 142).

When Levinas uses the phrase “living from,” it is to indicate the dependence of the sensitive, bodily being upon a world that is already there, the relationship to which is not mediated or across a distance (e.g., of representation).

Furthermore, he affirms the fundamental pleasure or agreeableness of being a body in a world, with felt needs that can be addressed, and for which things are not only tools for accomplishing purposes but also textures, warmth, coolness, variety, etc.

In degree of dependence, the one aspect building upon the other, Levinas claims that enjoyment of being is basic, that through it occurs the opening up of interiority, the withdrawal from immersion in the element, the gathering-onto-oneself that culminates in separation, and that is itself the necessary condition of representation or objectifying consciousness. Enjoyment, which is the happiness of being alive, is thus identified by Levinas as the basis of selfhood:

In enjoyment throbs egoist being. Enjoyment separates by engaging in the contents from which it lives. Separation comes to pass as the positive work of this engagement. . . . To be separated is to be at home with oneself. But to be at home with oneself . . . is to live from . . . , to enjoy the elemental.

(TI 147)

Another remark about the face is in order. Whereas the face of the Other is the compelling presence that is able to place in question my projects, neither the element nor things we use and possess have faces. This is a feature of the "I-it" relationship, as Levinas sees the latter, wherein I can seize upon a thing and put it to use to serve my interests. If Levinas emphasizes the face in his desire to believe that those who want to take ethics seriously are not dupes, it is because he claims that the beginning of moral consciousness is the recognition of the Other in the face, the experience of being confronted by Another, the experience of someone facing up to me.

### *Separation and language*

As we have seen, Levinas calls the relation to the face "conversation": it is addressing and being addressed, it is being called to and called upon, it is being held accountable to respond. There is accountability where I can be called to account, where I recognize the otherness of Another, where a thing presents itself as a face and makes me face up to it. The featurelessness of the element and the availability of objects for my use, are in clear contrast to the face. Neither respect nor disrespect is a possible attitude toward what has no face. If the latter relationship is an "I-it," the former is an "I-you." It is essential to note that for Levinas it is not an "I-thou."

Language is an essential aspect of the relation with the face for Levinas, for he says "speech proceeds from absolute difference" (TI 194), and "the essence of language is the relation with the Other" (TI 207). This assertion is based, I believe, on Levinas's view that what is special about a thing that

announces or presents itself as a face, is that it signifies its own presence, attends itself, but also always fails to be identical to its presentation. In an early passage on "discourse," he writes:

Manifestation καθ' αὐτό consists in the being telling itself to us independently of every position we would have taken in its regard, *expressing itself*. Here . . . the being is not placed in the light of another but presents itself in the manifestation that should only announce it; it is present as directing this very manifestation—present before the manifestation, which only manifests it. . . . The face is a living presence; it is expression. The life of expression consists in undoing the form in which the existent, exposed as a theme, is thereby dissimulated. The face speaks. The manifestation of the face is already discourse. He who manifests himself comes, according to Plato's expression, to his own assistance. He at each instant undoes the form he presents.

(TI 65–66)

We come now to separation. Separation is the condition for the "manifesting" of this quote; only a being that can withdraw from the orderedness of a totality, that can collect itself and gather-onto-itself, can manifest itself and undo the form in which this manifestation occurs. "Separation" refers to this condition, the basic feature of selfness: an "I" is a separated being, a being that is at home with itself, a being that can "come home to itself" or "gather itself unto itself." The expression Levinas uses is "*le recueillement*," which is rendered in translation as "recollection." Separation arises on the fact of enjoyment, says Levinas, but the interiority of recollection is not a being-distanced *from* the world, it is "a solitude in a world already human" (TI 155). Thus recollection refers us to an otherness that is neither the otherness of the element and possessions, nor the otherness of the face, but an otherness that Levinas characterizes as gentle, as intimate, as discreet.

We thus have three levels of otherness to keep straight, and this is codified in the linguistic conventions "I-you," "I-thou," and "I-it":

The I-Thou in which Buber sees the category of interhuman relationship is the relation not with the interlocutor but with feminine alterity. 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 and exercises its function of interiorization 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. And this is a new and irreducible possibility, a delightful lapse in being, and the source of gentleness in itself.

(TI 155)

I will explore this point in the next section through other texts than this one, but for now I want to make the observation that if the relation with feminine alterity is not through language, then this relation is not the relation with a face. This inference follows as well from the consideration that the relation with the face is not the welcome but the critique of the self, its being placed in question. At this rate, if the other of intimacy is feminine, the Other of discourse and the face can only be masculine. The masculine Other is, in *Totality and Infinity*, what I am calling the *serious* Other.<sup>5</sup>

### The place of the feminine in Levinas's philosophy

Anyone who has read *The Second Sex* is likely to recall the footnote in the introduction where Levinas is taken to task for providing one of the basic themes of de Beauvoir's analysis, woman as the Other. She quotes his *Le temps et l'autre*:

Is there not a case in which otherness, alterity, unquestionably marks the nature of a being, as its essence, an instance of otherness not consisting purely and simply in the opposition of two species of the same genus? I think that the feminine represents the contrary in its absolute sense. . . . Otherness reaches its full flowering in the feminine, a term of the same rank as consciousness but of opposite meaning.<sup>6</sup>

De Beauvoir comments that this can only have been written from a man's point of view, and that it is an assertion of masculine privilege.

It is unlikely that Levinas was persuaded by this critique, for twenty-five years later he published *Totalité et infini*, in which he develops this point about feminine alterity in several passages; and in another three years he published the Talmudic lesson, "Et Dieu créa la femme,"<sup>7</sup> which, although containing an argument that man and woman are equally human, nonetheless seems to endorse the traditional sociopolitical implications of the woman-as-other thesis.

In spite of similarities between the above quote from *Le temps et l'autre* and affirmations of feminine difference in some of contemporary French feminism, the use of the image of the feminine in *Totality and Infinity* to denote a discreet presence, a nonconfronting presence, a silent language (and "the inhabitant that inhabits [the home] before every inhabitant, the welcoming one par excellence, welcome in itself" [TI 157]), seems fairly straightforwardly an expression of good old-fashioned masculine privilege and arrogance. This appearance is strengthened by passages in the Talmudic lesson published in 1977. A primary lesson Levinas seeks to get across here is that sexual difference is in the service of the humanity of humans, that men and women have different tasks to see to in the joint adventure of human existence:



The last chapter of Proverbs comes to mind, where woman is glorified; she makes possible the life of men, she is the house of men; but the husband has a life outside the house, he sits in the city council, he has a public life, he is in the service of the universal, he is not limited to interiority, to intimacy, to the home, without which, however, he could accomplish nothing.

(DC 135)

Such words provide fairly strong evidence that *chez* Levinas the innovative concept of feminine otherness has little to do with any challenge to the sociopolitical traditions of patriarchy. The title of my paper derives from another passage in "Et Dieu créa la femme," however. This section of the text is entitled "L'apparence":

There is, in the feminine, face and appearance, and God was the first hairdresser. He created the first illusions, the first makeup. To build a feminine being is also to give appearance its due. "Her hair needed attention." There is, in the feminine face, and in the relations between the sexes, this call for the lie [*au mensonge*] or for an arrangement beyond the savage directness of the face to face, for the relation between humans encountering each other in the responsibility of the me for the other.

(DC 143)

Taken together with the treatment of "feminine alterity" in *Totality and Infinity* as the "Je-Tu" relation, this passage provides reason for saying that for Levinas, woman is faceless, because she is un-faced. She is unfaced even though she has a face, because this face is not meant to speak but to welcome, not to call others to account but to be responsible *for* them and to serve their projects. In her, the face becomes appearance only, not manifestation and self-signifying expression. The seriousness of discourse and accountability, of a public life, does not suit such a being. Such a being does not undo its manifestation of itself in its face but merges with this manifestation, and for just this reason is ultimately faceless. On the subject of the feminine face as object, *Totality and Infinity* says, "Equivocation constitutes the epiphany of the feminine" (TI 264). Levinas even indicates that this is part of the disrespect and objectification shown women, for

disrespect presupposes the face. Elements and things remain outside of respect and disrespect. It is necessary that the face have been apperceived for nudity to be able to acquire the non-signifyingness of the lustful. The feminine face joins this clarity and this shadow. . . . In this inversion of the face in femininity, in this disfigurement that refers to the face, non-signifyingness abides in the signifyingness of the face.

(TI 262–63)

The face, all straightforwardness and frankness, in its feminine epiphany dissimulates allusions, innuendos. It laughs under the cloak of its own expression, without leading to any specific meaning, hinting in the empty air, signaling the less than nothing.

(TI 264)

### The account of subjectivity in the later work

In *Autrement qu'être ou au-delà de l'essence* there is no talk of feminine alterity and no direct implication that the relation to the Other in the face is masculine.<sup>8</sup> But one is justified in suspecting that if this is so, it is perhaps because Levinas is now exploring the relation to "prefacial otherness" (if I may be permitted!), that is, the theme of "proximity." Proximity designates being-related, being-linked to the other, being-obligated to the other before being able to relate oneself, or before being in a position to forge a bond oneself, or before being able to obligate oneself. And "proximity" means, in the later work, a nonseparatedness, nonautonomy, nonidentity that Levinas claims is a condition for being-a-self. In this work, the self is conceived as "the other-in-me" and thus as "the seed of madness" (*le grain de folie*, AQE 86). To be a self is to be already submitted to another, to be by virtue of another, and to be for another; Levinas eventually evokes the maternal body to convey his meaning: "*le psychisme comme corps maternel*" (AQE 85)—the self as maternal body. In a sense this just develops a line of thought from *Totality and Infinity*, that the face of the Other is the origin of exteriority and significance, and hence that the separation and identity of the self begin with the situation of "living from" the maternal Other and encountering the possibility of significance in her face. But it is more strongly suggested now that the Other is the ground of the self, which must begin in nonseparatedness.

### The feminist meaning of this philosophy of the Other: If the self is the Other, the self is the (m)other

Although he himself never says this, it is clear from the logic of the accounts in *Totality and Infinity* that for Levinas *woman* is the always already forgotten Other, the taken-for-granted, hence always-overlooked Other; without her, there is no being-at-home, no dwelling, no enjoyment of the elements, no separation, no consciousness of, no encounter with the serious face of the Other (who is, by implication, essentially masculine). But this always already overlooked Other is what makes the selfhood of the self possible and is indeed part of selfhood according to the later work: the self is the Other-in-me. There is no me that is not always already "*othered*."

A consequence of this, for Levinas, is that the freedom of the self is *not* fundamental—against such thinkers as Jean-Paul Sartre. Rather, the self is always already subjected and bound to the Others, already in debt, already

obligated. Community in the relation to the Other has genuine priority over individuality in Levinas's conception of the self.

In English we can pun on this very conveniently; we can say, there is no me that is not always already *mothered*. And when you see how natural this pun is in English, it is all the more remarkable to find that Levinas leaves mothers out of his discussion entirely! As a stepfather, I can be gratified by his account of filiality, especially in *Ethics and Infinity*,<sup>9</sup> where he insists that biological ties are not essential, but I find it disturbing that he speaks always and only of *paternity*, and of the *father* finding *himself* in the son.

Indeed, Levinas's view that the self is uncompromisingly responsible for the Other (he approvingly quotes Dostoyevsky: "We are all responsible for all for all men before all, and I more than all the others"),<sup>10</sup> applies better to the kind of labor, devotion, commitment, and sacrifice expected of mothers concretely every day than to that which is really expected of fathers. This is clear to feminist writers like Dinnerstein, and it is compatible with Levinas's failing to take the feminine other, the feminine face, seriously.

More than acknowledging that the self is (m)othered, however, his later work wants to be clear on two points: that being-othered is not something simply past, and that, indeed, the crucial sense of "*l'autre-en-moi*" is not conveyed until we think the self as a (m)othering body, not only a (m)othered body. That is, selfhood consists in inescapable responsibility to and for the Other, a responsibility Levinas would have us recognize as being assigned to us by the fact that we can be addressed, by *the fact* that we can be appealed to and called upon. And *this* seems to be due only to the presence in the self, as one of the features that *make* a self, of the signifying face, the exteriority, of the mother.

The denial of the feminine in Levinas's early and best-known work is classic. In his own discourse, he seeks to instruct us that the condition of selfhood is the Other, that Western ontology seems animated by an absolute allergy to otherness, that in reality the Other has primacy, that this is being constantly covered up and obscured in Western philosophy, and that consequently there is no real affirmation of plurality or difference, no ethics, even in Western moral philosophy. In the course of this argument, his description of Same-Other relations employs gender categories based on traditional sex roles, but absolutizes these roles and repeats the marginalization of women from the serious world of public life and the moral sphere of accountability, which are thereby masculinized. By not assuming a feminist stance, by not associating his critique with the critique of patriarchal culture and philosophy, his exposition of the forgetting of the Other loses much of its credibility. We must, he told us, learn to see the primacy of the Other, learn to affirm the irreducibility of difference. But the Other whose otherness turns out to be the most difficult to recognize and affirm is, *even in his thought*, feminine! This is why I said at the beginning that reading Levinas reminds me of reading Dinnerstein, Chodorow, and object relations feminist theorists;

but *they* explore the dynamics of the tendency to deny the primary indebtedness to the mother, and look toward an organization of life, and a theory of life, that will be reoriented away from the violence of this denial. Levinas only exemplifies this tendency.

Levinas does not make the obvious political observation; although he takes the Other seriously, affirming the infinite responsibility to the face, he describes woman as undefinable and unrecognizable. His willingness to have a place for faceless, unrecognizable Others indicates that his early philosophy is no remedy to our allergic condition and is at best only a moment in the diagnosis. In his later work, he seems to give the emphasis to this “prefacial” relationship and to shift his interest away from the relation with the confrontational face of the serious Other, to trying to understand the prefacial presence of the Other in the self. At least in doing this he makes a more legitimate use of feminine imagery—the maternal body and responsibility for someone whom you do not yet know. But here he still does not seem to see that such a philosophy of the Other is not only a departure from Western philosophy, but even more so from patriarchal philosophy, or that among the greatest flaws of Western philosophy, as of Western culture generally, must be counted patriarchy and its essentially violent nature.

### Notes

- 1 Nancy Chodorow, *The Reproduction of Mothering: Psychoanalysis and the Sociology of Gender* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1978); Dorothy Dinnerstein, *The Mermaid and the Minotaur: Sexual Arrangements and the Human Malaise* (New York: Harper & Row, 1976).
- 2 Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, trans. A. Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne Univ. Press, 1969), 21; hereafter “TI.” Translation of *Totalité et infini: essai sur l'extériorité* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1961).
- 3 English translations of Levinas nearly always use *infinity* rather than *the infinite*. My own preference for the latter stems from Levinas's obvious interest in Descartes's concept of the infinite (TI 210–12), and the fact that Levinas's word in French is *l'infini* rather than *l'infinité*, the same choice Descartes makes (*infinitum* rather than *infinitas*). Translations of such passages have been modified.
- 4 The expression “forgetting the Other” does not occur in Levinas's writings; I suggested it as a way of capturing a basic point of his thought in my unpublished *thèse du troisième cycle*, “L'oubli de l'autre: le solipsisme épistémologique et la fondation dialogique de la morale” (Université de Paris-Nanterre, 1982).
- 5 For other descriptions of the category of otherness that is taken seriously, that confronts and commands, that manifests itself through language, and appears from a height, see TI 101, 155, 171, 200, 213.
- 6 Emmanuel Levinas, *Le temps et l'autre* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1979); quoted in Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans. H. M. Parshley (New York: Vintage Books, 1952, 1974), xix.
- 7 Emmanuel Levinas, “Et Dieu créa la femme,” in *Du sacré au saint: cinq nouvelles lectures talmudiques* (Paris: Editions de Minuit, 1977), 122–48; hereafter “DC.”

- 8 Emmanuel Levinas, *Autrement qu'être ou au-delà de l'essence* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1974), henceforth "AQE." English translation, *Otherwise than Being; Or, Beyond Essence*, trans. A. Lingis (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1981).
- 9 Emmanuel Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity: Conversations with Philippe Nemo*, trans. R. Cohen (Pittsburgh: Duquesne Univ. Press, 1985), 71.
- 10 Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity*, 101.

# TRAUMATIC RESPONSE

## Levinas's legacy

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Between November 1975 and May 1976, Emmanuel Levinas presented a lecture course under the title “La Mort et le Temps.”<sup>1</sup> Alongside a course on “God and Onto-theology,” presented during the same period (indeed on the same days, an hour apart from one another), this lecture course constitutes the last regular course that Levinas taught at the Sorbonne.<sup>2</sup> The lectures warrant attention for a number of reasons. Presented in the year after the publication of *Otherwise than Being* (1974) and fifteen years after *Totality and Infinity* (1961), they allow us to develop a new perspective on both these works for which Levinas is best known, along with the intervening essays.<sup>3</sup>

In particular, the lectures provide the first available sustained critique of the Heideggerian notions of temporality and being-toward-death. References to Heidegger's understanding of death and time are scattered widely throughout Levinas's corpus, and there are one or two texts, such as the early essay *Time and the Other* (1947), and “Diachrony and Representation” (1982), in which Levinas devotes concentrated attention to the interrelated themes of time and death.<sup>4</sup> But it was only with the appearance of the 1975–76 lectures that we were given the opportunity to knit together the context for Levinas's frequent, but often abrupt and undeveloped remarks about Heidegger's conceptions of time and death. These apparently gnomic utterances now take on the character of a well-articulated, albeit partisan, critique of Heidegger's celebrated analyses of being-toward-death.

In devoting close attention to Heidegger's *Being and Time*, the lectures represent a crucial contribution to sorting out the politically and ethically difficult, if not impossible, relationship that Levinas's philosophy bears to Heidegger's.<sup>5</sup> They are especially illuminating since they not only constitute a rare instance in which Levinas's published work treats Heidegger's

philosophy in any detail or at any length, but they also present a unique record of Levinas's mature meditations on Heidegger. Despite its inestimable importance for his entire thought, Heidegger's work tends not to be the focus of Levinas's developed philosophy. We had to rely until recently on the early essays of the 1930s in *En découvrant l'existence avec Husserl et Heidegger* (1949), which, arguably, were written before Levinas had begun to develop a philosophy that is recognizably his own.<sup>6</sup> The 1975/6 lectures discuss Heidegger more elaborately, and in the context of key figures of the history of philosophy, thus shedding new light on Levinas's earlier declarations about Heidegger.

Not only, then, does Levinas provide here the rationale for the distance he found it necessary to take in relation to Heidegger's attempt to establish an originary concept of time, a distance that until this point had only been intimated; he also gives us considerable insight as to how he thinks the philosophies of Bergson, Kant, Hegel, Bloch, and Fink fare in comparison to Heidegger's. While in some respects these figures remain consonant with the tradition Levinas seeks to go beyond, their philosophies also contain aspects that break with Heideggerian ontology. Heidegger has accustomed us, says Levinas, "to seek in the history of philosophy the very history of being; all his work consists of reducing metaphysics to the history of being" (MT: 66). For Levinas, "Reducing every philosophical effort to the error or errance of ontotheology is only one possible reading of the history of philosophy" (MT: 67). Levinas's own reading of the history of philosophy might be described as affirming that "in the history of philosophy, there can be meaning other than finitude" (MT: 68).

Thus Levinas retrieves from Bergson the notion of "duration," the ultimate significance of which is understood not in terms of the vital élan of *Creative Evolution* but in the sense that Bergson gives it in *The Two Sources of Morality and Religion*, as "the fact that man can emit a call to the interiority of the other man" (MT: 63).<sup>7</sup> And in the notion of hope that Kant presents in his practical philosophy Levinas finds evidence that something other than finitude can signify (MT: 68).

These lectures provide remarkably rich resources for assessing Levinas's reflections on time and death as thought both by historical figures, and in relation to contemporary philosophers, who are no less crucial to Levinas's own analyses of time because he ultimately seeks to go beyond them. Derrida, for example, in *The Gift of Death*, *Given Time*, and *Adieu* cites and comments on "La Mort et le temps."<sup>8</sup> It is the latter course that I shall focus on here, while making some references to the course on "God and-Onto-Theology." In order to articulate the importance of these lectures, I shall single out Heidegger and Hegel, who play dominant roles in both lecture courses. My approach to this task is governed by a perspective that reveals these lectures to be remarkable in still another way, the importance of which I want to emphasize.

The lectures stand as a token of last things, as a memorial to Levinas. If the text of these lectures provides new insight into Levinas's relation to Heidegger, and to Hegel (among others), if it fleshes out his understanding of the history of philosophy, and reveals the sense in which Levinas sees himself as going beyond this tradition, above all, this text on Death and Time provokes a response to Levinas's own death. I propose to think about what Levinas means when he speaks of trauma, both in this text and elsewhere, and sometimes by naming it in other ways. The word occurs only three times in this text, once towards the beginning of the lecture course, and twice on its penultimate page. It is perhaps not insignificant that each occurrence is structured as a question. I want to think about the question that trauma poses to us, as survivors of Levinas, as readers of his work, as teachers of philosophy in the twentieth century. So I begin with a question. Can the trauma which I am more than ever convinced is the central orchestrating event of Levinas's philosophy be understood or thought? What would be required by the understanding or thought that responds to the trauma of the Shoah? Does trauma require trauma to be rendered communicable or transferable, and how would such a transfer take place? Whose trauma puts me in question? Or does trauma put in question the notion of belonging?

I want to think about the way in which trauma informs Levinas's philosophy, the ways in which it exceeds his philosophy, the possibility for trauma to be communicated to Levinas's readers at a time when survivors of the holocaust are so few, and when the opportunity to hear these survivors witness to trauma diminishes at an accelerated speed. As we move toward the end of a century indelibly marked by the most extreme suffering, suffering condoned and orchestrated by state officials, this trauma poses a question. How will it be remembered?

Let me express more carefully and precisely, not my intentions, but my response; not what I might imagine to be the task of Levinas's general readership, but my own traumatic response to Levinas's death—let me speak of the gift of his work, of the texts that provide me with a legacy, and of books abandoned to a future that takes shape in the wake of his death—a death that has put me in question, and a future that poses the question of my responsibility. In marking this shift from the general issue of how a loosely defined “we,” how an already constituted community should read Levinas now (now in the shadow of his death), to the question with which Levinas's death confronts me, I mean to take note of two points observed by Levinas in his 1975–76 lectures. The first appears in a lecture, in the course on death and time—a lecture to which I will return—on Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*, and the second appears in the course on God and Onto-Theology, in a lecture on “The Ethical Relation as a Departure from Ontology.”

Levinas reminds us, in an aside, to note well that “For Hegel, ethics is always universal. The person is always thought in virtue of the universality



of the law. Hegel is Kantian on this point. As an individual the person is not Spirit and has no ethics. Here, in the present study, the person is the other individual, and any universal starts from there. But in German idealism, the person is the universal" (MT: 97). This parenthetical remark interrupts Levinas's explication of one of the most renowned passages of Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*, in which the State appears as split into the human and civic law, the law of the city which Hegel calls masculine, and the law of the family, the divine law which he construes as feminine.<sup>9</sup> Spirit in the immediate substance of individual action can be ethical in as much as it becomes universal. Taking on death through the act of burial, the blood relative transforms death from a natural and abstract event into an operation by which the dead are honored by the living.<sup>10</sup>

I will return to the extraordinary relation with death that Levinas credits Hegel as having articulated here. For the moment I only want to emphasize the basic contrast to which Levinas draws attention. For German idealism, the person as an individual cannot be ethical unless considered from the standpoint of universality, while for Levinas ethics starts with the individual, and tends to be submerged or obliterated by universality. What meaning this can have, given that we are, as a matter of empirical fact, in a social order that at every moment complicates my responsibility for my neighbor, is a question that must be broached in terms of what Levinas calls the third party.<sup>11</sup>

The second point I want to draw from the lectures is a difference that Levinas indicates by substituting a lower case letter for an upper case: the difference between "Being me" where the word *moi* is not capitalized, and being "Me" where the "Moi" is capitalized. To be me in the second sense concerns "the perseverance of one's being" (DMT: 209), where to be me is understood in the sense of *conatus essendi* (MT: 75), whereas the substitution of a lower case letter indicates the substitution of the "hostage" (DMT: 209).<sup>12</sup> What is indicated by this alteration is that "*Freedom is not first*. The self is responsible before freedom" (DMT: 209).

Responsibility before freedom, ethics before universal ontology, infinity before totality, the other before me, passivity before power, the "Here I am" of witness before the "I think" of representation. Disrupting the primacy that the tradition has maintained for the subject defined first of all by its free capacity for representation, Levinas effects yet another reversal of philosophy in terms of death and time, in the challenge he brings to the Heideggerian understanding of death as the "possibility of impossibility." Just as he reverses the order of priority that the tradition granted ontology over ethics, and totality over infinity, Levinas substituted for Heidegger's formula for the notion of death as the "possibility of impossibility," the idea of death as the "impossibility of possibility." But if this way of articulating Levinas's objection to Heidegger's notion of being-towards-death is characteristic of Levinas earlier work (in *Time and the Other* and *Totality and*

*Infinity*, for example), it makes way for a different formulation in the lectures on death and time. While the phrase “impossibility of possibility” is not entirely absent from the later work (as in *Otherwise than Being*), the reversal that it signals is expressed in a new refrain, namely the suggestion that it is not that time must be understood on the basis of death, as Heidegger’s analyses of Dasein’s finite temporality indicates—Levinas says for Heidegger, “it is through death that there is time and there is Dasein” (MT: 59). Rather, for Levinas, death must be understood on the basis of time—the time of patience. In the opening lecture Levinas signals “the direction of this course—death as the patience of time” (MT: 8).<sup>13</sup>

Levinas does not want to think time on the basis of Dasein’s finitude, which involves the projection of the future as determined by being-there, but to find the signification that death has for time (see MT: 55–56). Levinas proposes, in short, “To think death starting from time—and not, as in Heidegger—time starting from death” (MT: 122).<sup>14</sup> In order to appreciate what Levinas is doing when he says that time must not be understood on the basis of death, or starting with Dasein’s finitude—but the other way around, as the patience of time, we need to see how he arrives at this formulation. Before turning to this task allow me to forestall some possible misunderstandings.

We should not imagine that when Levinas reverses the order of priority Heidegger’s analyses of being-toward-death sets up between death and time he is innocent of Heidegger’s challenge to traditional metaphysical conceptions of time from Aristotle to Bergson (as Levinas—following Heidegger—is fond of saying). We must not imagine that Levinas wants to return to a naive conception of time as an infinite series of nows parading along, capable of being represented adequately in a linear fashion, on a line that joins instants to one another as if they were no more than placeholders, points that coalesce to form an unbroken continuity. We must not imagine, in other words, that Levinas intends a rehabilitation of the everyday time that Heidegger enabled us to rethink from the perspective of a more original temporality, from Dasein’s own perspective, a perspective that is most my own—that of finite temporality understood in the experience of anxiety. Levinas fully understands the difficulties that Heidegger brought to light in the traditional way of posing the question: what is the being of time? (MT: 8, and 30). In fact he opens his lecture course by acknowledging the significance of Heidegger’s insight that the very way of formulating the question “what is time” presupposes that it is a being. Levinas maintains however that because Heidegger admits no other source of meaning than the ontological, because everything is in the final analysis reduced to the comprehension of being, time and death too—despite what Heidegger would wish—are subordinate to the study of being (see MT: 51).

Levinas is well aware of the radical implications of Heidegger’s revised and original notion of temporality, well aware of the break with the tradition

that Heidegger introduces by his reorientation of temporality away from scientific time and toward Dasein's finitude. The importance of death in Heidegger's analysis is not lost on Levinas. He departs from Heidegger not in order to return to the traditional separation of time from death, but in answering the question of whose death matters most: mine, or the other's? It is because Heidegger assumes that the importance of death lies in my own death, and not in the death of the other that Levinas thinks Heidegger's critique of the Western tradition, for all its originality, does not go far enough, does not take death—neither the alterity of death, nor the other's death—seriously enough.

For Heidegger, death is "certainty par excellence" (MT: 11 and 15). Levinas shows that for Heidegger, not only is death the "origin of certainty" (MT: 11), but it is also in essence possibility. In Levinas's words, "Death is an absolutely certain possibility; it is the possibility which renders possible all possibility" (MT: 52). Suffice it to say that death initially appears to pose a problem for Heidegger's analysis insofar as it would seem to stand in the way of grasping Dasein's life as a totality, as a structural whole. By thinking death in terms of Dasein's authentic anticipation, as that which is always already ahead of it, and in this sense as that which belongs to Dasein from the start, the problem that death seemed to have posed for Heidegger's Dasein is resolved into Dasein's very mode of being. As Levinas says, "In dying is revealed the ontological structure which is mineness, *Jemeinigkeit*" (MT: 44). So for Levinas, "The way in which Heidegger goes toward death is entirely commanded by his preoccupation with the ontological" (MT: 38), or as he also puts it: "There is a reduction of everything human to ontology" (MT: 64). Not only is death a "modality of being," but so is man. Thus "Death marks above all the primary achievement of being-there, it is through death that being-there or man, who by way of being is the event of its being-there, is the totality of that which it is, or is properly there" (MT: 56).

Heidegger's advance over the tradition was to posit a more original time than clock time, or measurable time. Since Aristotle, for whom "Time is the number of movement" (MT: 30), our access to time has been governed by a notion of time that we measure by clocks, but even in Aristotle's definition of time there is a tentative access to a sense of temporality that is not reducible to its measurable quality.<sup>15</sup> With the notion of being-towards-death Heidegger sharpens this access (see MT: 8). By establishing time as a relation to death Heidegger "allows it to be thought otherwise than the pure and simple flux and flow of instants" (MT: 40). He substitutes the question "who is time?" for the question "what is time?" (MT: 30).

By thinking Dasein's end in "its mode of being-there," rather than as present-at-hand, Heidegger rethinks death not as something outside, or added on to Dasein, but as Dasein's very mode of-being-ahead-of-itself. Heidegger's originality consists in thinking time not as though it were made

of "adjoining parts" (MT: 45); Rather, "Dasein is in such a manner that its 'not-yet' belongs to it and yet is not yet" (MT: 45). For Heidegger, as Levinas says: "Death is not a moment but a way of being with which Dasein is charged as soon as it exists, such that the formula 'having to be' signifies also 'having to die'. It is not as a future unaccomplished that death must be thought, it is on the contrary starting from the to-be that is also a to-die that time must be originally thought" (MT: 48–49). Thus, "dying is not that which marks the last instant of Dasein, but what characterizes the very way in which man is his being" (MT: 56). By starting from mortality then, Heidegger discovers behind linear time a more original time (MT: 60).

Summing up Heidegger's analyses, Levinas says, "One sees how measurable time is not original time, how there is a priority of the relation with the future as the relation with a possibility and not as a reality: the concrete way in which such an idea is thought is therefore by the analysis of death. It is through death that there is time and there is Dasein" (MT: 59).

Heidegger's contribution lies in overcoming the idea of death thought on the model of the "destruction of a thing" or as an ending in the sense of an interruption of the flux of time (MT: 39). For Heidegger, time itself is rethought from death, and this is why Levinas considers Heidegger's rethinking of time to be a "necessary passage"—necessary because time and death are thought in relation to one another. But Levinas also sees the necessity of passing through, going beyond Heidegger's rethinking of time as being-towards-death because death remains in Heidegger fundamentally annihilation (see MT: 41), while, in Levinas's words, "death does not seem to us to amount to annihilation" (MT: 37).

Heidegger does not distance himself enough from the opposition that Levinas sees as characteristic of the tradition, where the idea of death occurs either as annihilation, negation, nothingness, or as pure being, as in a vision of an afterlife, eternal life.<sup>16</sup> In understanding death as Dasein's mode of being, it might seem that Heidegger avoids falling into the trap of equating death with nothingness, where "Death appears as a passage from being to no-longer-being understood as the result of a logical operation: negation" (MT: 10), but, as Levinas reads him, he does so only at the expense of re-inscribing death in terms of being. Levinas says, "the relation with my death is described as anxiety and returns to the comprehension of nothingness. And therefore the structure of comprehension is preserved concerning the question of my relation to my death" (MT: 16).

Heidegger, Levinas says, is fascinated by the way in which death seems to make nothingness accessible, but it is anxiety that gives us access to death (MT: 77), and death remains unthought in anxiety, even in the lived experience of anxiety (MT: 79). The negativity of death is thereby canceled out in Heidegger, who (not only returns death to experience in the privileged role he accord to anxiety, but also) rejoins a tradition unable to sustain the thought of nothingness. Levinas tells us, "Nothingness has defined Western

thought" (MT: 79) from Aristotle to Bergson. Bergson calls the idea of absolute nothingness a "destructive" and "pseudo-idea" and dismisses it as absurd (MT: 76), and Aristotle seems to have refused to think nothingness in itself (MT: 78). It is always a matter of the way in which one being becomes another being (MT: 81). The situation is similar for Hegel in *The Science of Logic*: "there is a nothingness, but a nothingness which awaits being, which wants to be, which will pass into being. Therefore one can ask if in this way beings are already presupposed" (MT: 82). For Aristotle, becoming is movement, and it is impossible to think death on this model (MT: 78). The notion of *metabole* may seem to admit the turning of being into nothingness, may seem to admit the separation of nothingness from being, but corruption, in his analyses, is always thought as closely related to generation (MT: 78). Although Aristotle distinguishes corruption and generation from alteration (MT: 78), "metabole conserves the style of alteration where being subsists in nothingness in such a way that nothingness is not thought as pure nothingness" (MT: 80).

Hegel said from the very beginning that it is impossible to think the nothingness of death in all its purity. While Levinas sees Hegel's interpretation of nothingness as adhering to the logic of being in *The Science of Logic*, in the *Phenomenology of Spirit* "death is not only a moment playing its role in the thought of being" (MT: 91) even if it is finally rendered "intelligible," ultimately reduced to a moment of self-overcoming, and as such it claims its place "in the world" (MT: 103). If in the *Phenomenology* the meaning of death is prevented from entirely collapsing into the play of being that nothingness exhibits in the *Logic*, where "Pure being and pure nothingness are the same thing" (MT: 85), it is because of the ethical significance it attains. As Levinas says about Kant, "it is not by accident that this way of thinking a meaning beyond being is the corollary of an ethics" (MT: 73).

It is the family as immediate substance that takes on the task of burying the dead, and in doing so it transforms death from a natural event, in which the dead are subject to irrational material forces, into an act that honors the dead and confers on it the universality that the act of burial alone can confer. A symbolic act by a blood relation that takes on the natural element of death, the burial of a family member achieves a unique bond between the living and the dead. Levinas says, "In the act of burial there is an exceptional relation of the living to the dead" (MT: 98–9). The singular act of burial takes on a universal significance since it has nothing of the contingency of other acts that can be performed for another in life, as in acts of service, education or love. "It must be a relation with a singularity and, for it to be ethical, it must have the contents of a universal relation" (MT: 95). As Hegel says in the passage to which Levinas directs our attention: "This action no longer concerns the living, but the dead" (MT: 97).

If Hegel provokes Levinas's admiration because he manages to *think* death, and not simply to describe it (MT: 99), death is nonetheless thought "in the

world as a moment of the self grasping itself" (MT: 103). In this respect, in so far as death becomes a "moment in the appearance of the world" and is rendered "intelligible" to the survivor, Hegel's account suffers from the same fault as Heidegger, for whom, the death of the other is an intraworldly event (MT: 54). For Levinas, on the contrary, "death is not of this world" (MT: 130). Refusing the alternative offered by the tradition, Levinas asks, "Is death not something other than the dialectic of being-nothingness in the flux of time?" (MT: 16)

Where Heidegger finds certainty in death, Levinas sees ambiguity and enigma (MT: 16); while Heidegger poses the problem of death as that which is most proper to Dasein, as the inevitable (see MT: 40), Levinas sees in death the indeterminacy of a pure question (see MT: 16). If for Heidegger death is that which is most my own—"death signifies my death" in which Dasein's being there is grasped in its "authenticity and integrity" (MT: 56)—Levinas's concern is the meaning that comes from the death of the other (MT: 12). As far as Heidegger is concerned, the death of others only distracts us from the real problem of death, and while on his account anxiety provides privileged access to death, Levinas asks if it is not in dread that death approaches. If death cannot be reduced to experience, Levinas asks if it is not in what he calls an "affection more passive than trauma" (MT: 11). Levinas retrieves the sense of excess, scandal and crisis that Socrates's death carries in Plato's *Phaedo* (see MT: 10, 16, and 20).

Levinas insists that death is inseparable from the relation to the other (MT: 9), and that "my relation with death is also made of the emotional and intellectual repercussion of knowing the death of others" (MT: 11). It is not death, as it is for Heidegger, that individuates Dasein, but "the other [who] individuates me in the responsibility I have for him. The death of the other who dies affects me in my identity even in my responsibility" (MT: 14–15). For "in the culpability of surviving, the death of the other is my affair" (MT: 44). My infinite responsibility for the other, the impossibility of fulfilling it, is patience.

Levinas contests the privilege of the death of the I. For him, all meaning is not reducible to being. The nothingness of death is not a simple negation of being. The meaning of death is not contained in finitude. For Levinas, death concerns above all my responsibility for the death of the other. Levinas insists that "the death of the other affects me more than my own" (MT: 121). Levinas maintains this against Heidegger's understanding of death by way of the anxiety Dasein experiences in the face of its own death. In the Heideggerian analyses it would be inauthentic to focus on the death of others in an attempt to understand the meaning of death. Levinas seeks a meaning in death that is not reducible to the terms of being; he stresses the alterity of death, the way in which death refuses the categories of being, the way it presents us with an *excess* (see MT: 10 and 20). Death is disquieting, there is in death a surplus of meaning (see MT: 41). A meaning that is

uncontainable, that goes beyond the everyday. The "Is it possible that he can be dead?" signifies something other than the idle talk of curiosity. Death is a pure question mark, an enigma. The death of the other puts me in question. It poses the question of my response to the death of the other, a response that consists of my responsibility for the death of the other (see MT: 91).

Levinas approaches death as a scandal, as if it were murder, as always premature. He approaches death as my taking on the responsibility of being a survivor (see MT: 81). The question of "responsibility for others" which includes "my responsibility for the death of the other, my responsibility as a survivor" (MT: 65) is elevated above my anxiety before my own death.

What concrete meaning can this have as we approach the end of the twentieth century in the memory of Levinas? Levinas reminds us that

this is the century that in thirty years has seen two world wars, the totalitarianisms of right and left, Hitlerism and Stalinism, Hiroshima, the Gulag, and the genocides of Auschwitz and Cambodia. This is the century which is drawing to a close in the haunting memory of the return of everything signified by these barbaric names: suffering and evil are deliberately imposed, yet no reason sets limits to the exasperation of a reason become political and detached from all ethics.

Among these events the Holocaust of the Jewish people under the reign of Hitler seems to us the paradigm of gratuitous human suffering, where evil appears in its diabolical horror. . . . The disproportion between suffering and every theodicy was shown at Auschwitz with a glaring, obvious clarity. . . . Did not the word of Nietzsche on the death of God take on, in the extermination camps, the signification of a quasi-empirical fact?<sup>17</sup>

Ultimately for Heidegger death and time, says Levinas, are thought as "modalities of being" (MT: 63). Even God is reduced to the questioning of being. Levinas asks if the "disquietude of God does not have other significations for philosophy than the forgetting of being and the errance of ontology?" (MT: 65). For Heidegger, everything that is interrogated returns to the question "what is being?" (MT: 65). For Levinas, another question arises behind the question of being, one that is irreducible to its terms.

Does the trauma of the other come from the Other (*autrui*)? Is the nothingness of death the very nudity of the face of the neighbor? "Thou shalt not commit murder" is the nudity of the face.

(MT: 134)

Trauma returns, but it is never fully present. There is always more for it to dispense. In a sense, it is nothing but repetition. Trauma is foreignness incarnate. Absolute otherness, not being oneself, being outside oneself—and therefore no longer being in any of the recognizable meanings of the term. To undergo trauma is to fail to recognize oneself in the places one usually finds oneself.<sup>18</sup> Trauma is beyond self and other. Being moved by the other is to be affected not by the other, but by what the other is affected by, the other's suffering. To be traumatized—in trauma the "to be" becomes redundant.

Shoah as trauma—humanity's trauma, philosophy's trauma, remains still—and always—to be thought. How could this have happened? How could it not have been forestalled? The standard questions—how could the unthinkable, the impossible, have occurred? How could it—how can it—be thought? To think it is to reduce it to a theme. Not to think it is to abscond responsibility. Here is the inevitable movement of philosophy, the reduction of the saying to the said, the betrayal of the other by the same, a reduction and a betrayal that are as necessary as they are dissimulating.

Without often naming it—which thematizes and reduces it to an event comparable to any other (see OB: 184; AE: 232)—Levinas gave his life, devoted his work to thinking the Shoah, to a mourning of philosophy—a mourning of what philosophy had become in allowing itself to flee from the Shoah. The rhythm of philosophy's language that Levinas discerns in the reduction and betrayal of the saying by the said is a restless rhythm, incessant and unstoppable. Breathless, it calls for renewal. It is discontinuous. The time of philosophy is diachrony. Philosophers unfold new meanings, and in doing so they produce an account that makes a said of the saying, but, says Levinas "this account is itself without end and without continuity, that is, goes from the one to the other, is a tradition. It thereby renews itself. New meanings arise" (OB: 169; AE: 215). If philosophy has a tendency to fix the meaning of statements, to render accounts, its function is also to not allow its saying to rest in a said.

One might say, bearing in mind Heidegger's analysis of death, that Levinas's death represents an end: the ending of certain possibilities that were never realized, which might never have been realized—but which now never can be realized. One might say that a certain potentiality-for-being has been removed for Levinas. But for Levinas time is not in relation to the end, it is in relation to the other (see MT: 123). For Levinas, "Time is not the limitation of being but the relation with infinity. Death is not annihilation but the necessary question for this relation with infinity or time to be produced" (MT: 21). And the relation with infinity is nothing but "the responsibility of one mortal for another" (MT: 135).

I want to recall two questions that Levinas poses, one on the opening page of the preface to *Totality and Infinity* and one in the final chapter of *Otherwise than Being*. Both questions concern war:



Does not lucidity, the mind's openness upon the true, consist in catching sight of the permanent possibility of war? The state of war suspends morality. . . . The art of foreseeing war and of winning it by every means—politics—is henceforth enjoined as the very exercise of reason. . . . Not only modern war but every war employs arms that turn against those who wield them. It establishes an order from which no one can keep his distance; nothing henceforth is exterior. War does not manifest exteriority and the other as other; it destroys the identity of the same.

(TI: 21; TeI: ix-x; my emphasis)

And from *Otherwise than Being*:

Does not the war perpetuate that which it is called to make disappear, and consecrate war and its virile virtues in good conscience? One has to reconsider the meaning of a certain human weakness, and no longer see in patience only the reverse side of the ontological finitude of the human. But for that one has to be patient oneself without asking patience of the others—and for that one has to admit a difference between oneself and the others.

(OB: 177; AE: 223, my emphasis)

When Levinas articulates a wariness of totalities, when he reminds us of the need to distinguish between the legitimacy of the state, and the meaning of ethics, he recalls an event that was justified by a political regime, and excused by countless others. He recalls an event that cannot be named. It cannot be named in the sense that it “has never been able to remain closed up in its site” (OB: 184; AE: 232). What is most striking is not that this event still haunts us, but that Levinas's response to it is not to advocate war. His response is patience. Endurance. Enduring time. Duration. The time of patience.

What is most striking is that it is a response. Passivity. It is his response. It is not a proposal nor a program outlined for others. As a response, it asks for nothing. It calls for no action, demands no counter-response. Of course, Levinas leaves us the legacy of his books, his works, and these books will take on, have already taken on, a life of their own. Levinas's radical passivity, his vigilant insistence in marking the difference between asking patience of myself and demanding it of others will be converted into a philosophy—despite itself. In this sense there is a danger that the gift of his work, the gift of his death, will be “for nothing;” that it will be absurd, that its meaning will be pure “nonsense” (MT: 135). This risk is one that Levinas's work embraces, without forestalling. His work is open to risk. It is “a fine risk.” He acknowledges, in the distance he finds it necessary to take from Hegel, that the death of the other can lose its transcendence through the customs

that organize it, in a society to which the other and I both belong, in a social body (MT: 134), where, as he says in *Totality and Infinity*, “The meaning of individuals . . . is derived from totality” (TI: 22; TeI: x).

Levinas affirms the importance of justice as a relationship that will set us up, the other and I—amongst all the others—as equals, a relationship that will be guaranteed by a system, legal, or otherwise, a totality, but above all he reiterates (or creates a space where such iteration can take place) that justice cannot occur without the saying from which it proceeds. He says: “It is 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” (OB: 159–60; AE: 203).

### Notes

- 1 Emmanuel Levinas, *La Mort et le Temps* (Paris: L’Herne, 1991). Hereafter cited in the text as MT, followed by page numbers. All translations are my own.
- 2 Emmanuel Levinas, “Dieu et l’onto-théo-logie” in *Dieu, la Mort et le Temps* (Paris: Bernard Grasset, 1993). Hereafter cited in the text as DMT, followed by page numbers. Translations are my own.
- 3 Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise Than Being or Beyond Essence*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1981); *Autrement qu’être ou au-delà l’essence*, second edition (La Haye: Martinus Nijhoff, 1978), hereafter cited in the text as OB; AE, followed by page numbers. Levinas (1975) *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1975); *Totalité et infini: essai sur l’extériorité* (La Haye: Martinus Nijhoff, 1961), hereafter cited in the text as TI; TeI, followed by page numbers.
- 4 Emmanuel Levinas, *Time and the Other and Other Essays*, trans. R. Cohen (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1987); *Temps et l’autre* (St. Clement: Fata Morgana, 1979), originally published in Jean Wahl, ed., *Le Choix, Le Monde, L’Existence* (Grenoble-Paris: Arthaud, 1947), hereafter cited in the text as TO; TA, followed by page numbers.
- 5 Heidegger, Martin, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1980); *Sein und Zeit* (Tübingen: Max Niemeyer, 1984), hereafter cited in the text as BT; SZ, followed by page numbers.
- 6 Emmanuel Levinas, *En découvrant l’existence avec Husserl et Heidegger* (Paris: Vrin, 1982).
- 7 Henri Bergson, *Creative Evolution*, trans. Arthur Mitchell (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1926 [1911]); *L’évolution créatrice* (Paris: Félix Alcan, 1920). *The Two Sources of Morality and Religion*, trans. R. Ashley Audra and Cloudesley Brereton (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1949 [1935]); *Les deux sources de la morale et de la religion* (Paris: Félix Alcan, 1932).
- 8 Jacques Derrida, *Given Time: 1. Counterfeit Money*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1992); *Donner le temps: 1. La fausse monnaie* (Paris: Galilée, 1991). *The Gift of Death*, trans. David Wills (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1995); “Donner la mort,” in *L’Éthique de don* (Paris: Transition, 1992). *Adieu à Emmanuel Levinas* (Paris: Galilée, 1997).
- 9 One could of course say plenty about the subordination of the feminine realm to the masculine in Hegel’s metaphysics and politics in his reading of Sophocles’

- Antigone*, and elsewhere I have attempted to say something about it, and will continue to try to respond it. But this is neither the place, nor the time to take on such a question.
- 10 In a more extended discussion one would have to elaborate the question of singularity, individuality and generality in Hegel.
  - 11 While I address the issue obliquely here, the task of fully elaborating the role of the "third party" in Levinas's work must be left for another occasion.
  - 12 Levinas marks the transition from "Moi" to "moi" by substituting the lower case for the upper case "m" throughout *Otherwise than Being*, and elsewhere.
  - 13 Patience is not a new idea in Levinas—it plays an important role in the 1947 text *Time and the Other*, for example, but the formulation of this idea finds in "La mort et le temps" is original.
  - 14 Here Levinas draws on the work of Ernst Bloch.
  - 15 See Martin Heidegger, *Basic Problems of Phenomenology*, trans. A. Hofstadter (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1982); *Die Grundprobleme der Phänomenologie* (Frankfurt: Vittorio Klostermann, 1978).
  - 16 See Levinas's comments on Plato's *Phaedo*, which understand death in terms of "pure being."
  - 17 Levinas, "Useless Suffering," trans. R. Cohen, in *The Provocation of Levinas: Rethinking the Other*, ed. Robert Bernasconi and David Wood (London: Routledge, 1988), pp. 156–67, see esp. p. 162; "La souffrance inutile," *Giornale di Metafisica* 4 (1982): 13–26, reprinted in *Les Cahiers de la Nuit Surveillée*. 3: *Emmanuel Levinas*, ed. Jacques Rolland (Paris: Verdier, Lagrasse, 1984), pp. 329–38.
  - 18 Levinas assigns this role to violence (see TI, p. 21; Tei, p. ix).

## ADIEU

*Jacques Derrida*

Source: J. Derrida, *Adieu to Emmanuel Levinas*, tr. Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas, Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1999, pp. 1–13. Originally published in French in 1997 as *Adieu à Emmanuel Levinas*, Editions Galilée.

For a long time, for a very long time, I've feared having to say *Adieu* to Emmanuel Levinas.

I knew that my voice would tremble at the moment of saying it, and especially saying it aloud, right here, before him, so close to him, pronouncing this word of *adieu*, this word *à-Dieu*, which, in a certain sense, I get from him, a word that he will have taught me to think or to pronounce otherwise.<sup>1</sup>

By meditating upon what Emmanuel Levinas wrote about the French word *adieu*—which I will recall in a few moments—I hope to find a sort of encouragement to speak here. And I would like to do so with unadorned, naked words, words as childlike and disarmed as my sorrow.

Whom is one addressing at such a moment? And in whose name would one allow oneself to do so? Often those who come forward to speak, to speak publicly, thereby interrupting the animated whispering, the secret or intimate exchange that always links one, deep inside, to a dead friend or master, those who make themselves heard in a cemetery, end up addressing *directly, straight on*, the one who, as we say, is no longer, is no longer living, no longer there, who will no longer respond. With tears in their voices, they sometimes speak familiarly to the other who keeps silent, calling upon him without detour or mediation, apostrophizing him, even greeting him or confiding in him. This is not necessarily out of respect for convention, not always simply part of the rhetoric of oration. It is rather so as to traverse speech at the very point where words fail us, since all language that would return to the self, to us, would seem indecent, a reflexive discourse that would end up coming back to the stricken community, to its consolation or its mourning, to what is called, in a confused and terrible expression, “the work of mourning.” Concerned only with itself, such speech would, in this

return, risk turning away from what is here our law—the law as *straightforwardness or uprightness* [*droiture*]: to speak straight on, to address oneself directly to the other, and to speak for the other whom one loves and admires, before speaking of him. To say to him *adieu*, to him, Emmanuel, and not merely to recall what he first taught us about a certain *Adieu*.

This word *droiture*—“straightforwardness” or “uprightness”—is another word that I began to hear otherwise and to learn when it came to me from Emmanuel Levinas. Of all the places where he speaks of uprightness, what first comes to mind is one of his *Four Talmudic Readings*, where uprightness names what is, as he says, “stronger than death.”<sup>2</sup>

But let us also keep from trying to find in everything that is said to be “stronger than death” a refuge or an alibi, yet another consolation. To define uprightness, Emmanuel Levinas says, in his commentary on the Tractate Shabbath<sup>3</sup> that consciousness is the “urgency of a destination leading to the Other and not an eternal return to self.”<sup>4</sup>

an innocence without naiveté, an uprightness without stupidity, an absolute uprightness which is also absolute self-criticism, read in the eyes of the one who is the goal of my uprightness and whose look calls me into question. It is a movement toward the other that does not come back to its point of origin the way diversion comes back, incapable as it is of transcendence—a movement beyond anxiety and stronger than death. This uprightness is called *Temimut*, the essence of Jacob.<sup>5</sup>

This same meditation also sets to work—as each meditation did, though each in a singular way—all the great themes to which the thought of Emmanuel Levinas has awakened us, that of responsibility first of all, but of an “unlimited”<sup>6</sup> responsibility that exceeds and precedes my freedom, that of an “unconditional yes,”<sup>7</sup> as this text says, of a “yes older than that of naive spontaneity,”<sup>8</sup> a yes in accord with this uprightness that is “original fidelity to an indissoluble alliance.”<sup>9</sup> And the final words of this Lesson return, of course, to death,<sup>10</sup> but they do so precisely so as not to let death have the last word, or the first one. They remind us of a recurrent theme in what was a long and incessant meditation upon death, but one that set out on a path that ran counter to the philosophical tradition extending from Plato to Heidegger. Elsewhere, before saying what the *à-Dieu* must be, another text speaks of the “extreme uprightness of the face of the neighbor” as the “uprightness of an exposure to death, without defense.”<sup>11</sup>

I cannot, nor would I even try to, measure in a few words the oeuvre of Emmanuel Levinas. It is so large that one can no longer glimpse its edges. And one would have to begin by learning once again from him and from *Totality and Infinity*, for example, how to think what an “oeuvre” or “work”<sup>12</sup>—as well as fecundity—might be.<sup>13</sup> One can predict with confidence

that centuries of readings will set this as their task. We already see innumerable signs, well beyond France and Europe, in so many works and so many languages, in all the translations, courses, seminars, conferences, etc., that the reverberations of this thought will have changed the course of philosophical reflection in our time, and of our reflection *on* philosophy, on what orders it according to ethics, according to another thought of ethics, responsibility, justice, the State, etc., according to another thought of the other, a thought that is newer than so many novelties because it is ordered according to the absolute anteriority of the face of the Other.

Yes, ethics before and beyond ontology, the State, or politics, but also ethics beyond ethics. One day, on the rue Michel-Ange, during one of those conversations whose memory I hold so dear, one of those conversations illuminated by the radiance of his thought, the goodness of his smile, the gracious humor of his ellipses, he said to me: "You know, one often speaks of ethics to describe what I do, but what really interests me in the end is not ethics, not ethics alone, but the holy, the holiness of the holy." And I then thought of a singular separation, the unique separation of the curtain or veil that is given, ordered and ordained [*donné, ordonné*], by God, the veil entrusted by Moses to an inventor or an artist rather than to an embroiderer, the veil that would *separate* the holy of holies in the sanctuary.<sup>14</sup> And I also thought of how other *Talmudic Lessons* sharpen the necessary distinction between sacredness and holiness, that is, the holiness of the other, the holiness of the person, who is, as Emmanuel Levinas said elsewhere, "more holy than a land, even when that land is a Holy Land. Next to a person who has been affronted, this land—holy and promised—is but nakedness and desert, a heap of wood and stone."<sup>15</sup>

This meditation on ethics, on the transcendence of the holy with regard to the sacred, that is, with regard to the paganism of roots and the idolatry of place, was, of course, indissociable from an incessant reflection upon the destiny and thought of Israel: yesterday, today, and tomorrow. Such reflection consisted of questioning and reaffirming the legacies not only of the biblical and talmudic tradition but of the terrifying memory of our time. This memory dictates each of these sentences, whether from nearby or afar, even if Levinas would sometimes protest against certain self-justifying abuses to which such a memory and the reference to the Holocaust might give rise.

But refraining from commentaries and questions, I would simply like to give thanks to someone whose thought, friendship, trust, and "goodness" (and I ascribe to this word "goodness" all the significance it is given in the final pages of *Totality and Infinity*)<sup>16</sup> will have been for me, as for so many others, a living source, so living, so constant, that I am unable to think what is happening to him or happening to me today, namely, this interruption or a certain non-response in a response that will never come to an end for me as long as I live.

The non-response: you will no doubt recall that in the remarkable course Emmanuel Levinas gave in 1975–76 (exactly twenty years ago), “La mort et le temps” (“Death and Time”),<sup>17</sup> where he defines death as the patience of time,<sup>18</sup> and engages in a grand and noble critical encounter with Plato as much as with Hegel, but especially with Heidegger, death is often defined—the death that “we meet” “in the face of the Other”<sup>19</sup>—as *non-response*,<sup>20</sup> “It is the without-response,” he says.<sup>21</sup> And elsewhere: “There is here an end that always has the ambiguity of a departure without return, of a passing away but also of a scandal (‘is it really possible that he’s dead?’) of non-response and of my responsibility.”<sup>22</sup>

Death: not, first of all, annihilation, non-being, or nothingness, but a certain experience for the survivor of the “without-response.” Already *Totality and Infinity* called into question the traditional “philosophical and religious” interpretation of death as either “a passage to nothingness” or “a passage to some other existence.”<sup>23</sup> It is the murderer who would like to identify death with nothingness; Cain, for example, says Emmanuel Levinas, “must have possessed such a knowledge of death.”<sup>24</sup> But even this nothingness presents itself as a “sort of impossibility” or, more precisely, an interdiction.<sup>25</sup> The face of the Other forbids me to kill; it says to me, “Thou shall not kill,”<sup>26</sup> even if this possibility remains presupposed by the interdiction that makes it impossible. This question without response, this question of the without-response, would thus be underivable, primordial, like the interdiction against killing, more originary than the alternative of “To be or not to be,”<sup>27</sup> which is thus neither the first nor the last question. “To be or not to be,” another essay concludes, “is probably not the question par excellence.”<sup>28</sup>

Today, I draw from all this that our infinite sadness must shy away from everything in mourning that would turn toward nothingness, that is, toward what still, even potentially, would link guilt to murder. Levinas indeed speaks of the survivor’s guilt, but it is a guilt without fault and without debt; it is, in truth, an *entrusted responsibility*, entrusted in a moment of unparalleled emotion, at the moment when death remains the absolute ex-ception.<sup>29</sup> To express this unprecedented emotion, the one I feel here and share with you, the one that our sense of propriety forbids us to exhibit, so as to make clear without personal avowal or exhibition how this singular emotion is related to this entrusted responsibility, entrusted as legacy, allow me once again to let Emmanuel Levinas speak, he whose voice I would so much love to hear today when it says that the “death of the other” is the “first death,” and that “I am responsible for the other insofar as he is mortal.”<sup>30</sup> Or else the following, from the same course of 1975–76:

The death of someone is not, despite what it might have appeared to be at first glance, an empirical facticity (death as an empirical fact whose induction alone could suggest its universality); it is not exhausted in such an appearance.

Someone who expresses himself in his nakedness—the face—is in fact one to the extent that he calls upon me, to the extent that he places himself under my responsibility: I must already answer for him, be responsible for him. Every gesture of the Other was a sign addressed to me. To return to the classification sketched out above: to show oneself, to express oneself, to associate oneself, *to be entrusted to me*. The Other who expresses himself is entrusted to me (and there is no debt with regard to the Other—for what is due cannot be paid; one will never be even). [Further on it will be a question of a “duty beyond all debt” for the I who is what it is, singular and identifiable, only through the impossibility of being replaced, even though it is precisely here that the “responsibility for the Other,” the “responsibility of the hostage,” is an experience of substitution<sup>31</sup> and sacrifice.] The Other individuates me in my responsibility for him. The death of the Other affects me in my very identity as a responsible I . . . made up of unspeakable responsibility. This is how I am affected by the death of the Other, this is my relation to his death. It is, in my relation, my deference toward someone who no longer responds, already a guilt of the survivor.<sup>32</sup>

And a bit further on:

The relation to death in its ex-ception—and, regardless of its signification in relation to being and nothingness, it is an ex-ception—while conferring upon death its depth, is neither a seeing nor even an aiming toward (neither a seeing of being as in Plato nor an aiming toward nothingness as in Heidegger), a purely emotional relation, moving with an emotion that is not made up of the repercussions of a prior knowledge upon our sensibility and our intellect. It is an emotion, a movement, an uneasiness with regard to the *unknown*.<sup>33</sup>

The *unknown* is emphasized here. The “unknown” is not the negative limit of a knowledge. This non-knowledge is the element of friendship or hospitality for the transcendence of the stranger, the infinite distance of the other. “Unknown” is the word chosen by Maurice Blanchot for the title of an essay, “Knowledge of the Unknown,”<sup>34</sup> which he devoted to the one who had been, from the time of their meeting in Strasbourg in 1923, a friend, the very friendship of the friend.

For many among us, no doubt, certainly for myself, the absolute fidelity; the exemplary friendship of thought, the *friendship* between Maurice Blanchot and Emmanuel Levinas was a grace, a gift; it remains a benediction of our time, and, for more reasons than one, a good fortune that is also a blessing for those who have had the great privilege of being the friend of either of them. In order to hear once again today, right here, Blanchot speak for



Levinas, and with Levinas, as I had the good fortune to do when in their company one day in 1968, I will cite a couple of lines. After having named what in the other “ravishes” us, after having spoken of a certain “rapture”<sup>35</sup> (the word often used by Levinas to speak of death),<sup>36</sup> Blanchot says:

But we must not despair of philosophy. In Emmanuel Levinas’s book [*Totality and Infinity*]<sup>37</sup>—where, it seems to me, philosophy in our time has never spoken in a more sober manner, putting back into question, as we must, our ways of thinking and even our facile reverence for ontology—we are called upon to become responsible for what philosophy essentially is, by welcoming, in all the radiance and infinite exigency proper to it, the idea of the Other, that is to say, the relation with *autrui*. It is as though there were here a new departure in philosophy and a leap that it, and we ourselves, were urged to accomplish.<sup>37</sup>

If the relation to the other presupposes an infinite separation, an infinite interruption where the face appears, what happens, where and to whom does it happen, when another interruption comes at death to hollow out even more infinitely this first separation, a rending interruption at the heart of interruption itself? I cannot speak of interruption without recalling, like many among you, no doubt, the anxiety of interruption I could feel in Emmanuel Levinas when, on the telephone, for example, he seemed at each moment to fear being cut off, to fear the silence or disappearance, the “without-response,” of the other, to whom he called out and held on with an “*allo, allo*” between each sentence, sometimes even in mid-sentence.

What happens when a great thinker becomes silent, one whom we knew living, whom we read and reread, and also heard, one from whom we were still awaiting a response, as if such a response would help us not only to think otherwise but also to read what we thought we had already read under his signature, a response that held everything in reserve, and so much more than what we thought we had already recognized there?

This is an experience that, as I have learned, would remain for me interminable with Emmanuel Levinas, as with all thoughts that are sources, for I will never stop beginning or beginning anew to think with them on the basis of the new beginning they give me, and I will begin again and again to rediscover them on just about any subject. Each time I read or reread Emmanuel Levinas, I am overwhelmed with gratitude and admiration, overwhelmed by this necessity, which is not a constraint but a very gentle force that obligates, and obligates us not to bend or curve otherwise the space of thought in its respect for the other, but to yield to this other, heteronymous curvature<sup>38</sup> that relates us to the completely other (that is, to justice, as he says somewhere in a powerful and formidable ellipsis: the relation to the other, that is to say, justice),<sup>39</sup> according to the law that thus calls us to yield to the other infinite precedence of the completely other.

It will have come, like this call, to disturb, discreetly but irreversibly, the most powerful and established thoughts of the end of this millennium, beginning with those of Husserl and Heidegger, whom Levinas introduced into France some sixty-five years ago! Indeed, this country, whose hospitality he so loved (and *Totality and Infinity* shows not only that “the essence of language is goodness” but that “the essence of language is friendship and hospitality”),<sup>40</sup> this hospitable France, owes him, among so many other things, among so many other significant contributions, at least two irruptive events of thought, two inaugural acts that are difficult to measure today because they have been incorporated into the very element of our philosophical culture, after having transformed its landscape.

First, to say it all too quickly, beginning in 1930 with translations and interpretative readings, there was the initial introduction of Husserlian phenomenology, which would feed and fecundate so many French philosophical currents. Then—in truth, simultaneously—there was the introduction of Heideggerian thought, which was no less important in the genealogy of so many French philosophers, professors, and students. Husserl and Heidegger at the same time, beginning in 1930.

I wanted last night to reread a few pages from this prodigious book,<sup>41</sup> which was for me, as for many others before me, the first and best guide. I picked out a few sentences that have made their mark in time and that allow us to measure the distance he will have helped us cover. In 1930, a young man of twenty-three said in the preface that I reread, smiling, smiling at him: “The fact that in France phenomenology is not a doctrine known to everyone has been a constant problem in the writing of this book.”<sup>42</sup> Or again, speaking of the so very “powerful and original philosophy”<sup>43</sup> of “Mr. Martin Heidegger, whose influence on this book will often be felt,”<sup>44</sup> the same book also recalls that “the problem raised here by transcendental phenomenology is an ontological problem in the very precise sense that Heidegger gives to this term.”<sup>45</sup>

The second event, the second philosophical tremor, I would even say, the happy traumatism that we owe him (in the sense of the word “traumatism” that he liked to recall, the “traumatism of the other”<sup>46</sup> that comes from the Other), is that, while closely reading and reinterpreting the thinkers I just mentioned, but so many others as well, both philosophers such as Descartes, Kant, and Kierkegaard, and writers such as Dostoevsky, Kafka, Proust, etc.—all the while disseminating his words through publications, teaching, and lectures (at the Ecole Normale Israélite Orientale, at the Collège Philosophique, and at the Universities of Poitiers, Nanterre, and the Sorbonne)—Emmanuel Levinas slowly displaced, slowly bent according to an inflexible and simple exigency, the axis, trajectory, and even the order of phenomenology or ontology that he had introduced into France beginning in 1930. Once again, he completely changed the landscape without landscape of thought; he did so in a dignified way, without polemic, at once

from within, faithfully, and from very far away, from the attestation of a completely other place. And I believe that what occurred there, in this second sailing, this second time that leads us back even further than the first, is a discreet but irreversible mutation, one of those powerful, singular, and rare provocations in history that, for over two thousand years now, will have ineffaceably marked the space and body of what is more or less, in any case something different from, a simple dialogue between Jewish thought and its others, the philosophies of Greek origin or, in the tradition of a certain "Here I am,"<sup>47</sup> the other Abrahamic monotheisms. This happened, this mutation happened, *through him*, through Emmanuel Levinas, who was conscious of this immense responsibility in a way that was, I believe, at once clear, confident, calm, and modest, like that of a prophet.

One indication of this historical shock wave is the influence of this thought well beyond philosophy, and well beyond Jewish thought, on Christian theology, for example. I cannot help recall the day when, listening to a lecture by André Neher at a Congress of Jewish Intellectuals, Emmanuel Levinas turned to me and said, with the gentle irony so familiar to us: "You see, he's the Jewish Protestant, and I'm the Catholic"—a quip that would call for long and serious reflection.

In everything that has happened here through him, thanks to him, we have had the good fortune not only of receiving it while living, from him living, as a responsibility entrusted by the living to the living, but also the good fortune of owing it to him with a light and innocent debt. One day, speaking of his research on death and of what it owed to Heidegger at the very moment when it was moving away from him, Levinas wrote: "It distinguishes itself from Heidegger's thought, and it does so in spite of the debt that every contemporary thinker owes to Heidegger—a debt that one often regrets."<sup>48</sup> The good fortune of our debt to Levinas is that we can, thanks to him, assume it and affirm it without regret, in a joyous innocence of admiration. It is of the order of the unconditional *yes* of which I spoke earlier, and to which it responds, "Yes." The regret, my regret, is not having said this to him enough, not having shown him this enough in the course of these thirty years, during which, in the modesty of silences, through brief or discreet conversations, writings too indirect or reserved, we often addressed to one another what I would call neither questions nor answers but, perhaps, to use another one of his words, a sort of "question, prayer," a question-prayer that, as he says, would be anterior to all dialogue.<sup>49</sup>

The question-prayer that turned me toward him perhaps already shared in the experience of the *à-Dieu* with which I began. The greeting of the *à-Dieu* does not signal the end. "The *à-Dieu* is not a finality," he says, thus challenging the "alternative between being and nothingness," which "is not ultimate." The *à-Dieu* greets the other beyond being, in what is "signified, beyond being, by the word 'glory.'"<sup>50</sup> "The *à-Dieu* is not a process of being:

in the call, I am referred back to the other human being through whom this call signifies, to the neighbor for whom I am to fear.”<sup>51</sup>

But I said that I did not want simply to recall what he entrusted to us of the *à-Dieu*, but first of all to say *adieu* to him, to call him by his name, to call his name, his first name, what he is called at the moment when, if he no longer responds, it is because he is responding in us, from the bottom of our hearts, in us but before us, in us right before us—in calling us, in recalling to us: *à-Dieu*.

*Adieu*, Emmanuel.

## Notes

The following notes were created by Vanghélis Bitsoris for his Greek translation of *Adieu* (Athens: AGRA, 1996), then included in the French edition. [Existing English translations of texts by Levinas and others have been used whenever possible, though many have been slightly modified to suit the context of Derrida’s argument.—Trans.]

- 1 Cf. Jacques Derrida, *The Gift of Death*, trans. David Wills (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 47:

It seems to me that *adieu* can mean at least three things:

- 1 The salutation or benediction given (before all constative language “*adieu*” can just as well signify “hello,” “I can see you,” “I see that you are there,” I speak to you before telling you anything else—and in certain circumstances in French it happens that one says *adieu* at the moment of meeting rather than separation);
- 2 The salutation or benediction given at the moment of separation, of departure, sometimes forever (this can never in fact be excluded), without any return on this earth, at the moment of death;
- 3 The *a-dieu*, for God or before God and before anything else or any relation to the other, in every other *adieu*. Every relation to the other would be, before and after anything else, an *adieu*.

[In his translation of “Bad Conscience and the Inexorable” (see n. 11 below), Richard Cohen captures much of the semantic richness of *adieu* with the English idiom “God bless.” For an excellent discussion of the *adieu*, see Hent de Vries, “*Adieu, à dieu, a-Dieu*,” in *Ethics as First Philosophy*, ed. Adriaan Peperzak (New York: Routledge, 1995): 211–19. This discussion is expanded in de Vries’s *Philosophy and the Turn to Religion* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999) and his *Horror Religiosus* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, forthcoming); the latter contains an illuminating chapter on the present book in the context of Derrida’s other recent writings on hospitality.—Trans.]

- 2 Emmanuel Levinas, “Four Talmudic Readings,” in *Nine Talmudic Readings*, trans. Annette Aronowicz (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), 48.
- 3 This is in the second of the “Four Talmudic Readings.”
- 4 *Ibid.*, 48.
- 5 *Ibid.*
- 6 See, e.g., *ibid.*, 50: “Certainly, my responsibility for everyone can also manifest itself by limiting itself: the ego may be called in the name of this unlimited responsibility to concern itself about itself as well.”

- 7 "Have we been rash in affirming that the first word, the one which makes all the others possible, including the *no* of negativity and the 'in-between-the-two' which is 'the temptation of temptation,' is an unconditional *yes*?" (ibid., 49).
- 8 Ibid.
- 9 Ibid.
- 10 See ibid., 50.
- 11 Emmanuel Levinas, "Bad Conscience and the Inexorable," in *Face to Face with Levinas*, ed. Richard A. Cohen (Albany: SUNY Press, 1986), 38. This essay is included as the final section of "La conscience non-intentionnelle," in *Entre nous: Essais sur le penser-à-l'autre* (Paris: Grasset, 1991).
- 12 See, e.g., Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969), 177–79. In "The Trace of the Other" (orig. pub. 1963), Levinas defines the work: "*A work conceived radically is a movement of the same unto the other which never returns to the same.* To the myth of Ulysses returning to Ithaca, we wish to oppose the story of Abraham, who leaves his fatherland forever for a yet unknown land, and forbids his servant to bring back even his son to the point of departure. A work conceived in its ultimate nature requires a radical generosity of the same, which in the work goes unto the other. It then requires an *ingratitude* of the other. Gratitude would in fact be the *return* of the movement to its origin." ("The Trace of the Other," trans. Alphonso Lingis, in *Deconstruction in Context*, ed. Mark C. Taylor [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986], 348–49.) See also Jacques Derrida, "At This Very Moment in This Work Here I Am," trans. Ruben Berezdivin, in *Re-Reading Levinas*, ed. Robert Bernasconi and Simon Critchley (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), 11–48.
- 13 See, e.g., *Totality and Infinity*, 267–69, where Levinas relates fecundity to the work.
- 14 Exodus 26: 31, 33. "You shall make a curtain of blue, purple, and crimson yarns, and of fine twisted linen . . . and the curtain shall separate for you the holy place from the most holy." The opening of the tent was protected by a "screen" (*epispastron*, according to the Greek translation of the Septuagint), while inside the tent the "curtain" (*katapētasma*) of a veil separated "the holy and the holy of holies" (*to hagion kai to hagion tōn hagiōn*).
- 15 See Levinas's preface to Marlène Zarader, *Heidegger et les paroles de l'origine* (Paris: Vrin, 1986), 12–13. [See also the interview with Schlomo Malka published in *Les Nouveaux Cahiers* 18 (1982–3): 71, 1–8; trans. Jonathan Romney in *The Levinas Reader*, ed. Seán Hand (Cambridge, Mass.: Blackwell, 1989), 297.—Trans.]
- 16 See *Totality and Infinity*, 304–6.
- 17 This is one of two courses Levinas taught at the Sorbonne (Paris IV) during 1975–76. It was first published in 1991 under the title "La mort et le temps" in *Emmanuel Levinas (Cahiers de l'Herne, no. 60, 21–75)*, and then in 1993 (with the other course from the same year: "Dieu et l'onto-théo-logie") in Levinas, *Dieu, la mort et le temps* (Paris: Grasset, 1993).
- 18 "In the duration of time, whose signification should perhaps not be referred to the pair being-nothingness as the ultimate reference of meaning, of all that is meaningful and all that is thought, of all that is human, death is a point from which time gets all its patience, this awaiting refusing itself to the intentionality of awaiting—'patience and length of time,' says the proverb, patience as the emphasis of passivity. Whence the direction of this course; death as the patience of time." (*Dieu, la mort et le temps*, 16.)
- 19 See ibid., 122: "We meet death in the face of the Other."

- 20 See *ibid.*, 17: "Death is, in beings, the disappearance of the expressive movements that made them appear as living—movements that are always *reponses*. Death will touch above all this autonomy or expressivity of movements that goes so far as to cover someone's face. Death is the *without-response*."
- 21 See *ibid.*, 20: "Death is this irremediable gap: biological movements lose all their dependence upon signification or expression. Death is decomposition: it is the without-response."
- 22 *Ibid.*, 47.
- 23 "Death is interpreted in the whole philosophical and religious tradition either as a passage to nothingness or as a passage to another existence, continuing in a new setting." (*Totality and Infinity*, 232.)
- 24 See *ibid.*, 232: "More profoundly and as it were a priori we approach death as nothingness in the passion for murder. The spontaneous intentionality of this passion aims at annihilation. Cain, when he slew Abel, must have possessed such a knowledge of death. The identifying of death with nothingness befits the death of the other in murder."
- 25 See *ibid.*, 232–33: "The identifying of death with nothingness befits the death of the other in murder. But at the same time this nothingness presents itself there as a sort of impossibility. For the Other cannot present himself as Other outside of my conscience, and his face expresses my moral impossibility of annihilating. The interdiction is to be sure not equivalent to pure and simple impossibility, and even presupposes the possibility which precisely it forbids—but in fact the interdiction already dwells in this very possibility rather than presupposing it; it is not added to it after the event, but looks at me from the very depths of the eyes I want to extinguish, looks at me as the eye that in the tomb shall look at Cain."
- 26 See *Dieu, la mort et le temps*, 123: "To bring to the fore the question that death raises in the proximity of the neighbor, a question that, paradoxically, is my responsibility for his death. Death opens to the face of the Other, which is the expression of the commandment, 'Thou shalt not kill.'"
- 27 See *ibid.*, 23: "Death is at once healing and impotence; an ambiguity that perhaps indicates another dimension of meaning than the one whereby death is thought according to the alternative being/not-being. Ambiguity: enigma."
- 28 "Bad Conscience and the Inexorable," 40.
- 29 Levinas defines death as "ex-ception": "The relation with the death of the Other is neither a *knowledge* of the death of the Other nor the experience of this death in its very way of annihilating being (if as is commonly thought, the event of this death can be reduced to such an annihilation). There is no knowledge of this ex-ceptional relation (ex-ception: to seize and put outside of the series)." (*Dieu, la mort et le temps*, 25.)
- 30 See *ibid.*, 54: "It is the death of the other for which I am responsible, to the point of including myself in this death. This is perhaps shown in the more acceptable proposition: 'I am responsible for the other insofar as he is mortal.' The death of the other is the first death."
- 31 See *ibid.*, 31 and 199: "This responsibility for the Other is structured as the one-for-the-other, indeed even as the one *hostage* of the other, hostage in his very identity as irreplaceably called, before any return to self. For the other in the guise of oneself, right up to *substitution* for the Other."
- 32 *Ibid.*, 21.
- 33 *Ibid.*, 25–26.
- 34 This is the text "Knowledge of the Unknown," first published in *La nouvelle revue française*, no. 108 (1961, 1081–95, then again in 1969 in *L'entretien infini*,

translated as Maurice Blanchot, *The Infinite Conversation*, trans. Susan Hanson (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 51–52.

35 See *The Infinite Conversation*, 50–51:

— . . . I will add that if we are able to have commerce with this unknowable, it is precisely in fear or in anguish, or in one of those ecstatic movements that you just refused as being non-philosophical; it is there that we have some presentiment of the Other—it seizes us, staggers and ravishes us, carrying us away from ourselves.

—But precisely in order to change us into the Other. If in knowledge—even dialectical knowledge, and through any intermediary one might want—there is appropriation of an object by a subject and of the other by the same, and thus finally a reduction of the unknown to the already known, there is in the rapture of fright something worse; for it is the self that is lost and the same that is altered, shamefully transformed into something other than myself.

36 See *Dieu, la mort et le temps*, 134: “It is my mortality, my condemnation to death, my time on the verge of death, my death not as the possibility of impossibility but as pure rapture, that constitute the absurdity that makes possible the gratuitousness of my responsibility for the Other.”

37 *The Infinite Conversation*, 51–52.

38 See *Totality and Infinity*, 86–88: “The Other measures me with a gaze incomparable to the gaze by which I discover him. The dimension of *height* in which the Other is placed is as it were the primary curvature of being from which the privilege of the Other results, the gradient of transcendence. The Other is metaphysical. . . . The relationship with the Other does not move (as does cognition) into enjoyment and possession, into freedom; the Other imposes himself as an exigency that dominates this freedom, and hence as more primordial than everything that takes place in me. . . . The presence of the Other, a privileged heteronomy, does not clash with freedom but invests it.”

39 See *ibid.*, 89: “The term welcome of the Other expresses a simultaneity of activity and passivity which places the relation with the other outside of the dichotomies valid for things: the *a priori* and the *a posteriori*, activity and passivity. But we wish to show also how, starting from knowing identified with thematization, the truth of this knowing leads back to the relation with the Other, that is, to justice.”

40 *Ibid.*, 305: “To posit being as Desire and as goodness is not to first isolate an I which would then tend toward a beyond. It is to affirm that to apprehend oneself from within—to produce oneself as I—is to apprehend oneself with the same gesture that already turns toward the exterior to extra-vert and to manifest—to respond for what it apprehends—to express; it is to affirm that the becoming-conscious is already language, that the essence of language is goodness, or again, that the essence of language is friendship and hospitality.”

41 A reference to *The Theory of Intuition in Husserl's Phenomenology*, Levinas's dissertation for the *doctorat de troisième cycle*, defended and published in 1930.

42 Emmanuel Levinas, *Théorie de l'intuition dans la phénoménologie de Husserl* (Paris: Vrin, 1970), 7; *The Theory of Intuition in Husserl's Phenomenology*, trans. André Orianne (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2d ed., 1995). [As the translator notes (xlix), Levinas's short preface or *avant-propos*, from which the above quote was taken, was omitted from the translation and replaced by the translator's foreword so as to provide a series of “historical remarks more specifically directed to today's English reader.”—Trans.]

- 43 *The Theory of Intuition in Husserl's Phenomenology*, lvi.  
 44 Ibid., lv.  
 45 Ibid., lvi.  
 46 See, e.g., *Dieu, la mort et le temps*, 133: "Does not the traumatism of the other come from the *Other*?"  
 47 It is tempting to suggest that a large part of Derrida's text "At This Very Moment in This Work Here I Am" might be read as a long commentary on this expression, in relation to both Levinas's use and interpretation of it and Derrida's own critical perspective. As for Levinas, a note in *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence* [trans. Alphonso Lingis (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1981), n. 11 on 199] refers back explicitly to Isaiah 6: 8: Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, 'Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?' And I said, 'Here I am; send me!' Note that in the Septuagint the Greek equivalent of the Hebraic *hineni* is: *idou egō* (translated literally, "here is I"), where the personal pronoun is in the nominative. The meaning of the pronoun "I" in the accusative as related to responsibility for the Other is explained by Levinas in *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence* (141–42):

The subject in responsibility is alienated in the depths of its identity with an alienation that does not empty the same of its identity, but constrains it to it, with an unimpeachable assignation, constrains it to it as no one else, where no one could replace it. The psyche, a uniqueness outside of concepts, is a seed of folly, already a psychosis. It is not an ego, but me under assignation. There is an assignation to an identity for the response of responsibility, where one cannot have oneself replaced without fault. To this command continually put forth only a "here I am" (*me voici*) can answer, where the pronoun "I" is in the accusative, declined before any declension, possessed by the other, sick, identical. Here I am—is saying with inspiration, which is not a gift for fine words or songs. There is constraint to give with full hands, and thus a constraint to corporeality.

- 48 *Dieu, la mort et le temps*, 16.  
 49 See *ibid.*, 134: "This question—the question of death—is its own response to itself: it is my responsibility for the death of the other. The passage to the ethical level constitutes the response to this question. The version of the Same toward the Infinite, which is neither aim [*visée*] nor vision, is the *question*, a question that is also a response, but in no sense a dialogue of the soul with itself. Question, prayer—does this not come before all dialogue?"  
 50 "Bad Conscience and the Inexorable," 39–40. "Infinity would have no meaning for a thought that goes to the limit, and the *à-Dieu* is not a finality. It is perhaps this irreducibility of the *à-Dieu* or of the fear of God to eschatology, an irreducibility that interrupts within the human the consciousness that was on its way toward being in its ontological perseverance or toward death which it takes as the ultimate thought, that is signified, beyond being, by the word 'glory.' The alternative between being and nothingness is not ultimate."  
 51 *Ibid.*, 40.



# IN MEMORIAM EMMANUEL LEVINAS

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The previous night, I had listened to the midnight mass celebrated in Bethlehem in the presence of Yasir Arafat—a ceremony that may have touched some Christians and Muslims. And then, a few hours later, the news of the death of the Jewish philosopher Emmanuel Levinas, my venerated friend, reached me. An incongruous coincidence. To lessen the shock, I went looking in my library for a little book of his: *Dieu, la Mort et le Temps*.

It includes a course entitled “Death and Time,” the last one Levinas gave at the Sorbonne in 1975–1976, followed by another parallel course, “God and Onto-Theology.” I shall not speak of Levinas dead, but of Levinas talking about death.

“Death and Time” consists essentially of a confrontation with Heidegger and his well-known theme of “being-toward-death.” Heidegger sought, says Levinas, to think time starting from death and death starting from the anxiety of nothingness, the end of the finite being. Levinas proposes just the opposite: to think death starting from time. The price to pay for doing so is heavy. It means renouncing the idea of Being and by implication also that of nothingness. But to undertake that apparently impossible task, it is first necessary to refuse Heidegger’s starting point, that is, anxiety in the face of *my* death, and to begin resolutely from the encounter with the death of the other person. The stakes are immense: *other than nothingness*, to echo the title of Levinas’s greatest book: *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence* (1974).

## The “durance” of time and “patience”

A long struggle with the ontological dilemma of Being and Nothingness underlies the whole movement of what Levinas has to say. Both time and

death have to be removed from this dilemma. It is not that he has nothing in common with Heidegger; both of them make no use of second-hand knowledge concerning death—death has having no response, as leave-taking, as affliction.

The break with Heidegger is consummated at the moment of naming the allegedly most authentic experience: anxiety in the face of death. For Levinas, this is already to grant too much to intentionality, an intending of meaning, moreover, oriented toward nothing. My initial access to death, is my affection—my being affected—by the death of another, that other who is confided to me. In turn, this affection presupposes an experience of time that owes nothing to death, which would be indicative of its finitude.

This underlying experience is that of the very *duration* of time, the “durance” of time that I “endure” in the mode of a matchless passivity that Levinas names “patience.” This patience intends nothing; it is without intentionality. We can intend contents within time, not time, not the duration of time. Patience therefore does not contain anything like anticipation, and *a fortiori* anything like the anticipation of nothingness.

We shall ask below whether there can be something more dreadful and more dreaded than nothingness; however we must not begin with this question, but rather with the affection that comes with the death of the other. This affection does not encompass any initial anxiety, even the most authentic anxiety. Rather it reawakens my bond of *responsibility*, now injured, an ethical relation par excellence.

### “Death opens onto the face of the other”

What is more, this relation is thoroughly positive. The source of negativity has to be sought elsewhere. “The negative character of death,” suggests Levinas, “is inscribed in hate or in the desire to kill. It is in the relation with the other that we think of death in its negativity.” What can I more fear, if not *to kill*? Levinas says it clearly in the last lecture of his course: “Death opens onto the face of the Other, which is the expression of the commandment ‘thou shalt not kill.’ Let us try to start from murder as suggesting the full sense of death.”

A purely ethical approach can only encounter violent death, inflicted by one human being on another.

Is it still permissible to return from the death of the other person to my death, to *my* death? Here Levinas’s murmurings come close to the border of silence. He speaks of an “emotion without representation,” like Michel Henry, of an “affectivity without representation,” of an “uneasiness with the unknown,” of an “emotion like deference before death.” Is there still something to think through here? What can we say about an “emotion like a question that does not include, in its very questioning, the elements of a response”?

In truth, there is not much to be found or even to look for in this direction. This is so for a fundamental reason having to do with the nature of the *duration* of time, which Levinas sees as related to the *Infinite*, in Descartes' sense, already referred to in *Totality and Infinity*. It is the wholly positive infinite that we think before thinking the finite that limits it. For Levinas, too, the Infinite surpasses everything it contains, it is the excess of the container over the contained, the uncontainable.

As a result, when once again placed against the background of the *duration* of time, in relation to the infinite, death can only announce itself as a scandal, a crisis. A critical threshold is reached here: what we must not do is allow patience to fall back into the disjunction: being/non-being. We have to unceasingly un-say [*dé-dire*] this alternative, to take up once again the well-known theme of "saying-unsaying" from *Otherwise than Being*.

Why this restraint, this reticence? Because the transfer from the death of the other to my death is constantly put off, due to a lack of support through foresight, through anticipation. We can only cling to our patience, more passive than any passivity. To actively inscribe the risk of nonsense, of a lack of meaning, in our patience would already be to withdraw its passivity from our patience. Therefore what remains thinkable off to the side, in the last analysis, is our deference before the death of the Other, and the reference of time to the Infinite, which remains the Different, the measureless measure.

### What is more dreadful than nothingness

Perhaps then, despite what Levinas may have said, there is a way leading from time to death, *as* there could be, for Heidegger, one leading from death toward time.

We can only repeat: "Death is disturbing in its uneasiness rather than in the problem it poses." And then come back to the question left in suspense whether there is not something more dreadful than nothingness: yes, "the dreadful jumps out as the disproportion between me and the Infinite—as being-before-God, as the *à-Dieu* itself."

The word God has been pronounced. Everything starts over from it in the second course from 1975–1976. But no easy answer is securable here inasmuch as, here again, we have to think God without Being, hence outside of any onto-theology, whose error over the millennia has been to take God for a being, confused with Being.

We had already read in *Otherwise than Being*: "But to listen to a God uncontaminated by Being is a human possibility no less important or no less precarious than *drawing Being from forgetfulness* where it is said to have fallen in metaphysics and in onto-theology." The way of onto-theology being closed, the *ethical* way alone imposes itself. In this regard, the best session of this final course is perhaps the one that takes up again the magnificent

theme of testimony, which, at the time of *Totality and Infinity*, celebrated the *glory* of the Infinite in the epiphany of the face.

Returning to the first of the two courses, after reading the second, we can ask, not just if Levinas was successful in thinking death starting from time, but whether the very insistent question, imposed upon him by his draining confrontation with Heidegger, ever was a real *concern* for him. This is a troubling, but legitimate question, if it is true that Levinas was not the thinker of either care or anxiety, but of the responsibility that only inspired one ultimate fear in him, that of putting—or allowing—the other person to be put to death.

246.51  
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