

LEVINAS' PLATONIC INSPIRATION

M.A. Thesis - B. Bouwman; McMaster University - Philosophy.

LEVINAS' PLATONIC INSPIRATION

By BENJAMIN BOUWMAN, B.A.

A thesis submitted to the School of Graduate Studies in Partial Fulfillment of the  
Requirements for the Degree Master of Arts

McMaster University © Copyright by Benjamin Bouwman, September 2013

M.A. Thesis - B. Bouwman; McMaster University - Philosophy.

McMaster University MASTER OF ARTS (2013) Hamilton, Ontario (Philosophy)

TITLE: Levinas' Platonic Inspiration AUTHOR: Benjamin Bouwman, B.A. (Redeemer

University College) SUPERVISOR: Dr. Diane Enns NUMBER OF PAGES: vi, 111

## **Abstract**

I argue that the relationship between Levinas and Plato is best described as one of inspiration, because both thinkers understand themselves as inspired by a transcendent Good. Levinas' obscure and frequent citations of Plato have led many scholars to conclude that their relationship is impossible to understand, but I argue that an implicit Platonic inspiration is at the root of each of Levinas' polemic and descriptive arguments.

My method is to map the overlap between Levinas and Plato in *Totality and Infinity* and *Otherwise than Being*. Inspiration, as a unifying concept, emerges from this mapping. I also consider Derrida's demonstration of how difficult it is for Levinas to align himself with Plato. I argue that Derrida has missed the Platonic inspiration at the core of Levinasian philosophy and therefore cannot understand how the two are aligned. For both Levinas and Plato, inspiration puts the thinker's ability to act in question, and makes the thinker realize his passivity to the transcendent Good.

### **Acknowledgements**

I wish to express my thanks to the following parties who assisted me in the writing of this thesis in various ways. To Dr. Diane Enns, who has asked critical questions from this project's inception to its defense, to Dr. Brigitte Sassen and Dr. Richard Arthur, who provided critique and revisions, and to the rest of the Philosophy Department at McMaster University. To the Lewis & Ruth Sherman Centre for Digital Scholarship for hosting me. To the Ontario Graduate Scholarship and the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, for support during the research and writing of this thesis. To Dr. Dana Hollander, Dr. Deborah Bowen, and Dr. Craig Bartholomew, who assisted me in posing the questions that drove this project. To Kira Lodder, who helped and challenged me at every stage.

## Contents

Introduction: What is Inspiration?	1
1: Levinas' Platonic Inspiration in <i>Totality and Infinity</i>	13
1.1 The Height of Transcendence	13
1.2 Need	17
1.3 Truth or Maieutics	22
1.4 Passivity as Inspiration	27
1.5 The Rhetoric of Myth	31
1.5.1 Separation	33
1.5.2 Inspiration in <i>Republic</i>	36
1.6 Freedom	43
1.7 Conclusions	47
2: Levinas against Plato: Derrida's 'Violence and Metaphysics'	48
2.1 Husserl, Heidegger, and Greek Philosophy	50
2.2 Parricide	56
2.2.1 Levinas as a Greek Phenomenologist	58
2.3 Beyond	60
2.4 Comprehensibility: Case Studies in Light and Science	63
2.5 Conclusions	66
3: Inspiration as Persecution: Levinas' Response to Derrida in <i>Otherwise Than Being</i>	72
3.1 Plato's Failures	74
3.1.1 The 'Saying' or the 'Said'	75

3.1.2 Essence	76
3.1.3 Maieutics	77
3.2 Response to Derrida on Ambiguity of Levinas' Platonism	81
3.3 Otherwise than Husserl and Heidegger	83
3.4 Plato's Thread	87
3.4.1 Thread, the Gordian Knot, and the Nessus Shirt	88
3.4.2 Platonic Inspiration for the Nessus Shirt	93
3.5 Errant Causes	97
Conclusion	103
Bibliography	107

## **Introduction: What is Inspiration?**

“I exist through the other and for the other, but without this being alienation: I am inspired.”<sup>1</sup>

In this paper, I argue that the best model for understanding the ambivalent relationship between Plato and Levinas is inspiration. The most important question to answer in this introduction is what these two thinkers understand inspiration to mean. Before I can answer this question, I need to demonstrate first that Levinas himself acknowledges a philosophical debt to Plato, and second that this debt makes sense given Levinas’ basic philosophical commitments.

In spite of the critiques of Plato that seem implicit in his philosophy, Levinas maintains throughout his career that his thought is “a return to Platonism”<sup>2</sup>. Levinas continually claims Plato as the philosopher who provides him with much needed support in his definition of the exteriority that challenges the totality of the self. Levinas reinterprets and critiques the history of both ancient and contemporary philosophy as support for his thesis that metaphysics *qua* ethics is the presupposed in every form of thought and in every relation. Plato was the first to discover the truth of a metaphysical Good, the condition for the possibility of ethics, that Levinas wants to point us to. As such, Plato appears over and over again in *Totality and Infinity*, and forms the inspiration for Levinas’ philosophy of transcendence. As a model for the relationship between these two

---

<sup>1</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise Than Being, Or Beyond Essence*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1998), 114. Hereafter referred to parenthetically as “. . . (OTB [page number])”

<sup>2</sup> In Levinas’ abstract for his doctoral research, dated 1961. Translated in Peperzak, Adriaan Theodoor, *Platonic Transformations* (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield, 1997), 121. Also in 1964, in the essay “Meaning and Sense”. In Emmanuel Levinas, *Basic Philosophical Writings*, ed. Adriaan T. Peperzak et. al. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996) 58.



thinkers, inspiration connects the significant digressions from and critiques of Platonic thought that Levinas makes with the basic attitude of appreciation and reverence that also surrounds Levinas' citations of Plato. To understand this relationship of inspiration, we first have to analyze Levinas' system to understand its terms, movements, and rhetorical force.

Levinas is concerned primarily with understanding otherness such that it is absolutely Other than the Same. This understanding of the absolute difference in kind between otherness and sameness goes by a variety of names. It is the difference between metaphysics and ontology.<sup>3</sup> It is the transcendence by which the Good exceeds being, in Plato's formulation.<sup>4</sup> It is the difference between a world in which things lend themselves to me as manipulable tools, amenable to my use, and a world in which my ethical duties destroy my abilities to use and manipulate. (TI 38) I will argue that this final distinction, between the possibility of use inherent in the immanent world of the Same and the escape from comprehensibility that characterizes the Other, is the standard by which Levinas judges different forms of Platonism. An inspired Platonism is one in which the Other escapes my abilities to manipulate my world.

This incommensurable difference between the Other and the Same leads us into the great paradox of Levinas' thought. If absolute difference is actually absolute for both differing terms, and if our life "in the world" (TI 33) is irrevocably a life of Sameness, there can be no relation between us and the absolutely other. However, Levinas' claim is

---

<sup>3</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, trans. Alfonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969), 42. Hereafter referred to parenthetically as ". . . (TI [page number])".

<sup>4</sup> Plato, *Republic*, trans. Alan Bloom, 509b.

that absolute difference is only absolute for the Same. Relation to the Good that transcends me is not only possible but is necessary given our need to understand that we are not “duped by morality”. (*TI* 21) Levinas’ sense of the word ‘absolute’ is therefore “asymmetrical”. (*TI* 53) The transcendence of the beyond precludes my ability to manipulate it for my own ends in the world, but does not preclude my responsibility to know the Good and to do it.

The way we *know* our obligations to do the Good is through the face: “The face opens the primordial discourse whose first word is obligation.” (*TI* 201) The concrete presence of another person, expressed in the term ‘face’, reveals ethics to me. It demonstrates that before I give my consent, I have already been chosen to know that the Good is worth doing and that the Other, revealed by the face, needs my hospitality. “The face is a living presence; it is expression. . . . The face speaks.” (*TI* 66) The face of the other is the beginning of demand, the beginning of language, and the beginning of life, in the sense that it is the condition for the possibility of all these things. The face comes from beyond, asymmetrically challenging me to forego what I think are duties to myself in order to aid the Other. Levinas poetically expresses the infinite duty I owe to one who is absolutely Other: “To give, to-be-for-another, despite oneself, but in interrupting the for-oneself, is to take the bread out of one’s own mouth, to nourish the hunger of another with one’s own fasting.” (*OTB* 56). The effect of the face is this knowledge of my infinite duty and the cost to my own life that this duty will have.

Plato’s Good is a challenging concept for Levinas to enlist in this philosophy that emphasizes transcendence and original difference, because to claim to know the Good

seems to presuppose a panoptical<sup>5</sup> view of a totality from which the Good can inform everything, or from which, by knowing the Good, we can know everything insofar as it relates to the Good. In order to avoid the comprehensive ontology that the Good might found, Levinas has to reinterpret Plato, who sees no problem with comprehensive ontological thinking. This reinterpretation makes the Good a fundamental element of his philosophy while opposing the key Socratic doctrines of maieutics and *anamnesis*.

Maieutics, or midwifery, is the Socratic art of bringing someone else to understanding. On this model, learning is like birth, and Socrates guides the idea being born into the world by helping his interlocutors to see the truth that is already in them.<sup>6</sup> The truth in us is because of a past that we have forgotten; this past was our disembodied life in the realm of the forms as it is described in *Republic* 620a. The problem is forgetting, or *amnesia*, which happens when our souls enter our bodies. To recollect, the act of *anamnesis*, is to recover what has been lost. Maieutics, therefore, leads to *anamnesis*, which is true knowledge according to Plato.

Levinas argues that these two doctrines invite us back into the Same, into the world of manipulability. This opposition is founded on the Good beyond being. Levinas ends up proposing that Plato has caught a glimpse of the Good but has ignored it in his construction of the concept of reminiscence. The adventures of communication and dialogue that the Good's transcendence commit us to act as the ground of Levinas'

---

<sup>5</sup> In Foucault's sense, where the panopticon is the modern inscription of the authority of the one on the body of the other. Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage Books, 1977), 195ff.

<sup>6</sup> Plato, *Theaetetus*, trans. Benjamin Jowett, 148e-151d.

critique of Plato insofar as they expose reminiscence as a falsely immanent epistemology which has as its only possible destination the establishment of myself as the foundation of ethics. If I can found my own ethics, the whole world *and the Other* are manipulable for my own ends.

The manipulability of a thing is proof that it belongs to the order of the Same and can be made into a tool for me. If a concept, idea, or duty appears in the face as something that escapes my abilities, this is the Other. I will argue that this difference founds both Plato's and Levinas' theory of inspiration. Inspiration is Plato's concept for understanding another truth, besides *anamnesis*, that is revealed to poets and philosophers when gods overwhelm them. The different theories of art in *Republic* and *Ion* give us a clear picture of Plato's theory of inspiration. In the *Republic*, art that copies nature is civically dangerous because it takes our attention away from the standards by which nature is governed and from nature itself.<sup>7</sup> Inspired art, as understood in the *Ion*, is that which is produced by an artist who is completely open to the gods speaking through him.<sup>8</sup> In the first theory, the artist's technique produces a copy of a copy of a form and is therefore prone to mistakes. The attempt to comprehend and manipulate nature into art is ethically, epistemically, and politically dubious. In the second, the artist cannot be thought of as using technique: in fact, he loses his mind in the process of relating the message of the gods. This loss of comprehension is what qualifies the rhapsodic poet as a speaker of the truth.

---

<sup>7</sup> Plato, *Republic*, 595b.

<sup>8</sup> Plato, *Ion*, trans. Benjamin Jowett, 534c.

Levinas sees inspiration as the best description for the “claiming of the same by the other” (*OTB* 141) that happens in responsibility. The core argument of all of Levinas’ work is that I am claimed by an other, and that I am unable to change anything about this claim. This can be seen as a form of Platonism based on the possession by the gods that legitimates rhapsodic art in the *Ion*. Levinas uses inspiration to claim that I must have been passive and open to an other before I could even experience the world.

I will argue that manipulability is the standard by which Levinas will choose which parts of Plato he wants to accept and which parts he wants to reject. Therefore, Levinas applies Plato’s own standards for determining whether or not a work is inspired *to Plato’s work itself*. My method is to map the overlap between Levinas and Plato in *Totality and Infinity* and *Otherwise than Being*. Searching for this overlap gives us a reliable sense of the critique of comprehensibility which Plato inspires in Levinas. This overlap will allow me to answer my primary question: whether or not inspiration can be a philosophically rigorous model for the relations between Same and Other, and between Plato and Levinas. Because Levinas posits a return to Platonism as the only way forward for ethics, we must determine if Levinas’ use of inspiration as a standard for refining Plato reveals anything of value. Levinas diverges from Platonism in his phenomenological descriptions of the encounter with the face and of the command of the Other, but it remains unclear whether this divergence is just Platonism in phenomenological terms or something more, a unique moment in the development of ethics where Plato inspires us to go beyond himself as we understand our duties.

To answer this question we first have to examine the concepts for which Plato plays an explanatory and originary role for Levinas. In Chapter 1 I will survey these concepts as they appear in *Totality and Infinity*. After examining them, we will have a sufficient picture of Platonism in one of Levinas' mature works, and can begin to answer the question of whether or not Levinas builds on this Platonism or merely inherits it. The picture of Plato that emerges is one of a philosophical Other, someone who speaks from beyond Levinas with an absolute mastery and inspires us to think. Plato founds Levinasian philosophy in the same way that the Other founds ethics. He speaks from beyond Levinas' text, and as such Levinas' appeal to him is most often a pseudo-ethical appeal of responsibility, as if all philosophy must answer to Plato, who first commanded that the Good is beyond being. Levinas calls our attention to this command first in order to show what type of knowledge unites Same and Other and second to claim that his sharpening of Plato is the 'return to Platonism' he wants to achieve. If we can think of this appeal and critique as 'inspiration', we can claim that Levinas finds something of value in Plato. Otherwise, Levinas' constant invocations of Plato's texts are nothing more than posturing, an unjustified attempt to convince us that transcendence exists.

Inspiration does not preclude critique, but in this chapter we will demonstrate that even when Levinas is most critical of Plato he reaffirms the Platonic command to go beyond being. The reasons why he does this remain unclear, and it is this ambiguity that contributes to suspicion that inspiration is a disguised form of revelation, where what is revealed must be accepted at face value as truth and cannot be subjected to the rigors of rational interrogation. Levinas claims that our acceptance of his system is warranted

because the understanding of ethics that proceeds from our reflection on the lived experience of the other has the Good, which Plato saw, as its necessary condition. The Good as the transcendent condition for the possibility of concrete ethics is the inspiration for Levinas' Platonism throughout *Totality and Infinity* and *Otherwise than Being*. The rationality of believing that the Good exists depends on inspiration.

Chapter 1 is also a sustained conversation with Tanja Staehler's interpretation of the relationship between Levinas and Plato in her recent work *Plato and Levinas: The Ambiguous Out-Side of Ethics*.<sup>9</sup> In this work, Staehler argues that we need to finally appraise Levinas' debt to Plato as ambiguous. Though this appraisal seems warranted by Levinas' critiques and invocations of Plato, I argue that ambiguity cannot be our model for the kind of inspiration that Levinas acknowledges. Levinas has reasons for his certainty about transcendence that are experienced in the body. These experiences are anything but ambiguous.

In chapter 2 I demonstrate the critique of Levinas' claim to be a Platonist offered in Derrida's essay "Violence and Metaphysics". Derrida consistently uses the Platonic tradition *against* Levinas, a strategy that opposes Levinas' claim to have reinstated Platonism. For Derrida, Heidegger and Husserl share a common Greek ancestry. Levinas is of interest insofar as he represents the possibility of a break with the Greek tradition at its source, a possibility manifest in the critiques he makes of Heidegger and Husserl, which ultimately do set him apart from the Greek origin of all philosophy. Derrida

---

<sup>9</sup> Staehler, Tanja. *Plato and Levinas: The Ambiguous Out-Side of Ethics*. New York: Routledge, 2010.

expresses this original difference in terms of a parricide, a killing of the father of ontology, Parmenides.

Further, he posits that Levinas can make his philosophical claims “within a *recourse to experience itself*. Experience itself and that which is most irreducible within experience: the passage and departure towards the other.” (VM 83) Derrida has taken on the daunting task of proving that the recourse to experience that Levinas makes is essentially Hebraic while reason, theory, and ontology are essentially Greek. Plato’s Good, because it is discovered by the theory of the contemplative philosopher, appears to be a thoroughly Greek concept. Therefore, the problem with Levinas is that his inspiration by Plato’s Good crosses the boundaries between Greek and Hebraic thinking. A commitment to experience, the hallmark of Hebraic thought in Derrida’s estimation, keeps Levinas away from Plato’s Good, which must be intellectually perceived.

I will argue that this critique of Levinas is ultimately successful in paring away the more extravagant of Levinas’ claims to represent a true Platonism, separate from Husserl and Heidegger. My core claim, however, that Levinas is ‘inspired’ by Plato, can be maintained because Levinas’ definition of experience includes the revelation of ideas to the thinker. The simplistic opposition between intellect and experience and between Greek and Hebraic thought is inadequate for explaining the face, which can be experienced in Descartes’s *idea* of infinity and Plato’s *form* of the Good. The distinguishing characteristic between ontologically totalizing thought and metaphysical passivity is not experience, but *comprehensibility*. We experience both ideas and phenomena in the face. The question is whether or not we can gain control over the ideas that present themselves



to us. The immanent truth of life is comprehensible and manipulable, whether this action takes its form experientially in my use of tools or intellectually in my pretentious claims to totalizing thinking. The transcendent face of the Other escapes my use. The idea of the Good fits Levinas' understanding of inspiration because he receives it from beyond. That it is received by the intellect is unimportant, because it is only when the intellect gives up its pretense to have control over itself that it begins to perceive anything at all.

In Chapter 3 of this work I explain the renewed Platonism of the Good by which Levinas proceeds, and argue that the presence of a transcendent Other in my embodied experience of responsibility constitutes a constructive digression from Plato's metaphysics that nevertheless maintains the relationship of inspiration I am arguing for. Derrida's work has shown us that this argument must be made with a skeptical attitude towards Levinas' extensive use of transcendence as a foundational concept. Perhaps the separation of Other from the Same is just not the way things are. But to assume that 'the way things are' is philosophy's question is to miss the point of Levinas' skepticism, by which he doubts that ontology's knack for comprehending the ways things are can mean anything at all for the Good.

I also argue that Levinas' philosophical embodiment of responsibility as it is developed in *Otherwise than Being* opposes the phenomenal account of transcendence developed in *Totality and Infinity* because transcendence precedes my experience. To be sure, I experience the fact of the Good, but I did not experience a commitment to it. The "election" (*OTB* 57) to the Good is an impenetrable mystery for Levinas, who nevertheless builds his entire philosophy on it. How can Levinas talk about what he did not

experience? If Derrida is right that Levinas relies on a radical empiricism that challenges the structures of ontology and even of classical metaphysics, how can this empiricism attest to an original ethical commitment which we did not experience? Levinas' only counter for this critique is the claim that my election to know the demand for hospitality that comes from the other is what must be presupposed by the fact that we all have a moral sense. The condition for the possibility of our ethical experience is election to the Good.

Critically, Levinas makes use of Plato's support for this claim. In the *Timaeus* we get a description of "errant causes", which are invoked to explain chaotic occurrences in a universe that is otherwise rational and necessary. Election can only be explained by one of these causes, because it escapes philosophy. An errant cause escapes our comprehension and can therefore function as the source of inspiration. Further, it is a form of knowledge that can be sustained even though Levinas has shown that phenomenology falls short in the description of my election to the Good.

I also argue that Levinas' embodied Platonism is developed into the "exact trope of an alteration of essence" (*OTB* 110) of the shirt of Nessus. The myth of Hercules, who is poisoned by a shirt, demonstrates the final destruction of the Same by the Other. The metaphor of woven thread is first found in Levinas with reference to Plato's fates, who weave the fabric of being on the loom of Necessity in the *Republic*. Being, however, cannot describe responsibility because of its Parmenidean baggage. Levinas proceeds to describe the ipseity of the I as a Gordian knot in the thread of the universe. This is another explicit reference to Plato, for whom my individual fate is chosen by me and ratified by the

Reason, Necessity, and Fate, who 'bind' my soul to the fabric of being. The Gordian knot is insufficient because it justifies the uniqueness of the I that would separate me from my duty to the other. Instead of these metaphors, Levinas claims that my skin and my responsibility are like a Nessus tunic, a fabric of responsibility woven around me that cannot be taken off. The identification of my skin with my responsibility is made by an appeal to the evidence of the experience of the face and to the wandering causality Plato identifies, which can account for traces of what is other than reason and necessity.

In the development of the metaphor of thread there is an implicit appreciation for Plato's discovery of the "exact trope" by which essence is escaped, and a critique of his inability to proceed beyond this discovery. Levinas constructs my responsibility with reference to Plato, who makes this metaphor possible, but leaves Plato's inherent ontological bias behind by identifying the fabric of responsibility with my inescapable skin.

The combination of reverence and critique that we consistently find in Levinas' relationship with Plato justifies my claim that Levinas should be seen as inspired by Plato. Derrida helps us to see that this inspiration depends on one unquestionable Platonic doctrine: the transcendence of the Good beyond being. What I will finally achieve is the establishment of the knife's edge of ambivalence towards Plato upon which Levinas' inspiration balances. Without Plato, Levinas' philosophy amounts to nothing. But what Levinas gains from Plato is, in Derrida's words, "very little - almost nothing". (VM 80)

## **Chapter 1:**

### **Levinas' Platonic Inspiration in *Totality and Infinity***

#### **1.1 The Height of Transcendence**

Levinas' general attitude towards the Other is called Desire, which is a metaphysical and asymptotic principle where the movement of the Same towards the other always pushes away its goal, in the same principle that guides Zeno's paradoxes of motion. Desire is opposed to need, which implies the lack of something attainable. The sustenance that corresponds to need is a definable, comprehensible object, and obtaining this sustenance gives satisfaction. In *Totality and Infinity*, the entire movement of satisfaction is opposed to Desire, which indicates in the first place insatiability. The object of desire is not even an object, properly speaking, because since Kant objectivity has implied comprehensibility and the possibility of use by a subjectivity. Because the "object" of desire escapes me *ad infinitum*, my Desire is deepened by the knowledge of its object. "The metaphysical desire has another intention; it desires beyond everything that can simply complete it. It is like goodness - the Desired does not fulfill it, but deepens it." (TI 34)

Plato's sense of Goodness, which continually escapes the thinker by virtue of its place atop the realm of the forms and by its exteriority to being, is why Desire is unable to achieve its object. The deepening of Desire by the knowledge of the Desired is evidence that the good transcends. Transcendence must be defined in two senses: first, it must indicate a difference from the immanent, and second, there must be a relation between these two that makes knowing the transcendent worthwhile in the immanent world. Plato captures this dual requirement: "That knowledge only which is of being and the unseen can make

the soul look upwards.”<sup>10</sup> The “upwards” Plato points out is Levinas’ figure for the transcendence of Desire. It is knowable, yet it is unseen.

Transcendence is the most compelling reason for a critique of Levinas. As a philosophy of difference, Levinas’ metaphysics defines separation, plurality, or multiplicity as the necessary condition of unity. To do this, he invokes Rimbaud: “‘The true life is absent.’ But we are in the world”. (*TI* 33) We are *in* the world, and the true life is absent from any spatial reference to the world. This non-spatial, non-prepositional difference between us and the true life is purported to be a difference in kind, not in degree. Levinas thinks that Plato is the philosophical father of this kind of difference, since he has discovered the idea of the Good, which can truly be called different. “The other with which the metaphysician is in relationship and *which he recognizes as other* is not simply in another locality; this other recalls Plato’s ideas which... are not in a site”. (*TI* 38) The fact that Levinas at one moment evokes height to describe the other and in the next evokes the non-site seems like an inconsistency. Levinas, however, is quite assured that Plato’s term ‘height’ gives us a sharper picture of the type of transcendence he has in mind. Before we can understand the critiques of difference made by Derrida we have to fill out the Platonic heritage of Levinasian transcendence.

Transcendence includes both the elevation and the destitution of the other. Levinas argues that the other speaks a credible command to us, such that we have no choice but to know that the command is justified, while at the same time it begs us from extreme lack for the things that we have. The Other’s voice comes from beyond but is

---

<sup>10</sup> Plato, *Republic*, 529b.

*concretized* as a voice from within our experience. Levinas unequivocally reserves a place for my life and the goods under my control and ownership because these are the immanent goods that the concretized Other demands. “The transcendence of the Other, which is his eminence, his height, his lordship, in its concrete meaning includes his destitution, his exile, and his rights as a stranger.” (II 77) The destitution of the other calls for my possessions and my hospitality, which “figure not as what one builds but as what one gives”. (II 77) Transcendence reveals the fact that all my possessions are insufficient to bridge the gap between me and the Other, and the fact that my possessions still mean something vital in this relationship.

If we concretize Levinas’ transcendence in an encounter with a poor stranger, ‘beyond’ is an expression for the command of this person’s face, where the gaze entreats me to obey what is Good. This command is abstract, and we can never fully obey it because the Good constantly escapes us. But what we can do is respond to the infinite command of the transcendent Other by giving the finite possessions we have. These possessions do not bridge the gap between me and the absolutely Other that commands me, but they are a responsible answer to the fact of this command. Philosophically, Levinas thinks that the experience of feeling duty and the possibility of answering it in this situation reveals that ethics, as a responsibility to the absolutely Other, is presupposed by this experience. Our concrete experience is inductive evidence for the metaphysical claims Levinas makes.

In spite of Levinas’ reassurances that we can move from concrete experience to metaphysics, multiple problems appear. If the other is in a non-site, not just another place

than I am, how can it be destitute of the physical necessities of life? And how can my possessions, which can aid the stranger in his exile and destitution, be accounted for in this universe of absolute separation? Why is the gift the only relation that my things enact with the other? Our suspicion of transcendence always returns, and since Levinas invokes the finite needs of a poor stranger as the expression of height, we need to question the duplicitous character of the other's need/call and destitution/elevation. Already, Levinas appears to not only fail to build a positive philosophy on Plato, but also to be susceptible to the same critiques of dualism that Plato had already faced in *Parmenides*.

Levinas' answer to these questions begins in Plato, in which the knowledge that makes the soul look upwards is of being *and of* the unseen.<sup>11</sup> The other, whose apparently unknowable nature is somehow expressed both in the height of command and in the destitution of poverty, is (to borrow from Nicholas of Cusa) the coincidence of these opposites.<sup>12</sup> The concrete needs of the other, which belong to an ontologically and economically constituted world in which I can own things, coincide with the unseen height from which the other commands me because the immanent world presupposes metaphysics. The stranger's lack is exactly what demands my respect - if the stranger were not destitute *and* transcendent, I could ignore him. For Levinas the concrete, embodied needs of the Other indicate a profound unity of transcendence and immanence in the face.

---

<sup>11</sup> Plato, *Republic*. 529b.

<sup>12</sup> Nicholas of Cusa, *Selected Spiritual Writings*, trans. H. Lawrence Bond (New York: Paulist Press, 1997), 91.

Is this believable? In seeing a strange face in need, we are supposedly called irresistibly to answer the unseen, incomprehensible Other by giving visible, manipulable goods. If we cannot agree with Levinas that this is what happens when we are begged, it's difficult to stay on track with the rest of what he says because this experience is utterly unverifiable by positive scientific standards. But for the rest of this work, we are going to assume that what Levinas proposes has at least *prima facie* resonance with our experience of otherness when we face a beggar. This resonance, I think, is the greatest strength of Levinasian philosophy, and it is the strength that Derrida ends up pointing out as a sufficient way of understanding Levinas' entire philosophy.<sup>13</sup> Instead of contesting the claim this experience of meeting a beggar is universal, I will critically examine Levinas' assumption that the metaphysics that is implied by this concrete embodied experience can be called Platonic.

## **1.2 Need**

The problem with construing Plato this way is that he is manifestly not opposed to the metaphors of need, satiety, and the soul in his descriptions of the soul's desire for truth. Levinas is always careful, as we noted earlier, to understand the relation with the Other as distinct from the relation to any thing, because things, in their constitution as objects of use by the Same, imply comprehensibility. Plato doesn't see the need to distinguish the Other from an ontology of use, and therefore Levinas has to do some reconstructive work, or to make use of some kind of selective attention. For example,

---

<sup>13</sup> Jacques Derrida, "Violence and Metaphysics" in Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), 83. Hereafter referred to parenthetically as ". . . (VM [page number])".



“Plato speaks of the soul that feasts on truths. (Phaedrus 246e) ... throughout this book we are opposing the full analogy drawn between truth and nourishment... but the Platonic image describes, with regard to thought, the very relationship that will be accomplished by life, where the attachment to the contents that fill it provides it with a supreme content.” (*TI* 114) Levinas invokes Rimbaud’s categories of “absence” and “life”<sup>14</sup> in order to explain why Plato talks about a soul feasting on truths. Instead of admitting that Plato allows for the relationship of economy, comprehensibility, and need with Desire, metaphysics, and infinity, Levinas firmly categorizes Plato’s position here as referring exclusively to “life”, or to the immanent world we are forced to deal with. This categorization is not meant to disparage life in the world, but is meant to exonerate Plato for claiming that the soul relates to the truth as the body relates to food. Levinas anachronistically claims that Plato is doing descriptive phenomenology: describing the relation of the soul to the truth in life rather than making an ethical/metaphysical claim. For Levinas to be a Platonist, Plato cannot have associated truth and nourishment. Instead of this obvious reading of nourishment as a key concept of Plato’s metaphysics, Levinas proposes that Plato was only doing the ontology of “life” when he shows that the soul needs truth. By this reasoning, Plato might have understood Levinas’ metaphysical sense that the soul Desires truth without nourishment, because truth reveals itself as infinite.

But what is “life” in Levinas’ account? According to Rimbaud’s dictum “real life is absent, we are not in the world.”<sup>15</sup> It would be easy to understand Rimbaud’s ‘absence’ as

---

<sup>14</sup> Arthur Rimbaud, “A Season in Hell”, 1873. In *Rimbaud, Complete Works, Selected Letters*, ed. Wallace Fowlie (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 281.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

Levinas' 'transcendence', since both ask us to go beyond the same to find the truth of the elsewhere. But for Levinas, though he can agree with Rimbaud that real life is absent, he explicitly states that "we *are* in the world." (TI 33) Transcendence, therefore, implies separate terms, and Levinas argues that though something true is supposed to be absent, we are stuck here below, with all of the messes of ethical life.

The Other is beyond both presence and absence, insofar as it is revealed in a trace, in the condition of the possibility of what we see and feel and know in the embodied experience of another person.<sup>16</sup> Presence and absence presuppose the economic relations that lack and plenitude allow, and this is enough for Levinas to reject this fundamental opposition in favour of an account that is open to infinity, which is both absolute presence in its height and command, and total absence in the fact that it is not in a site or location commensurate with the Same. The coincidence of these opposites is manifest in the trace of the face, in which the Other is both present (destitute and in need) and absent (metaphysically beyond and the source of both ethics and the possibility of my constituting myself).

Separation is therefore not a situation in which one term lacks the characteristics of another; it cannot be adequately described with reference to lack. Instead, Levinas describes separation as the possibility of consummation that presents itself in the openness of the trace. "Life does not consist in seeking and consuming the fuel furnished by breathing and nourishment, but, if we may so speak, in consummating terrestrial and celestial nourishments." (TI 114) Consummation indicates a relation of permanence, a

---

<sup>16</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, "Meaning and Sense", in Emmanuel Levinas, *Basic Philosophical Writings*, ed. Adriaan Theodoor Peperzak et. al. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996), 60.

founding moment. Life as we know it is only possible given an original moment of consummation, of relation between the Same and the Other.

In contrast to consummation, life as separation is the ultimately futile attempt to find a foundation for the same on the elements of the world. Levinas calls this the relation of “living from . . .”. (TI 114) This kind of relation cannot function as the original consummation of life, because it presumes that the only existent things, the world and the self, are related as forms of *being*. This seems to indicate that our ability to know how to manipulate things is of foremost importance for defining who we are. It is admittedly difficult to think of the transcendence that would exceed such a world of ‘living from’ the nourishments of an object. But the separation of me from objects is not transcendence, since it presumes the efficacy of my ‘living from’ the particular goods of the world. Levinas accepts as foundational the fact that another person reveals the Other to me, and as such cannot be used as an object among others.

What this fact signifies is that we are not *forced* to acknowledge life and the world, the two categories Levinas announced earlier. These two somehow co-mingle in “atheist separation” or a separation that seeks to deny the original consummation of our relationship with the Good. (TI 58) In Levinas’ “atheism”, we ironically depend on the objects of life for our identity as masters of the objects of life: “The paradox of ‘living from something,’ or, as Plato would say, the folly of these pleasures, is precisely in a complacency with regard to what life depends on - not a mastery on the one hand and a dependence on the other, but a mastery in this dependence.” (TI 114) Levinas wants to convince us of the absolutely foundational nature of dependence, the secondary nature of

mastery based on this dependence, and therefore the folly of positing an absolute mastery over what we live from as the definition of relation. Absolute separation is therefore revealed as relation in the fact that the Same is founded upon a sense of the trace of the Other. Plato, Levinas thinks, points out that to think that one is free even though one ‘lives from . . .’ is folly. We are all complacent to what comes to us from outside. Plato has therefore begun to sense the trace of the Other in its distinction from the ontological world of comprehensibility.

This complacency, however, falls short of passivity, which is the concept Levinas is looking for. The complacent I is not passive enough, since it still presupposes an ontological relationship with the being of beings. It “acquires its own identity by this dwelling in the ‘other’” (*TI* 115), and the ‘other’ that gives me my self-identity is really not an other at all, even if I am passive in receiving my identity from it. The relation of living from the world, even if we acknowledge our debt to what is outside the Same in this relation, is not enough to found an ethics. Levinas believes that passivity must radically redefine identity, a redefinition that fits with the subjection of the body to the demands of the Other.

The inspiration I claim is at the root of Levinas’ philosophy has already been shown to be severely limited. Levinas’ polemic is directed against ways of thinking about the Other that attempt to reduce it to one of the objects of our life. Plato has not exonerated himself from this polemic, and Levinas must therefore stretch Plato’s claims in order to show that he was only talking about the relation of the Same to the elements outside of it, not to the transcendent Other. Levinas can re-invoke other doctrines of

Plato's in an attempt to shore up his metaphysics, while consigning Plato's focus on satisfaction to the status of a mere description of my relationship to objects.

### **1.3 Truth or Maieutics**

The risk and discomfort that I experience when I encounter an Other, whether in concrete form as the face of a stranger, or in abstract form as the idea of the Good, puts us on the path to understanding Levinas' critique of Socratic dialogue. The simultaneous destitution and authority invoked by Plato's 'height' unsettle the self and awaken it to the beyond.<sup>17</sup> Levinas is committed to a form of knowledge that involves risk and adventure. The adventure of learning about "being and the unseen" can only be had with an unknown future. This is the theory of knowledge that substantiates Levinas' claim that transcendence appears as the trace of the beyond in the immanent world. Any type of Odyssean trope for learning is excluded on the basis that such a metaphor presumes that the end of our journey will be our home, which we already know. To stay at home with ourselves is to oppose transcendence from the outset. For learning from the Other to have a real meaning, we have to escape the confines of the Homeric epic, a task made no easier by the Western philosophical tradition which, since Plato, has pictured learning as a rediscovery. In the process of this escape, Levinas' selective approach to Plato is further demonstrated.

The Platonic understanding of learning appears most clearly in *Meno*, where the fact of our ignorance seems like proof that we can never set out on a journey to know a new thing. The journey from ignorance to knowledge is, strictly speaking, impossible,

---

<sup>17</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, 'God and Philosophy' in *Basic Philosophical Writings*. Page 132.

since there is no way to get from what we know to what we don't know. Meno's challenge is as follows: "On what lines will you look, Socrates, for a thing of whose nature you know nothing at all? Pray, what sort of thing, amongst those that you know not, will you treat us to as the object of your search? Or even supposing, at the best, that you hit upon it, how will you know it is the thing you did not know?"<sup>18</sup> Socrates' answer is that by understanding just one thing, learning, we can come to know what we know and what we don't know.<sup>19</sup> This answer seems unsatisfying, since it presupposes that learning actually exists in relationship with the truth. Meno challenges the very possibility of learning and Socrates answers that we can overcome these doubts by defining learning. This answer seems to be question-begging until Socrates gives us his definition of learning as anamnesis, or recollection, which founds the entire project of learning on a past state of absolute knowledge that we can recover by philosophy.

The soul is supposed to have known, in an immemorial past, the forms that allow it to distinguish between things and do simple math in a disembodied state. To demonstrate that this is true even for someone without much education, Socrates asks leading geometry questions to Meno's slave boy, and when the boy figures them out, Socrates proclaims that all knowledge is recollection. This solution to the paradox is maieutics, or the art of childbearing. Socrates sees himself as a midwife who provides guidance and technical advice to his dialogue partners as they give birth to the truth that they already know but have forgotten.

---

<sup>18</sup> Plato, *Meno*, trans. Benjamin Jowett, 80d.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid*, 81d.

Levinas thinks this answer is a sham, but not exactly for the same reason that Meno does. The adventure of actually learning something new from an exterior non-site is at the core of his teaching, so he can't allow Socrates to propose this recollective model of knowledge. Recollection is just an repetition of sameness because on this account the known thing and the knower are self-identical. "This primacy of the same was Socrates' teaching: to receive nothing of the Other but what is in me, as though from all eternity I was in possession of what comes to me from the outside, to receive nothing, or to be free."(TI 43) Levinas affirms this as a description of the attempt of the Same to constitute itself, but as we discovered in Levinas' critique of the attempts of the Same to 'live from . . .' the world around it, this attempt falls short. If the object of our knowledge is otherness, learning as rediscovery is impossible. We will have to receive something, our freedom will somehow be limited, and we will be passive as we learn about what transcends us.

At this point, it seems like Plato has nothing at all to contribute to Levinas' epistemology. Recollection and discovery are diametrically opposed and share no common characteristics. But Levinas argues in *Totality and Infinity* that Socratic maieutics is not a complete waste. Levinas sees maieutics as a correction to Lysias, a sophist who confuses Phaedrus into thinking that the lover should love the non-lover in Plato's *Phaedrus*. "Socratic maieutics prevailed over a pedagogy that introduced ideas into a mind by violating or seducing."(TI 171) Lysias is exposed by Socrates to be an impious rhetorician, and this exposure takes the form of a demonstration of the techné of argument. Socrates can convince Phaedrus both to agree and to disagree with Lysias, and

it thus becomes clear that minds can be violated or seduced. However, this does not mean that they should be seduced. The *Phaedrus* has as its one undeniable doctrine that the use of rhetoric to convince people to do what is wrong is irrational and opposed to the entire Platonic project of bringing the Good into parlance with life.

In Tanja Staehler's reading, the *Phaedrus* is where Plato reveals his theory of the relationship of the body to reason. Against classical interpretations of Plato, where the body is to be neglected in favour of attention to the rational soul, Staehler maintains that Plato is carefully attuned to the body, at least in this dialogue. She notes the phenomenological descriptions of the beautiful countryside that Socrates and Phaedrus walk through and the bodily excitement of Socrates as he enjoys the water and the sky around him. She also highlights the fact that dialogue, especially about Eros, can only take place between two embodied people.<sup>20</sup> For Socrates to convince Phaedrus that Lysias is not to be trusted, the two of them must be together, walking and talking. Phaedrus' body is therefore a body of vulnerability in that he will give his rational assent to whoever is present to his body.

This account of *Phaedrus* as a philosophy of the body is directed against the critique of Plato made by Derrida, who assumes that Plato is always opposed to the body. Reason and embodiment go hand in hand. The condition for the possibility of learning the truth is my presence to the Other in my body, and this doctrine unites Levinas and Plato.

---

<sup>20</sup> Staehler, *The Ambiguous Out-Side of Ethics*, 51.



But this unity is ambiguous in a way that Staehler has not noticed, because Levinas does not accept Socrates as the perfect teacher. Levinas thinks that Socratic maieutics, in its appeal to the bodily presence of the Other as a teacher of truth, is an improvement over the sophistry of Lysias, but this improvement is just one step towards understanding learning as a risk. Socrates defends first the facticity of truth (he ends up praising a conventional understanding of love in Phaedrus in order not to anger the gods), and second, that anamnesis is the secret to Phaedrus learning the truth. But Levinas would like to separate these two teachings. “[The truth taught] does not preclude the openness of the very dimension of infinity, which is height, in the face of the Master.” (*TI* 171) Since truth does not preclude openness, Socrates has made progress from the pure rhetoric of the sophist and Levinas can claim him as an ally even though maieutics is a less palatable Platonic doctrine. Levinas announces a height that is contradictory to maieutics: the face. The Other could not have been chosen by me, could never have been known by me in the past. Coming to know the truth of the Other is real learning. Truth, therefore, is beyond rhetoric and Levinas can oppose metaphysics, which discovers truth, to the ontological life we live in the world, which can use reason to seduce minds.

What remains of Levinas’ Platonism shows itself in his cautious critique of maieutics. It is a critical Platonism that demonstrates that the association of truth as a teachable and rational concept with a closed totality of all things that are true is not a viable association. Neither does Plato aim at this association. Instead, he maintains that openness receives what comes from beyond, and that what comes from beyond is infinite. Levinas develops his Platonic theory of dialogue so that it meshes with Desire, the

insatiable going-beyond that the Same experiences in relation to the other. We can Desire the truth. Learning is openness, it does not preclude any possibility, and neither does it expect any particular truth to emerge. In fact, this preclusion and expectation would prevent the Same from discovering the truth. Levinas' Platonism holds the openness of the body to reasoning of the Other as a fundamental concept that is necessary for relation, and rejects the maieutics that are purported to guarantee knowledge against the risk of failure. The next section of our discussion demonstrates the Platonic sources of Levinas' commitment to openness, which is roughly synonymous with inspiration because both force us to give up our attempts to control the Other.

#### **1.4 Passivity as Inspiration**

Passivity seems like an anti-Socratic theme. We assume that it is the activity of the questioning mind that reveals truth, and that Socrates' greatest contribution to philosophy is his ability to urge his interlocutors to active thinking. Levinas, however, believes that there is another side to Plato's philosophy, one that affirms passivity. In *Ion* and *Phaedrus* we find Plato trying to understand what happens in inspiration, where the poet or the rhapsode is possessed by the muse or by the gods. The possession of the speaker by the gods makes art worth paying attention to in *Ion*,<sup>21</sup> and gets the thinker close to the forms in *Phaedrus*<sup>22</sup>. Levinas sees this "possession" as the passivity of the self, and affirms this as the core of Platonic philosophy, even more important to Platonism than the activity of reasoning.

---

<sup>21</sup> Plato, *Ion*, trans. Benjamin Jowett, 534c.

<sup>22</sup> Plato, *Phaedrus*, trans. Benjamin Jowett, 237a.

In *Phaedrus* Socrates depends on the aid that the gods can give to a philosopher. “Come then, O tuneful Muses . . . grant me your aid in the tale this most excellent man compels me to relate”.<sup>23</sup> Phaedrus, who is confused by Lysias, depends on Socrates’ ability to demonstrate the problems in Lysias’ argument. To achieve this, Socrates calls on the aid of the Muses. “We find that this presence in thought of an idea whose ideatum overflows the capacity of thought is given expression. . . in Plato. . . He affirms the value of the delirium that comes from God, ‘winged thought.’” (*TI* 49) ‘Winged thought’ is a description of the soul in *Phaedrus*, which ascends to the forms as it is drawn by winged horses.<sup>24</sup> For Levinas, this is evidence that Plato had discovered the transcendence of the ideas which found ethics, namely, infinity and the Good. Their transcendence is invoked by the term ‘inspiration’, which describes how these ideas function as the condition for the possibility of finitude and ethics, respectively.

Plato was first to see what Descartes reaffirms, that the ideas of the Good and of the infinite must always refer beyond the content of my own thought. In Descartes’ philosophy, this is proof that God exists, since the objective reality that corresponds to any finite thought could be founded in the formal reality of my own mind and therefore should be doubted. Since the objective reality of an idea of infinity could not come from my own finite mind, an infinite being must exist. The idea of infinity’s ability to overflow

---

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 237a

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 246a

its own formal expression in my mind is what guarantees that an actually infinite being exists.<sup>25</sup>

Levinas believes that the discovery of infinity is first made by Plato, who understands “winged thought”, “delirium”, and “rhapsody” as a direct connection to the Other. In this connection, none of the self’s powers matter, because they are manifestly unable to access otherness, and when they purport to, they have in fact only cast otherness as a different version of sameness. This is why Plato admits the rhapsode to the Republic while excluding the mimetic artist, whose active technical choices and immanent view of things cause reproductions of reproductions. These simulacra are at fault for deluding the public about what the forms are.<sup>26</sup> In contrast, the paralysis of the rhapsodic poet by the daimon or muse is, for Levinas, evidence that Plato is more complicated and useful for founding a theory of passivity and inspiration than our commonsense association of Socrates with active reasoning might indicate.

The separated I is an analogous moment in Levinas’ thought because, though it seems like pure activity, it is ultimately revealed to be passive by the face of the other. Levinas develops this concept in the following way. Without an I that can define itself on its own, or, as Levinas says it, that can function “*chez soi*”, at home with all the comforts of comprehension, the real difference between same and other would be impossible. Even though the I is founded by its relation to the other, this relation implies things, tools, and the home, which are what the Other, in its destitution, demands. These things are

---

<sup>25</sup> René Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy*, Trans. Donald A. Cress. Hackett, Indianapolis, 1993. Pages 28, 31.

<sup>26</sup> Plato, *Republic*, trans. Alan Bloom, 595b.

valuable to the Other only because they are mine; they are constituted by an activity of my self. This activity is definitely not the original moment of Levinas' philosophy, but it nonetheless matters for him because even though the Other comes from a non-site the relation with the Other can only happen to me, to my body, with all its powers to act and the results of these powers. In the final analysis, however, the condition of the possibility of my own being at home with myself, my own ability to identify myself as the same, is the Other's command. This command is infinite and speaks from the height of the Good, revealing itself as the founding of even my own being, and paralyzing my ability to act.

The founding relation between the infinite Good from beyond and the finite life of the separated "I" is Platonic inspiration. A voice can be heard across the infinite divide between gods and humans, (for Plato) and between Same and Other (for Levinas). Even though the separated I can make itself at home in the world by making tools and caring for itself, the face of the other contests the at-home-ness of the self in the world. The contestation that the other makes of my very being is not a simple negation of the self, because it reveals positive truth to the self: that I should not kill and that I should practice hospitality.<sup>27</sup> This is the basic distinction between the mimetic artist of *Republic* and the rhapsodic poet of *Ion*: the mimetic artist is not himself challenged by his art but can simply produce endless iterations of the thing in itself, iterations which hopelessly confuse anyone looking for the truth. The rhapsode, by contrast, acts as a sort of vehicle for the voice of the gods, and can make art that does not simply reiterate simulacra. This rhapsodic art, because it attends passively to the beyond, expresses the truth and should

---

<sup>27</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity: Conversations with Philippe Nemo*, trans. Richard A. Cohen (Pittsburgh, Duquesne University Press, 1985), 86.

therefore be permitted in the Republic. Inspiration expresses Levinas' exact intentions: to allow what is beyond to remain beyond *and* to allow it to speak into life in the world as the condition of the possibility of that life. The problems of dualism are answered in inspiration.

Plato is inspirational in two ways: first, he discovered the possibility of inspiration, as we just discussed. Secondly, when Levinas advocates for a return to Platonism, he is asking us to become inspired by Plato, who is a philosophical Other. We can see this most clearly in the way Levinas cites Plato on the Good: rather than a result of descriptions of phenomena or reasoning from premises to conclusion, the Good is revealed to be unquestionably true for everyone. Plato speaks of the beyond in a relationship of pure metaphysical Desire, and escapes the temptation to think about everything comprehensively and ontologically. Levinas sees himself as inspired by Plato's Good, and tries to let it speak through him into contemporary ethics as the rhapsodic poet lets the muse speak through him. We will put his Platonic message to the test in our next section.

### **1.5 The Rhetoric of Myth**

How is this speaking accomplished? Why should we be convinced by a condition for the possibility of our experience that Levinas identifies as a basic fact that needs no evidence? It is possible that Levinas and Lysias are allied in convincing us of what is untrue by empty rhetoric. Levinas seeks to answer these suspicions by an appeal to the myth of Gyges as Plato tells it. This myth can be quickly summarized as follows. The earth opens in front of a poor shepherd one day, and in the chasm he finds a skeleton with a ring. This ring makes the wearer invisible, and Gyges uses this power to become a

messenger to the king, seduce the queen, and take the throne after killing the king.

Because it demonstrates that without consequences for injustice we could order the entire world for our own power, this thought experiment can show that “no one is willingly just but only when compelled to be so.”<sup>28</sup>

In this section I will argue that Plato uses the absurdity of thinking that Gyges is an honourable and wise man as a *reductio* against Thrasymachus, whose “might is right” theory of justice, in its simple form, presupposes no connection between justice and the good. Glaucon proposes the myth of Gyges as a further challenge to Socrates’ dismissal of Thrasymachus and as proof that if we could get away with what we wanted, we would do so. This thesis is ultimately demonstrated to be false by Plato, for whom the Good is a form beyond the comprehensible use of tools by which Gyges would proceed to sleep with the king’s wife, kill the king, and take over the throne.

The most significant point of overlap between Levinas and Plato is Plato’s argument that the Good is beyond the use of the Same because it only emerges in society. Levinas’ use of Gyges should be seen as a continuation and expansion of this argument for the incomprehensibility of the Good and its relation to us who live in the world because Gyges is unable to escape the demands of the Good in society even though he is free from the consequences of his wrongdoing. If consequences mattered, they would constitute losses in the comprehensible economy of things that Gyges rules and would therefore be just as manipulable as any other tool in Gyges’ possession. But in society, the

---

<sup>28</sup> Plato, *Republic*, trans. Alan Bloom, 360c.

Good is revealed by other people such that the economy of a separated self no longer has any meaning.

### **1.5.1 Separation**

First of all, Gyges gives us the clearest sense of what separation means. The transcendence Levinas requires is expressed by the separation of a being alone with itself, constituted by its opposition to relation with any other. It is paradoxical that this is the condition of the possibility for real relation to another, but Levinas believes that experience proves this to be the case. In a naive sense, the aloneness of the I expressed by Levinas' "*chez soi*" (the being at home with itself) is a fact of reason, and the necessary condition for relation because the terms of a relation are originally self-identical. Levinas will account for the paradox of the simultaneous self-identity of the Same and its foundation on otherness by invoking Plato's myth of Gyges, who pretends to be alone and tries to cheat the ethical structure of relation.

"In enjoyment the separated being affirms an independence that owes nothing, neither dialectically nor logically, to the other which remains transcendent to it. This absolute independence ... is accomplished in all the plenitude of economic existence." (TI 60) Even though relation is the fundamental fact of reality, separation is real. We can be atheist, that is, we can suppose a non-relation to the other, if we are embedded in the immanence of what Levinas calls "home". By the ability to separate oneself he means the possibility of ignoring the Infinite and the Good while still having some semblance of ethics. If we believe that this separation is the ultimate ground for ethics, however, we are ultimately duped because ethics without the Other is nothing but the Same looking out for



itself and using everything it comes across as an element from which a home can be made.

For both Plato and Levinas the fact of participation guarantees the truth of ethics, but this guarantee does not ensure our recognition of the truth. We *can choose* not to participate in the truth: “To break with participation is, to be sure, to maintain contact, but no longer to derive one’s being from this contact: it is to see without being seen, like Gyges.” (*TI* 61) So contact can be maintained even in a break of participation. How this is possible remains obscure, but Levinas posits it as empirical fact. Participation is opposed to this break. For Plato, participation is the way particular beings have their essence as identifiable creatures. In the *Republic*, participation explains how we know that two beds are both beds even though they appear as separate objects. The two beds participate in the common form of ‘Bed’ and this is how we know to use them both as beds and not as chairs.<sup>29</sup>

Levinas argues that to break with this model is to claim that the source of one’s being is one’s being. Besides being eminently tautological, such a formulation does not grasp Plato’s discovery of the Good in society for what it is. As such this break with participation is both unethical and philosophically untenable. Participation is just an obvious fact about which we are all supposed to be agreed. Gyges, the despised Greek tyrant, is the proper name for one who seeks to break with participation this way.

Although the separation of Gyges is unethical because it tries to break contact with the other even while living from what is other, it is an accurate description for our

---

<sup>29</sup> Ibid, 596b-597d.

finitude as beings who can enter relation. “The myth of Gyges is the very myth of the I and interiority, which exist non-recognized. . . . The inner life, the I, separation are uprootedness itself, non-participation, and consequently the ambivalent possibility of error and of truth.” (TI 61) Even though Levinas condemns Gyges for the attempt to define himself as a self-caused being, he nevertheless sees the moment of separation as the condition of the possibility of the being that searches for truth. Only an uprooted being can “lack nothing”, and only a being that lacks nothing can forget the economic concerns of the *chez soi* to search for truth. As we discussed earlier, Levinas’ main critique of Platonic epistemology is the fact that it precludes real discovery in favour of recollection, while he takes the fact that Plato finds a real truth to search for as foundational for his own philosophy. In an analogous move, Levinas appreciates the phenomenon of separation as the necessary condition for the discovery of relation, while in the ethical mode, separation is shown to be a moral morass.

When Levinas turns to a critique of truth as guaranteed knowledge, Gyges provides him with his figurative example. The separation of the Same from the Other is part of a what we can call ‘spectacle ontology’, an ontology best described as the condition of Plato’s rebel king. This kind of I is “a being conformable to the fate of Gyges who sees those who look at him without seeing him, and who knows that he is not seen. . . . Gyges’s position involve[s] the impunity of a being alone in the world, that is, a being for whom the world is a spectacle.” (TI 90) The fact that Husserl and Descartes begin with the ego implies an essential acceptance of spectacle ontology, and Levinas argues that this presupposition fails to ground both Descartes’ and Husserl’s philosophy, which are

supposed to have room for an infinite object that would overwhelm what the I can see. Theoretical ontology, which presumes an unfounded commonality of being between subject and object, short-circuits our search for truth such that the results are guaranteed. The phenomenological method that Levinas inherits fails when it attempts to gaze at the Other, whose entire meaning is the opposition to this totalizing ontology. Gyges is the figure of this failure: alone, gazing at what cannot gaze back in a world constituted by his gaze, and totally unassigned to the Good.

Levinas is inspired by the ethical philosophy that Plato opposes to such a system. I will make this inspiration explicit by searching for something like Levinas' thought in Plato's rebuttal of Thrasymachus, and his uses of Gyges in proving to Glaucon that the Good prevails beyond consequentialist ethics. The critique of separation is based on the ethical critique of Gyges that Plato develops in *Republic*. For Plato, it is society that inspires us to see relation behind apparent separation.

### **1.5.2 Inspiration in *Republic***

Thrasymachus appears in book 1 of *Republic*, and tries to dismiss Socrates on account of his refusal to give any positive content to what justice must be. Justice as “the needful, or the helpful, or the profitable, or the gainful, or the advantageous”<sup>30</sup> is not a good enough answer for Thrasymachus, since these “inaneities” do not clarify how exactly Socrates thinks of justice. Thrasymachus is eventually forced to give his own account of justice as “the advantage of the stronger”<sup>31</sup> because Socrates refuses to give an answer

---

<sup>30</sup> Ibid, 336d.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid, 338c.

other than what Thrasymachus has already ruled out. Thrasymachus' evidence for this position is the plurality of structures of Greek states: some are democratic, some tyrannic, some oligarchic. Thrasymachus thinks that what is common between these forms of government is the fact that those who rule create laws that benefit themselves.

Alan Bloom notes that the "benefit" or the "advantage" that Thrasymachus speaks of is an underlying theme of the *Republic*. He translates the Greek 'kreitton' as 'better' but notes that "its use was also expanded to cover all sorts of superiority, and it finally could mean goodness or excellence."<sup>32</sup> On the opening page of *Republic* the slave of Polemarchus accosts Socrates and orders him to wait for his master, or "prove stronger [kreitton]" than the many servants who accompany him. This frames the entire debate of the *Republic* such that Socrates' arguments are always made with either explicit or implicit reference to the "better".

The critique of Thrasymachus is where this method is first pursued. Socrates begins by pointing out the manifest fallibility of rulers, who "sometimes completely mistake what is best for themselves". The second premise of this critique is Thrasymachus' thesis that "it is just to do whatever the rulers command".<sup>33</sup> These two concepts cannot both be true because when a command that is not in a ruler's best interests is given, a citizen should obey this command since it is given by the ruler; while simultaneously disobeying because the command is not in the best interests of the ruler.

---

<sup>32</sup> Ibid, 444.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid, 339d.

What makes this critique work is the reference to the Good. Socrates' insistence that the Good exists, yet is unknown by the authorities who work in a world of manipulable, ontologically constituted resources means that Thrasymachus cannot be right. Because rulers make mistakes in understanding their relationship to the Good, a system of justice based on a ruler's word as supreme command is untenable. Levinasian inspiration is already emerging in Socrates' use of the Good as the transcendent standard which founds our concepts of justice.

Thrasymachus then claims that Socrates is being childish to think that a shepherd raises sheep for any other reason than to kill them. Socrates remains unconvinced because it's clear that the practitioner of any art does not "produce benefit when he works for no [wages]".<sup>34</sup> Instead, those who practice the art of ruling are no different than those who practice the art of woodworking, in that both work for wages that are the artificial products of their work. This means that a person who rules does so for wages that are supplementarily granted; if this were not the case no one would voluntarily rule since doing so is difficult and messy work. "No kind of rule provides for its own benefit, but, as we have been saying all along, it provides for and commands the one who is ruled, considering his advantage - that of the weaker - and not that of the stronger. . . It is for just this reason. . . that there must be wages for those who are going to be willing to rule."

35

---

<sup>34</sup> Ibid, 346e.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

This is the first moment of a general movement in the text away from models of justice as personal gain. So far this movement has proven that a ruler's relationship to justice cannot have anything to do with what he gains from his rule. Thrasymachus' gravest error is thinking that ruling is pleasurable for the ruler. The essence of ruling, for Socrates, is the pain that comes from submitting to the interests of weaker people. Moreover, this pain is a necessary corollary of the pursuit of the essence of justice.

Instead of that which is in the interests of the stronger, justice is what is understood by the good and wise man, while injustice is the state of the unlearned and bad person. Socrates has succeeded, he thinks, in aligning justice, goodness, and wisdom. Their alignment means that the good ruler will thus pursue these virtues whether or not economic benefit results. In fact, when justice favours the weak, the ruler will do justice at immense cost to himself. So we have our first Socratic impulse from *Republic* that is carried on to Levinas: rejection of any theory that relates economic considerations to justice. We discussed the difference between need, which can be satisfied by things, and Desire, which cannot be satisfied by anything, in the first section of this chapter.

Glaucon takes Socrates at his word on this impulse by introducing the myth of Gyges, who becomes emblematic as a being for whom economic goods are so plentiful and manipulable that justice *obviously does not* relate to their acquisition or loss. The idea is that if we are to arrive at the essence of justice, we must formally exclude any reference to the material gains or losses associated with a just or unjust life. Glaucon argues that because many people think that justice is valuable in the same way that exercise is valuable, as a drudgery with a noble goal, Socrates should attempt to justify his claim that

doing justice is in itself a good thing. The formal exclusion of consequences is enacted in the figure of Gyges.

The point of Glaucon's telling of the Gyges story is that the ability to get away with injustices would be enough to convince us to commit injustices. Therefore, if Socrates wants to claim that justice is a good in itself, we should evaluate the case of two men, one who is unjust but has a reputation for justice and who is rich and happy, and another who is just but has a reputation for injustice and lives in pain and poverty.

Socrates' response to Gyges, who represents the formal exclusion of the consequences of justice and injustice, is to examine the city, in which we get a clearer picture of what justice must be since it's worked out on a larger scale. This is a rhetorical shift from the question of what is Good for the individual (the question which annuls Thrasymachus' theory) to the question of what is Good for cities. We get a Platonic definition of the justice that does not refer first of all to a self-sufficient separated individual like Gyges, but instead takes place in society and with respect to the demands of otherness upon the individual members thereof. This is a point consistent with Levinas, for whom the question of ethics presupposes society, not a separated individual.

Why does a city require justice? For Socrates, the answer begins with the fact that cities are social. They presuppose relations, and we are part of city life because we are *not* self-sufficient. "A city, as I believe, comes into being because each of us isn't self-sufficient

but is in need of much.”<sup>36</sup> This move is analogous to Levinas’ critique of the powers of the Same. He considers the transcendent (a term for ethics, relation, difference, the Other, the infinite, the Good) as the condition for the possibility of the immanent (a broad term for the home, separated being, the I, economic existence, and spectacle ontology).

Socrates’ city is founded because wanting/incommensurability precedes self-sufficiency.

The infinite separation between Same and Other incites desire in me and begins the discovery of justice.

The puzzle of Gyges, who can act any way he wants and get away with it, is not a problem for Socrates, since we are all originally founded by desire for what is beyond. It is true that Socrates does not make Levinas’ distinction between “desire” and “need”. The Greek *ἐνδεής* means “we *fall short* of [the many]”, and this “falling short” has traditionally been interpreted as a lack of economic goods.<sup>37</sup> This interpretation is consistent with the rest of Socrates’ argument, where he makes it clear that we form cities in order to divide labour and produce benefits for each other. But is this “falling short” exclusively a falling short of our ability to provide for ourselves?

Considered with reference to Levinas, to connect sociability to goods is already to forget what it means to “fall short”. Instead of the satiable needs for division of labour,

---

<sup>36</sup> Plato, *Republic*. 369b. In my translation: “each isn’t independent [autarches] but we fall short [endeis] of the many”. A Levinasian reading of this text would espouse a translation more like this, which does not associate a movement away from independence with lack but with incommensurability (“falling short”). The word “need” in this text does indeed have the meaning “lacking” but its primary sense is “falling short”, and is thus an idiomatic form of Levinas’ “Desire”.

<sup>37</sup> Jowett, Shorey and Bloom translate *ἐνδεής* with explicit reference to “lack”. Jowett: “no one is self-sufficing, but all of us have many wants.” (Plato, *The Republic*, translated by Benjamin Jowett. New York: Vintage Press, 1991. Page 369.); Shorey: “we do not severally suffice for our own needs, each of us lacks many things” (Plato, *The Republic*, Translated by Paul Shorey. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1935. Page 369.); Bloom: “each of us isn’t self-sufficient but is in need of much.” (Alan Bloom, *The Republic of Plato*. New York: Basic Books, 1968. Page 46.)



food, and shelter that a city can fill, falling “short of the many” is an instance of Desire. To be in need is to presuppose the possibility of satiety, but Levinas believes there is a Desire that is beyond need, a desire for society, and it is exactly this desire that Socrates ends up proposing as the foundation for society. To “fall short” is to partake in another order, differing in kind from the order in which one falls short of material goods or of the ability to grasp anything. The difference between these orders means that the valuable objects of my own economy are utterly insignificant for closing the gap between them. Levinas’ entire philosophy depends on the distinction between the incommensurability of Desire and the satiability of mere lack.

Although Socrates argues that the reason for cities is that we have needs that can be filled by access to goods, he also claims that another principle, besides need, is at work. Access to goods does not necessarily indicate a life of justice that mirrors the reasons for the origin of society. His example is the decadent city, which goes beyond necessity and yet still justifies its wars, economies, and luxuries by a false appeal to need.<sup>38</sup> The distinction between the desires which found society and the needs which propel it to excess is foreshadowed in Plato but made explicit in Levinas. And Plato’s sense that justice is discovered by our desire for plurality and society, and thus does not originate in the isolated Gyges, is what Levinas inherits.

So the question whether or not Plato is a philosophically inspiring ‘other’ for Levinas is answered by the methodical use of Plato’s position in *Republic* as a voice for the beyond. Plato’s discovery of the fundamental character of our desire for the Good, which

---

<sup>38</sup> Plato, *Republic*. 373c

is presumed by the structure of a peaceful society, inspires Levinas. This discovery is made when Socrates opposes not only Thrasymachus, whose theory seems utterly twisted and nefarious, but also Glaucon, who wants to admit at least some role for consequences in how we think about the good. Plato consistently makes relation and society the context for the debate because he is unwilling to settle for anything less than an admission of the transcendence of the Good.

The fact that Plato aims to let the Good relate to society as its foundation is the core value of Platonic thought for Levinas. That separation implies distinct terms does not mean that Levinas believes in an ultimate difference between same and other; even though there is no spectacular perspective from which to claim that everyone is bound by the Good, without this thesis Levinas' and Plato's philosophy of society is pointless. As such, what Levinas gains from Plato are the inspired concepts that he will embody in the personal experience of responsibility that he argues is universal. The separation that seems necessary for difference and that presents itself to us in our experience is in fact necessary only as a historical accident on our journey to discovering the Other.

What is unique about Plato, then, is not that Levinas uses him illustratively, since he uses numerous philosophers this way. Rather, Plato's position is indicated by Levinas' reinterpretation of his doctrines such that we sense the primary concern for justice that inheres in them all along, even as he exposes some Platonic doctrines as illegitimate shortcuts on the journey to ethics.

## **1.6 Freedom**

If Gyges is essentially unable to write the rules of his world, what role does freedom have in ethics? The Same is ultimately passive, and even its successful attempts to fulfill its needs mean nothing for ethics. Can freedom mean anything in such a world? I have argued that the phenomenon of separation that Levinas opposes to the history of Western ontology (in the name of finding original relationship) is an illusion. This has significant implications for the theories of free subjectivity and commitment that we have assumed, since Kant, to be foundational for our duties. Levinas' critique of modern freedom does not merely find poetic expression in Plato. Instead, it conscripts Plato's conceptual achievements in locating the Good beyond being as an inspired vision that works against the systems of ethics that hold freedom as the essence of the human.

That justice originates elsewhere than in the I does not indicate that freedom is an illusion. Plato and Levinas are agreed that we *can choose* to forget the Good. For Plato, this is the existential character of the non-philosophical prisoner in the cave.<sup>39</sup> Before philosophy, we had forgotten the truth, and our recovery of the truth is expressed as the realization of freedom. For Levinas, "the separated being can close itself up in its egoism . . . this possibility of forgetting the transcendence of the Other . . . banishing the transcendental relation that alone permits the I to shut itself up in itself - evinces the absolute truth, the radicalism, of separation." (TI 173) Separation is absolute truth at the same time as it is possible only by the permission of a transcendental relation. We can be convinced of our freedom even while we are ultimately not free to choose our duties to the Other. Plato's freed prisoners go on to contemplate the intelligible sun and the Good,

---

<sup>39</sup> Ibid, 514a.

which have already conditioned their freedom such that it is not absolute. Their freedom is, in Levinas' words, "difficult". This claim is based on the fact that freedom is conditioned by non-freedom, by passivity, and by responsibility. The "absolute truth" of freedom and separation depend for their truth on something else. For Levinas this paradoxical situation is manifest in Gyges, who "is the very condition of man, the possibility of accepting the rules of the game, but cheating." (TI 173) The rules of the game are the transcendental facts of plurality and difference, and the cheater is just the one who ignores this fact and sets himself up as the source of his own freedom.

Tanja Staehler misses the fact that Levinas identifies Gyges as a cheater. In her account, "interiority cannot be understood as the reverse of exteriority, nor vice versa. The story of Gyges helps to show that the state of separation consists of its own stories and ways of being."<sup>40</sup> Staehler has hypostatized interiority into a supreme concept that founds its own world, a world separate from the world of the Good and the exterior. This move is diametrically opposed to Levinas' entire project, which is conducted for the sole purpose of finding a relation between the Good and the Same. If interiority exists on its own, if Gyges' story is true of us all, Levinas' philosophy is worthless because the dualism implicit in this account would undo any relation between Same and Other.

That Gyges' solitude is an attempt to *cheat* means that relation is the first fact of metaphysics, because immanent life, regardless of how technically advanced it becomes, can never change the fact that we find ourselves assigned to care for the Other, a fact proven by the Good. Staehler argues that relation and isolation are equally conditional for

---

<sup>40</sup> Tanja Staehler, *The Ambiguous Out-Side of Ethics*. New York: Routledge, 2010. Page 36.

each other in Levinas' philosophy, and this is why she affirms a final ambiguity in the relationship between Levinas and Plato. However, Gyges' inability to escape the Good confirms Levinas' 'asymmetry', which means that relation, not isolation, is original.

Levinas' Platonism depends on the fact that separated being is revealed as an illusion by our Desire to know and do the Good. A philosophy of absolute difference need not imply a separated being *causa sui*, and Plato's concept of participation, whereby the immanent justice of the particular laws of the republic relate to the transcendence of the Good by a relationship of inspiration, demonstrates this. Levinas understands the inspiration of the world as the trace of the Other, concretized in the face of someone in need. Staehler's reading, in which Levinas condones the separation of Gyges as a moment capable of constituting its own world, is a misreading of both Plato and Levinas.

The isolated I, like Gyges, is free to function economically any way it wants, because all its needs are met by its own ability. It can carve out a home for itself from the elements of the world, make tools, and fulfill needs. Levinas' constructive philosophy, inspired by Plato, posits that the Other breaks into this economy of the Same and demands respect and hospitality *ad infinitum*. The human condition is not exclusively an experience of needs; the inspiration of Desire is real. The justice that the other demands from the same is that of infinite command, which would require everything from me. The infinite command is analogous to an infinite Desire which is never satisfied. This concept of justice as transcendent demand<sup>41</sup> is thoroughly Platonic, and Levinas' recovery of transcendence that persists despite my freedom is his greatest gain in *Totality and Infinity*.

---

<sup>41</sup> See also Plato, *Crito*, 54c. The transcendence of the Law over the immanent practice of the law means that injustice inheres in the latter and does not excuse Socrates from breaking the former.

### **1.7 Conclusions**

By what immanent standards can Levinas claim to know that a transcendent Good exists? If Gyges can delude himself that he is self-sufficient, Levinas can delude himself that the Good exists outside of our world. To ask these questions is to put transcendence to the test.

I have argued that Levinas has Platonic inspiration for understanding the ethical relation as a relation of transcendence. Plato's "height", the dimension by which the soul knows both "being and the unseen", is the unifying principle by which Levinas proposes to understand the relation of the absent true life to our being in the world. Levinas' focus on truth presupposes Plato's work in framing the value of maieutics, by which a truth separate from the thinker is discovered. Our passivity to the Good and the true is discovered first by Plato, and it is this passivity that occasions Levinas' radical call for a return to Platonism. Logical problems with the relation of a self-sufficient I to a commanding and transcendent other are resolved by Levinas' use of the figure of Gyges, whose myth functions as an exemplar of the folly of thinking that economic existence can have anything to do with justice. Instead, sociality and relation are "the very condition of man", and this fundamental pluralism, which complicates my free actions, is Levinas' key philosophical contribution in *Totality and Infinity*. He owes its inspiration to Plato.

## **Chapter 2:**

### **Levinas against Plato: Derrida's 'Violence and Metaphysics'**

Derrida's critique of Levinas casts him as a Hebrew militant, ready to destroy the foundations of Greek philosophy. Derrida's question is whether or not this conspiracy succeeds. I have argued that Plato and Levinas should be seen as thinkers who agree with each other that the transcendent Good inspires our experience, and therefore I need to demonstrate that Derrida's opposition of Levinas to the entire Greek tradition is mistaken.

In "Violence and Metaphysics" Derrida exposes as tenuous the associations between Being, ontology, and concept that Levinas depends on to assemble the immanent world of comprehensibility that is opposed to the beyond. Derrida also attempts a Husserlian and Heideggerian reading of Levinas, with the aim of reconciling each of these thinkers with Levinasian ethics. Husserl and Heidegger are focussed on a scientific manipulation of the world of being. Levinas' Platonic inspiration, which is opposed to comprehensibility, is put to the test because Husserl and Heidegger are heirs of Plato.

By understanding "Violence and Metaphysics" as a critique of Levinas' Platonism, we can examine the viability of a theory that claims to show either 1) Levinas' implicit agreement with Husserl and Heidegger as they read Plato or 2) Levinas' undoing of the methodological foundations he stands on. In the first instance, if the reconciliation between Levinas and his philosophical forebears is successful, Derrida can cast doubts on Levinas' distancing of himself from Husserl and Heidegger. In the second instance, Levinas cannot claim to have constructed anything philosophically meaningful, since his

phenomenological/ontological foundations for concepts such as transcendence, the Other, and the Good are undermined. It looks like Levinas is caught in a dilemma: either he can proceed with Plato and therefore remain complicit with the ontology of Parmenides as it is expressed in Husserl and Heidegger, or he can distinguish himself from Plato and lose his philosophical claim to be inspired.

This chapter contributes to my broader project because the Platonic metaphor of the parricide of Parmenides by Levinas' "instrument of destruction" (*VM* 85), the Good beyond being, is another way of saying that Levinas has been inspired by Plato. As we defined it above, inspiration is neither unthinking acceptance nor outright rejection. Inspiration is the trace of a voice from beyond that speaks inside philosophy. Levinas and Derrida are basically divided on the question of whether Levinas can legitimately claim to be inspired by Plato. For Derrida, Levinas' attempt to escape Parmenides means that he must finally be opposed to all Greek philosophy. For Levinas, Parmenides is the Greek philosopher who drives the separated life of Gyges to its totalizing excesses while the core of Platonism remains worthwhile because it is inspired by the Good beyond being.

I will begin with an exposition of the problems Derrida finds in Levinas' philosophy, and then turn to Derrida's method for understanding these problems. On this account, Levinas undertakes parricide of Parmenides by wielding God as a philosophical weapon. I show how this parricide helps Derrida to understand Levinas' differences from Husserl and Heidegger. Ultimately, however, Derrida has missed the fact that Levinas' inspiration is passivity to the Good. This means that my inspiration persecutes my



subjectivity rather than freeing it to destroy ontology. In Chapter 3 I will argue that this thesis is also inspired by Plato.

## **2.1 Husserl, Heidegger, and Greek Philosophy**

In this section, I demonstrate that Derrida interrogates Levinas by way of the Greek tradition, which he thinks is exemplified by Husserl and Heidegger. Derrida is convinced that no philosophy can be done without reference to these ‘Greeks’: “it would not be possible to philosophize, or to speak philosophically, outside this medium.” (VM 81) The impossibility of escaping the Greek heritage of philosophy, which Derrida also calls the reign of Parmenides, means that in Husserl and Heidegger the priorities of philosophy remain aligned with a scientific project of knowing beings through theory. This allows Derrida to frame his main problem with Levinas: the ethical relation seems like it is philosophically inspired by a synthesis of Husserl’s phenomenology and Heidegger’s ontology. According to Derrida, Plato plays no bigger role for Levinasian philosophy than Husserl and Heidegger.

The first Platonic influence effects Husserl’s phenomenology, which posits consciousness as the only pure being and must also posit the illuminating character of light, which connects the pure being of consciousness with its objects. For Derrida, this emphasis on light is Platonism. “Plato, for Husserl, was the founder of reason and a philosophical task whose telos was still sleeping in the shadows.” (VM 81) The shadows that cover the end of philosophy will apparently fall with the progress of reason. But more importantly, “phenomenology, in the wake of Plato, was to be struck with light. Unable to reduce the last naivete, the naivete of the glance, it predetermined Being as object.” (VM

85) Husserl's phenomenology depends on Brentano's intentionality, since the light by which consciousness sees must of course strike *things*, or what Brentano discovered as intentional objects. Plato and Husserl are agreed, Derrida thinks, that phenomena are things that participate in being, or that at least guarantee that what we know is not the product of idealism. If this were not the case, Kant's critique of the subject/object paradigm would prevail and Husserl could not claim to provide the foundation for science. Being is the object of Husserl's phenomenology, and it is determined by a consciousness. Derrida aligns Husserl with Plato and all other theories of knowledge that depend on seeing, which occurs because of light. For Plato, light "enlightens the visible sun". (VM 86) On this account, the knowledge that comes from light can ensure science. As such, inspiration is forgotten as a useful form of knowledge: a scientist needs no inspiration to see the world.

Moreover, Husserl's ego, which apprehends the phenomena that are, does not properly speaking exist in the same sense as these things. Questions of the existence of the self are bracketed in Husserl's phenomenology because of the patently obvious fact that we do indeed experience phenomena. The self, however, does not appear to us but is synthesized as a secondary truth, knowable because of the logic that phenomena presuppose a transcendental subject who perceives phenomena.<sup>42</sup> The only trouble is that this subject cannot be phenomenally known because the self-reflection that discloses it requires at least an instant of time in which the disparate phenomena of the past can be synthesized into a picture of the ego. This instant of time separates the perceiving ego

---

<sup>42</sup> Edmund Husserl, *Cartesian Meditations*, trans. Dorion Cairns (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, 1977), 67.

from the phenomenon of its selfhood, and prevents the immediate access to the manifold world that founds Husserl's scientific project. In one sense, this seems to indicate an agreement between Husserl and Levinas, since what is outside the self (phenomena or the Other) is given the foundational role. But this accord is problematic since Husserl emphasizes the enduring role of intentional consciousness in spite of the lack of foundation we just discussed, while Levinas insists that the Other (in its manifestations in the Infinite and the Good) overwhelms consciousness.

For Derrida, the fact that Western philosophy sees itself as a science is enough to aggregate Plato with Husserl as part of the long tradition of Western metaphysics. Plato would buy Husserl's speculative account of the intentional ego, because the science of discovering the Good could not exist without understanding its origin in the ego. On this account, self and world relate scientifically in a theoretical relation that depends on being and the Same for veracity. In Derrida's view, these assumptions, which Plato would share, are enough to put Levinas at odds with Western Platonism.

Heidegger is no less Greek than Husserl in Derrida's estimation. Heidegger's critique of the phenomenological reduction we just discussed is made "from within, and in the name of, a Greco-Platonic tradition under the surveillance of the agency of the glance and the metaphor of light."(VM 88) The critique depends on the active ability of Dasein to inquire into its "ownmost"<sup>43</sup> nature, an active ability that Husserl does not account for in his description of the intentional ego. It is considered a Platonic critique by Derrida because, again, it concerns a being that presents itself to our gaze in the light:

---

<sup>43</sup>Martin Heidegger. *Being and Time*. Translated by John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson. New York: Harper & Row, 1962. Page 232.

Dasein, or that being which asks itself the question of the meaning of being. Even though this question seems to differ from Husserl's because it presupposes that Dasein's action (or inaction) determines the degree of authenticity of its relation to being, and thus has real ontic effects, Derrida puts Heidegger in Husserl's camp because of the explicit reference to the surveillance of the world that Heidegger depends on. Again, Heidegger represents Western Platonism because the discovery of a truth which depends on the glance that looks upon being is a Platonic doctrine.

In Levinas' interpretation, Heidegger sees being not as the object of a theoretical relation but as the ground of action. "This world is not primarily given over to the glance, but is rather 'in its very Being like a center of action, a field of activity or of *solicitude*'"<sup>44</sup> Being is dissociated from its complicity with the hidden gaze of Gyges' separated existence. Levinas' critique of Husserl is made from this perspective, which can loosely be called Heideggerian because of its emphasis on the activity of Dasein in discovering its own authentic constitution.

But Levinas does not remain Heideggerian. The activity of Being that Husserl does not account for is violent. "Heideggerian 'possibilities' remain powers. Although they are pretechnical and preobjective, they are nonetheless oppressive and possessive." (VM 97) In Derrida's eyes this is an example of Levinas' disingenuous use of Heidegger against Husserl. First, Levinas critiques Husserl for an empty theoretism that cannot account for ethical action the likes of which would be needed for the absolute ethical relation. But then Levinas critiques Heidegger for supposing that the activity of Being is efficacious in

---

<sup>44</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *Theorie de l'Intuition dans la Phenomenologie de Husserl*, quoted in Derrida, VM, page 87.

founding ethics, and advocates passivity as the meaning of the Good. Neither can we be active in creating ethics, nor can we discover ethics by looking at the world. Derrida argues that Levinas is opposed to Greek philosophy in general, and Plato himself in particular, because of this paradox.

Derrida attempts to find a path through this dilemma. He argues that Levinas' ethics are a Heideggerian "letting-be" of the other who comes to us as something other than an object of knowledge. "The 'letting-be' concerns all possible forms of the existent, and even those which, *by essence*, cannot be transformed into 'objects of comprehension'. If it belongs to the essence of the Other first and foremost to be an 'interlocutor' and to be 'interpellated,' then the 'letting-be' will let the Other be what it is, will respect it". (VM 138) Derrida argues here that Levinas himself depends on the categories of being and essence to speak about the other and to define the kind of cheating of which he has accused Gyges. It seems impossible to think of any approach to the Other that is passive enough, responsible enough, or that refuses to totalize the Other less than 'letting be'. If the essence of the Other is to overwhelm the categories of the Ego, then it does so by its essence and by *being* itself, in opposition to my being.

Thus we find Derrida completing the first of the two critiques I identified above: "Levinas must ceaselessly suppose and practice the thought of precomprehension of Being in his discourse, even when he directs it against 'ontology.'" (VM 141) Levinas, insofar as he wants to be a philosopher who speaks a language comprehensible to the Greek tradition, must claim that his thought applies to Being, and this is why he can claim that plurality is the structure of *Being*. (TI 58) For Derrida, this definition of being as

essential plurality is at the same time a disingenuous use of Husserl and Heidegger and a “making tremble” of the entire structure of Greek thought. Levinas claims simultaneously to distance himself from Heidegger and Husserl’s spectacular ontology while achieving this distancing by means of their concept ‘Being’.

Derrida attempts to acknowledge this paradox by arguing that Levinas opposes Greek thought from a Hebraic tradition. In aiming for an absolute plurality, an original difference, “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, deferring the act into a hallucinatory murder.” To place difference at the origin of being is to contradict the logic of Parmenides. But Derrida is suspicious of Levinas’ purported ability to break with Parmenides, because all philosophy must use the Greek language and the concept of being. To aim at a real original difference that acts as the condition of the possibility of our experience of ethics is a Herculean task.

The difficulty of this task can be interpreted two ways. First, to ‘break the rules’ of philosophy could signify non-philosophy, absurdity, and this means that we would be right to ignore those who ask us to break the rules on the grounds that such thought is illogical. In this interpretation, we might conclude that Levinas is finally overcome by the inconsistencies inherent in the attempt to think his way out of the Greek tradition. Alternatively, Levinas could be attempting to disguise himself as a Greek in order to finally achieve the difference that only parricide could create. According to Derrida, Levinas will have to “feign to speak Greek in order to get near the king.” (VM 89) His epigraph from Matthew Arnold is telling. “[The world] ought to be, though it never is,

evenly balanced between [Hebraism and Hellenism].”<sup>45</sup> With Arnold, we believe that the world *could be* suspended between Hebrew and Greek thought, and this belief of ours is a product of the conceptual commonality between these polarized traditions, a commonality expressed in ontology, science, and techné. But for these to be absolutely different in kind and not just in degree, Levinas will have to accomplish the shaking of the philosophical world.

We can recapitulate the paradox Derrida has identified as follows:

1. Derrida shows how Levinas needs Husserl and Heidegger even as he tries to separate himself from them.
2. The metaphor of parricide is the best way to make sense of this; Levinas is feigning Greek philosophy in order to shake its foundations.
3. Simplifying to the extreme, Levinas and the Greek tradition oppose one another.

## **2.2 Parricide**

According to Derrida, parricide is the only metaphor that can help Levinas out of this paradox. The interrogation of Levinas’ thought is conducted for the explicit purpose of finding whether or not one might destroy Parmenides and think outside of this Greek tradition. Immediately after claiming that Husserl and Heidegger are Greek heirs of Plato, Derrida writes that “it is at this level that the thought of Emmanuel Levinas can make us tremble.” (VM 82) What, precisely, is it about Levinas that makes Derrida tremble this way? Is parricide the only possible interpretation of Levinas? If this is true,

---

<sup>45</sup> Quoted in Derrida, VM, 79.

he will need other philosophical means for proceeding because his critique of phenomenology and ontology would devastate his project.

Another option for interpreting Levinas is that he is inspired by Plato. This would mean that he does not destroy the entire Greek tradition. We can sketch the basis for this interpretation in a way that highlights its difference from Derrida's conspiracy theory as follows. First, the founding of ethics in the experience of the Other concretized in the face *is* a step away from the Greek origins of philosophy, origins realized in Husserl and Heidegger. Levinas claims that the experience of the Other is "metaphysics". The founding moment, the encounter with the face, is a moment of metaphysical Desire. Desire for the Other is defined as self-reinforcing, that is, when we desire what is other, our desire is not met with satiety since what can genuinely be said to be other must remain Other even to my Desire. This is the sense in which Levinas can call his account of Desire "metaphysics". (TI 34) Metaphysics represents a step beyond ontology and out of the kingdom of comprehension that scientific phenomenology aims for. As we discussed in Chapter 1, Levinasian metaphysics strives to interpret Plato as the philosopher who first glimpsed (though in a way of seeing different from theory) the Good that inaugurates the ethical relation and Desire.

It is in the definition of metaphysics that Levinas finds his commitment to Plato. Derrida believes that this Platonic recovery is "a metaphysics that Levinas seeks to raise up from its subordinate position and whose concept he seeks to restore in opposition to the entire tradition derived from Aristotle." (VM 83) For Aristotle, metaphysics is "the science



of wisdom”<sup>46</sup>, the formal structures of reasoning by which the wise are identified and can order things. It guarantees the efficacy of the ordering action of the wise on the unwise. On the other hand, for Levinas and Socrates metaphysics is more a signifier of our passivity than our activity. That which is metaphysical, the object of Desire, or the Good beyond Being, forces itself upon us. I will demonstrate how this metaphysics works itself out in the difference between Levinas’ and Derrida’s readings of phenomenology and transcendence. After this we will be in a position to see what Derrida has missed in his reading of Levinas.

### **2.2.1 Levinas as a Greek Phenomenologist**

If Levinas is to vindicate his critique of Husserl, he will need to exonerate the face to face relationship, with all its concrete-yet-metaphysical trappings, from the charges he makes against Husserl’s phenomenology. This distancing is accomplished, in Levinas’ account, by the complicity of the theoretical relation presupposed by phenomenology with violence. To suppose a theoretical relation between same and other is to allow the same to comprehend the other, and this comprehension is violence *par excellence*. Comprehension happens when we are able to include the other in the same, and this inclusion is achieved when we consider both the other and the same under the rubric or the “light” of being. Levinas argues that this comprehension is a violation of the other, a form of Gyges’ cheating the rules of pluralism, and can therefore group together Being, light, comprehension, and violence as events which make ethics impure. To find the

---

<sup>46</sup> Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, I.2.1.

absolute origin of ethics, Levinas thinks, we must do without reference to these themes, which merely reinforce the type of 'ethics' that I control.

Derrida associates Levinas' claim to be an heir of Plato with the Greek heritage of Husserl. Insofar as Levinas must think Greek thoughts to do philosophy, he is stuck with the presupposition that the thinkable is being and being is the thinkable, a bias first enforced by Parmenides.<sup>47</sup> Husserl's mistake stems from the fact that he has forgotten the infinite occasion of the cogito's idea of the infinite. "Repression of the infinite would have kept Husserl from access to the true depths of intentionality as desire and as metaphysical transcendence toward the other beyond phenomenality or Being." (VM 118) Phenomenology illegitimately supposes that the cogito *is* in fact the source of the idea of infinity, and therefore utterly mistakes the character of intentionality, which is supposed to let its object speak.

But Derrida demonstrates that Levinas has not done enough to distance himself from Husserl (and from Heidegger) because phenomenology is precisely this attitude of respect for that which shows itself, letting the existent thing be, or taking experience at face value. Derrida sees the intentional ego as essentially Levinasian: "Is not intentionality respect itself?" (VM 121) And since ethics can be thought, especially in the Platonic discovery of the Good by the *thinking* person, it does not look as if Levinas escapes his own charges of theoretism. The problem for Derrida is that to let Being speak in the theoretical relation is not a radical movement away from Parmenides. If Levinas simply practices a phenomenology of being, there is no difference in kind between the Same and

---

<sup>47</sup> Parmenides, Fragment 7, trans. John Burnet: "For never is this to be asserted, that things that are not, are. But keep your thought away from this road of inquiry."

the Other and Levinasian ethics must be empty. However, Derrida omits the fact that Levinas is not concerned with the beyond, pure and simple, as if the difference between intentional object and intentional consciousness were the original difference between Same and Other. If this were true, I would have an ethical duty to mere objects that would be commensurate with my ethical duty to you. The absurdity of this kind of thinking stems from the fact that it is not mere escape from Kantian idealism that grounds Levinas' thinking; it is instead the unique form of escape that Plato discovered in the "Good beyond Being".

### **2.3 Beyond**

The break with Parmenides is first made when the *epekeina tes ousias*<sup>48</sup> of Plato's *Republic* is proposed as Levinas' starting point. The Good beyond being is the opening of ethical thought, and throughout Levinas' career he names Plato as the one who first points us to this Good. Derrida is hesitant to allow Levinas to keep his Platonism and claim that the Good is absolutely beyond being. For Plato, the relation between the forms and our actively searching reason is of utmost concern, but this efficacy of reason is a farce for Levinas, who is committed to the founding of ethics in an absolutely exterior non-site, which is inaccessible by the techné of the Same. (*TI* 79-81)

Derrida remarks in parentheses that this inaccessibility is anti-Platonic because of the doctrine of participation: "(But did not the Platonic sun already enlighten the visible sun? ... Plato's sun does not only enlighten: it engenders. The good is the father of the visible sun which provides living beings with 'creation, growth, and

---

<sup>48</sup> Plato, *Republic*, trans. Alan Bloom, 509b.

nourishment.’...)’ (VM 86) The ability of certain living things, namely, philosophers, to notice the engendering of created things by the Good is proof that these relate to each other and thus must not be absolutely exterior to one another. If I can choose whether or not to order my life after the Good, I can relate to the Good as a tool for managing my affairs in an immanent world.

So, on Derrida’s view, a symmetrical relation of same and other matters for ethics, and the ‘Greek tradition’ posits and explains this relation. Plato shows us that what is transcendent and what is immanent are really one and the same insofar as they explain justice, and the doctrine of our ability to manipulate this sameness would enthrone Parmenides as the Greek philosophical king. The Greek tradition explains this relationship first in terms of the theoretical relation, a model that culminates in Husserl. It does so secondly in ontology, the active search for an adequate description of Being such that it is an accurate category under which same and other could fall. This model culminates in Heidegger. Both of these views achieve a relation of the same and the other, and Derrida demonstrates that this is what makes them Platonic. They would agree that the idea of the Good “engenders” the mediated forms of the good we see in experience. Derrida aligns himself with this tradition by assuming that the transcendent needs to be manipulated before it can speak.

But this is not a worthwhile theory of transcendence for Levinas, who insists on a radicalization of the term “beyond”. If something is truly Other, it cannot be subsumed under the categories of the Same without violent repression of the Other’s meaning. So Levinas must be opposed to any tradition that says the name “beyond” without

understanding it, or without understanding that I cannot understand the beyond.

Derrida's belief that the "enlightenment" of Plato's sun is the same as its "engendering" is an aggregation of two separate historical Platonisms. Levinas opposes the first, in which the light of being founds ethics as it shines in the theoretical relationship, and as it makes ethics amenable to the gaze and comprehension of a separated being. He calls us to a return to another kind of Platonism: Socrates' teaching that the Good engenders ethics and inspires the philosopher. The relation of engendering cannot be accounted for as a phenomenological or ontological relation; this is where Levinas differs from Husserl and Heidegger. Derrida, however, misunderstands engendering as an ontological concept, comprehensible and manipulable by the philosopher. If this were true, Gyges could engender an ethical world of his own, and could be justified in his heinous crimes. Separation would be equally as true as relation, and the asymmetry Levinas discovers between me and the Other would be lost.

Derrida improperly distinguishes between Levinas and Plato by the way they conceive of the preposition "beyond". For Plato, metaphysics is beyond ontology in such a way that it can guarantee what is real. The philosopher can have access to what is beyond being by reason, which is ultimately passive to the structure of the Good. For Levinas, the Good beyond being is absolutely beyond, and we are incapable of entering into relation with it, but this does not mean that it cannot enter into relation with us. 'Engendering' is a good description of this one-way relation. Levinas' invocation of the idea of infinity and of the Good as phenomena that overflow their own phenomenality, the synthetic ego, and the totalizing thought of the same is Platonism, even if it opposes the scientific Platonism

that Derrida assumes. We can perceive the Good and infinity, but only because our intellect is originally inspired into existence by these ideas. The Same depends on the Other, but the Other does not depend on the same.

#### **2.4 Comprehensibility: Case Studies in Light and Science**

The most obvious manifestation of the asymmetry in Levinas' thought as it is inspired by Plato's Good is in terms of comprehensibility, or manipulability, or amenability to use. Transcendence, for Levinas, is the escape from a world of comprehension to a world where I am passive and impotent. Derrida's critique of transcendence has demonstrated that there is a relation between these two worlds. In his opinion, this relation is sufficient to expose transcendence as a delusion. Levinas escapes this critique, however, because he admits an asymmetrical relation between Same and Other such that the Other's call to do the Good is irreducible to a manipulable object of my experience. I will demonstrate that Levinas' understanding of inspiration as what decreases my power to act is what separates Levinas and Derrida. Their disagreement is manifest in their differing readings of light and science.

We have discussed Derrida's claim that the metaphor of light is foundational for Western philosophy, since it is by light that we experience phenomena, know being, or illuminate the world. But Derrida sees that Levinas makes a fundamental break with philosophies of light, since "everything given to me within light appears as given to myself by myself." (VM 92) To renounce egoism is to give up on light as the founding metaphor of philosophy. But Plato insists that light is good in the myth of the cave, where the weakly shining light of the fire inside the cave is at the same time a tool of the oppression of the

prisoners' minds and an analogue or prefiguration of the light of the real sun that gives us real knowledge of things as they are. Therefore, Levinas, insofar as he rejects Husserlian consciousness and Heideggerian being, also rejects the metaphorical value and explanatory power of light. Finally, this rejection seems to indicate an absolute impasse between Levinas and Plato.

According to Derrida's conspiracy theory, Levinas would be using light as a criterion of philosophical truth just in order to show how empty such a criterion is. Derrida argues that this happens in Levinas' use of the face as a trope for the ethical: "What language will ever escape [light]? How, for example, will the metaphysics of the face as the *epiphany* of the other free itself of light?" (VM 92) That the face is seen, that it reveals itself, and that I must acknowledge it as existing all require the presence of light.

Levinas answers this question by insisting that if light is the totalizing metaphor for philosophy, infinity breaches this totality. The face comes before theory, and is thus a "revelation": "*the absolute experience is not disclosure but revelation, a coinciding of the expressed with him who expresses, which is the privileged manifestation of the Other, the manifestation of a face over and beyond form.*" (TI 66) The face does not need light to be seen and does not depend on a relation of disclosure. In fact, Levinas has defined the face in such a way that it undermines the phenomenological model of consciousness as disclosure. The face is the condition for the possibility of disclosure in that it throws my comprehensive abilities to create my own world into question.

Already in *Totality and Infinity*, before the publication of "Violence and Metaphysics", Levinas distances himself from light as the metaphor for the Other. In

*Otherwise than Being*, Levinas chooses the tropes of substitution and of election to indicate that the Other is in the Same in the form of a election to the Good. Ethics self-evidently, non-conventionally, and transcendently assigns us to the side of the Good, and the knowledge of our election to care for the good is revealed to us in a trace, which exceeds phenomenon and reason. The revelation of the face does not depend on my looking - it comes to me without my permission. Therefore, our election does not depend on the light of theory.

The next example of manipulability as the key characteristic that differentiates Levinas from Derrida concerns Husserl's philosophy as the guarantor of science. The adoption of Husserlian analysis and technique, an adoption that Derrida terms a 'borrowing of a tool' is something that Levinas admits. Although he wishes to break with the phenomenological tradition, Levinas starts with Husserl's language and techniques in his analyses. Derrida's critical question is why Levinas would begin philosophizing this way if a critique of Husserl is one of his goals. "Now, what the phenomenological method refers to, explicitly and in the last analysis (and this would be too easy to show), is Western philosophy's decision, since Plato, to consider itself as science, as theory; that is, precisely as that which Levinas wishes to put into question by the ways and means of phenomenology." (VM 118)

The problem in Derrida's interpretation is a misnaming of Levinas' opponents: Levinas is not opposing all of Plato, but only a particular Platonism as we inherit it from Husserl and Heidegger. The problem, as Levinas sees it, is not Platonism, but scientific Platonism, the kind that aims at comprehending being in the phenomenological relation.



Even this would not be so odious to Levinas' ethic if it did not claim a total perspective and therefore repress the Other. This is why Levinas' critique of the phenomenological *ego*, which cannot exist as an intentional ego when it is addressed by the Other, is not enough to prevent him from using phenomenological methods. These methods allow us to discover the Other in its concrete form as the face, even if the moment of this discovery is also the moment at which I discover that my intentionality is undone by an object that overwhelms my consciousness.

Light and science allow us to see the distinction between an instrumental and an inspired Platonism. Derrida assumes that these are equal but this assumption leads him into trouble in identifying how Levinas functions between the poles of Hebraism and Hellenism. In fact, Levinas argues that inspiration by the transcendent differs from comprehension of the transcendent. Derrida's assumption that all philosophy must be done with "tools" leads him to a place of ambiguity, where Levinas' final value is unnameable. He remains stuck in the paradox I identified in section 1.0. I will demonstrate that this commitment to comprehension as the defining characteristic of philosophical truth is the reason that Derrida must characterize Levinas as a Hebrew assassin who shakes philosophy by destroying Parmenides, its king.

## **2.5 Conclusions**

The Platonic metaphor of parricide clarifies the ambiguity and the incoherence that Derrida admits in his essay, and is the clearest instance of opposition between instrumental and inspired Platonism. In Chapter 3 I will argue that a narrowing in focus and a reinstatement of Levinas' Platonic inspiration in *Otherwise than Being* results from

Derrida's conspiracy theory. For now, I will attempt to find the bias towards comprehension in Derrida's use of Plato's *Sophist*.

In the *Sophist*, the stranger from Elea arrives to lecture in Athens about who the Sophist is. Socrates, an old man by now, listens in silence while the stranger develops the classification of the Sophist as an angler who catches men with ideas, selling the appearance of virtue for money. The stranger then discovers the difficulty of defining "appearance" since likeness is both like and unlike what it refers to. In some ways it is the same as its object, and in other ways it is different from it. The sophist's virtue is both like and unlike virtue, so it is and is not virtuous at the same time.

This logical contradiction is normally enough for an entire chain of reasoning to be declared absurd, but the stranger does not give up. Since it is empirically obvious that there is a difference between a true philosopher and a sophist, the apparent wisdom and virtue of the Sophist must be real; i.e., the appearance of virtue must exist, even if only as an appearance. The stranger is then able to show that being and not-being are not opposites but rather a relation, and can both exist at the same time. This relation of being and non-being grounds a relation of seeming. "Thus, in spite of Parmenides, we have not only discovered the existence, but also the nature of not-being—that nature we have found to be relation."<sup>49</sup>

But what this constitutes is a parricide of Parmenides, the stranger's teacher, whose poem warns us against thinking not-being: "never shall this thought prevail, that

---

<sup>49</sup> Plato, *Sophist*, trans. Benjamin Jowett, 258d.

not-being is; Nay, keep your mind from this path of investigation”<sup>50</sup>. The stranger is stuck proposing that not-being is not the opposite of being but is rather in relation with being. This break is a “parricide” of “our Father Parmenides”<sup>51</sup>, and a fundamental breach of logic, but it must hold true if there is such a thing as appearance.

This reading of *the Sophist* is meant to lend support to Derrida’s interpretation of Levinas as the philosopher who can finally accomplish the parricide of Parmenides. The stranger, like the other for Levinas, undoes the logic by which the self makes sense of being. This undoing of the self by the other is the generative source of ethics for Levinas. The undoing of sameness and unity by what is other would be the only escape from Parmenides.

The weapons for this parricide, Derrida thinks, are “asymmetry, non-light, and commandment”. These would be “violence and injustice themselves” (VM 108) if Levinas could not invoke God as the guarantor of the efficacy of metaphysics *qua* ethics. But Levinas’ God is present “as separation, presence-absence -- again the break with Parmenides”. This God, who could be named the presence of separation, or difference, guarantees both that our parricide will be effective *and that* we will not have a world of violence and injustice. We see Derrida finally admitting here that Levinas’ is not a complete break with the Greek tradition, since, even in the terms of Derrida’s own conspiracy theory, he is committed to God as the guarantor of the *manipulability* of the Hebraic parricidal weapons. Levinas simultaneously needs the Greek control and

---

<sup>50</sup> Parmenides, Fragment 7.1. Translated by John Burnet.

<sup>51</sup> Plato, *Sophist*, trans. Benjamin Jowett, 241d.

comprehensive ability of tool-making and the Hebraic weapons of transcendence and commandment to destroy Parmenides. Although Derrida's use of the modifier "Hebraic" would not be the first way Levinas would describe God's role in philosophy, it is another way of stating the transcendence that we are supposed to rely on in the Levinasian system.

I have argued that Levinas' Platonism consists in his definition of inspiration, which undoes my comprehensive powers. But Derrida argues that if philosophy cannot acknowledge the Other unless it escapes from Parmenides, this escape must be a regicide. Because regicide needs weapons, and because weapons need manipulability if they are not to destroy the one who uses them, Levinas must invoke God as the guarantor of comprehension, which contradicts his Platonic inspiration.

This paradox lends the whole of *Violence and Metaphysics* a tentative character, since Derrida must decide when Levinas is using Parmenidean logic as he inherits it from Husserl and Heidegger, and at which moments he is shaking the foundations of this logic. Derrida himself admits that "we will not choose between the opening and the totality. Therefore we will be incoherent, but without systematically resigning ourselves to incoherence." (VM 84) There is perhaps "very little - almost nothing" (VM 80) that Derrida can do to identify a positive Levinasian contribution to ethics that does not end in this paradox.

The problem with Derrida's agnostic approach is its presupposition that the only escape from Parmenides is a violent overthrow of the ontology of an other. Parmenides is seen as the progenitor of totalizing thinking, and this means that in Derrida's adversarial model Levinas must destroy him. However, this reading ignores key Platonic moments in

Levinas' work. The first is Levinas' wholesale endorsement of Plato, which continues throughout his career in spite of Derrida's critique. Derrida calls Husserl and Heidegger the heirs of Plato, but this is an unsustainable aggregation given the inspired Platonism Levinas has identified. Further, Platonic philosophy as exemplified in the characters of the *Parmenides*, namely, Socrates, the stranger, and Parmenides, is opposed to the theoretical relation as it is developed in Husserl. This is because the concern of these characters for justice, the good, wisdom, and the beyond cannot be understood as a theoretical concern. Instead, they are concerned with these themes because they come to us from beyond the borders of the Same and the manipulability inherent in this sameness. Levinas' use of Plato consistently avoids the theoretical and ontological developments of Husserl in favour of an embodied Platonism that emphasizes passivity to the Good in inspiration. Instead of a regicide, achieved by using the Hebraic meaning of God to undo Parmenides' world, Levinas sees himself as a martyr. Levinas does not claim that the Good persecutes Parmenides but rather identifies the the persecuted one as the Same, or me. Persecution is expressed as inspiration or possession, where the Other destroys my apparent ability to constitute a world of being.

Derrida's understanding of 'Platonism', in which Husserl and Heidegger basically say the same thing as Levinas and in which intentionality and Dasein both amount to letting the other be as itself, can be seen as a ruse or disguise or borrowed weapon by which Levinas is going to assassinate Parmenides. But Levinas has never wavered from his claim that these two thinkers are only one form of Platonism, called the "Western tradition", which emphasizes the manipulability of the world. Gyges is the example of

this tradition. Another form of Platonism, consistently maintained throughout Levinas' oeuvre, gives him numerous tropes for how the world is passive to and inspired by the Good beyond being. These tropes and their development into a philosophy of my body and my responsibility are our concern for the next chapter of the present work.

Derrida's work is of value in highlighting the ways in which Plato has been interpreted as the founding father of a theoretical mode of thinking that posits the existence of a subject, an object, and a relation of mutual being between the two. However, this Platonism is inconsistent with the passivity that Levinas takes to be central to responsibility. Where Derrida challenges Levinas to identify a "beyond" while remaining philosophical, Levinas answers with Plato's Good.<sup>52</sup>

---

<sup>52</sup> cf. *TI* 103, *OTB* 123.

### **Chapter 3:**

#### **Inspiration as Persecution: Levinas' response to Derrida in *Otherwise than Being***

“Violence and Metaphysics” compels us to choose one of two options: either Levinas is actively pursuing a Hebraic parricide of Greek thought or he is passively inspired by Plato. But even though Derrida begins his essay by explaining these choices as the polarity between Hellenism and Hebraism, and between which culture inevitably hovers, he ends by citing James Joyce, who knows that “Greekjew is Jewgreek”. The reason he ends with ambiguity is first because Levinas' approach to Plato and the Hebraic tradition cannot easily be pigeonholed, but second and more importantly because Derrida has ignored the defining characteristics of the Platonism that Levinas always maintains. I have shown that this Platonism opposes Gyges in the name of the inspiration of the Same by the Other, but Derrida wants to convince us that Gyges' control over the world is the only escape from Parmenides.

At the very least Derrida has demonstrated that Levinas can make Platonism as it is exemplified in Husserl and Heidegger tremble. I have shown that Levinas holds another kind of Platonism, which is inspired by the transcendent and which emphasizes passivity. But the question remains whether or not Levinas can build a philosophy of his own from the absolute passivity of inspiration. It is only if we can answer this question in the affirmative that we can posit a lasting Levinasian contribution to philosophy that is not just a repetition of Platonic inspiration in phenomenological terms or a simple re-reading of Plato's ethics that ignores its basic problems. I will argue that Levinas' late philosophy

constitutes an inspired departure from Plato. His goal is to re-orient ethics as an experience in my body and his method is an appeal to Plato's vision of the Good, which breaks in on me and commands me to be responsible. The departure from and appeal to Plato coexist, because, as I have emphasized, inspiration does not preclude critique.

I will also demonstrate the Platonic responses to Derrida in Levinas' *Otherwise than Being*. This demonstration is proof that Levinas owes a philosophical debt to Plato that is not just an appropriation of terms and figures but a claim that Plato has seen something real, a Good beyond being which opposes Derrida's reading of the history of philosophy and of Levinas. The conceptual discoveries of Plato speak to Levinas, who thinks they describe the presence of the Other in the Same, a presence whose possibility we discovered as inspired by the Other in chapter 2. I will demonstrate that Levinas exceeds Plato by his re-reading the story of the death of Hercules in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* in order to show that the body is the locus of my relationship to the Other. Insofar as Derrida misses the point of Levinas' focus on Plato by constructing a critique that ignores the concept of the Good and the responsibility in embodied life that it engenders, Levinas is able to hold onto his Platonism and reaffirm transcendence. Insofar as Plato is complicit with a tradition that seeks to grasp the Other, Levinas must pare away his Platonism in order to exceed this tradition and remain inspired by the Good.

This paring away notwithstanding, Levinas persists in looking to Plato for his inspiration. I will argue that Levinas's work is still based on a final and indissoluble commitment to Plato. This commitment is evinced in his use of a theory of causality that



emerges from Plato's *Timaeus*, and allows Levinas' reasoning to produce written philosophy in spite of his critiques of manipulability, rationality, and ego.

### **3.1 Plato's Failures**

We can see a significant sharpening of Levinas' Platonism in *Otherwise than Being*. Because of Derrida's critique, Levinas has distanced himself from Platonism as represented by Husserl and Heidegger and narrowed his focus to one Platonic doctrine: that of the Good beyond being. Levinas must take a more critical approach to Plato than we have seen him do in *Totality and Infinity*. According to Levinas this is because, even in his late work, Plato has not gone far enough in letting the Good beyond being inspire him. "Among the five 'genera' of the *Sophist* a genus opposed to being is lacking, even though since the *Republic* there had been question of what is beyond essence." (OTB, 3) As Levinas has noted in *Totality and Infinity*, Plato has seen just a flash, as if only by a stroke of lightning, of the Good beyond being. He is at fault for ignoring this vision in his metaphysics.

Levinas' attitude to Plato has changed: the vision of being's other in *Republic* has not been formally stated in *Sophist*, and this lack of formalization is Plato's failure. Plato has not allowed his philosophy to be inspired by the Good. The stranger in *Sophist* does see that "after a fashion not-being is and on the other hand in a sense being is not." (*Sophist* 241d). But Plato makes a commitment only a few pages earlier that "to speak of "something" in the abstract, naked, as it were, and disconnected from all beings is impossible, is it not?" (237d). The "something" of non-being, posited against Parmenides, is not accepted for what it is: the inspiration we need to break free from the preeminence

of ontology. Plato remains stuck at this point, unable to speak philosophically because of his tacit commitment to Parmenides' logic.

Insofar as Levinas argues that we can speak of being's other, he is admitting Plato's impotence and is finally turning the tyranny of ontology in upon itself. The pretension of being to express the Good can only be exposed as false by a philosopher who can speak about what is beyond being. Levinas purports to be this philosopher, and this claim sets him at odds with Plato, whose philosophy remains impotent. Levinas therefore admits that Derrida is right that Plato could never go far enough to destroy Parmenides. I will demonstrate this by focussing on Plato's failures in language and in essence as they are described in *Otherwise than Being*.

### **3.1.1 The 'Saying' or the 'Said'**

Levinas' first weapon against Parmenides is a distinction between "saying" and "the said" (*OTB* 5). Our positivist bias makes it seem like every 'saying' can be congealed, immobilized, or comprehended in the 'said'. Our approach to philosophy belies this when we propositionalize arguments and proceed from what we have said to what these premises commit us to. If language manifested itself as pure propositional speech, in which every sentence must posit a state of affairs, it would be a system of "saids" in which every word could be used, comprehended, and made rhetorical. Levinas posits the condition of the possibility of the said: the saying. "Antecedent to the verbal signs it conjugates, to the linguistic systems and the semantic glimmerings, a foreword preceding languages, it is the proximity of one to the other, the commitment of an approach, the one for the other, the very signifyingness of signification." (*OTB* 5) The two differ in that

the said has been fated to express essence and to be bound by Parmenidean logic; statements express states of being, and in this expression the law of non-contradiction applies such that non-being cannot be. Plato sees, in *Sophist* 237d, that not-being is, but cannot accept that this is the weapon with which he can disabuse spectacular ontology of its supremacist claims. Levinas experiences the reality of what is beyond essence, and wants to use saying - the speech between the same and the other in proximity - as a method of making this reality philosophical.

Levinas proceeds by interrogating ontology to find the conditions of its possibility, conditions which are inescapably pluralist and thus transcendent to the immanent world of the Same. Then he radicalizes these conditions and reintroduces them into the practical ethical thinking we have to do to see that ethics is not an illusion. With respect to the saying and the said, Levinas thinks that Plato should have used a similar distinction to escape the comprehensive grasp of being. It was Plato, after all, who discovered that the Good is beyond even being in dialogue, in the saying of the other. To have discovered the beyond but to refuse to accept the risk of responsibility by saying it is Plato's greatest problem. He remains as silent as Gyges, unwilling to say the inspiration of the Good in the structure of the world. Levinas seeks to push philosophy forward by saying this inspiration. By 'saying' it, he hopes to demonstrate that there is a difference between our philosophical speech about the Good and that which is about being. 'Saying' preserves the risk of a relation to the Good and does not allow it to congeal into an object of predication, and therefore is a responsible answer to inspiration.

### **3.1.2 Essence**

Essence is also problematic for Levinas. It means the comprehensibility of a thing, its susceptibility to use in the world of being controlled by Gyges. Recall our discussion of the Same as Levinas exposts it in *Totality and Infinity*: the Same is primarily a living from . . . , a being “chez soi”, at home with itself. To set oneself up in one’s home is to use the elements of nature for the benefit and comfort of the Same. This kind of use depends on a perception of the essence of nature: what it’s good for, its comprehensibility.

Levinas’ “use” thus differs from Heidegger’s, in which a tool in use is forgotten as the tool user forgets the question of his own being in his work. For Levinas, the use of tools is a fundamental self-defining act for the being *chez soi*, an act by which it learns to be self-same and to see the otherness inherent in the world as an opportunity for self-identification. Essence is at the very least complicit in the abuse of the Other by Gyges, who seeks to cheat the system. The free and carefree I needs essence to use the world around it. By perceiving essence I can make a tool or a resource of otherness, and can live from the otherness of the other and forget his absolute claim. To respond to the call of the Other by Desire is to deny that essence is the final meaning of the Other, and thus to be inspired by the Other. Inspiration is therefore different in kind from the knowledge of essence presupposed by Gyges.

### **3.1.3 Maieutics**

In Chapter 1 I discussed the critique of Socratic Maieutics that is explicit in Levinas’ Desire for the Other. Because ethics is an adventure, a “fine risk to be run”, we cannot end the journey before it begins by predicting exactly what will be discovered in our Desire for the Other. Levinas is therefore opposed to Plato’s *Meno*, where what we

know is spuriously proven to be memory. The critique of maieutics we uncovered in *Totality and Infinity* is continued and sharpened in *Otherwise than Being* by a shift in focus to a philosophy of unrest and disturbance. In this work, Levinas claims that there can be no rest *chez soi* when the Other awakens me to my responsibilities. Therefore, a new theory of knowledge, which I discussed above in the introduction as ‘trace’, emerges. The concepts trace, signification, and proximity arise from the failures of Husserl and Heidegger to explain the responsible body.

The revelation of the Other expressed by these concepts is always already closer to me than I am to myself, like a skin that I wear by virtue of being my body. Skin becomes Levinas’ word for the experience of proximity. We can make sense of this by thinking about the experience of meeting a beggar. In this instance, I feel physical effects of my duty to the other without actually touching the Other. The face enters my own body as a revelation of my duty that cannot be denied. We will discuss this further below. For now, the important characteristic of the face is that it puts my projects and my ability to define myself at risk. Levinas finds this risk in the project of philosophy itself, and finds its Platonic inspiration in the *Phaedrus*. Levinas’ refined appreciation of Plato can be seen in how he opposes maieutics in the name of the risk of drama.

Levinas conceives of *Otherwise than Being* as one act in the continuing drama of philosophy. For philosophy to be a drama is not for it to have a beginning, middle, and end, as Aristotle might have us believe. Instead, like ethics, philosophy is a risk. Because we do not know what will happen next, philosophy makes us part of a drama. Western thought from Plato’s *anamnesis* to Hegel’s dialectic has posited that a resolution to our

questions must come for no other reason than that we have a question and that we set out to answer it. Levinas opposes this structure on the grounds that the Infinite and the Good are genuine discoveries, that is to say, they could not have been predicted and no aim or intention of the philosopher could influence their insistent way of breaking in on philosophy.

Instead, “philosophy arouses a drama between philosophers and an intersubjective movement which does not resemble the Platonic dialogue, which is the reminiscence of a drama rather than a drama itself.” (*OTB*, 20) Levinas is suspicious that Plato’s writing might miss the truth of dialogue, just as Socrates would be. In *Phaedrus*, Socrates shows that writing, instead of being a divine gift, is a crutch for people who cannot remember reality itself, or a tool for the hobby gardener by which the seeds of ideas are planted and grow flowers but never produce a useful crop.<sup>53</sup> The reminiscence of Platonic dialogues has none of the risk, and answers none of the questions, that are put to me by the Other. Therefore they form a totality.

But Plato obviously knew about this criticism of his failure to account for learning about something other than my own essence. His escape comes in the form of real dialogue, which, to be sure, is sedimented in the written *Phaedrus*, but which was a real risk for Phaedrus, the young man Socrates reasons with. After all, he is trying to decide whether or not he should trust Lysias’ rhetoric, and Socrates’ arguments have real consequences in that Phaedrus might give his love to a man who does not love him in return if Socrates does not succeed. The question of whether the non-lover or the lover is

---

<sup>53</sup> Plato, *Phaedrus*, 276d.

more to be loved does not presuppose or contain its own answer, contrary to Aristotle's dramatic structure and its philosophical progeny, and contrary to the aloof perspective assumed by a composed dialogue such as the *Phaedrus*. Levinas' point is that Plato must distinguish speech from writing in order to preserve a difference between the adventurous philosophy of Phaedrus and the predictably written, narrated and composed dialogue that bears his name.

Levinas sees himself as running the risk we see Phaedrus run: the preface to *Otherwise than Being*, in which this discussion of drama appears, is a work in itself that plays a role in questioning the rest of the book, as Richard Cohen notes about the preface to *Totality and Infinity*.<sup>54</sup> That Levinas identifies philosophy, not writing, as that which arouses drama, and that he does so in a preface which already questions his own completed text, mean that he is trying to run the risks that philosophy has tended to avoid. Levinas uses the same technique as Plato in attempting to escape the force of his own critiques of the said - pointing out that the said can testify to a saying that is a "fine risk". In Plato's parlance, written letters can help us reminisce about what we should really remember: justice and the good for our erotic relationships, in *Phaedrus*.

In opposition to Socrates' maieutics, Levinas enlists Platonic "drama itself" as a risk more risky than childbirth, which (on his account) produces only that with which we are already familiar. Pivotaly, this drama begins before being. "The 'birth' of being in the questioning where the cognitive subject stands would thus refer to a *before the questioning*, to the anarchy of responsibility, as it were on this side of all birth." (*OTB* 26) We are,

---

<sup>54</sup> Richard Cohen, *Elevations: The Height of the Good in Rosenzweig and Levinas*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994. Page 224.

undeniably, cognitive subjects who have to deal with being. However, this is not enough to rule out the possibility that the birth of being refers originally to something other than itself. Levinas argues that the risk referred to by the birth of being is on *this side* of birth; it is immanent to life, in the language of *Totality and Infinity*. This means that reminiscence, the recollection of what was made by the same in a hitherto forgotten past, is a false otherness. Plato's maieutics cannot explain the birth of the otherwise than being, which always already happens before consciousness. Levinas again opposes the totalizing force of recollection precisely because it fails its own test: truth recollected is only a false image of truth when recollection aims at that which I did not experience but which constitutes my ethical Desire; this is the truth of inspiration.

### **3.2 Response to Derrida on the Ambiguity of Levinas' Platonism**

Plato's failures contribute to the sense of ambiguity that Derrida identifies in Levinas' work. The first ambiguity nascent in Levinas' Platonic transcendence is expressed in terms of light. For Derrida, the fact that Plato's light of being engenders the visible sun in a relation proves that transcendence is a concept that is much more difficult to accept than Levinas had let on in *Totality and Infinity*. In Derrida's eyes, absolute transcendence means that relation is impossible, and real relation means that absolute transcendence is impossible. Plato's light of being unifies the realm of the forms and the visible world such that real knowledge can exist in the here below. Because of this, Derrida purports to show that Levinas' insistence on the absolute transcendence of the Other is at the very least illogical and probably impossible. Most of all, absolute transcendence is inconsistent with and dangerous to Greek thought, which Plato wanted to escape but remained inside.



In order to address these ambiguities, Levinas introduces new terms in *Otherwise than Being*, terms that he thinks push the debate about transcendence forward. One of these terms is signification, which is a model of knowledge that is directly opposed to comprehensive ontology as discussed above. The relation of the arbitrary signifier to a signified which is not immediately accessible to the glance or revealed by light is named signification. Levinas wants a term for the “fine risks” of communication, which does not always succeed, especially when the communication in question is with the Other. “The other calls upon that sensibility with a vocation that wounds, calls upon an irrevocable responsibility, and thus the very identity of a subject. Signification is witness or martyrdom. It is intelligibility before light, before the present of the initiative with which that signification of logos in its present, in its synchrony, signifies being.”(OTB 78) An epistemology and a philosophy of language whereby we should never expect that our knowing and our language match up perfectly with reality results from Levinas’ ‘signification’. This emphasis on the risk and failure experienced by the I is the response to Derrida’s critique. Levinas is aware that his philosophy fails to reduce the Other to an object of his experience, and is aware that his responsibility, which nevertheless persists, is “martyrdom”. Instead of as an assassin, Levinas sees himself as a martyr, who is persecuted to death by the Other. This martyrdom is wrapped up in his understanding of language, which I receive as a gift from the Other and cannot constitute myself.

Socratic maieutics, which we discussed in chapter 1, is opposed to signification not in that it presumes to teach a truth to another but in that it locates the truth in the Same, in the immanent world of the self. If this were true, I should be able to remember the

truth by reasoning well. Signification, on the other hand, finds teachable truth in the relationship with the Other, who teaches me what I have never known and cannot grasp without a relationship to the Other.

What is the relation between signification and the Platonic metaphor of light? This metaphor is the locus of Derrida's critique, since the light of the intelligible sun and of the Good shines on the comprehensible world in such a way that absolute otherness seems suspect. Levinas basically opposes the concepts of signification and light to each other. Embodied sensibility to the call of the other means that "no escape is possible with impunity". The experience of ethics in the body assigns us irrevocably to the Good, and Levinas contends that the Good remains intelligible even though it precedes the light of being. The call of the other, identified by sensibility as signification, precedes the whole order of light. Light is a tool of ontology: it is necessary, but it presupposes a relation with the Other, which demonstrates that light cannot come first in a systematic ethics. Inspiration by an other is presupposed by light.

### **3.3 Otherwise than Husserl and Heidegger**

Levinas believes that the Good that is revealed in the face is transcendent, even though it is present before the gaze in light and therefore seems to fit the ontological and comprehensible characteristics of Sameness. We've seen that for Derrida this is untenable given Levinas' reliance on Husserl and Heidegger. This reliance, however, wanes in importance in *Otherwise than Being*, in which the critiques of Husserl and Heidegger I discuss in chapter 2 are reaffirmed and adapted as a response to Derrida.

Derrida's account of this critique is as follows: Husserl, who claims to bracket questions of selfhood as unanswerable, presupposes an *ego* that is conscious of the being of things. This ego is foundational for phenomenology, which depends on the perceptive faculties of a perceiving being. If the Other is perceived by an ego, it is not truly Other because perception of the Other's being depends in the first place on perception of the Same's being.<sup>55</sup> Since Levinas' "otherness" cannot abide the association of the Other and the Same under the categories of being, Husserl has not seen true and absolute otherness.

Heidegger, who tries to reintroduce the question of being to the history of philosophy, does little to escape the totalization of same and other under the reign of being. The fact that Dasein asks itself about its being does not mean that it overcomes a fundamental association of same with other - in fact, this active questioning can only accept as its answer that your being and my being are the same insofar as we both are authentically Dasein. Though Heidegger sees in death the particularization of being such that I can only die my "ownmost" death and such that this death is ultimately *different* from the death of the other, his focus on the question of being leaves him inside Parmenidean ontology.<sup>56</sup> He remains Parmenidean, and the difference between the death of the Other and that of the Same is a moot point given the conceptual apparatus at work in this scheme.

Derrida's critique depends on the presence of what I have called a comprehensive ontology that is supposed to motivate Levinas' thought. If Derrida could have

---

<sup>55</sup> Edmund Husserl, *The Shorter Logical Investigations*, trans. J.N. Findlay, ed. Dermot Moran (London: Routledge, 1970) 205.

<sup>56</sup> Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 307.

demonstrated this presupposition, then Levinas would have a hard time proceeding because he is simultaneously affirming and denying the methods by which he proceeds. But Levinas has significantly narrowed the focus of his Platonic inspiration since introducing this critique of his philosophical forebears. *Otherwise than Being*, in its focus on my body as the testimony to my debts to the other, develops the critique of Husserl and Heidegger in carnal terms. After demonstrating that this critique is embodied, I will show that it can still be seen as inspired by Plato.

Levinas explains Husserl's doxic thesis as "the element of intentionality which, according to Husserl, thinks of objects as existing. It is because each act of consciousness includes a doxic thesis that the objects of these acts - values, useful objects, or aesthetic objects - exist".<sup>57</sup> Moreover, the doxic thesis functions to "embed [any body] in the system of significations that figure in the said." (*OTB*, 76) Against Husserl, Levinas posits that "proximity, however, does not 'think of objects as existing'" in this way. Instead, in proximity "the sensible experience of the body is already and from the start incarnate." (*OTB* 76) Husserl's way of predicating being or existence of the objects that I experience phenomenally brackets skeptical questions about the efficacy of knowledge by relocating science within human experience of phenomena. The being of things is synthesized as a secondary movement, determined by the appearances that manifest themselves to me. But Levinas thinks that proximity, incarnated in the inescapability of my body, renders this bracketing ineffective. The question of my own embodiment, a question put to me by the other in "proximity", (*OTB* 138) cannot be answered by

---

<sup>57</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *The Theory of Intuition in Husserl's Phenomenology*, trans. Andre Orianne, 2nd ed. (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1995) 134.

Husserl's phenomenology. Indeed, it cannot be answered at all, because it has to remain the cause of my inability to finally come to terms with the Other. This inability was expressed earlier by the term Desire, but now Levinas has located this kind of Desire in the body, which is irrevocably in proximity to what transcends it.

Heidegger, too, is answered this time with a critique based on embodiment. As before, Levinas notes that Dasein depends on "comprehension", because "technological activity itself is openness, discovery of Being, even if in the mode of forgetting of being." (*OTB*, 80) Levinas' first critique of Heidegger rests on the fact that 'letting beings be' is not an adequate escape from the preeminence of ontology. The same and the other can be subsumed under the category of being, and therefore this category merits our suspicion if it purports to found an ethics. Heidegger points out exactly what Husserl cannot: that being is a fundamental question of philosophy. The skeptical question returns *ad infinitum*, in spite of Husserl's attempts to make philosophical questions remain in the immanent world of our experience. But Heidegger's skepticism does not go all the way down to a radical empiricism like the kind Derrida identifies in Levinas: "an entity *counts* only on the basis of knowing, of appearing, of phenomenology". (*OTB* 80, my emphasis) Ontology's totalizing grip and purported comprehension of everything confound Heidegger insofar as he cannot admit the slippage and restlessness we experience as bodies *and* maintain his insistence that we should ask ourselves the question of our being.

This slippage is Levinas' way of describing the condition of the body such that it is sensible to the signification of the other. "Sensibility is not reabsorbed... it is vulnerability, susceptibility, denuding, circumscribed and concerned by the other, irreducible to the

appearing of the other.” (*OTB* 80) The critique of Heidegger and Husserl is really the same, even though they find themselves at either end of the ontological/phenomenological spectrum. Because the body is the locus of slippage in time and in intentional perception of the world, both phenomenology and an ontology are equally susceptible to a skeptical critique. Skepticism is roughly the same as carnal empiricism in its relationship to ontology and phenomenology. What is supposed to be the guarantee of philosophical truth is not known by my body’s finitude with respect to the infinite character of my responsibility, and therefore Levinas must be skeptical of it.

Derrida has missed the point of Levinas’ appeal to experience even though he was the first to be able to name this empiricism as such. The body’s incommensurability with metaphysics is proof of my passivity to the other and the good. The only reason I cannot avoid the fact of the other’s need/command is my body, which keeps me passively stuck in my place, in my Sameness, and stuck as a term across a separation from the Other. This passivity is my passivity to the Good. Because Derrida’s critique is concerned only with showing the impossibility of transcendence and not with the Good or the Other that *de facto* transcends me, Levinas can escape this critique and continue his project in *Otherwise than Being* as a meditation on embodied responsibility, the call of the Other in the Same. The good and the infinite, Plato’s and Descartes’ most valuable glimpses of the beyond, guarantee transcendence precisely because they are experienced in a finite body. The embodied experience of otherness guarantees the truth of transcendence even though it is philosophically undefinable.

### **3.4 Plato’s Thread**

So far, I have shown that Levinas has retained a narrow Platonic focus by defending truth as the ‘saying’ that persistently inspires me, and that he has developed a philosophy of the body that opposes Husserl and Heidegger. I will further demonstrate that Levinas is philosophically innovative because he takes up Plato’s metaphor of thread, which demonstrates the binding power of the Fates over individual souls as told in *Republic*. He weaves these threads into what he calls the “Nessus tunic”, a poisoned shirt that disturbs my rest in myself. In the final movement, which unites his philosophy of the body and inspiration, he declares that this tunic is my skin. What results is a definition of my body such that the repressive side of Plato’s ontological bias is made to weigh only on me, in my responsibility. Like Hercules, I am destroyed by my body, which holds me captive to the Other.

### **3.4.1 Thread, the Gordian Knot, and the Nessus Shirt**

The trope of thread and weaving is a device we find scattered throughout *Otherwise than Being*. I will trace its detailed progression in this section, with the goal of discovering Levinas’ philosophical inspiration and the construction on Plato that he undertakes. He begins with a reference to the Greek Fates, who appear in book 10 of Plato’s *Republic*. There, they explain the origin of the character that each soul has received from a forgotten past. Plato’s myth of Er recounts the testimony of a soldier who came back from the dead after witnessing the procedures by which people are assigned to their reincarnated lives in the intermediary period between life and death. Souls, separated from their bodies, get the chance to choose their life. Each soul has a chance to pick whatever life it sees fit, and this choice is guaranteed by the Fates, who give each soul a

daimon and make the “threads” by which the souls are bound to their destiny irreversible. Finally, these souls are made to drink from the river of carelessness, which makes them forget their destiny. After all this, the souls are born in bodies.<sup>58</sup>

For Levinas, what’s most important about this myth is that the metaphor of thread opens up the question of whether or not I can escape being. For Plato, the fates we choose are woven on the loom of Necessity and bound to us by the threads of Destiny. Levinas asks whether or not we might break these threads of fate: “to conceive the otherwise than being we must try to articulate the breakup of a fate that reigns in essence”. (*OTB* 8) Fate, the eternal rule of essence, needs to be escaped, in order to understand what transcends being, but this escape is not absolute since we need fate to describe the inescapable call of our duty to the other. Levinas calls fate “the straight thread of essence” (*OTB* 8), woven by Necessity into a rational universe. Fate means inescapability, and I am inescapably called by the Other in my essence. The ambiguous possibility of escape characterizes the entire development of the metaphor of thread.

There is more than the fabric of Fated essentialism, spread equally and univocally across the universe, because “ipseity”, or the self that reflects upon its selfhood, is a “Gordean knot” (*OTB* 77) tied in the thread of the universe. “In order that there be produced in the drawing out of essence, coming out like a colorless thread from the distaff of the [Fates], a break in the same, there must be the recurrence of the oneself.” (*OTB*, 105) So reflective life, my ability to think about myself, understand my duties to the Good, reason about the infinite, and feel in my body the weight of responsibility to the point that

---

<sup>58</sup> Plato, *Republic*, trans Alan Bloom, 614b - 629d.



I lose sleep<sup>59</sup>, indicates that the universe is not woven as a uniform sheet of being. Plato has given us a universe of equality, but the Gordian knot of subjectivity has complicated this universe by positing my self-reflexivity. This has two effects: first, that I am unique, that the rules of the game are different for me, and second, that I can choose to set up my world as I see fit, and separate myself from the other in the atheist separation of Gyges. I am indissolubly different from others, which means that I can escape from Parmenides but that I also escape from ethics into the absolute separation of Gyges. Both of these options would re-establish myself as the creator of the Good: in the first, I can use the fact that we are all bound by the same fabric of being to reason my way out of my duty, and in the second, I am able to originally constitute myself and write my own rules. To align himself with the Platonically inspired asymmetry inherent in ethics, Levinas must preserve my irreducibility to the Other and my inability to create my own definition of the Good.

To achieve this balance, Levinas weaves what he calls the “Nessus shirt” of my responsibility. His account acknowledges my uniqueness as a uniqueness that demands my responsibility, and this means that the ontological claims of Parmenides are turned in on me, wrapped around me, such that I bear the weight of responsibility for the whole world. As Dostoyevsky puts it, “each of us is guilty before everyone, for everyone and for every thing, *and I more than the others*”.<sup>60</sup> Levinas goes beyond Plato in demonstrating that I am clothed with this kind of responsibility because of my body, and he can therefore claim to develop his own unique philosophy that nevertheless retains its Platonic inspiration.

---

<sup>59</sup> Emmanuel Levinas. “God and Philosophy”. In *Basic Philosophical Writings*, Ed. Peperzak, Adriaan Theodor et. al.. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996. Page 132.

<sup>60</sup> Fyodor Dostoyevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*. Quoted in Emmanuel Levinas, “God and Philosophy”, 144.

Book 9 of Ovid's *Metamorphosis* explains the death of Hercules as the result of a murderous gift from the centaur Nessus. After winning Deianira for his bride, Hercules heads home and must cross the river Evenus. Nessus, who knows the shallows, offers to carry Deianira over the river while Hercules swims across. Upon his arrival at the far bank, Hercules looks up to see the centaur running away with his new bride, and shoots him through the back. As the centaur dies, he bleeds the blood of the Hydra, which is poisonous to the touch, and gives his shirt to Deianira with the promise that it will kindle Hercules' love for her. Years pass. Deianira hears rumours of her husband's fame while he is away and becomes jealous, thinking that Hercules will soon marry someone else. To arouse his love, she sends him the shirt. As he wears it, he lights a fire for offering incense to the gods, which activates the poisonous blood on the inside of the shirt. It burns his flesh, sticking to him, and as he attempts to pull it off it begins to pull his skin and muscles from his body. He dies, cursing Juno, killing the servant who brought him the shirt, and destroying everything around him.

For Levinas, Hercules' heroism represents the self-sufficiency of the Same. Hercules has, until this point, been able to overcome any obstacle he finds. He is like Gyges, who is able to carve out a home in the world in which every object is a tool in economic existence. Like this separated being, Hercules is undone by an Other: "Now I am faced with a new affliction, which cannot be conquered by courage or all of the weapons I own. A devouring fire is roaming the depths of my lungs and consuming the whole of my body."<sup>61</sup> The shirt of Nessus' ability to destroy the pretension of Sameness is

---

<sup>61</sup> Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, trans. David Raeburn (New York: Penguin, 2004) 349.

why Levinas chooses it as his simile for the original asymmetry of my relation to the Other. The experience of responsibility reveals that I cannot do anything to escape the Good.

In contrast to this account of responsibility as martyrdom, being does not allow us to escape from the essentialism that closes off the adventure of relation to the Other. In being, multiple threads are woven together to form the fabric of totality. Ontological thinking focusses on the undeniable fact that other people and I both 'are' in a way that might be significant for ethics. According to Parmenides, unbeing cannot be, and could never have been. Therefore being must be eternally equal everywhere, and I can think of you as just a being among others. The equality of our being makes my absolute responsibility, as Dostoyevsky envisions it, impossible because there is no looseness in the universe for me to be any different from the Other. Because the experience of difference in the gaze of the Other cannot be denied, the fabric of being cannot be as uniform as proposed in the Parmenidean universe.

Levinas' debt to Husserl is expressed in the Gordian knot of subjectivity: "The breakup of 'eternal rest' by time, in which being becomes consciousness and self-consciousness by equalling itself after the breakup, presuppose the oneself. To present the knot of ipseity in the straight thread of essence according to the model of intentionality of the for-itself, or as the openness of reflection upon itself, is to posit a new ipseity behind the ipseity one would like to reduce." (*OTB*, 105) Husserl has taught us that every attempt to escape Parmenides' evenly woven universe of being presupposes the oneself, and every attempt to reduce self-reflexivity to a function of a universe that has mind as an

ontological property (as Hegel and his heirs<sup>62</sup> might have it) constantly presupposes ipseity and the Same. The presupposition of the Same is expressed by the Gordian knot. By being tied around myself, I can define my subjectivity as different from the Other. For Husserl this counts as the foundation of modern science. Levinas appreciates the uniqueness that Husserl achieves but seeks to make it ethical rather than epistemological by a meditation on the bodily experience of responsibility.

Levinas' philosophy of the body demonstrates that the fabric of being is woven as a shirt that I wear and not as the fabric of the universe. My skin is the locus of my destruction insofar as it separates me from being and forces me to bear responsibility for my world to the Other. Embodied life is this responsibility and risk. The shirt of my responsibility has an inside and an outside, and I am irrevocably inside it. The shirt of Nessus is poisoned on the inside, and this is how the separated self is destroyed. The heroic Sameness of ipseity is overcome in inescapable martyrdom. Inspiration means that the Other is on the "hither side" of my being and always closer to me than I know. In contrast to Derrida's reading, Levinas is less interested in the death of Parmenides than in the martyrdom of the separated being.

#### **3.4.2 Platonic Inspiration for the Nessus Shirt**

Levinas thinks Plato has glimpsed the disturbance that characterizes my martyrdom in the *Theatetus*, where the world depends on restless motion for its preservation. This restlessness is revealed in a meditation on perception. It looks like Protagoras has proven that "perception is always of existence" - as a wind takes on

---

<sup>62</sup> Thomas Nagel's *Mind and Cosmos* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012) is a contemporary example.

different characteristics to the one who is cold compared to those it has to the one who is warm, it is a cold or warm wind as it is perceived. Being is therefore becoming because, though each of our perceptions are perceptions of being, they change. So how is this world of change ordered? “everyone except Parmenides” would agree that Homer’s golden chain of the cosmic structure is the breathlessness of spirit, constantly moving, never at rest.<sup>63</sup> It is rest that ruins mind, body, and by analogy, universe. Plato’s glimpse of restlessness here is how Levinas opposes Parmenides, since “the difference that separates essence in war from essence in peace ... presuppose[s] that breathlessness of the spirit, or the spirit holding its breath, in which since Plato what is beyond the essence is conceived and expressed.” (*OTB* 5) Essence is not original, even in peace. Peace and essence presuppose an original, persistent restlessness of the self. The poisoned shirt of Nessus tears at Hercules’ flesh all the more as he tries to remove it, and Levinas sees this destruction of the same as the persistent martyrdom of passivity to the Other.

For Levinas, restlessness describes the way separated being is ill-at-ease. In our bodily experience of meeting the face of the Other, we know that the reassurances of an ontologically thinkable and graspable world are not the original truth of ethics, and are therefore not enough to escape my skin. This knowledge puts the same “out of phase” (*OTB* 34) with itself so that its rest is disturbed. The shirt of Nessus, which first of all undoes the heroic ipseity that would last through every challenge, is “irremissible guilt with regard to the neighbour” and “responsibility prior to any free commitment”. (*OTB* 109) There is a past prior to any free commitment on my part, and I can know this past

---

<sup>63</sup> Plato, *Theaetetus*, trans. Benjamin Jowett, 153c.

because it weighs on me with the same or greater ethical weight than the past in which I made promises.

Most importantly, Levinas synthesizes responsibility with embodied experience by identifying this Nessus tunic with “my skin”. We experience the face and its demands in our concrete flesh, while the recuperable past in which I made a promise is known in the knot of ipseity. Levinas is contrasting the experience of knowing our responsibility to help a stranger with the experience of keeping a promise to someone we know. In both cases we feel a duty, but in the one it comes to us without our permission and we feel the impossibility of escape, while in the other we might be able to readily call to mind what we’ve said and done in the past that created this responsibility.

Responsibility for an Other, i.e. an other we know nothing about, is meaningless unless it is experienced “in the same”, or in the concrete body which we inhabit. Hercules’ human body is utterly laid waste, and the shirt of Nessus undoes even his devotion to his gods. In the same way, responsibility undoes our false commitments to idealized Sameness and destroys the self in its ipseity while awakening the self in its flesh to the unseen world of the Other. This awakening is the bridge from my embodied life to the non-phenomenal Good which commands me. The responsibility I feel, like debt I need to pay to the destitute stranger, is restlessness in my body. This is how Levinas brings Platonic inspiration into conversation with his philosophy of the body.

For Levinas, the embodied characteristics of restlessness and persecution that describe responsibility are inspired by Plato. The restlessness One, for Plato, is always on

the edge of both motion and rest.<sup>64</sup> Responsibility is inflicted on me like an “itch” (*OTB* 109), a sensation without sensed object, a challenging of the normally constituted system I have of interacting with the world. The body is the locus for responsibility like it is the locus for an itch; responsibility and an itch are both felt ‘in my skin’ but none of my actions can make it go away. Levinas calls the paralysis of my actions insomnia, passivity, possession, and restlessness.

Levinas holds that escape from responsibility, and from the Same, is just like escape from the body: utterly impossible. But this does not stop him from maintaining that the Other might be *in* the Same, that it might disturb my rest asymmetrically, from beyond essence. The meditations on the Other from *Totality and Infinity* are embodied in the experience of an itch, of a skin I have no choice but to wear.

Tanja Staehler points out that though other philosophers such as Husserl and Hegel have a sense of the Other in the same, they do not have this perspective where the other destroys or threatens the same. For Hegel, the impossibility of knowing enough to enact Kant’s categorical imperative and the urgency of acting anyway means a blind spot that is similar to that blind spot we have where the Other is concerned.<sup>65</sup> For Husserl, the Other is in the Same because of the inaccessibility of the self. The Other and my identity share the characteristics that they are not phenomena.<sup>66</sup> In both of these examples, “being possessed or obsessed by the Other *complicates* my structure, makes my identity less tight

---

<sup>64</sup> Levinas quotes Plato’s *Parmenides*, 156d.

<sup>65</sup> Tanja Staehler, *The Ambiguous Out-Side of Ethics*, 40.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid*, 58.

and less restrictive, and at the same time, creates the possibility for madness.” Staehler is open to the possibility that this ‘complication’ of my identity might be the openness that inspires Plato’s *Phaedrus*, but does not give complication the sense of “persecution” or “martyrdom” that it has in Levinas. As such, she does not arrive at the paralysis of my comprehensive powers which I have argued that Levinas takes as the core of Plato.

Levinas’ earlier focus on inspiration, on risk, and on adventure are embodied. The epistemological critique of the possibility of knowing responsibility before philosophy, a problem pointed out by Derrida, is answered in the embodiment of these concepts. The passivity of my body means that “I am summoned as someone irreplaceable. I exist through the other and for the other, but without this being alienation: I am inspired.” (*OTB* 114) My asymmetrical relationship with the Other is one of inspiration.

That Levinas incarnates the idea of the infinite as evidence that his work is not merely a negation of Husserl and Heidegger, a contradiction of Plato, nor a wholesale acceptance of Plato. Rather, it is a positive philosophy that is inspired by Platonism, creating the concept of skin as the locus of responsibility by appealing simultaneously to the ideas of the infinite and the Good and to my experience of knowing the gaze of the other. His inductive appeal to the conditions of the possibility of my embodied experience of Otherness legitimates my claim that Levinas’ philosophy is both Platonic and constructive.

### **3.5 Errant Causes**

Finally, to demonstrate that Levinas’ philosophy of martyrdom is reasonable given his Platonic inspiration, I will argue that the roots of the causal relations that inspire



Levinas' inductive reasoning are Platonic. These causal relations must be of a different order than the causes that would be amenable to Gyges in a universe of essence and being. By a reading of the *Timaeus* I will argue with Levinas that causality other than Reason and Necessity must be invoked to explain the second part of Dostoyevsky's claim that "Each of us is guilty before everyone, for everyone and for every thing, *and I more than the others*".<sup>67</sup>

First, we need to identify the challenges this reading will overcome. If Derrida is right that Levinas relies on a radical empiricism that challenges the structures of ontology and even of classical metaphysics, how can this empiricism attest to an original ethical predestination which we did not experience? Levinas' answer for this critique is not just the *de facto* claim that we are, in fact, elected to know the demand for hospitality that comes from the other. The evidence for this election is described in Plato's *Timaeus* as the result of an "errant cause".<sup>68</sup> In spite of Derrida's critique, Levinas' Platonic evidence for this universality demonstrates that Plato has given me (or the responsible one in question) exactly what I need to remain skeptical of the demands of Otherness for others while being assured of the demands of otherness for myself.

Derrida claims to have shown that Levinas needs the Hebraic concept of God to prevent the universe of violence that would be an undesirable consequence of killing Parmenides. But Levinas thinks that he can show the causal effects of the Good in the universe without appeal to God as the guarantor of peace. The role of the Good is not

---

<sup>67</sup> Fyodor Dostoyevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*. Quoted in Emmanuel Levinas, "God and Philosophy" 144.

<sup>68</sup> Plato, *Timaeus*, trans. Benjamin Jowett, 48a.

declared by fiat, but has been discovered by Plato. Inspiration has been my category for understanding Levinas' and Plato's induction that the Good is the origin of ethics. My inspiration by the Good cannot be questioned, but this does not mean it is unphilosophical. Instead, inspiration is philosophically rigorous truth that differs from ontological truth because it depends on a form of causal relation that cannot be made to serve the ends of the Same. By proceeding from what Plato calls an 'errant cause', Levinas remains a philosopher in spite of the fact that he has destroyed the means for doing philosophy that he inherited from Husserl and Heidegger. Levinas can do more than simply invoke transcendence as the nature of the Good. Errant causes are the philosophical side of inspiration, and they are the causal relationships by which Levinas build a constructive account of the Good. Errant causes reveal a Good that is not amenable to comprehension, but that still has effects that the philosopher can work with.

We need to understand why Levinas calls the evidence for responsibility an errant cause. This is an acknowledgement of a debt to Plato: "there is a paradox in responsibility, in that I am obliged without this obligation having begun in me, as though an order slipped into my consciousness like a thief, smuggled itself in, like an effect of one of Plato's wandering causes."(*OTB*, 13)

Plato's errant causes slip into his account of the creation of everything as we find it in *Timaeus*:

"For, in truth, this Cosmos in its origin was generated as a compound, from the combination of Necessity and Reason. And inasmuch as Reason was controlling Necessity by persuading her to conduct to the best end the most part of the things coming into existence, thus and thereby it came about, through Necessity yielding to intelligent persuasion, that this Universe of ours was being in this wise

constructed at the beginning. Wherefore if one is to declare how it actually came into being on this wise, he must include also the form of the Errant Cause, in the way that it really acts.”<sup>69</sup>

We are formally obliged by an errant cause, which Levinas claims is accidental to consciousness. Most of the universe operates by the rhetorical relation of Necessity to Reason. This relation necessarily leaves complications that, in spite of their origin outside the world, causally explain what we see in the world. Though we can think of almost everything as a compound of Reason and Necessity, there are some events in the universe that must originate from another cause. Levinas argues that Infinity and the Good impose themselves upon one who thinks, and that this imposition one of these errant causes. Although necessity and reason may not lead to the Good, the Good is inescapably presupposed by justice and the ethical life. Plato’s concept of an errant cause explains “the way [the universe] really acts” insofar as the Good reveals itself as the condition for the possibility of the universe.

Levinas also argues that the effects of errant causes are exclusively ethical. The ideas of the Good and of the infinite only have effects because of our finite constitution, which forces us to admit that there is something that transcends the immanent world. By demonstrating that the Good is outside the universe even while it manages to be the only reasonable explanation for ethical relationships inside the universe, Levinas has succeeded in using philosophy to point out the traces of the Good inside ontology.

He explicitly connects this trace-as-condition model to his discussion of the face in *Totality and Infinity*, and invokes the errant cause of the *Timaeus* as the best category for

---

<sup>69</sup> Ibid.

the trace. “The infinite orders to me the neighbour as a face... this way for the order to come from I know not where... this non-phenomenality of the order which... ‘slipping into me like a thief’, we have called *illeity*... is the pure trace of a ‘wandering cause’, inscribed in me.” (*OTB* 150) Earlier, I explained the trace’s character as that which is simultaneously present and absent. Levinas is able to maintain his associations between Other, face, infinity, and Good, and with them the relation of metaphysics to ontological justice, by focussing on Plato’s admission that there are leftovers in the universe that cannot be accounted for by reason or necessity. Phenomenality cannot explain the trace, and neither can being. It is pure inscription in me by the Other.

For Levinas, this excuses him for paradoxically developing an extensive philosophy that is supposed to be, at its core, about my failure to comprehend the world. We might think that if the Good inspires me to passivity and to absolute duty to the Other, then developing a philosophy is a waste of time. Levinas ends *Otherwise than Being* with a meditation on skepticism in order to pay homage to this paradox: “The periodic rebirth of skepticism and its invincible and evanescent force to be sure does not permit us to confer any privilege on its said over against the implicit presuppositions of its saying. But [skepticism] recalls the breakup of the unity of transcendental apperception, without which one could not *otherwise than be*.” (*OTB* 171) Skepticism, as a doctrine or a ‘said’, gets us nowhere. But if skepticism is allowed to return, over and over again, not as a doctrine but as a question, it can break up the unity of the Same that would keep us from experiencing responsibility as Otherness in the same. Skepticism, like restlessness,

persecution, and inspiration, is effective for philosophy only insofar as it disturbs me and my comprehension of the world.

Inspiration by the Other, then, is the product of skepticism speaking to philosophy over and over. For Plato, this skepticism would proceed by pointing out the effects of errant causes such as the restlessness of the One in the *Parmenides*, our need for society in *Republic*, the voice from beyond in *Ion*, or the soul's wings in *Phaedrus*. Levinas' skepticism takes these errant causes, first discovered by Plato, and demonstrates that they all point to an irrevocable relationship to the Good that we experience. Because of this, Levinas has Platonic inspiration for building a constructive philosophy in spite of his insistence on my passivity as the ultimate truth of ethics.

## Conclusion

What is left of inspiration? The concept begins in the *Ion*, where Plato defends the rhapsodic poet, who is possessed and inspired by the god. This kind of poet is a pure vessel for the truth to come to us. She avoids the pitfalls of simulacra that plague the mimetic artist. Later, in *Phaedrus*, inspiration is revealed as the gift of the gods for philosophers. Good rhetoric can be used to nefarious ends if it doesn't conform to the inspiration that is revealed from beyond.

Levinas, burdened with the problems of dualism, uses Plato's 'inspiration' to form a definition of transcendence that fulfills two conditions: 1. That which is transcendent must be knowable by humans in some way. 2. The transcendent must have notable effects on the immanent, so that it is worth positing. Because of the standards of knowability and efficacy in 1. and 2., the transcendent could be just an extremely important fact that is nevertheless part of the immanent world. Because this is possible, there has to be some way of seeing the transcendent that allows us to grasp both its epistemological and practical immanence *and* its incommensurability with the immanent world. If any of these conditions remains unfulfilled, transcendence is an illusion.

Levinas argues that inspiration functions as an epistemic guarantee that we can know the transcendent, a practical guarantee that the transcendent can be efficacious in the world, and as the guarantee of the paradoxical immanence/difference of the 'trace' of the Other in the world. I have demonstrated in Chapter 1 that inspiration allows Levinas to critique Plato on the basis of the face of the Other. While maintaining his claim to reinstate Platonism, Levinas shows that Plato's philosophies of the body, of learning, and

of need do not make sense given his account of inspiration. Inspiration, revealed in *Ion* and *Phaedrus* as the source of truth in poetry and philosophy, cannot fit with Plato's attempts to disparage the body, to take short cuts on the adventure of learning, and to define the truth as a need and not a Desire. What remains of Plato is his reference in *Phaedrus* to "winged thought", which would allow us to climb out of immanence and see the world as it really is. In contrast to Parmenides, Plato has seen that "the nature of non-being is relation"<sup>70</sup>, and the discovery of this nature can only occur because of the inspiration of the Same by an Other who comes to me. Plato's critique of Thrasymachus and the doctrines that arise from the myth of Gyges also fit with Levinas' model of inspiration because they point to an irreducible Good that must be seen as the course of ethics.

The rigors of Derrida's critique pare away the methods by which Levinas can philosophize about his inspiration, but they do not destroy the core of his Platonic inspiration. Husserl and Heidegger, who are revealed to be Greek thinkers *par excellence*, help Levinas achieve philosophical progress in debunking the myths of domination proposed by Gyges, but Levinas wants to avoid being identified as just the next thinker in the phenomenological tradition. Instead, he is committed to his inspiration: the Other has to undo both the phenomenological ego and the ontological Dasein. Derrida shows that this is a Herculean task. Escaping Parmenides, whose ontology knows no boundaries and subsumes everything, is almost impossible. Derrida does think that Levinas escapes, but only insofar as he uses God as a weapon against philosophy.

---

<sup>70</sup> Plato, *Sophist*, 258d. Trans. Benjamin Jowett.

The problem with thinking that Levinas uses God is that the Same and the Other have been consistently differentiated by Levinas on the basis of the distinction between amenability to use and frustration of use. The Same, presided over by the separated being of Gyges, can be distinguished from what is Other by the efficacy of Gyges' tools in setting up a world for himself. The Other is manifest in every experience of the Same where it cannot control its destiny this way. Because Levinas commits himself to this basis for distinction, the thesis that God is a weapon, used by Levinas for the destruction of Parmenides, is absurd. There is another relationship to being that Levinas posits as synonymous with inspiration in *Otherwise than Being*: persecution.

I showed that the characterization of inspiration as persecution in *Otherwise than Being* is a rebuttal to Derrida's claim that Levinas is a philosophical assassin. However, Levinas does narrow his definition of Platonic inspiration in response to Derrida's critique. Plato fails to grasp the ways that the Good inspires philosophy in his insistence on maieutics as an epistemological model. Levinas contests Plato's claim that the truth can be seen in a scientific and theoretical relationship, a doctrine embraced by Husserl and Heidegger. Levinas' position against Plato's maieutic theory since *Totality and Infinity* has been that truth is the product of an adventure, with no foreseeable outcome.

Plato has also failed to put the Good beyond being into philosophically meaningful terms. Levinas understands that Plato's original commitment to the Good cannot be formalized into a written "said" - or a verifiable content of speech. However, Plato is at fault for not letting the "saying" of the Good inform his philosophy enough. His focus on essence has kept him from letting being's Other, the Good, inspire his philosophy fully.



Levinas is therefore the heir of Plato, who will complete the 'saying' of the Good beyond being that Plato could not achieve.

I also demonstrated that for Levinas, the body, as the scene for the inspiration of the Good, is distinctive from the body in Husserl and Heidegger. Where these philosophers claim that being is everything that appears to an ego, or the results of the researches of Dasein, Levinas counters that the body, in its restless proximity to the Other, is proof that there is more than being. Proximity, passivity and obsession are experiences that demonstrate that the world is not reducible to what appears. Instead, there is something that inspires me in my body, before all appearances. This is the Other. Levinas can argue this way and still claim to be inspired by Plato because he has found that Plato himself affirms this passivity and provides us with the first philosophical words for it when he affirms the transcendent Good.

Inspiration does not imply unthinking acceptance. Neither does it imply provisional acceptance of first principles and critique of the results of these principles. In inspiration there is room for creation, where the original impetus for creativity is assumed to be true, where some of the expressions of this impetus are eliminated, and where *something new results from this assumption and elimination*. I showed that Levinas can claim to be inspired by Plato in his development of the metaphor of thread into the Nessus shirt. The individual fate that each of us has, according to Plato, is preserved but modified: my fate was not chosen by me, and does not consist in my position in the fabric of essence. Neither is my subjectivity simply a Gordian knot of reflexivity, as Husserl might have developed Plato's thread. Instead, the thread of being is woven *around me*, and me only,

such that I experience the responsibility of the whole world. My skin, as the locus of my passivity to the Other, experiences responsibility like Ovid's Hercules experiences the shirt of Nessus. To try to absolve myself from responsibility is to destroy myself, and to accept responsibility is to accept responsibility for the whole world and, therefore, to destroy myself. I am left with no escape because essence 'hems me in' and keeps me from passing my duty off to anyone else.

We need to question Levinas' assumptions here. At the most basic level, the problem concerns whether or not I can think of my subjective experience of responsibility *philosophically*. Levinas' metaphor of the impoverished Other, who commands me even as he transcends my world even as he needs my aid, may or may not be experienced by his readers to the same intense degree. I argued that in order to relate this experience of radical responsibility to philosophy, Levinas invokes Plato's 'wandering causes', a category for the causes of those things that cannot be explained by reason or necessity. By finding one form of causality in Plato that persists despite his critiques of essence, theory, the phenomenological ego, and Gyges, Levinas can write philosophically about an experience of radical and absolute otherness. According to Plato's *Timaeus*, an errant cause can be perceived inductively as the only possible cause for the outlying experiences we have. For Levinas, this is enough to found philosophy in spite of the constant return of skepticism, because errant causality allows us to proceed from irreducible ethical experience to the conditions of the possibility of that experience.

The debt to Plato in Levinas' work cannot be understated without losing a sense of how Levinas defends himself against critiques of dualism. My work has demonstrated that

Levinas' defensive work is always done from the basis of Plato's philosophy. I finally concluded that Levinas gains constructive ground by this appeal to Plato. In both polemic and constructive movements, Levinas is inspired by Plato.

## Bibliography

Achtenberg, Deborah. "The Eternal and the New: Socrates and Levinas on Desire and Need." In *Levinas and the Ancients*, edited by Brian Schroeder and Silvia Benso, 24-39. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008.

Aristotle. *Metaphysics*. Translated by John Henry MacMahon. London: H.G. Bohn, 1857.

Benso, Silvia. "Joy Beyond Boredom." In *Totality and Infinity at 50*, edited by Scott Davidson and Diane Perpich, 11-28. Pittsburgh, Duquesne University Press, 2012.

Benso, Silvia. "The Breathing of the Air: Presocratic Echoes in Levinas." In *Levinas and the Ancients*, edited by Brian Schroeder and Silvia Benso, 9-23. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008.

Bloom, Alan. *The Republic of Plato*. New York: Basic Books, 1968.

Cohen, Richard. *Elevations: The Height of the Good in Rosenzweig and Levinas*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994.

Cornford, Francis Macdonald. *Plato and Parmenides*. New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1957.

Derrida, Jacques. *Of Grammatology*. Translated by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976.

Derrida, Jacques. *Writing and Difference*. Translated by Alan Bass. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978.

Descartes, Rene. *Meditations on First Philosophy*. Translated by Donald A. Cress. Indianapolis: Hackett, 1993.

Foucault, Michel. *Discipline & Punish*. Translated by Alan Sheridan. New York: Vintage, 1995.

Gonzalez, Francisco J.. "Levinas questioning Plato on Eros and Maieutics." In *Levinas and the Ancients*, edited by Brian Schroeder and Silvia Benso, 40-61. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008.

Heidegger, Martin. *Being and Time*. Translated by John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson. New York: Harper & Row, 1962.

Husserl, Edmund. *Cartesian Meditations*. Translated by Dorion Cairns. The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, 1977.

Husserl, Edmund. *The Shorter Logical Investigations*. Translated by J.N. Findlay, Edited by Dermot Moran. London: Routledge, 1970.

Levinas, Emmanuel. *Basic Philosophical Writings*. Edited by Adriaan Peperzak, Simon Critchley, and Robert Bernasconi. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996.

Levinas, Emmanuel. *Ethics and Infinity: Conversations with Philippe Nemo*. Translated by Richard A. Cohen. Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1985.

Levinas, Emmanuel. *On Escape*. Translated by Bettina Bergo. Palo Alto, California, USA: Stanford University Press, 2003.

Levinas, Emmanuel. *Otherwise than Being: Or Beyond Essence*. Translated by Alphonso Lingis. Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1998.

Levinas, Emmanuel. *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*. Translated by Alphonso Lingis. Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969.

Nagel, Thomas. *Mind & Cosmos*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2012.

Ovid. *Metamorphoses*. Translated by David Raeburn. New York: Penguin, 2004.

Peperzak, Adriaan Theodoor. *Platonic Transformations*. Lanham, Maryland, USA:  
Rowman & Littlefield, 1997.

Plato. *Complete Works*. Edited by John M. Cooper. Indianapolis: Hackett, 1997.

Plato. *Ion*. Translated by John Marshall MacGregor. Cambridge: Cambridge University  
Press, 1956.

Plato. *Parmenides*. Translated by R.E. Allen. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997.

Plato, *The Works of Plato*. Translated by Benjamin Jowett. Edited by Irwin Edman. New  
York: Random House, 1956.

Rimbaud, Arthur. "A Season in Hell", 1873. In *Rimbaud, Complete Works, Selected Letters*.

Translated by Wallace Fowlie. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005. Page  
281.

Stahler, Tanja. *The Ambiguous Out-Side of Ethics*. New York: Routledge, 2010.

Stahler, Tanja. "Getting Under the Skin: Platonic Myths in Levinas." In *Levinas and the  
Ancients*, edited by Brian Schroeder and Silvia Benso, 62-78. Bloomington: Indiana  
University Press, 2008.