

LEVINAS, SINGULARITY, AND THE RESTLESS SUBJECT

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By

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Abstract

This dissertation argues that Emmanuel Levinas's is first and foremost a philosopher of subjectivity. I argue that the themes of restlessness of singularity and restlessness govern Levinas's account of subjectivity and that these themes directly inform the account of the relationship with the Other found in his mature works. Chapter I presents Levinas's early reflections on identity and escape as arising from his encounter with Husserl's and Heidegger's respective philosophies. The first chapter establishes restlessness and singularity as central themes in Levinas's philosophy. The second chapter argues that Levinas's account of the relationship with existence found in *From Existence to Existence* further develops these themes by establishing the subject as originating from a pre-cognitive event that Levinas calls "hypostasis." Chapter III turns to *Totality and Infinity* and argues that the notion of the "anterior posterior" condition, by which Levinas means a "logical" condition that precedes a "chronological one," is conceptually similar to the idea of "hypostasis" found in the earlier works and that it allows him to develop the theme of singularity as an ethical category. Chapter IV focuses solely on the connection between singularity and the Face, and argues that Levinas's notion of the Face follows from his earlier accounts of singularity but that Levinas fails to address the precise relationship between the different forms of meaning that make up interior life and the relationship with transcendence, and that these problems lead to further questions concerning the roles of politics and justice in his later philosophy. The final chapter will show that in his later works Levinas rehabilitates the theme of restlessness, which is absent in *Totality and Infinity*, and that it allows him to show that the singularity of the self and the singularity of the Other are both bound in the same moment. Thus, Levinas returns to the theme of restlessness as a way of addressing the problems that I find in *Totality and Infinity*. These later developments lead to further questions concerning the role of context in Levinas's idea of the "political." The last chapter concludes by arguing that Levinas is unable to address everyday moral decision-making because of his account of the ethical as a "meaning without context."

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Introduction:
Subjectivity and Singularity

Emmanuel Levinas is often called a philosopher of the Other, and for good reason. From the late 1940s onwards, Levinas's philosophical efforts consist in showing that the relationship with the Other is the very source of ethical meaning and that this relationship constitutes the very core of subjectivity. This dissertation does not contest the claim that Levinas is a philosopher of the Other, but argues that Levinas's account of the relationship with the Other demands that he be clear about the kind of subject that is needed for such a relationship to be possible. This dissertation focuses specifically on the themes of restlessness and singularity in relation to Levinas's account of subjectivity, and argues that Levinas's account of the relationship with the Other found in his mature works stems from questions concerning these themes. For Levinas the singularity of the self is not a stable identity that the subject assumes at all times, but is rooted in an essential discordance at the core of subjectivity. Levinas calls this discordance restlessness and I will show that in his later works this early theme informs his later notions of trauma and recurrence.

The discordance at the core of subjectivity is seen first in Levinas's early works from the 1930s and 1940s. These early works are largely a response to Martin Heidegger's *Being and Time*. Levinas scholarship is quick to point out the differences between Levinas and Heidegger, but the similarities between them cannot be understated. We will see in the first chapter that Levinas credits Heidegger with offering a viable response to the alleged priority of epistemology in the philosophy of Edmund Husserl. Levinas understands Heidegger's philosophy, as it is presented in *Being and Time*, as returning to the concrete existence in which the subject pains, worries, is restless, and whose very future is an issue. This return to the drama and gravity of existence itself impressed the mind of the young Levinas in 1930, even to the point where we can say that he was, as Salomon Malka puts it, a "fervent disciple" of Heidegger.¹ In his 1930 dissertation on Husserl, Levinas even enlists Heidegger's support when he asks "Is not the world presented in its very being as a center of action, as a field of activity or of *care*—to speak the language of Martin Heidegger?" (*TIHP* 119). While Levinas comes to question the priority of the relationship with the world, he agrees with Heidegger's basic insight that the human individual is not initially a knower and that it is constituted by passive structures of meaning that cannot be resolved into relationships of knowledge.

By 1934, however, Levinas learns of Heidegger's political involvement with the Nazi Party, and begins to question the possible relationship between his teacher's

¹ Salomon Malka, *Emmanuel Levinas: His Life and Legacy*, trans. Michael Kigel and Sonja M. Embree (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 2006), 48.

philosophy and his political involvements. The news of Heidegger's involvement sparks a couple of articles that I examine in Chapter I: "Some Reflections on the Philosophy of Hitlerism" (1934) and *On Escape* (1935). These early works outline Levinas's first attempts to escape ontology, and he frames the question of escape as the attempt to break the link between the being that exists and the brutal fact of existence. For the early Levinas, human existence is constituted by a fundamental disharmony with oneself: to be an individual is to find oneself at odds with oneself, and this non-coincidence manifests itself as the need to escape existence. This is to say that even in 1935 he takes the individual's relationship with itself as the starting point. He begins *On Escape* with the complaint that traditional philosophy (i.e., the philosophy that has been handed down to us) "opposes man to the world, not man to himself" and that the "I" is generally "given to peace with itself, completes itself, closes on and rests upon itself" (*OE*, 91/49). For Levinas, on the contrary, the existent (his alternative to Heidegger's *Dasein*) is restless, never at peace. The existent finds its existence an inescapable burden. This essential separation and relationship is at the very heart of his works from the 1930s and 1940s. While it is the case that even in the early works ontology swallows up the individual in an anonymous existence, this conflict is *not* experienced simply by an isolated subject combating what is exterior to it—like a proletariat who recognizes nothing of himself in the capitalist State. Rather, for Levinas the fight against ontology—the fight against the loss of singularity and the sinking-back into anonymity—takes place initially *within* the individual itself. Escape is motivated from the inside of the individual and is not a response to some external and oppressive force. For the early Levinas, the self is constituted by a fundamental relationship with otherness, but this otherness is already a part of what it means to be an existent. The need to escape ontology, thus, "is the need to get out of oneself, that is, *to break that most radical and unalterably binding of chains, the fact that the I [moi] is oneself [soi-même]*" (*OE*, 98/54). I would like to emphasize, then, that for Levinas in 1935 ontology is primarily seen more as a philosophy that maintains the possible self-coincidence of the self with itself, than as a philosophy that imposes an external structure of meaning on the subject.

If the need to escape existence is motivated from the inside, then there must be something that happens within the subject itself that sparks the need. Hence Levinas's earlier works take as their theme those experiences through which the subject experiences the promise of escape. In *On Escape*, Levinas presents nausea as a form of experience that awakens in the individual the desire for escape. Nausea is a singularizing experience in that it is my identity that is at issue, and I cannot remain at peace with myself. The experience of nausea, in other words, opens up a gap between my identity and the brutal fact of existence. Other experiences that accomplish this "cleaving" between existence and the existent include pain, weariness, and indolence. They are experiences in which Levinas glimpses an escape from the relationship with existence from within the subject itself. This fact that Levinas is operating from the inside means that we can only approach the meaning of a genuine "Other" if we are clear about the nature of

subjectivity as such. If an encounter with an absolute Other is possible, then what kind of subject is needed in order for this encounter to take place? This, I think, is one of the central questions of Levinas's philosophical thought, even in his later works. The problem with *On Escape*, as many commentators have noted, is that the movement from the inside to the outside is there, but the destination of that escape that is not named. It is only a parting for the sake of parting, with no hopes of even encountering anything Other at all. It is an escape without itinerary, without promise. In these early works, there is nothing outside of the subject that motivates this need for escape from Being. When escape does seem to occur, it is a failed escape and the individual falls back into the oppressive relationship with existence. By 1947, however, Levinas comes to accept that something else, some "Other," is needed in order for this escape. The only way for the individual to escape the chain that links it with existence—a chain that the later Levinas calls the *conatus essendi* of an ego concerned with its own existence—is, for the mature Levinas, the ethical encounter with the other person.

Levinas's account of singularity in the 1947 work *From Existence to Existents* revolves around the notion of "hypostasis," which names the event through which the individual gains its singularity over and against the anonymity of the brutal fact of existence. The notion of hypostasis is particularly important because it opens up the question of the origin of subjectivity. On the one hand, conscious awareness already presupposes that hypostasis has taken place. On the other hand, there must be a way for the event of hypostasis to become accessible to the inquiring subject. While hypostasis never gives itself as a theme for consciousness, there are events that allow one to recognize it indirectly. There are glimpses, like a scintillation of light or a wink (*EE*, 116/65), in which hypostasis reveals itself without settling as an object for thought. These glimpses are visible in certain human experiences, such as weariness and indolence, in which the separation between existence and the existent is manifested. Here is the central paradox of *From Existence to Existence*: the separation between existence and the existent does not depend on an existent who is capable of grasping that separation, but nevertheless that separation does enter human experience on some level. The separation, it turns out, can only be discovered after the fact; the separation between existence and the existent is not synonymous with its discovery. In this way, Levinas implicitly sets himself up for the position in his later works that ethical meaning does not rely on a subject who can consciously recognize it; it is already in play whether the subject realizes it or not.

Although *Totality and Infinity* seemingly drops the problem of the relationship between existence and the existent, the notion of hypostasis is the backbone of the notion of anterior posteriority, which is essential to Levinas's method in that book. Levinas draws from Descartes's third Meditation a crucial distinction between "chronological" and "logical" senses of priority. In the second Meditation Descartes establishes the Cogito as the first item of knowledge, but in the third Meditation the priority of the

Cogito is displaced by the logical priority of God's existence. Although the discovery of the Cogito is chronologically the first discovery, God is logically the condition for the discovery of the Cogito. The logical condition, then, is discovered after the fact. Levinas calls this the "anterior posterior" condition. Levinas is not interested in the proof for God's existence, but in how Descartes's argument shows that there can be a condition for subjectivity that does not reveal itself in its completeness in human experience. Like the event of hypostasis, there are certain forms of experience that reveal this anterior posterior condition, but the condition itself never reveals itself to consciousness as an object for thought. As I will show in Chapter IV, one problem with *Totality and Infinity* is that Levinas identifies different examples of anterior posterior conditions and does not indicate the relationship between them, or which one is the most important and why. For example, he identifies the relationships with the body and the dwelling as anterior posterior conditions, but then later identifies the relationship with the Other as one as well. Levinas does not explain the relationships between the different senses of anterior posterior conditions, or even whether they all point to the same condition. These relationships are important because they point to the problem of the relationship between the two different accounts of singularity, namely, the singularity of the self and the singularity of the Other.

Furthermore, *Totality and Infinity* runs into conceptual problems in its concern with singularity. While Chapter III examines the singularity of the self, Chapter IV examines the singularity of the Other. In many ways *Totality and Infinity* is an essay about singularity, in that Levinas seeks to describe the "thisness" of the self and its relationship with the Other without relying on finite concepts and determinations, and without reducing one of the terms (self or Other) to a moment of the other. Both terms remain separate and singular. This separation, however, opens up questions concerning the roles of justice and plurality in human relationships. The self is always faced with more than one singular Other, and so Levinas needs to explain how this relationship with the "third person" is possible. I argue that the problem of the third is not adequately addressed in *Totality and Infinity*, although it becomes a central concern in his later works.

In the period of *Otherwise than Being* Levinas changes his account of subjectivity so that the singularity of the self and the Other are both bound in the same moment. For the later Levinas it is not possible to speak of the subject's singularity without referring to the singularity of the Other. The subject is therefore now formulated as "being-for-the-Other" and as the "Other-in-the-Same." At the heart of this development is a return to the restlessness of subjectivity. Levinas cleverly finds a way to incorporate some of the themes from his earlier works into his ethical philosophy. Instead of talking about the gravity and inescapability of existence, the later Levinas speaks of the gravity and inescapability of moral responsibility. Moreover, the subject is not restless because of an ontological burden to exist, but because subjectivity is constituted by the incessant

“recurrence” and “trauma” of being called to responsibility. The inescapable commitment to exist is now the inescapable “Here I am!” of a subject who is subjected to an imperative without having chosen to assume that position. Just as hypostasis and the anterior condition, the subject is constituted by a condition that does not come from its own initiative and that cannot become a theme for consciousness.

It turns out that for the later Levinas “singularity” does not only refer to the subject or the Other but to the very ethical relationship itself. This raises serious questions about the role of the “third person” in Levinas’s analysis. If the relationship with the Other is a singular relationship, what happens when I find myself faced with many different singularities? How am I able to choose between equals? These questions, Levinas says, call for institutions that help us decide between equals; they signify the need for justice. But this call to judge between equals is not an accident of the ethical relationship, but is for Levinas essential to subjectivity itself. In effect, Levinas finds a way to include ontology and politics as necessary moments of human experience. This amounts to a need for context in human relationships, since the relationship of singularity is a meaning without context. I will argue in Chapter V that Levinas’s attempts to re-introduce context into his ethical philosophy are unsuccessful, and that he is unable to account for the fundamental role that social and historical contexts play in human existence.

The chapters in this work will be organized in the following way. Chapter I examines Levinas’s encounter with phenomenology and how it informs his early works from the 1930s and its themes of identity and escape. Chapter II focuses on *From Existence to Existents* and shows that Levinas’s project in that book is motivated by the question of singularity and the need to escape being, and how the notion of hypostasis is to be taken as a condition that precedes consciousness, yet reveals itself in specific experiences. Chapter III examines Levinas’s account of the “anterior posterior” condition and its role in his account of interiority in that work, and shows how it follows from Levinas’s earlier account of hypostasis. Chapter IV argues that Levinas’s account of the Face is rooted in the question of singularity and this question leaves unresolved questions concerning context and the precise relationship between ethics and politics. Finally, Chapter V explains how Levinas’s later account of subjectivity integrates restlessness, singularity, and the notion of hypostasis into his account of ethical meaning. From there, I examine the viability of Levinas’s attempt to move from a context-free ethical meaning to a need for context-based decisions.

By showing how themes of singularity and restlessness are found in Levinas’s earlier and later works, I see myself as contributing to Levinas scholarship by providing an account of the continuity of Levinas’s work as motivated by very specific philosophical questions concerning singularity and the question of subjectivity. In any case, the reader should realize that in this work I strive to present Levinas’s position on

its own terms and without relying heavily on the constellation of influences that have no doubt informed Levinas's philosophical development at various points. Admittedly, many of Levinas's interpretations of other thinkers are misrepresentative, and I do not think that Levinas's own philosophical position at any stage can be defended solely in relation to his disputes with his masters, whether it is Heidegger, Husserl, or any other thinker. Where possible, I emphasize the positive relationship that Levinas has with these thinkers and I strive to present Levinas's arguments on their own terms.

Chapter I:
Levinas in the 1930s:
Phenomenology, Being, and Escape

In this chapter I will argue that Levinas's works from the 1930s are motivated by questions concerning singularity and the nature of inwardness. These questions, I will show, arise from his encounter with phenomenology, more specifically the philosophy of Martin Heidegger. As an introduction to Levinas's early thought, this chapter will proceed in the following way. First, I will provide an introduction to Husserl's transcendental phenomenology. From there, I will introduce Martin Heidegger's *Being and Time* and will consider its influence on the young Levinas. The rest of the chapter examines closely the central themes that arise from his encounter with phenomenology and remain essential in the later periods of his philosophy. I argue that the early Levinas is concerned first and foremost with the question of singularity and with how this singularity is constituted by an essential internal discordance between the self and its existence; this discordance is experienced as the restlessness that is motivated by the burdensome relationship with existence. Levinas accepts Heidegger's position that human existence cannot be addressed adequately by Husserl's transcendental philosophy. However, by 1934 Levinas comes to question the possible political and ethical implications of Heidegger's philosophy and in 1935 he announces a need to escape Being altogether.

This chapter will set the stage for the later chapters of this work. We will see in the second chapter that in the works from the mid-1940s the relationship with existence remains the central theme of his thought. The central theme in this chapter and the next will be the question of the relationship with oneself, and how this relationship is essentially restless and disjointed. This restless self, I will show in the last chapter of this dissertation, is the basis for the later Levinas's account of the restless ethical self who is incessantly and traumatically called to responsibility by and for the other person.

1.1 An Introduction to Phenomenology

Levinas's works from the 1930s are largely a product of his encounter with phenomenology. It is therefore fitting to begin with a general introduction to Husserl's transcendental phenomenology. I will begin by showing that Husserl's theory of intentionality is a response to modern mind-body dualism. I will then show how the theory of intentionality leads to a rejection of modern representationalism and that it would be better to understand Husserl's phenomenology as "presentationalism" than representationalism in that it seeks to describe what is given, exactly as it is given. We will see that the presentational account of experience has important implications for how

we are to describe whole-part relationships. From there, I will move on to methodological considerations by discussing the difference between the phenomenological and natural attitudes and their relation to the phenomenological reduction. Finally, I will conclude this section by examining Husserl's idea of "eidetic seeing" and the place of intuition in his thought. This section on phenomenology, along with the next section on Heidegger, will provide us with a path through which to approach the works of the young Levinas.

Phenomenology is one of the most influential philosophical movements of the twentieth century. Its significance lies largely in how it addresses certain problems in modern philosophy by redefining the nature of subjectivity. Modern epistemology relies largely on mind-body dualism, which distinguishes the mental life of the subject from the external world of physical objects. For dualists, the division between mind and body is mutually exclusive: they are separate, and one has no causal efficacy on the other. Because of its ability to reason and judge without appeal to the external world, the mind is affirmed as the starting point of knowledge. As is the case for Descartes, the mental life of the subject becomes better known than the external world. One central problem of modern philosophy is to explain how the mind, as an encapsulated sphere, can have knowledge of, and even any access at all to what lies outside of it. Even empiricists such as David Hume, who claims that all knowledge must come from experience, are unable to show how our knowledge of the world is reliable, for they accept the basic subject-object opposition.

Edmund Husserl addresses the problems associated with mind-body dualism by introducing the theory of intentionality. In his 1913 book *Ideas*, Husserl identifies intentionality as the indispensable starting point and basis of phenomenology.² Intentionality represents a necessary correlation between consciousness and its object, that is, the idea that consciousness is essentially "consciousness of..." Each conscious act is directed to an object of some kind. To think is to think of something, to desire is to desire something, to will is to will something. Of course, this is not to say that every object of a conscious act physically exists. If I imagine a unicorn, that unicorn is the object of my conscious act, but the unicorn does not actually exist. Husserl is not concerned with the actual existence of the object of a conscious act, but with the meaning of such acts; it is the form of experience as such that concerns Husserl. Each kind of act has its own structure and meaning, and Husserl seeks to identify and describe these different forms of intentional acts. These forms of intentionality include, but are not limited to, visual perception, touch, embodiment, self-consciousness, and time-consciousness.

² Edmund Husserl, *Ideas: General Introduction to Pure Phenomenology*, trans. W.R. Boyce Gibson (New York: Collier Books, 1967), 225.

The act of consciousness does not only happen to have an object corresponding to it, but actively directs itself towards that object. Consciousness bursts forth towards its object and gives meaning to what is encountered. An object is always experienced within a “horizon.” An object of visual perception, for example, always has a spatio-temporal location and is situated among other things. The table is distinguished from other objects but is also demarcated from the floor and wall under and around it, and is understood within a larger horizon. Moreover, the horizon contains other co-potential meanings: I can change my gaze from the chair to the bookcase, and my former “theme” of perception now falls into the horizon, and the bookcase now becomes my actual theme. Husserl claims that modern reductive sense-data theories overlook the significance of horizons. Neither consciousness nor its object can be abstracted from the horizon in which it is rooted. The meaning of a conscious act depends on where the subject happens to be and the perspective from which the thing-thought is experienced. Because meaning requires a conscious act, it does not exist independently from a subject. Meaning is not “out there” in the world waiting to be discovered. Without intentional acts, there can be no meaning at all.

In fact, Husserl’s theory of intentionality leads him to abandon the words “content” or “object” when describing the thing-thought. When I experience a chair, this chair does not simply become the content of my consciousness. Aron Gurwitsch explains that “Husserl calls the object as perceived—to be taken exactly as it appears through a given perception—the ‘perceptual sense’ or *perceptual noema*, a term which henceforth replaces that of ‘content.’”³ Because the words “object” and “content” are associated with mind-body dualism, Husserl prefers the term *noema*, which means the thing thought, and correlates it with *noesis*, which, means the thinking act. The necessary correlation between consciousness and the thing thought is better stated as the *noesis-noema* correlation.

Dualistic accounts of knowledge are largely representationalist, in that they regard subject as not having direct access to the object. Instead, they either present the object as mediated by the structure of the mind, or they claim that we only have access to sensations that impress themselves upon the mind. By contrast, the Husserlian account of intentionality affirms the subject’s capacity to have direct and immediate access to the world.⁴ We only have access to how things actually do present themselves. As Dan Zahavi puts it, “rather than saying that we experience *representations*, one could say that our experiences are *presentational*, and that they *present* the world as having certain

3 Aron Gurwitsch, “Towards a Theory of Intentionality,” *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 30, 3 (March, 1970), 354-67, 363.

4 For this very reason, there cannot be a distinction between the *noema* and the actual transcendent object, since this would imply that the *noema* does not present us with the thing as it appears. Such a distinction would mean that phenomenology falls into a form of representationalism that Husserl meant to avoid.

features.”⁵ Experience itself does not dictate that we have access only to an idea or to a mere appearance. Husserl remains faithful to experience by describing the way things actually do give themselves, without presupposing a general theory of representation. By establishing a direct link to the world, phenomenology sidesteps the question of how the subject can have any access to something that is completely different than it. Phenomenology begins with the fact that the world is given in such-and-such a way, and its aim is to describe what is given in the way that it is given.

Together, the rejection of reductive sense-data empiricism and the affirmation of presentationalism lead to a new understanding of the relationship between wholes and parts. Since modern reductive sense-data empiricism, according to Husserl, allegedly takes its object as uprooted from the context in which it appears, it follows that for Husserl its treatment of whole-part relations is also lacking. Modern thought, according to Husserl, mistakenly confuses two different ways of understanding the parts of a whole. Wholes, Husserl observes, can be divided into “pieces” and “moments.” Pieces are removable parts of a whole that can exist separately from that whole. Like a branch torn from a tree that can exist on its own, pieces are independent. Moments, in contrast, are dependent on the whole to which they belong; they are irremovable. Color and pitch cannot exist independently, but depend on something else in order to be what they are. For Husserl, modern philosophy mistakenly thinks of secondary qualities, such as color and smell, as comprehensible on their own without reference to that which they belong. For Husserl, a color is essentially a color of something, a smell a smell of something. Moreover, when I perceive a house, I do not merely experience its features in a particular succession of impressions. I experience each feature along with the others. The experience of the redness of the house drags along with it the qualities of the house. The meaning of the whole is implicit in the explicit meaning of the part; experience is holistic. It is worth noting, as Jay Lampert points out, that for Husserl consciousness’s capacity to distinguish between pieces and moments of a whole must not be reduced to a psychological theory of perception. After all, Husserl is concerned with the logical form experience must take. With that said, though, the distinction between separable and inseparable parts of a whole does not come without its problems, for it is certainly the case that a removable piece still exists within a horizon and can be said to be part of a different whole, such as the spatio-temporal location of that removed piece (the fallen branch is still in the backyard, for instance). Moreover, there are cases when it is not clear where a part ends and another begins. If I look at the surface of a desk, running my gaze slowly from one end of the surface to the other, and notice that the shade of brown gradually changes from a lighter shade to a darker one, it is not clear where the lighter shade officially ends and the darker shade begins. Such problems cannot be addressed further here, but let me note that these are the sorts of questions that phenomenology makes possible to address, and does so without presupposing a

⁵ Dan Zahavi, *Husserl’s Phenomenology* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), 19.

metaphysical notion such as substance or representation; such problems call for a proper descriptive analysis.⁶

The holistic and contextual features of human experience can perhaps be described better by considering one of Husserl's best known examples: the experience of listening to a melody. When I listen to a melody I do not simply hear a series of discrete atomic notes. If the experience of listening to a melody were like this then I would not be hearing a melody at all; I would not have a holistic experience. When the melody moves from one note to the next, the first note does not disappear from my mind. Nor does it simply become a note that I remember as simply past. There is an important sense in which the first note still remains present in the occurrence of the next note. Each note is heard within the context of the notes that precede and succeed it. Husserl calls this remaining presence "retention." Likewise, the anticipated note is also part of my experience of listening to a melody. The present moment drags the immediate past with it and anticipates the imminent future moment. This anticipated future Husserl calls "protention." The experience of a melody in fact teaches us something about how we experience time. Each experienced "present" was at one point an anticipated future and necessarily becomes a retentional past. Again, this is another example of how human experience is contextual and cannot be broken down into simple elements that can be understood on their own.

These descriptions of whole-part relations are meant to be just that: descriptions. The goal of phenomenological analysis is to describe what is essential to such forms of experience without invoking metaphysical concepts that do not have their source in the way things give themselves to consciousness. But phenomenological description is not always easy, for we are naturally influenced by preconceived opinions and popular theories about what human experience must be like. For the most part, we live our lives without adopting a critical attitude towards such opinions and theories. We tend to think that the world exists objectively and that the world and the facts it harbors are there waiting to be discovered. Husserl calls this uncritical approach to the world the "natural attitude." Steven Crowell defines the natural attitude nicely as "the uncritical incorporation into philosophy of 'truths' borrowed from other sciences."⁷ It is what we might call common-sense thinking, and this is the view of the world that the sciences work with. We live our lives for the most part without reflecting on essences. We drink from a cup without thinking about the essence of the cup, and listen to a song without asking about the essence of a melody. The natural attitude, nevertheless, is essential because it is where the phenomenologist always begins. Husserl's goal is not to discredit

⁶ For a serious treatment of the whole-part relation in phenomenology, see Jay Lampert, "Husserl's Theory of Parts and Wholes: The Dynamic of Individuating and Contextualizing Interpretation—*Übergehen, Abheben, Ergänzungsbedürftigkeit*," *Research in Phenomenology* (vol. 19, pp. 195-212).

⁷ Steven Crowell, "Husserlian Phenomenology," in *A Companion to Phenomenology and Existentialism*, eds. Hubert L. Dreyfus and Mark A. Wrathall (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006), 19.

the natural attitude or to suggest that the sciences do not provide us with knowledge. Rather, Husserl's point is that if we are to engage in pure phenomenological description then all such theories—as true and reliable as they might be—must be put aside. The goal here is to step away from the natural attitude and enter what Husserl calls a “transcendental” or “phenomenological” one.

The movement from the natural attitude to the phenomenological one is not easy; a methodological reduction is needed. The phenomenological reduction consists of “bracketing” theories that are not legitimated by the very presentation of *noemata*. Husserl often uses the term *epochè* to name this suspension or bracketing of the natural attitude. The phenomenological attitude is to operate from a “presuppositionless” starting point. The goal of the phenomenological reduction is to arrive at the pure ego so that we may describe what appears as it is given. From there, it is possible to describe, in their purity, the intentional relations that constitute lived experience. As Crowell puts it,

The transcendental reduction thus allows phenomenology to study the intentional constitution of things—that is, the conditions that make possible not the *existence* of entities in the world (the issue of existence has been bracketed), but their *sense* as existing, and indeed their being given *as* anything at all.”⁸

Again, phenomenology is not concerned with whether a certain object of consciousness actually exists, but rather with the form of experience itself. This is what Crowell (and Husserl) here means by the “sense,” which is a translation of Husserl's German term *Bedeutung*.

After the reduction has been accomplished, there remains a “pure ego,” which is the residuum of the reduction. With the reduction completed, with the natural attitude put aside, it is now possible to describe what presents itself without prejudice. The natural attitude opens up the possibility of describing what is essential to a form of experience. This openness to what is essential is called “eidetic seeing.” Eidetic seeing is a kind of reduction⁹ in that it puts aside inessential features of a mode of appearing in order to gain access to what is essential to that respective mode. Eidetic seeing requires one to be able to distinguish between what is contingent (factual) and necessary (essential) to a form of experience. A fact is a statement about a state of affairs that is empirically true. It is a fact that the Calgary Flames won the NHL Stanley Cup in 1989. It is a fact that as I write this sentence I live in Hamilton, Ontario. Facts, however, are contingent. Any fact could

8 Crowell, 21.

9 I should note here that Husserl sometimes presents eidetic seeing as a product of a different kind of reduction called the “eidetic reduction.” Sometimes eidetic reduction is presented a completely different reduction, and sometimes it is presented as a part of the phenomenological reduction. I will not examine this issue here, but it is widely accepted among Husserl scholars that eidetic seeing is indispensable to Husserl's transcendental philosophy.

have been otherwise; I could have traveled elsewhere to continue my education and the Montreal Canadiens could have beaten the Calgary Flames in the 1989 Stanley Cup finals. Essences, in contrast, are necessary; they could not be otherwise. It is not possible for me to see all sides of a table at the same time. I cannot hear all the notes of the melody in an instant. No matter how much the world or my experience of it changes, the form of experience never changes. The essence of a form of experience, then, is that without which a form of experience could be what it is. Let me add that the essence itself never appears as a thing; it is always tied to something that is given. I never see “one-sidedness” itself, but always a thing that is seen in that way. To avoid confusion between factual and eidetic seeing, Husserl often favors the term “intuition” over “experience” when speaking of the way the subject has access to the essence of its objects.

Let us pause a moment and consider the idea of intuition more closely. The importance of intuition is summed up nicely in Husserl’s oft-quoted passage in *Ideas* concerning the “principle of all principles”:

*that every originary presentive intuition is a legitimizing source of cognition, that everything originarily (so to speak, in its “personal” actuality) offered to us in “intuition” is to be accepted simply as what it is presented as being, but also only within the limits in which it is presented there.*¹⁰

This is a succinct articulation of Husserl’s position that in perception the subject is to take what is given as it presents itself and describe it without adding or subtracting anything from it.

Intuition provides us with “evidence” (*Evidenz*). Evidence is the immediate self-giveness of a *noema* in its phenomenologically reduced purity. Thus, evidence in this sense is intuitive evidence. An intuition can be adequate or inadequate. To say that an intuition is inadequate is not to say that what is given is unclear or obscure, but that the very form of that experience does not present the *noema* in its full presence. For example, a spatio-temporal thing will always be given inadequately because I cannot perceive all sides of a physical thing at the same time. This is not a weakness of perception but is rather the form any experience of that kind must have. Similarly, even an act of memory is not considered to be an imperfect perception, but has its own form of experience with its own essential features. On the other hand, immanent acts such as the thought of a number or the conception of a triangle are adequate. An idea does not admit of another side; the *noema* is simple (although we should refrain from saying that immanent acts always have a greater degree of truth, since a memory of a thing can never be a perfect representation of the original). In any case, intuition is eidetic when it gives its *noema* directly and immediately, regardless of the adequacy or inadequacy of its mode

¹⁰ Husserl, *Ideas*, 44.

of presentation. Intuition is by no means easy to accomplish, for it is first necessary to carry out the reductions and accomplish a presuppositionless starting-point.

As we will see later, the young Levinas, under the influence of Heidegger, finds Husserl's emphasis on intuition problematic because it does not do justice to certain forms of experience that do not take a *noesis-noema* structure. Does the experience of eidetic seeing found the practical life of tool-handling and practice, or vice-versa? This is one of the central questions of Heidegger's phenomenological ontology, and one that Levinas takes seriously.

1.2 An Introduction to Heidegger's Phenomenology

This section will provide a basic introduction to Heidegger's *Being and Time*. A basic introduction to this text will assist me in introducing the ideas found in Levinas's articles from the early 1930s.

In *Being and Time* Heidegger poses the question of the meaning of Being. He argues that traditional philosophy from the pre-Socratics to the medieval thinkers, and from Descartes to the present, has forgotten the meaning of "Being" (*Sein*). Traditional philosophy has been too concerned with particular beings (*Seiendes*) and most often fails to acknowledge how beings differ from Being itself. In *Being and Time* Heidegger tries to find the proper way to ask the question of the meaning of Being. To ask the question properly, he carries out a phenomenology of the human being, which he calls Dasein.¹¹ Dasein is in a unique position because it is the kind of being for whom its own Being, and Being in general, is an issue. Thus, Heidegger states, "if we are to formulate our question explicitly and transparently, we must first give a proper explication of an entity (Dasein), with regard to its Being" (*BT* 8/27).¹² Without an explication of Dasein's Being, the question of the meaning of Being cannot be asked properly, let alone answered. Although the meaning of Dasein's Being is not identical to the meaning of Being in general, it is to be taken as a phenomenological clue to it.

Heidegger's first step is to carry out an existential analysis of Dasein's ontological structure. Rather than focus on the structure of Dasein's conscious acts, Heidegger is concerned with Dasein's existence (*Existenz*). These basic structures of Dasein's existence are called "existentials" (*Existentialie*). The most basic of these structures is

11 In its everyday usage, "Dasein" means "existence". Heidegger, however, points out that the word consists of the words "Da," "there," and "Sein," Being. Dasein, then, can be translated as "being-there" or "there-being".

12 Martin Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit* (Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 1977). Translated by John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson as *Being and Time* (London: Harper & Row, 1962). Both sources contain the original German pagination, which I give in all citations. Hereafter *BT*.

“Being-in-the-world” (*in der Welt sein*). By “world” Heidegger means neither the sum of all that which exists nor a place we live in. Dasein and the world are not two separate entities, but rather constitute a unitary phenomenon. Dasein is not “in” the world like water might be “in” the cup. Dasein is from the start immersed in the world and preoccupied with it. This preoccupation is not a theoretical relationship, but rather one of an involvement that precedes any cognitive relationship. I use a hammer, drive a car, and turn a doorknob. In this basic involvement with the world, Dasein knows the world in a pre-reflective sense, like a mechanic has a tacit familiarity with his garage of tools. Dasein is “attuned” with the world, where by “attunement” (*Stimmung*) Heidegger means an implicit understanding of its surroundings without that understanding being an explicit “consciousness of...” When I walk into a room, for example, I do not merely see a collection of objects given to perception, but I see things that have a practical significance and that fit into an intended project. I might see the chair that has not yet been taken by anyone else, or the podium that I will stand in front of. When I engage with the world, things present themselves as “ready-to-hand” (*handen*), as opposed to “present-at-hand” (*Vorhandene*) or as merely objects of perception. Things reveal themselves to Dasein as “equipment” (*Zeug*). The relation to equipment, for Heidegger, precedes the theoretical attitude towards it. When I use a hammer, I am not practicing eidetic seeing. For Heidegger, Dasein’s way of engaging with things is prior to any theoretical attitude towards it. The relationship with the world, as a relationship with a system of references, is what makes possible any theoretical relationship with the world.

The theoretical attitude (mere perception) is founded on the pre-theoretical relation to the world (*BT* 62/90). Heidegger writes, “[Being-in-the-world] becomes the ‘evident’ point of departure for problems of epistemology or the metaphysics of knowledge” (*BT* 59/86). Although Husserl does inquire into the different forms of experience, on Heidegger’s account Husserl fails to ask about the meaning of the being who has intentionality. In fact, in *The Basic Problems of Phenomenology* Heidegger says explicitly that “intentionality is the essential though not the most original structure of the subject itself” (*BPP*, 92/65).¹³ Heidegger resists speaking of the subject precisely because subjectivity is often associated with theoretical contemplation, and he is describing the ontological structures that make such theoretical contemplation possible. Although Levinas comes to question what he perceives as the priority of “Being” in Heidegger’s philosophy, he agrees with Heidegger’s basic insight that intuition and *eidetic* seeing do not capture the individual’s most basic relationship with the world, and with itself.

As Being-in-the-world, Dasein “has” “possibilities.” Dasein is the being who is

13 Martin Heidegger, *Die Grundprobleme der Phänomenologie* (Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 2005). Translated by Albert Hofstadter as *The Basic Problems of Phenomenology* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988). Hereafter *BPP*.

able to be. To have possibilities, on Heidegger's account, does not depend on one's being explicitly conscious of those possibilities. Having possibilities is written into the very structure of Dasein's existence. Dasein's ability to be (*Seinkönnen*) makes understanding possible. That is, understanding is a mode of possibility. By understanding, Heidegger does not mean the conceptual grasping of something that is, but rather a pre-conceptual awareness that one has possibilities, regardless of what specific possibilities might be available. Another way to put this is to say that understanding opens up for Dasein its possibilities, and "as a disclosure, understanding always pertains to the whole basic state of Being-in-the-world" (*BT*, 144/184). Now, understanding, in this sense, is not yet the explicit meaning of Being that Heidegger seeks to describe. Understanding must become "interpretive" in order for Dasein to accomplish this. Dasein always finds itself in a certain context, but at the same time always possesses a tacit understanding of the meaning of Being as such. This "hermeneutic circle" is constitutive of what it means to be Dasein. Dasein is always in some situation, attuned to some circumstance or other. This means that Dasein's existence cannot be viewed in theoretical terms as a series of cognitive acts. Rather Dasein's existence is one of "facticity," and this facticity is not immediately accessible to the theoretical attitude of the sciences. We begin with an obscure understanding of Dasein's existence, and hermeneutical interpretation is to help clarify this obscure understanding and provide a clue to the meaning of Being as such. Interpretation allows one to work out those possibilities that are implied in the pre-ontological understanding.

For the most part, Dasein lives in "everydayness" under the sway of *das Man* (the They or the One). Dasein, for the most part, is the They-self. One engages in idle chatter, is curious, and thinks and behaves as others do. Much of everyday life is filled with activities and attitudes that are largely unreflective. This way of existing is "inauthentic" (*uneigentlich*). Dasein is not its own and is "fallen." In this way of existing, Dasein in fact loses itself because it becomes immersed in anonymity. To put it another way, Dasein does not act on the possibilities that reflect its individuality or its ownmost being. Now, Heidegger does not claim that inauthentic existence is an inferior mode of existence. It is not his intention to provide a manual for authenticity, or to preach to us what we should become. Heidegger's method here is descriptive: he is describing what is essential to human existence and what it means to have a sense of "mineness." Dasein is in each case mine and so the question of authenticity is the question of how Dasein can act on the possibilities that bring to light its originary sense of mineness.

Let us note here a methodological similarity between Heidegger's inauthentic and authentic modes of existence, on the one hand, and Husserl's natural and phenomenological attitudes, on the other. Similarly to Husserl, Heidegger points out how the human being lives his or her life for the most part and then points to a primordial attitude that this usual way of living covers up. Moreover, like Husserl, Heidegger

maintains that this pre-reflective attitude is not an inferior one, but covers up an essential form of meaning that is always in play but never given in the naïve relationship with the world.

On the one hand, Dasein is “thrownness” (*Geworfenheit*) in that it finds itself in a world it did not choose. The possibilities it has are inherited, handed over to it without its own initiative. On the other hand, Dasein is projection (*Entwurf*). By virtue of existing, Dasein is aware of its possibilities and is future-oriented. Moreover, Dasein is concerned in that it occupies itself with worldly things. If we take all of these structures of Dasein’s existence (and others I have not mentioned for the sake of brevity) and understand them as a whole, we have what Heidegger calls the “care” (*Sorge*) structure of Dasein’s existence. “Care” is not something that Dasein engages in at times and not at other times. It is not a passing mood or attitude. Rather, care is the essential interconnection of Dasein’s existence as a unity. In order for Dasein to be what it is, it must essentially be a being constituted by the care structure. Loosely speaking, we can call care an ontological *a priori* in that it is the condition for the possibility of Dasein’s existence. In order for thrownness, projection, concern, and the other existential structures of Dasein’s existence to be even possible, Dasein must first be ontologically structured as care. Since care is presupposed in every activity or mood (which we will discuss shortly), the “theyself” is not an annihilation of the care-structure, but only a modification of it. To move from inauthenticity to authenticity is to uncover this care structure and own up to one’s most proper possibilities.

But how is the movement from inauthenticity to authenticity accomplished, and what does the care structure have to do with it? Dasein is a being with attunement (*Stimmung*) or with a “state of mind” (*Befindlichkeit*). Unlike understanding, Dasein’s state of mind reveals what it essentially *is*. Dasein is not attuned in the way that a substance can have a predicate; attunement is not something “about” Dasein. Rather, Dasein is at all times attuned in some way or other. One of the benefits of Heidegger’s approach—and this Levinas recognizes—is that phenomenology now takes affective experiences such as emotions as worthy of philosophical consideration, instead of just dismissing them as psychological contents. An attunement such as an emotion is not a meaning that I choose, but one that I find myself with. To be attuned is to be delivered over to something that does not originate in cognition. Indeed, while it is possible to reflect on one’s attunements, attunements are not initially contents of consciousness. An attunement is not a *noema* for a *noesis*, to borrow Husserl’s language. Instead, it is a way of Being-in-the-world; it is constitutive of Dasein’s ontological structure. This means that there is never a time when Dasein is not attuned to some situation or context. Levinas takes this idea of attunement to mean that Dasein is always set in motion; existence is not at rest, it is always active. There is never a time when Dasein is at rest without being attuned to the world in some way or other. It is as if human existence is like a current that sweeps one along. Levinas, we will see, agrees that human existence is

never at rest, but he questions what he thinks is Heidegger's position that a proper relationship with existence can leave to a fundamental form of being at peace with oneself.

While there are many forms of attunement, there is one in particular that reveals to Dasein its essential thrownness and projection: anxiety (*Angst*). Heidegger distinguishes anxiety from fear. Fear is always a fear of something in particular, a fear of an entity. Fear always has a definite object; it is ontic. Anxiety, on the other hand, has an indeterminate object; it is ontological. The world itself is not the source of anxiety, but anxiety reveals the world as what it is: the ground of our preoccupations, albeit not the source of anxiety. In anxiety Dasein is individualized, for Dasein's own individuality is revealed to itself as a possibility to be actualized. Anxiety, in other words, reveals "how" one is. Dasein finds itself no longer at home in the world; it finds itself out of place. What was familiar to Dasein is now foreign and irrelevant.

Anxiety leads us to Heidegger's account of death, but I will postpone my discussion of that topic until a little later. For now, I will turn to Levinas's early works and show that his early philosophical efforts are motivated by essentially Heideggerian concerns. I will also point to the tension at the heart of Levinas's early works—a tension that will always remain: although Levinas is committed to Heidegger's approach to phenomenology, he nevertheless has the need to rethink the basic tenets of that approach.

1.3 The Early Levinas on Heidegger, German philosophy, and Hitlerism

In 1928, on the recommendation of his teacher Jean Hering, a theologian and student of Husserl, Levinas traveled to Freiburg to study under Husserl. He had already read Husserl's *Logical Investigations* and was impressed by the new philosophical method it presented. Upon arriving in Freiburg, however, Levinas quickly discovered that Husserl's popularity was waning and being eclipsed by Martin Heidegger, whose work *Being and Time* (1927) established him as one of Germany's leading intellectuals. As Levinas put it in a 1989 interview, "I came for Husserl and found Heidegger."¹⁴ Levinas quickly became an admirer of Heideggerian ontology and remarks at the outset of his 1932 article "Martin Heidegger and Ontology" that Heidegger's thought marks "both a new phase and one of the high points of the phenomenological movement" (*MHO*, 11).¹⁵ Levinas understands Heidegger's phenomenology as a further

14 Emmanuel Levinas, "Intention, Event, and the Other" (1989), *Is It Righteous to be? Interviews with Emmanuel Levinas*, ed. Jill Robbins (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001), 156. Hereafter *RTB*.

15 Emmanuel Levinas, "Martin Heidegger et l'ontologie" (1932), *En découvrant l'existence avec Husserl et Heidegger* (Paris: Librairie Philosophique J. Vrin, 1967), pp. 53-76. Translated by the Committee of Public Safety as "Martin Heidegger and Ontology," *Diacritics*, Vol. 26, No. 1 (Spring 1996), pp. 11-32. Hereafter *MHO*.

development of Husserl's method. In his 1930 dissertation on Husserl, it is evident that Levinas even reads Husserl through a Heideggerian lens. Early in his dissertation Levinas announces that "we want to show...how the intuition which [Husserl] proposes as a mode of philosophizing follows from his very conception of Being" (*TIHP*, liv). Later in the work he enlists Heidegger's support when he questions whether our primary attitude towards the world is that of theoretical contemplation: "Is not the world presented in its very being as a center of action, as a field of activity or of *care*—to speak the language of Martin Heidegger?" (*TIHP* 119). There is no indication that in 1930 Levinas thinks Heidegger's thought overturns or challenges Husserl's approach. Although Heidegger goes beyond Husserl by laying out the ontological structures of human existence, Levinas in fact sees this endeavor as an extension of the Husserlian method.

The main purpose of this section is to establish a line of continuity between three of Levinas's articles from the early 1930s: "Martin Heidegger and Ontology" (1932), "The Understanding of Spirituality in French and German Culture" (1933)¹⁶, and "Reflections on the Philosophy of Hitlerism" (1934)¹⁷. I will then devote two separate sections to the 1935 essay *On Escape*, which I will present as the culmination of these earlier articles. I will argue that Levinas's account of Heidegger's thought in 1932 is quite consistent with his accounts of German spirituality and Hitlerism in 1933 and 1934, respectively. Accordingly, I maintain that the article on Hitlerism is just as much an attack on Heidegger's philosophy as it is on Hitlerism. I will show how these three articles present the philosophy of Heidegger (who, for Levinas, is the German philosopher par excellence) as opposing the abstract theory of consciousness in favor of a turn to the concrete existence of the individual with his or her own pains, hopes, and fears. On Levinas's account, the turn to existential concreteness implies a scorn for epistemology and a valorization of the individual who pains and worries about its future. For Levinas's Heidegger, theoretical contemplation cannot account for the concrete existence of the individual. Levinas initially takes these features of Heidegger's thought as positive contributions to philosophy, but by 1933 he realizes that these ideas can take dangerous forms. We will see that, for Levinas, Heidegger's philosophy of existence is inseparable from a certain notion of destiny, which Hitlerism then adopts and develops into a theory of biological identity. The allegedly Hitlerist appropriation of Heideggerian ideas develops into a form of racist relativism that nevertheless seeks to universalize its ideals through conquest and war. Levinas's critiques of German philosophy,

16 Emmanuel Levinas, "The Understanding of Spirituality in French and German Culture" (1933), *Continental Philosophy Review*, vol. 31, 1998: 1-10. The original copyright source of the Lithuanian text is unavailable.

17 Emmanuel Levinas, *Quelques réflexions sur la philosophie de l'hitlerisme* (1934) (Paris: Éditions Payot & Rivages, 1997). Translated by Seán Hand as "Reflections on the Philosophy of Hitlerism" in *Difficult Justice*, ed. Asher Horowitz and Gad Horowitz (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2006), pp. 3-11. Hereafter *RPH*.

Heideggerian ontology, and Hitlerism, I argue, hinge on the question of singularity and anticipate Levinas's later attempts to understand human singularity without reference to a general concept like "man" or "rational being." Let us trace Levinas's position in more detail.

"Martin Heidegger and Ontology" offers an account of the central ideas of *Being and Time*. There we find no critical approach to Heidegger's phenomenology. If anything, Levinas is clearly enthusiastic about Heidegger's phenomenology. Nevertheless, in that article we encounter a few themes that Levinas later singles out in his critical turn against Heidegger. In this connection, I should note that I think it is impossible to understand Levinas's early philosophical efforts in *On Escape* without taking into consideration his turn against Heidegger. However, I am not interested in evaluating Levinas's criticisms against Heidegger. My goal is to show how Levinas's encounter with Heidegger's *Being and Time* informs his early work. Thus, my next task will be to outline those central themes that Levinas questions in 1934 and 1935, and then show how Levinas's early philosophical efforts are a response to those issues.

In "The Understanding of Spirituality in French and German Culture," Levinas praises the phenomenological approach for taking certain elementary data of consciousness that are usually reserved for psychology and deeming them as worthy of philosophical consideration. One of the benefits of Heidegger's approach, according to Levinas, is that philosophy no longer relies on an abstract notion of the self, but turns to the concrete being. Similarly, in more than one place in "Martin Heidegger and Ontology" Levinas contrasts the abstract notion of consciousness typical of modern philosophy with the Heideggerian turn to the concrete drama of existence (*MHO*, 68/24, 71/26, 72/27). Heidegger, Levinas writes, is "hostil[e] to epistemology" (*MHO*, 15)¹⁸ and seeks to describe "a fundamental event where one's entire destiny at issue," an event that "comprises the fundamental drama of human existence" (*MHO*, 57/16). Understanding, for Levinas's Heidegger, is not the result of a detached contemplation, but is now "man's very mode of being" (*MHO*, 58/16). In sum, one of the defining features of Heidegger's philosophy is that he rejects the abstract theory of consciousness and turns to the inner drama of human existence.

This turn to the inner drama of human existence is not just a feature of Heidegger's philosophy, but the very core of it. Although it is unclear to what extent Levinas in 1933 endorses the details of Heidegger's philosophy, we do find at that time a positive evaluation of it. He praises Husserl, Scheler, and Heidegger for treating phenomena that are often dismissed as belonging to psychology. Phenomenology has allowed us to describe "biological life, sexual restlessness, and the fear of death" without

18 The abridged French version in *En découvrant l'existence avec Husserl et Heidegger* does not contain this passage.

reducing them to physical phenomena to be dealt with only by psychologists. Levinas is so impressed by this accomplishment that he himself later offers phenomenological descriptions of pleasure, shame, nausea, weariness, indolence, and pain. In the 1933 article, however, we catch a glimpse of what becomes a full-fledged attack against Heidegger, German philosophy, and Hitlerism within the next couple of years. It might not be immediately clear why these three articles belong together. I will develop their interconnection as I proceed. In what follows, I will show how for Levinas Heidegger, German spirituality, and Hitlerism all share the same basic philosophical commitments, and then point to the general philosophical problems that arise from these commitments.

While it is not immediately obvious that Heidegger is Levinas's target in the article on Hitlerism, in the "spirituality" article he explicitly identifies Heidegger with German "spirituality," which he defines in the following way:

Germans begin with concrete mental existence....Man is the concrete 'I,' worried about his fate and anxious before death, who looks at it straight in the eyes or runs away from it. This uneasiness and these experiences of our senses and emotions form the whole tragedy of human existence: love, hate, passions and disillusionments all go to make up one dramatic whole. It is this drama which expresses the spirit. (*FGC*, 4)

Later in the article he says the following about Heidegger's philosophy:

When Heidegger speaks about spiritual reality, he does not use the word 'consciousness', but rather 'existence'....wanting to emphasize the concrete and dramatic aspects of the spirit. (*FGC*, 6)

It is clear that for Levinas Heidegger is not just a philosopher who happens to be German; Heidegger's philosophy is itself the expression of a certain German philosophical consciousness. Indeed, Levinas remarks that "it is no coincidence that extremist political parties, which are presently so strong in Germany, are enchanted with this notion of the spirit" found in Heidegger (*FGC*, 6). However, in this 1933 article Levinas does not object to this notion of spirit. Rather, towards the end of the article he says that "every concept has its dignity, but can also be deformed into a ridiculous and dangerous form" (*FGC*, 10). The "ridiculous and dangerous form" of Heideggerian-German spirituality is spelled out and attacked in detail by Levinas in the "Hitlerism" article, published only one year later.

In the article on spirituality Levinas speaks of Heidegger's philosophy quite openly, but in the article on Hitlerism Heidegger's name is nowhere to be found. Nevertheless, there are good reasons to believe that when Levinas attacks Hitlerism he is also attacking Heidegger. He writes that "the Germanic ideal of man seems to promise

sincerity and authenticity” (*RPH*, 21/10), and this reminds us of Heidegger’s notion of “authenticity” we discussed in the last section. In a 1991 preface to the English translation, Levinas identifies “the essential possibility of *elemental Evil*” that comes with National Socialism as “inscribed within the ontology of a being concerned with being” (*RPH*, 25/3). If that’s not enough, the themes of drama, embodiment and destiny appear in the article after Levinas has already identified these themes as belonging specifically to Heideggerian philosophy and German spirituality in the earlier articles. As we can see, there are good reasons to believe that Heidegger is a target in the article. To modify a Levinasian statement about Franz Rosenzweig in the preface to *Totality and Infinity*, we can say that Heidegger is “too present” in the article to be cited even once.

At this juncture, it is not yet clear exactly what Levinas finds to be problematic in either Heideggerian or Hitlerist philosophy. A few paragraphs ago, I pointed to the alleged role of destiny in Heideggerian philosophy without justifying Levinas’s reference to it. This is precisely where we find the German concept of “spirituality” deformed into a “ridiculous and dangerous” form. Before we get to Levinas’s analysis of the German account of “spirituality” in Hitlerism, let me justify Levinas’s claim that it is present in Heidegger.

Let us recall that for Heidegger “anxiety” is the *Stimmung* that reveals to Dasein its singularity. As a finite being, Dasein is essentially Being-toward-death. To choose oneself is to accept one’s finitude and to choose the possibilities that allow Dasein to “win itself” in the face of its own possible annihilation. Heidegger calls this acceptance “anticipatory resoluteness,” in which “Dasein understands itself with regard to its potentiality-for-Being, and it does so in such a manner that it will go right under the eyes of death in order thus to take over in its thrownness that entity which it is itself, and to take it over wholly” (*BT*, 382/434). Once it has grasped the finitude of its existence in anticipatory resoluteness, Dasein is brought “into the simplicity of its *fate* [*Schicksal*]” (*BT*, 384/435). Dasein, as Heidegger says, “hands itself down” to a possibility it has inherited (by virtue of being thrown), but yet at the same time has chosen through anticipatory resoluteness. This simple fate Heidegger speaks of does not isolate Dasein from other people. After all, Being-with is one of the basic ontological constituents of Dasein’s existence. Dasein’s individual fate (*Shicksals*) is intricately bound with the destiny (*Geschick*) of the community of which Dasein is a member. Heidegger writes,

Destiny [*Geschick*] is not something that puts itself together out of individual fates, any more than Being-with-one-another can be conceived as the occurring together of several Subjects [*Subjekte*]. Our fates have already been guided in advance, in our Being with one another in the same world and in our resoluteness for definite possibilities. Only in communicating and in struggling does the power of destiny become free. Dasein’s fateful destiny [*schicksalhafter Geschick*] and with its ‘generation’ goes to make up the full authentic

historicizing of Dasein. (*BT*, 384-85/436)

In other words, Dasein's individual fate (*Shicksals*) is inseparable from the communal fate that has been "guided in advance." The freedom of the individual, on this reading of Heidegger, is inseparable from the fate of the community of which one is a part.

"Martin Heidegger and Ontology" is largely uncritical of the account of destiny in Heidegger, but Levinas criticizes it harshly two years later in the Hitlerism article. Keeping Heidegger's appeal to destiny in mind, along with my earlier evidence for Heidegger's presence in the article, consider the following passage from the Hitlerism article:

Man no longer finds himself confronted by a world of ideas in which he can choose his own truth on the basis of a sovereign decision made by his free reason. He is already linked to a certain number of these ideas, just as he is linked by birth to all those who are of his blood. He can no longer play with the idea, for coming from his concrete being, anchored in his flesh and blood, the idea remains serious. (*RPH*, 22/10)

Already in 1932 Levinas presents Heidegger's philosophy as opposing an abstract theory of consciousness that neglects the very existence of the concrete being. Levinas always finds this position to be one of the positive contributions of Heidegger's philosophy. However, when this turn to concreteness is bound to a notion of destiny, a series of dangers arises.

What could possibly be wrong with the shift to man's concrete existence, to the inner drama that constitutes human subjectivity? The answer is that the distrust in reason we find in Heidegger, Hitlerism, and German spirituality falls into a form of relativism. The distrust in reason develops into a form of skepticism that denies the universal truths of reason.

Thought becomes a game. Man revels in his freedom and does not definitively compromise himself with any truth. He transforms his power to doubt into a lack of conviction. Not to chain himself to a truth becomes for him not wishing to commit his own self to the creation of spiritual values. Sincerity becomes impossible and puts an end to all heroism. Civilization is invaded by everything that is not authentic, by a substitute that is put at the service of fashion and of various interests. (*RPH*, 22/10)

This is not to say that for Hitlerism there is no truth, but rather that there arises an ideal that is specific to the individual and yet is shared by the community. This ideal is essentially rooted in the bodily identity of the individual. The Germanic ideal is one

rooted in blood, rooted in the very heart of the Germanic soul.

For the Hitlerist (and for Levinas as well), consciousness and embodiment are essentially inseparable. It is true that the body is closer to an individual than anything else in the world. To have an experience of myself is essentially to experience myself as embodied. Levinas states that the body's "*adherence to the Self is of value in itself*. It is an adherence that *one does not escape* and that no metaphor can confuse with the presence of an external object" (RPH, 18/8). (The reference to escape anticipates the central theme of his 1935 essay *On Escape*, which I will discuss in a later section of this chapter.) Nevertheless, we see here how the experience of embodiment is bondage:

To be truly oneself does not mean taking flight once more above contingent events that always remain foreign to the subject's freedom; on the contrary, it means becoming aware of the ineluctable original chain that is unique to our bodies, and above all accepting this chaining. (RPH, 19/9)

Here we see a clear reference to Heidegger's position that authentic selfhood requires an acceptance of one's inherited destiny. The ideal of truth that corresponds with this call to accept one's bondage is rooted in the very biological identity of the German soul. Truth, Levinas writes, "consists in a drama in which man himself is the actor" (RPH, 19/9). This drama in which man is the actor implies an end for which one acts. Here lies the essential danger of Hitlerism: the call for universality and conquest.

The universality that comes with Hitlerism is not one that applies to everyone. Hitlerist universality is racist in that it endorses a universality that applies only to one group of people. Not only that, there is the call for war and conquest in the name of this universality. That is, the goal of Hitlerism is to expand: "*Universality must give way to the idea of expansion*, for the expansion of a force presents a structure that is completely different from the propagation of an idea" (RPH, 23/11). At stake here is not just Germany or even Europe. Rather, Levinas concludes the article on Hitlerism, at stake "is the very humanity of man" (RPH, 24/11).

While I do not think there is enough evidence to suggest that for Levinas Heidegger's philosophy is *essentially* Hitlerist, or vice-versa, we can see why Levinas thinks that Heidegger's philosophy is at least compatible with some of its ideological principles. Yet Levinas is not content with simply dismissing Heidegger's philosophy, since he does not want to abandon the positive philosophical contributions of Heidegger's philosophy. For Levinas, there is always (then and for the next forty years) the need to acknowledge the brilliance of Heidegger's 1927 work, but with the cautious need to escape the potential political pitfalls to which it is susceptible. The first place we find this serious ambivalence in Levinas's attitude towards Heidegger is in the 1935 essay *On Escape*.

On Escape is Levinas's first attempt to present a philosophical position of his own, and for this reason it has an important place in Levinas's *oeuvre*. This work is of special importance because it develops for the first time some of the themes that remain present in Levinas's later works. In my analysis of this text, I will focus on the notion of being "chained" or "riveted" to one's identity, and to how the need to escape Being is motivated from within the individual itself.

1.4 On Escape: *Existence, Identity, Escape*

One basic position that Levinas carries over from Heidegger is that the individual is essentially bound to its bodily identity. In this sense, Levinas says that the individual is "riveted" or "enchained" to what it is. Levinas sees value in the idea of the subject found in Heidegger's philosophy, but nevertheless remains suspicious of how it can lend itself to a certain conception of humanity that brings with it the possibilities of war and conquest. One can understand, then, why in 1935 Levinas inquires into the possibility of escaping what he calls the "brutal fact of existence." Levinas's questioning of Heidegger's position naturally leads to the theme of transcendence, and it is here presented as the need for escape. Levinas now turns to the question of leaving Being behind, of effecting a break of the chain that links the self and its identity. But what could he mean by "escape" in this regard, and what could be the alternative to the brutal fact of existence?

At the outset of "On Escape," Levinas writes:

The revolt of traditional philosophy against the idea of being originates in the discord between human freedom and the brutal fact of being that assaults this freedom. The conflict from which the revolt arises opposes man to the world, not man to himself. (*OE*, 91/49)¹⁹

Traditional philosophy, by which Levinas means the philosophy that is handed down to us, has privileged the I-world relationship. The problems that arise from the traditional view, thus, do not reflect the individual's own being with its struggles and pains. They instead reflect the disharmony between man and the world. Levinas's essay starts off with a strong Heideggerian point: he accuses traditional philosophy of neglecting a basic distinction that is at the very heart of human existence, namely, the individual's existential relationship with itself.

19 Emmanuel Levinas, *De l'évasion* (Paris: Le livre de poche, 1998). Translated by Bettina Bergo as *On Escape* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003).

Levinas, then, presents here at the outset two dualisms already present in the 1933 and 1934 articles: I-world and I-self. Let us recall the significance of the first dualism. Modern thought emphasizes the interiority of the subject as the starting-point of philosophical reflection. One basic problem of modern thought concerns how the self-contained ego can gain access to what lies outside it. The body is treated as a lifeless accident to the mind, and so the idea of the body as having a fundamental role in lived experience is largely missed by modern thought. The struggles that derive from the traditional view, Levinas writes, “do not break up the unity of the ‘I,’ which—when purified of all that is not authentically human in it—is given to peace with itself, completes itself, closes on and rests upon itself” (*OE*, 91/48). We find here Levinas’s earliest criticisms of “egology,” namely, the position that the subject takes itself as self-sufficient and complete. This ideal of being at peace with oneself, Levinas thinks, is exemplified by the eighteenth and nineteenth century romanticists and carries over into bourgeoisie consciousness and capitalism. “No one is more proud than Rousseau or Byron; no one is more self-sufficient” (*OE*, 91/50), and the capitalist “aims less at reconciling man with himself than at securing for him the unknowns of times and things” (*OE*, 93/50). The bourgeois “admits no inner division” and is caught up in the present, which it tries to master by focusing on “business matters and science as a defense against things and all that is unforeseeable in them” (*OE*, 93/50). Behind the Romantic, bourgeois, and capitalist conceptions of self-sufficiency there is an ontology that looks no deeper than the sufficiency of existence itself.

Yet this category of sufficiency is conceived in the image of *being* such as things offer it to us. They *are*. Their essence and their properties can be imperfect; the very fact of being [*le fait même de l’être*] is placed beyond the distinction between the perfect and the imperfect. The brutality of its assertion [that of the fact of being] is absolutely sufficient and refers to nothing else. Being is: there is nothing to add to this assertion as long as we envision in a being only its existence. This reference to oneself is precisely what one states when one speaks of the identity of being. Identity is not a property of being, and it could not consist in the resemblance between properties that, in themselves, suppose identity. Rather, it expresses the sufficiency of the fact of being, whose absolute and definitive character no one, it seems, could place in doubt. (*OE*, 93/50-51)

There is no admitting of degree when it comes to existence. One thing does not exist more or less than another. Of course, we can say that, for instance, one thing may be more or less perfect than another thing of the same kind, but existence itself does not admit of degrees. While I might be stronger and more intelligent than the person sitting across from me, this does not mean that I have a greater degree of existence. Identity itself “is not a property of being” and is in fact presupposed in any attempt to judge the perfection or imperfection of a being. Jacques Rolland notes that “Levinas’s meditation will align itself, in effect, with pure *existence*, with *existentia* or *quoddity*, distinct from

essentia or *quiddity*" (*OE*, Rolland's Introduction, 9). This is to say that Levinas is concerned with the fact "that" I exist, apart from "what" I might be. Levinas, unlike what he reads in Heidegger, does not want to affirm that human identity consists in the unity of existence and essence. Instead, Levinas wants to isolate existence and make it the theme of his analyses. Perhaps this is one way that he wishes to renew the question of Being in a way different than the one sought by a "certain modern philosopher" (*OE*, 99/56).

Levinas claims that traditional philosophy addresses the imperfection or finitude of human existence, but has never questioned the individual's relationship with himself. Philosophy, in his view, has questioned how we can become better, how we could become sufficient and come to be at peace with ourselves, but never questions the brutal fact of existence itself. This endeavor to perfect our imperfect being is what Levinas calls ontologizing, and it anticipates what he later calls totalization or the reduction of the Other to the Same. He writes,

And Western philosophy, in effect, has never gone beyond this. In combating the tendency to ontologize [*ontologisme*], when it did combat it, Western philosophy struggled for a better being, for a harmony between us and the world, or for the perfection of our own being. Its ideal of peace and equilibrium presupposed the sufficiency of being. The insufficiency of the human condition has never been understood otherwise than as a limitation of being, without our ever having envisaged the meaning of "finite being." The transcendence of these limits, communion with the infinite being, remained philosophy's sole preoccupation. (*OE*, 93/50)

The "tendency to ontologize" does not refer to an exterior system that swallows up an individual (as perhaps we might find in Kierkegaard), but refers to the way that the individual finds itself as peace with the world through a prior peace with itself. In the early works, then, we already find at least two forms of "the Same" that are present in *Totality and Infinity*: egology and political totality. The above passage anticipates Levinas's later position that traditional philosophy is concerned mainly with totalities, even if here the ethical significance of totalizing has not yet been announced. The 1935 essay marks Levinas's earliest articulation of the need to go beyond being, of a need to break up the unity of the self.

Already we can see how Levinas's call for escape arises from a critique of Heidegger's ontology. On Levinas's account, for Heidegger human existence is always on the way; Dasein is essentially active. Levinas agrees with this account of existence as active. What he does not agree with, however, is the alleged unity with Being that authenticity is meant to accomplish for Heidegger. For Levinas, it is not a matter of accepting the chaining that links the self with existence, but of breaking that chain. Levinas rejects the idea that an individual can be at peace with itself. The disharmony of

the individual with itself is for Levinas the basic situation of human existence. As Jeffrey Bloechl puts it, Levinas charges ontology “with prescribing ends for a movement that can have none.”²⁰ Levinas’s escape, we will see, has no prescribed ends. It is a departing for the sake of departing.

Levinas claims he is borrowing the term “escape” from “contemporary literary criticism” and that it refers to the “pain of the age” (*mal du siècle*), or what is commonly translated as “world-weariness.” However, it is clear that it is not the world that the individual is weary of here, but the brutal fact of existence. This is an age of pain “that leaves no one in the margins of life, and in which no one has the power to slip by himself unaware [*passer à côté de soi*]” (*OE*, 94/52). There are certain situations in human existence in which “the elementary truth ‘there is’ *being*—a being that has value and weight—is revealed at a depth that measures its brutality and its seriousness” (*OE*, 94-5/52). It is not a particular way of living that must be escaped. The need for escape is not a need to change one’s properties but the very fact and permanent quality one’s being. It is not a need to come to terms with oneself, to find oneself, or even to become a better person. It is not a matter of anticipatory resoluteness, but of escaping the very framework in which such a notion can be entertained. Levinas’s task is to identify and describe those situations in human experience that reveal the very brutal fact of existence and then illustrate how these situations promise a break from the brutal fact of existence.

Levinas offers a series of explanations of what he means by escape, most of them negative: 1) it is not a poetic search for a higher reality; 2) it is not a break from social conventions and constraints; 3) it is a quest for the marvelous (*merveilleux*) that breaks up the self-satisfaction of bourgeois existence; 4) it is not a freedom from the blind mechanism of the body; and 5) it is not a nostalgia for death. Each of these examples, Levinas thinks, points to the brutal fact of existence, but neither captures it adequately. As Levinas puts it, “they translate the horror of a certain *definition* of our being but not that of being as such” (*OE*, 96/53). Furthermore, Levinas distinguishes his notion of escape from Bergson’s *élan vital* and creative evolution. The Bergsonian creative urge is an escape from the present, but Levinas thinks that it still does not mark an escape from being, but only an escape to a higher determination of being. Moreover, to emphasize the complete departure from being, Levinas does not yet want to use the term “transcendence,” but instead prefers “excendence” (*excendance*), which he borrows from Jean Wahl.

Escape is motivated by need and this need is experienced as a revolt (*OE*, 95/42). This revolt is expressed as “a need to get out of oneself, that is, *to break that most radical and unalterably binding of chains, the fact that the I [moi] is oneself [soi-même]*” (*OE*, 98/55). The concept of revolt is telling here, because without an “Other” to motivate the

20 Bloechl, 111.

movement out of being, it has to occur from the inside. That is, the theme of a “shock” or “disturbance” from the outside is completely absent from Levinas’s earlier works. Once Levinas, in his later works, introduces the Other as the source of the escape from Being, the notion of a revolt disappears from his philosophy, only to be replaced by an unexpected event that can in no way have its source in the individual alone.

Consistently with the articles on spirituality and Hitlerism, Levinas identifies suffering as the experience in which the brutal fact of existence is revealed. Levinas writes that “the ground of suffering consists of the impossibility of interrupting [life], and of an acute feeling of being riveted [*rivé*]” (*OE*, 95/52). Here we find Levinas taking up again the term *rivé*, which he employed in the earlier articles from this period to refer to the essential enchainment to existence. A little further on Levinas repeats that the identity of being “appears in the form of suffering and invites us to escape” (*OE*, 98/55). Suffering calls into question the self-sufficiency of the “I.” This calling into question is not yet the ethical questioning originating in the Face of the Other, but nevertheless already challenges the sovereignty of the subject. Moreover, in the need for escape we find a “dramatic form” (*forme dramatique*) of meaning rather than a “logical or tautological” one (98/55). The experience of suffering, which is the basis of need, does not only affect the “what” or essence of existence, but the “that” of existence, the brutality and seriousness of being itself. It is the very fact of one’s being that is affected.

We must note here that there are political and religious roots to Levinas’s notion of escape. As Jacques Rolland points out, Levinas is addressing here the fact of having an inescapable Jewish identity in a fascist Germany. Rolland quotes Levinas’s 1935 article “The Religious Inspiration of the Alliance”: “Hitlerism is the greatest trial—an incomparable trial—through which Judaism has had to pass....The pathetic destiny of being Jewish becomes a fatality. One can no longer flee it. The Jew is ineluctably riveted [*rivé*] to his Judaism.” Furthermore, a young person “discovers in the reality of Hitlerism all the gravity of being Jewish” and that “one does not desert Judaism” (*OE*, Rolland’s annotations, 74-5). The analyses of suffering found in the articles from the 1930s, then, are not only to be understood as abstract meditations on human identity, but as speaking even to the threat Levinas saw presented to his own identity as a Jew—a threat that he already points out in the essay on Hitlerism. Philosophy is not only close to life, but essentially bound to it. This is the lesson Levinas learns from Heidegger, but it is a lesson, as we saw, with harsh and serious implications.

1.5 The Possibility of Escape

We continue with another key passage, this time the one that closes the first section of “On Escape”:

Therefore, the need for escape—whether filled with chimerical hopes or not, no matter!—leads us into the heart of philosophy. It allows us to renew the ancient problem of being qua being. What is the structure of this pure being? Does it have the universality Aristotle conferred on it? Is it the ground and the limit of our preoccupations [*le fond et la limite de nos préoccupations*], as certain modern philosophers would have it? On the contrary, is it nothing else than the mark of a certain civilization, firmly established in the fait accompli of being and incapable of getting out of it? And, in these conditions, is *excedence* possible, and how would it be accomplished? What is the ideal of happiness and human dignity that it promises? (*OE*, 56)

Levinas says that he is “renewing” the problem of being. This statement places him squarely in the philosophical tradition of which Heidegger is a part. That is, in this early work Levinas still considers himself to be doing ontology, although he already seeks to do it in a way different than Heidegger. Heidegger takes Dasein’s care for its own Being as a phenomenological clue to the meaning of Being in general. Levinas, on the other hand, wishes to escape Being itself. For Levinas, it is not a matter of addressing a way of being, of addressing “how” the human being can have an authentic relationship with its own Being, but rather of putting Being itself in question. This can only be a need for *excedence*. He examines suffering and illness not in order to show how the meaning of human existence points to the meaning of Being, but rather to show how it essentially breaks through the universality of being itself. The final question concerning happiness and human dignity indicates that there are ethical issues at stake, although Levinas does not pursue what these issues amount to. At this juncture we can only suggest that they point to what becomes one of the central themes in his mature thought: ethics and the Good.

The need signified in the experience of suffering does not have the structure of privation, where by privation we mean a lack that needs to be filled. Instead, the experiencing of suffering Levinas has in mind is “malaise.” When one is in pain, the hope for the absence of pain is not like the desire to satisfy a privation. This malaise that comes with suffering is not even a state of passivity that awaits its fulfillment. “The face of being ill at ease [*mal à son aise*],” Levinas writes, “is essentially dynamic. It appears as a refusal to remain in place, as an effort to get out of an unbearable situation” (*OE*, 104/59). Malaise presents itself as an imperative to get out, to escape the confinement of one’s being. But this imperative to get out does not announce a destination. It is a call for an escape but an escape without any particular *telos*.

Rather than announcing an end, for Levinas need is installed in the present and cannot break away from it: “In itself, need does not foreshadow the end. It clings fiercely to the present, which then appears at the threshold of a possible future” (*OE*, 105/59). This position that the experience of existence is rooted in the present is also be

maintained in the 1947 work *From Existence to Existents*. The need Levinas speaks of is insatiable, not because it keeps feeding on an object without being filled, but because it does not even fit the structure of need as privation. “What gives the human condition all its importance,” Levinas says, “is precisely this inadequacy of satisfaction to need” (*OE*, 106/60). At this point Levinas needs to support further his claim that need does not initially take the structure of privation. How does need point to the brutal fact of existence, my very substance, rather than a quality or property of what I am? To answer this question, Levinas examines the experience of pleasure. Let us note here that unlike the experience of pain, pleasure is a forgetting of the brutal fact of existence. Through an analysis of pleasure Levinas seeks to show that there is an experience that promises the break between the existence and the existent. However, Levinas treats pleasure (and the other experiences we will discuss shortly) in a Heideggerian way, namely, as a form of experience that cannot be treated as an object of theoretical contemplation. We might say that Levinas is using Heidegger’s phenomenological method in order to get beyond his teacher.

Levinas rejects the position that pleasure is only a state of mind or content of consciousness unworthy of philosophical consideration. As a phenomenologist, Levinas is dedicated to describing pleasure as it is lived. Once again, Levinas is drawing on phenomenology’s ability to treat what is normally reserved for psychology. Levinas considers pleasure as one form of experience that promises escape. Pleasure is never present as a whole. It is a dynamic process with varying degrees of intensity. Pleasure is for pleasure’s sake, and it roots the individual in the present. But pleasure changes how this present is experienced. In pleasure, one loses the sense of time. The present is no longer long, one’s being no longer a burden. Levinas writes that “it is precisely the instant that is split up in pleasure. It loses its solidity and its consistency, and each of its parts is enriched with new potentialities for swooning as the ecstasy intensifies” (*OE*, 108/61). So, where pain roots one in the instant, pleasure is experienced as a release, as an experience of duration. The human being “feels its substance somehow draining from it; it grows lighter, as if drunk, and disperses” (*OE*, 108/61). Pleasure promises a break from the brutal fact of existence: “We therefore note in pleasure an abandonment, a loss of oneself, a getting out of oneself, an ecstasy: so many traits that describe the promise of escape contained in pleasure’s essence” (*OE*, 108-9/61). Need points to the liberation from one’s being, not to an affirmation of it.

The analysis of pleasure indicates that escape is not something that is accomplished by a willed act; I cannot choose to escape the fact of existence. I can surely choose to engage in an act that brings pleasure, but the pleasure itself is not an act.²¹ Nor may we say that the act plus pleasure effects an escape from being, for then

21 So, while Levinas does not yet turn to the Other as the initiator of escape, he already holds that the break from Being is not accomplished through the subject’s own initiative. This anticipates Levinas’s later

pleasure is treated as a contingent property or a state of mind. Furthermore, pleasure is not even the goal of need because, as we established earlier, the need Levinas is articulating has no *telos*. Levinas says explicitly that pleasure cannot even be understood on the model of activity or passivity. Pleasure is a form of affectivity prior to any distinction between activity and passivity because it breaks through this very distinction. He writes, “pleasure is affectivity precisely because it does not take on the forms of being, but rather attempts to break these up” (*OE*, 110/63). Here we catch a glimpse of what Levinas in his later thought calls the “pure passivity” prior to any distinction between activity and passivity.

However, pleasure fails to accomplish a complete break from being. When pleasure comes to an end, the individual finds itself once again riveted to the brutal fact of existence. This falling-back into being, or perhaps the reminder that one is still riveted to the brutal fact of being, is experienced as shame. This shame points to what Levinas in *From Existence to Existents* calls a reminder of a commitment to exist. Shame reveals that there is a fact of existence that cannot be evaded, and that if one manages to forget about it for a moment there are acute experiences that reveal this brutal fact of existence in all its force. By shame, Levinas does not mean the experience of regretting what one might have done. Such an understanding of shame points to the finitude of one’s being, of the fact that one cannot go back and do otherwise. That is, it addresses a quality of existence but not existence itself. For Levinas, on the other hand, shame exposes the individual’s nudity (*nudité*). Nudity here does not refer to the lack of clothing but to the inability to cover one’s very existence. It is the inability to hide from oneself, let alone from others. That is, Levinas here emphasizes the personal aspect of shame over its social aspect:

What appears in shame is thus precisely the fact of being riveted to oneself [*rivé à soi-même*], the radical impossibility of fleeing oneself to hide from oneself, the unalterably biding presence of the I to itself [*du moi à soi-même*]. Nakedness is shameful when it is the sheer visibility [*patence*] of our being, of its ultimate intimacy. And the nakedness of our body is not that of a material thing, antithesis of spirit, but the nakedness of our total being in all its fullness and solidity, of its most brutal expression of which we could not fail to take note. (*OE*, 113/64-5)

Nudity is not something that can be true or false about a being. I can be fully clothed but can still be naked in Levinas’s sense of the term because I can never cover up or escape the brutal fact of existence. The experience of shame points to an inability to escape one’s being, but neither “pleasure” nor “shame” describes adequately the revolt that lies at the basis of need. To demonstrate this experience of revolt, Levinas examines the experience of nausea.

position that the subject finds itself substituted for the Other “despite itself” and committed without choice.

In nausea, Levinas argues, malaise appears in its purity. This is to say that it speaks to the brutal fact of existence, and does not confuse this fact with a way of existing. Once again, Levinas is concerned with the experience insofar as it is lived. Nausea, on Levinas's analysis, is not a predicate. I am not nauseated like a house happens to be red. Nausea permeates one's whole being. Levinas rejects the position that there is a duality between the self and nausea. Nausea is not an obstacle to overcome; it is not something external to me. In a Heideggerian vein, nausea is part of the subject's very constitution. Nausea is a unitary phenomenon. I myself am nauseated. And like Heidegger's anxiety, nausea, as Bloechl also points out, is an event of singularization.²² It is an event that reveals that I am in fact at odds with myself, but that at the same time I cannot escape this internal discordance. As Levinas puts it, "in nausea—which amounts to an impossibility of being what one is—we are at the same time riveted to ourselves and enclosed in a tight circle that smothers" (*OE*, 116/66). Levinas adds that this experience "is the very experience of pure being, which we have promised at the beginning of this work" (*OE*, 116/67). This idea of "pure being" takes center stage in *From Existence to Existents* as the "there is" (*il y a*). In "On Escape," however, he has not yet taken the position that pure being has a meaning without appeal to existents. Nevertheless, nausea does provide an insight into shame "as purified of any admixture of collective representations" (*OE*, 117/67). When one has to vomit, the impersonal fact of existence is revealed in its sheer brutality.

But here Levinas anticipates an objection: is it not the case that nausea consists in the consciousness of being nauseated? Why is nausea not seen as a state of consciousness? Once again, this objection supposes that there is an essential difference between the self who is ill and the nausea itself; Levinas rejects this dualism: "For what constitutes the relationship between nausea and us is nausea itself" (*OE*, 118/68). Nausea, then, does not point to a way of existing. Rather, nausea is presence itself. It is the very act of positing oneself (*se poser*) which is prior to any way of existing I may choose. This is a presence that bears down on me before I have a chance to contemplate it as a detached observer. Nausea reveals the presence of being, but also the impotence of the being to escape its existence. But this impotence is not finitude, for it points to the nature of existence itself, not one of its qualities. This impotence is not an announcement of finitude; it is "nothing other than our powerlessness to take leave of that presence" (*OE*, 118/68). To be clear, Levinas does not deny that human beings are finite, but that the being in question is finite first because of relationship with the brutal fact of its existence.

It turns out, then, that escape is an aporetic concept in *On Escape*. To be "me" is always to be in a smothering relationship with the brutal fact of existence. To be an

22 Bloechl, 117.

individual is always to be in act, and this constant state of being in act is restless and allows of no respite. This restlessness of subjectivity is further developed in *From Existence to Existents*.

This chapter began as a general introduction to phenomenology, and then moved to a discussion of Heidegger and his influence on the young Levinas. My main point in these analyses is that Levinas's reflections during this pre-war period can be understood as a series of reflections on the nature of human identity as riveted to the brutal fact of existence. This "brutal fact" is to be distinguished from properties, qualities, or ways of existing. For Levinas, it is not a matter of choosing one's way of existing, as it is for Heidegger, but of identifying those forms of experience in which the relationship with Being is put into question. To communicate this drama of existence, Levinas draws on the experiences of pain, pleasure, need, and nausea.

Although the idea of escape in these early works is essentially aporetic and ambiguous, we find in these early works themes that reappear in his later works. The most important of these themes, I suggest, are singularity and restlessness. Levinas's project consists in showing that at the heart of human existence there is an irreducible singularity that cannot be described as a relationship with Being. This basic position guides his analyses in his later works, even if there are changes in how he approaches this theme. The next chapter will consider the idea of singularity as an inner disharmony between existence and the being that exists. This disharmony, I will argue, will be Levinas's way of inquiring into the singularity of the individual and it is within this framework that we should approach the introduction of otherness into his philosophy. As for restlessness, we will see that the singularity of the individual does not point to the individual as a unity, but as essentially at odds with itself. To be singular is to find oneself always reminded of brutal singularity that calls one's identity into question.

Chapter II:
From Existence to Existents

Levinas spent 1940 to 1945 in captivity in a German labor camp. He did not learn of the horrors of the Holocaust and of his mother's and sister's deaths until the end of the *stalag*. During these five years Levinas wrote most of *From Existence to Existents*, which he published in 1947.²³ In 1946-47 Levinas also gave a series of four lectures at the Philosophical College in Paris that he published as *Time and the Other*.²⁴ This chapter will deal primarily with these two texts.

The theme of the "riveted" subject carries over into this period, and it is once again rooted in an essential disharmony at the heart of human existence. As in the earlier works, Levinas focuses on the singularity of the individual, but now he frames this singularity as a severance from the anonymity of pure being, which he now calls the "there is." Levinas is very much still concerned with the question of the meaning of existence in this work, as he accepts Heidegger's basic distinction between Being and beings, which Levinas reformulates as the distinction between "existence" and the "existent" (the human being). However, he questions what he sees as Heidegger's method of beginning with Dasein and then deriving the meaning of Being from that starting-point. Levinas, in contrast, moves "from existence to existents," as the title of his 1947 work indicates. Levinas argues that the "there is" can be described without any reference to the existent. Paradoxically, however, Levinas can only describe this impersonal nature of existence by referring to those human experiences in which the separation between existence and the existent reveals itself. As it turns out, the relationship with existence is both a separation and a relationship: existence strikes me as a foreign force and inspires horror in me, but at the same time I find myself unable to escape the commitment to exist. I will pay special attention to this duality between separation and relation.

As I did in Chapter I, in this chapter I will lay out a set of central themes that remain essential in Levinas's later works. The most important of these is Levinas's account of singularity as constituted by a fundamental restlessness. For Levinas, in *From Existence to Existents*, to be a human being is to be in a basic relationship with existence, but this relationship is experienced as painful and horrifying. To be a singular being is to be beyond any categories, but it is at the same time to be at odds with oneself; it is to

23 Emmanuel Levinas, *De l'existence à l'existant* (1947) (Paris: Librairie Philosophique J. Vrin, 1981). Translated by Alphonso Lingis as *Existence and Existents* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 2001). I modify Lingis' translation of the title as "From Existence to Existents" in order to emphasize the fact that Levinas is moving from existence to the existent, as indicated by the 'à' in the title. Hereafter *EE*.

24 Emmanuel Levinas, *Le temps et l'autre* (1947) (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1983). Translated by Richard A. Cohen as *Time and the Other* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1987).

resist the law of identity, which allows one to establish a stable identity. This disharmony of the self is felt at a basic pre-conscious level that Levinas here calls “wakefulness,” “hypostasis,” and “taking a position.” This disharmony is experienced as trauma and restlessness in moments when a cleaving between existence and the existent is manifest. These experiences include weariness, indolence, and pain. This basic characterization of inwardness as a dual solitude, I will argue, is the basis for Levinas’s later account of infinite responsibility as rooted in trauma and restlessness.

In this period we find Levinas’s first explicit mention of the relationship with the Other as a serious philosophical theme. However, that relationship is not yet Levinas’s central concern. In the preface to *From Existence to Existents*, Levinas admits that his concerns lie elsewhere when he writes that “the Platonic formula that situates the Good beyond Being serves as the general guideline for this research—but does not make up its content” (*EE*, 7/xxvii). The content of the work, rather, is concerned with the “movement” (*mouvement*) in which an existent accomplishes a break from the “there is”. Levinas is careful to note that this phrase “beyond Being” does not signify a complete leaving-behind of Being, since “ex-cendence and the Good necessarily have a foothold [*piéd*] in Being” (*EE*, 7/xxvii). The relationship with existence requires something else for its justification. This something else is the relationship with the Other, which Levinas in this period identifies with the erotic relationship with the feminine. I will consider the relevance of the relationship with the Other later in the chapter, and say a few words about how it anticipates the developments in his later philosophy.

2.1 The separation between existence and the existent

Before I examine Levinas’s account of the existence-existent relation, let me make a couple of notes concerning Levinas’s terminology. In *Time and the Other*, Levinas notes that his distinction between existence (*l’existence*) and existents (*l’existant*) is a translation of Heidegger’s distinction between Being (*Sein*) and beings (*Seiendes*), respectively (*TO*, 24/44). So, there are points where I speak of “existence” and “Being,” on the one hand, and “existents” and “beings,” on the other, interchangeably. I will try to be as careful as possible and hope that the context in which I use these terms will make it clear the sense in which I am using them. Moreover, while for Heidegger *Seiendes* can refer to both human beings and things in the world, for Levinas the term *existant* is reserved solely for the human being. Levinas employs the terms “things” (*choses*) or “objects” (*objets*) when speaking of non-human entities.

For Levinas, Heidegger’s thought is certainly what Derrida would call a *pharmakon* in the Greek sense: a remedy and a poison. On the one hand, Levinas always admired the phenomenological analyses of *Being and Time*, yet he remains suspicious of its possible links with National Socialism. His relationship to Heidegger’s thought in this

period is summed up best by this oft-quoted passage from the introduction to *From Existence to Existents*:

If at the beginning our reflections are in large measure inspired by the philosophy of Martin Heidegger, where we find the concept of ontology and of the relationship which man sustains with Being, they are also governed by a profound need to leave the climate of that philosophy, and by the conviction that we cannot leave it for a philosophy that would be pre-Heideggerian. (*EE*, 19/4)

Levinas does not want to return to the state of philosophy as it was before Heidegger's *Being and Time*. For Levinas, Heidegger is the contemporary philosopher *par excellence*, the one thinker whom anyone who is studying philosophy must read. On the other hand, Levinas was always pained by Heidegger's involvement with the Nazi Party, and it is tempting to trivialize the above passage as a simple dislike of Heidegger's political involvements. But if we read Levinas closely we see that the need to leave the climate of Heidegger's philosophy leads him to develop a way of doing philosophy that questions what he thinks is the heart of Heidegger's ontology: the ontological difference between Being and beings.

The title of Levinas's 1947 book, *De l'existence à l'existant*, translates literally as "from existence to existents." The very title of the book makes a statement about Levinas's relationship to Heidegger's ontology. For clarification, let us turn momentarily to *Time and the Other*, where Levinas says the following about his understanding of Heidegger's ontological distinction:

The most profound thing about *Being and Time* for me is this Heideggerian distinction [between Being and beings]. But in Heidegger there is a distinction, not a separation. Existing is always grasped in the existent, and for the existent that is a human being the Heideggerian term *Jemeinigkeit* precisely expresses the fact that existing is always possessed by someone. I do not think Heidegger can admit an existing without existents, which to him would seem absurd. (*TO*, 24/44-5)

Levinas understands himself as reversing the Heideggerian approach: instead of beginning with the existent and asking about the meaning of Being from the vantage point of Dasein, Levinas wants to speak of existence without any reference to existents at all. On Levinas's reading of Heidegger's *Being and Time*, it is not possible to speak of the meaning of Being without referring to the one for whom the question of the meaning of Being is an issue. Accordingly, Being is not described in its anonymity and neutrality—it is always Being as it is for the being with a sense of mineness (*Jemeinigkeit*). As we will see shortly, Levinas identifies the experiences of lassitude and fatigue as ones in which existence reveals itself in its anonymity. For our purposes, it is

not important whether Levinas's criticism of Heidegger is a viable one. The more important question is how Levinas's own position can be justified on its own terms.

Nevertheless, Levinas finds in Heidegger himself a way of questioning this distinction that is not a separation. It is not the distinction *per se* that Levinas questions, but rather the possibility of describing existence without reference to the other side of the distinction. That is, according to Levinas Heidegger (in *Being and Time*) does not consider the possibility of existence without referring the existent. Ironically enough, Levinas finds a way of questioning this priority of the existent in Heidegger himself. In the idea of *Geworfenheit*, which is commonly translated as "thrownness," Levinas sees support within Heidegger for an existence without existents. He continues,

One must understand *Geworfenheit* as the "fact-of-being-thrown-in" existence....It is as if the existent appeared only in an existence that precedes it, as though existence were independent of the existent, and the existent that finds itself thrown there could never become master of existence. It is precisely because of this that there is desertion and abandonment. Thus dawns the idea of an existing that occurs without us, without a subject, an existence without existents. (*TO*, 25/45)

If it is the case that the human being is thrown into existence, then into "what" is it thrown? Existence is in some sense prior to the existent, and Levinas's project is to articulate the meaning of this existence without existents.

The question now is how Levinas is to approach this existence. As soon as one speaks of existence, is it not always existence insofar as it is for me, the one who is capable of raising the question? Was it not the chief lesson of Husserl's phenomenology that there can be no meaning without a subject? Was it not Heidegger who also held that meaning requires *Dasein*, the one for whom there is meaning? How is it possible to speak of pure existence without reference to the one who has that meaning? To address these questions, he continues by carrying out a reduction. He writes,

How are we going to approach this existing without existents? Let us imagine all things, beings and persons, returning to nothingness. What remains after this imaginary destruction of everything is not something, but the fact that there is [*il y a*]. The absence of everything returns as a presence, as the place where the bottom has dropped out of everything, an atmospheric density, a plenitude of the void, or the murmur of silence. There is, after this destruction of things and beings, the impersonal "field of forces" of existing. There is something that is neither subject nor substantive. The fact of existing imposes itself when there is no longer anything. And it is anonymous: there is neither anyone nor anything that takes this existence upon itself. (*TO*, 25-6/46-7)

In a Husserlian spirit, Levinas carries out this reduction, but this is not a reduction to a pure subject, but rather a reduction to pure existence. Although Levinas refers to a return to nothingness, the “there is” is in fact the plenitude of being prior to any act of thematization, prior to any subject. The “there is” is the emptiest of all concepts, but at the same time the richest. Because the “there is” is a state of existence that does not depend on consciousness, it does not fit into the subject-object relationship. The “there is” is neither a subject nor an object. For this reason, it is improper to speak of a “relationship” with existence, since existence itself is not a term.

The “there is” cannot become a theme of consciousness, but there are experiences that reveal to the subject the brutal and horrifying anonymity of the “there is”. Levinas identifies a number of experiences that manifest the separation between existence and existents, although there is at the same time a realization of the inescapability of this pure being. The relationship with existence is constituted by the simultaneity of relation and separation. Take, for instance, the experience of the night. Imagine lying in pure darkness, not knowing what might be around you. In the dark there is no longer a “something” but the sheer fact of existence. Existence is an impersonal weight that cannot be shaken off. One cannot flee the “there is” to a place where it is not. However, the “there is” is not something which is “for me.” It remains foreign to me and does not belong to me. The “there is” is never “mine” but threatens me, and calls my own security into question. This duality between separation and relation reappears in *Totality and Infinity* in many different forms, especially in the structure of enjoyment as an independence based on dependence, and in the relationship with the Other who calls me to hospitality while remaining separate from me.

In any case, for Levinas the “there is” is ontologically prior to cognition or to any relationship with the world. I say “ontologically prior” in that neither the world nor cognition is constitutive of the existence-existent relationship. Levinas writes,

For where the continual play of our relations with the world is interrupted we find neither death nor the “pure ego,” but the anonymous state of being. Existence is not synonymous with the relationship with a world; it is antecedent to that world. In the situation of an end of the world the primary relationship which binds us to Being becomes palpable. (*EE*, 26/8)

As in 1935, Levinas wishes to bracket the I-World relationship in order to describe the existent’s relationship with the “there is.” Later in *From Existence to Existents*, Levinas confirms this point when he reminds us that his “investigation did not start with the ancient opposition of the ego to the world” (*EE*, 140/82). But what exactly does Levinas mean by “world” here? Levinas has his own account of the relationship with the world, and we will deal with that later, but for now we need to clarify what Levinas is contesting

when he says that the relationship with the world is not constitutive of the relationship with the existence. The notion of world that he contests is the one he finds in Heidegger. Levinas understands Heidegger's account of world as an ensemble of tools where Dasein acts "in such a way that in the final account action has our own existence for its object. Tools refer to one another to finally refer to our care for existing" (*TO*, 45/62). Put simply, Levinas rejects the claim that the individual's relationship with existence is grounded in a relationship with the world that refers back to the care-structure of Dasein. The relationship with existence, on Levinas's account, is in fact prior to any engagement with tools. It is a relationship with the very identity one is riveted to, an identity whose weight is felt in those instants that reveal the separation between existence and the existent.

In the above-quoted passage from *From Existence to Existents*, Levinas claims that the relationship with existence is prior to the "pure ego," which is the residuum of Husserl's transcendental-phenomenological reduction. The pure ego is not the final destination of Levinas's reduction. In other words, Levinas's reduction is meant to go beyond both Husserl and Heidegger, beyond both theory and ontology. In fact, Levinas positions Heidegger's philosophy as already presupposing a fundamental event that *Being and Time* covers up. To ask the question "What is Being?"—which, Levinas claims, can only be done after light has illuminated the world—is to presuppose the brutal fact of existence: "The question is itself a manifestation of the relationship with Being" (*EE*, 28/9). With respect to Husserl's pure ego, Levinas again thinks that his teacher did not go far enough in his reduction. In Levinas's estimation, both Husserl and Heidegger offer philosophies of "light" that imply that all facets of human existence can be laid bare and described. For Levinas the existence-existent relationship can only be described indirectly by referring to certain experiences that reveal the cleaving between existence and the existent. Levinas's method, we might say, is closer to what Wittgenstein would call an ostensive demonstration—we are already familiar with the experiences Levinas points out, and his point is to show how that familiarity teaches us something about the nature of human existence, and even existence in general. While the burden of existence does reveal itself in human experience, this revelation does not provide something that phenomenology can adequately describe.

To explain further how the relationship between existence and the existent is inadequate to phenomenological description, let us now delve into Levinas's detailed analyses of weariness (*lassitude*) and fatigue (*paresse*), which reveal the separation between the "there is" and the existent. As Levinas puts it, "the truth of this 'duality', the effecting of this takeover, is attested to by certain moments in human existence where the adherence of existence appears like a cleaving [*clivage*]" (*EE*, 27/9). Such experiences, Levinas adds a couple of pages later, are prior to reflection, and so he recommends that we "ignore all attitudes toward existence which arise from reflection, attitudes by which an already constituted existence turns back [*se penche*] over itself" in order to "grasp that

event of birth in phenomena which are prior to reflection” (*EE*, 30/11). He reminds us of this reductive approach at various points throughout his analyses.

The next section will consider in more detail how the experiences of weariness, indolence, and the instant reveal to the existent a “cleaving” between existence and the existent. We will see that this essential duality between existence and the existent is at the bottom of a “commitment to exist.” I suggest that this commitment to exist anticipates the later Levinas’s account of the inescapable commitment to the Other, a commitment rooted in a “oneself” distinct from the ego of consciousness.

2.2 The burden of existence: weariness, indolence, and the instant

The question of the relationship between existence and the existent, Levinas notes, is not a new one. He remarks that 19th century biology has taught us that the conflict between existence and the existent is manifested in the struggle for life. However, Levinas thinks this biological theory, by which he most likely means Darwinism,²⁵ does not yet go deep enough. It emphasizes the struggle to survive, but does not capture the “continual birth” that is accomplished in an instant of effort (which I will describe below). Later in the book he calls this “continual birth” “hypostasis” or “taking a position.” This continual birth develops into the recurrence of the ego to the oneself in Levinas’s later works, and, as in 1947, points to an underside of selfhood that do not give itself to consciousness as an intentional object.

As he did in *On Escape*, Levinas specifies that the need to escape is motivated by the weariness of existence itself, not by the world (*EE*, 31/11). It is a weariness of the “there is”. Weariness is essentially a refusal of the commitment to exist, a commitment that Levinas calls an “unrevokable contract” (*EE*, 31/12). This refusal, however, is not a conscious decision. Rather, “the refusal is *in* weariness. Weariness by all its being effects this refusal to exist” (*EE*, 32/12). The commitment to exist is in fact a commitment to act. At the bottom of the commitment to exist there is a “one must” which animates “need to act and to undertake,” and Levinas calls this commitment an “ultimate obligation” (*EE*, 32/12). As we can see, the relationship with existence is here framed as an internal relationship. There is here a form of self-difference that presents itself to the subject as an imperative. This experience of self-difference, I will show in Chapter V, underlies Levinas’s account of subjectivity in the 1970s. In his later works, the relationship with the Other is intricately bound with the self’s relationship with itself, such that the singularity of the subject becomes tied with the singularity of the Other in the irreducible relationship of proximity.

25 See Robert Bernasconi, “Levinas and the Struggle for Existence” in *Addressing Levinas*, ed. Eric Sean Nelson, Antje Kapust, and Kent Still (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2005), 172-73.

In retrospect, we should note that the language Levinas uses this work and 1935's *On Escape* share some of the same language and terminology. As in that earlier work, escape is identified as a need, and it is a need to go somewhere, but nowhere in particular: "An evasion without itinerary and without an end, it is not trying to come ashore somewhere" (*EE*, 32/12). Unlike in his earlier works, though, we now find a reference to an obligation that cannot be refused. This obligation anticipates the infinite responsibility of the subject in Levinas's later works, for it is a commitment the existent cannot get behind and assume as its own, a commitment that precedes even the capacity to choose itself. This contract to exist, in other words, prefigures the later Levinas's account of heteronomy and of the pre-cognitive source of moral responsibility.

To show further how the imperative to act is at the bottom of the commitment to exist, Levinas turns to an analysis of indolence. By indolence, Levinas means neither idleness nor rest, but a withdrawal from action. It is the refusal to make an effort, the refusal to carry out a task one knows must be completed. But indolence is not indecisiveness or a feeling of being overwhelmed. The intention to act is already present, but just needs to be carried out. It is like wanting the remote control from the coffee table, but being too lazy to make an effort to get it. The escape from indolence is not a material impossibility, but it is nevertheless an aversion to action. Indolence is tied up with beginning, with effort. The experience of indolence does not only apply to a single act, but also to a series of acts that come with a task. I have to remove the blanket from me, put my slippers on and then go all the way over to the coffee table. When a continuous task is at issue, the task of an indolent person does not flow. "The job does not flow, does not catch on, is discontinuous—a discontinuousness which is perhaps the very nature of a 'job'" (*EE*, 34/12), like when one has a job to do but does not want to do it. Levinas is thus not only speaking of the withholding of an act, but also the very effort that the escape from indolence calls for. Indolence points to the experience of existence as a disjointed and interruptive one.

To illustrate the gravity of existence further, Levinas contrasts the effort of beginning with game-playing. Games, Levinas claims, do not have the same structure as the "beginning" that arises from indolence. Games lack the seriousness of the relationship with existence. They can be abandoned without consequence and leave nothing of themselves. A game is "a reality that leaves no traces; the nothingness that preceded it is equal to that which follows it" (*EE*, 34/14). A game, surely, does take place in the instant, and may even require the effort of action (think of the tired hockey player who must make those final strides in the dying seconds of a game), but it is not itself constituted in the instant that expresses the contract between existence and the existent. Game-playing is a way to forget the burden of existence, and as such it is a fleeing from both work and indolence: "The man who gives himself over to pleasure, entertainment, and distraction is fleeing indolence as much as work" (*EE*, 37/16). Let us

recall that in the 1933 article on spirituality leisure is a way of forgetting about death. Later in *From Existence to Existents*, Levinas claims that leisure helps one forget about the instant and the burden of existence (*EE*, 154/92). Pleasure is here a distraction, and Levinas does not recognize the positive role it can play in human experience. The positivity of pleasure is highlighted in *Totality and Infinity*, but, perhaps ironically, at the cost of dropping all talk of the painfulness of existence outlined in *From Existence to Existents*.

The contrast between beginning and game-playing offers an insight into the nature of human action. An act, Levinas tells us, is not “free as the wind” but is essentially bound to the materiality constitutive of human existence. Beginning is caught up in itself. There is a double movement back upon itself, a return to the point of departure. Levinas explains,

We are like on a trip where one always has to look after one’s baggage, baggage left behind or baggage one is waiting for. An act is not pure activity; its being is doubled up with a having which both is possessed and possesses. (*EE*, 36/15)

There is in an act a self-concern—not for the future—but for the very fact of existence. When I put an effort into something, I do it with my existence. I possess my existence in the sense that only I can do what I need to do; no one else can carry the baggage of existence for me. However, this existence is not just something I possess but something that weighs down on me; it is a relationship of both mastery and servitude.

Again, the duality is not something that we become aware of through a judgment. Once we begin reflecting on the possessing-possessed duality, it ceases to have the same force on us. A further contrast between effort and game playing will be instructive for understanding Levinas’ notion of the instant. Levinas compares game-playing with the experience of listening to a melody. A melody is essentially a duration, a unity that cannot be broken down without it losing its status as a melody. Were it to be broken down, we would have pieces of a former melody but no longer the melody itself. The melody, as duration, Levinas says, has no instants. The instants it has pass out of existence. There is no atomic “here and now” in a melody. Like game-playing, the instant in listening to a melody “is not self-possessed, does not stop, is not present” (*EE*, 47/23). Game-playing, likewise, is not rooted in the instant. For Levinas, then, there is no duration in the relationship with existence, and, likewise, there is no central instant in duration. Further, the relationship with existence is not “frozen in time”; it does not even have a time at all. As Levinas puts it in *Time and the Other*, “it seems to me impossible to speak of time in a subject alone, or to speak of a purely personal duration” (*TO*, 64/77). This is not to say of course, that one is incapable of finding that time passes slowly. This would be time in the objective sense. Following Heidegger and Bergson, Levinas takes the subjective experience of time as tied with the urge to do something, the urge to act.

Because it is the effort of action that concerns Levinas, the instant is rooted in the very “here and now” in which the effort is made.

At the bottom of the relationship with existence is the imperative to act, and this is the imperative to take up the present. In taking up the present, the existent drags its existence along with it. To be an existent is, for Levinas, to be compelled to act out of a deep commitment that does not begin in consciousness. Even when the existent is not acting, it is still in a sense in act. Rest, which is the search for relief from the brutal fact of existence, expresses the very active tension between existence and the existent: “The fundamental activity of rest, foundation, conditioning, thus appears to be the very relationship with being, the upsurge of an existent into existence, a hypostasis” (*EE*, 51/25). This imperative to act, again, is prior to the will. The commitment to exist is prior to any choice to accept this commitment. Those familiar with Levinas’s later thought might read into this his later notion of “response,” where subjectivity *is itself* the response to otherness. His later account of ethical subjectivity again finds a source in his earlier works.

Levinas calls the duality between the self and the existence it carries “inwardness” (*intimité*) (*EE*, 38/16). For Levinas the subject is not an indivisible interiority, which is defined against the exteriority it is not; solitude is dual. Levinas accuses Descartes and modern philosophy in general of missing this dual solitude (*EE*, 136/79). Nor is it a site where the subject can achieve a state of serenity and be at peace with itself; the existent is at odds with itself. Nor is the subject essentially a simple substance; it is essentially active, an event. Human existence is “bent and caught up in itself, showing that the verb to be is a reflexive verb: it is not just that one is, one is oneself [*on n’est pas, on s’est*]” (*EE*, 38/16). This is for Levinas solitude *par excellence*: the subject is not abandoned in relationship to the world, but only in relationship to itself. He writes,

This is a peculiar form of abandonment [Abandon *sui generis*]. It is not the solitude of a being forsaken by the world with which it is no longer in step, but of a being that is as it were no longer in step with itself, is out of joint with itself, in a dislocation of the *I* from itself, a being that is not joining up with itself in the instant, in which it is nonetheless committed. (*EE*, 24/50; modified)

To be condemned to be oneself is to be condemned to the present. Solitude is dual, but this is a restless duality. We may anticipate here the traumatized subject of the later works, the subject who is never at peace because it is always—recurrently—interrupted by the Other.

So far, Levinas’s analyses speak only to the internal tension between existence and existent. For Levinas, the present, action, and existence are bound together. Levinas is careful to note that these descriptions bracket the relationship with the world and the

future, and do not even presuppose any general account of time at all. These descriptions, as he puts it, are bound to the instant in which the existent begins, acts, makes an effort. Chapter I of *From Existence to Existents*, nevertheless, leaves open a number of questions. While Levinas has shown how certain experiences reveal the separation between existence and the existent, it is not clear what Levinas means by the “arising” of the existent from existence. This event, which he calls “hypostasis” or “taking a position” is the subject of Chapter IV of *From Existence to Existents*. Before I examine that, let us first turn to his account of the relationship with the world. How does a subject abandoned to itself relate to what is outside of it? What is the place of the world in Levinas’s analyses? The answers to these questions will allow me to show further how Levinas’s account of the relationship with the existence brackets theory and the world, and by implication, closes off the possibility of a relationship with transcendence that is accomplished solely in the “I.”

2.3 The World

It is one thing to ask what the place of the world in the ontological adventure is, and another thing to look for that adventure within the world itself. (*EE*, 64/33)

We have already said a few words about the place of the world in the “ontological adventure” of the subject. So far, we know that the imperative to take up of existence precedes the relationship with things outside of the subject. To be sure, in making an effort I might be engaging with the world. My indolence might have the task of writing a dissertation as its object. The primary object of indolence, however, is the weight of existence itself. Indeed, we cannot even call the weight of existence an object properly speaking because existence itself is not a term. For this reason, Levinas claims that the relationship with existence cannot be understood on the model of the “inside-outside” relationship. The “inside-outside” relationship first comes to light in the relationship with the world. In the relationship with the world the relationship with existence is postponed. It is forgotten because the existent is now turned to something outside of itself. Nevertheless, as we will see, the relationship with the world results in a return to the self. Even in the relationship with the world there is no genuine transcendence.

Although the relationship with the world is where knowledge proper is attained, Levinas is not interested in offering an epistemological theory. His concerns here remain ontological. The most striking feature of our relationship with the world, Levinas says, is the fact that the subject is in a relationship with things outside of itself. Levinas employs the term “intention” to sum up this relationship. For Levinas, as for Husserl, “intention” does not refer to some projected end one has in mind when one acts. Levinas contests the

“neutral and discarnate sense” (*EE*, 56/27-8) which he says exists in medieval philosophy and Husserl. Instead, he wants to focus on the “ordinary meaning with the sting of desire that animates it” (*EE*, 56/28). The subject is, by virtue of its constitution, led to what is outside of it. This is one of the basic tenets of phenomenology: that the subject is not a capsule trapped in its own interiority. This account of intention, then, is an early form of what becomes the desire for the Invisible in *Totality and Infinity*. As he does later in *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas here seeks to describe a pure relationship with exteriority. As in his account of the relationship with existence, Levinas restricts intention to the very presence of the given, with no reference to further ends. In this sense, Levinas speaks of intention as “sincerity.” When I eat, I do so because I am hungry, not because I want to accomplish some further end. “Desire,” Levinas writes, “has no further intentions behind it, which would be like thoughts; it is a good will” (*EE*, 56/28). In *Time and the Other*, Levinas frames this sincerity as the event of nourishment. The world, before it is cognized and known, is for Levinas the place where I bathe, rest my head, and savor my meals. Levinas later develops this account of the elemental in terms of enjoyment in *Totality and Infinity*.

The “sting of desire” that animates consciousness names an essential relationship between two terms that can be reduced to neither. Moreover, the relationship with the world always has a center; it is never anonymous like the relationship with existence (*EE*, 59/30). There is an essential correlation between two terms, but it always begins from the subject. As a relationship beginning with the subject, the relationship with the world denotes a form of separation. Desire signifies a distance between me and what I desire. In traversing the distance between me and an object I still remain at a distance to it. Moreover, while my relationship with existence is a burden, my relationship with objects is not. They can be dropped off, abandoned, laid aside. “The I,” on the other hand, “does not turn to its existence; it is enthralled by it” (*EE*, 73/39). To turn to something is to turn to a particular, and this particular necessarily has a form, “by which a thing shows itself and is graspable, what is illuminated in it and apprehendable and what holds it together” (*EE*, 73/39). The “sting of desire” names this basic outbound movement which animates the relationship with the world. To put it in Husserlian language, consciousness burst forth into the world.

Since what is given depends on how it is given to the subject, sense (*sens*) “is that by which what is exterior is already adjusted to and refers to what is interior” (*EE*, 74/40). When I encounter a thing in the world, I do not let that thing stand as it is. Rather, I identify it, contextualize it, and understand it within a larger understanding of the world. In any case, there is a distance between me and the object, and there is a space that allows the object to affect me in ways that pure existence does not. It is here that Levinas introduces the idea of “light.” By light Levinas means a principle of intelligibility that allows me to represent to myself the world as a totality and to situate and contextualize what I encounter as an individual within a larger whole. This light,

moreover, makes possible a movement back to the subject. I encounter something outside of myself, and then I conceptualize that thing and it becomes a moment of my conscious experience of the world. "Light makes objects into a world, that is, makes them belong to us" (*EE*, 74/40). This fact of belonging means that what is given as outside of me ends up with a meaning that begins in me: "it comes from an exterior already apprehended and comes into being as though it came from us, as though commanded by our freedom" (*EE*, 76/41). With light as the condition for intelligibility, the world is not for Levinas primarily the sum total of objects, for those objects can never come into view without light. Or, as Levinas puts it, "there is a totality because it relates to an inwardness in the light" (*EE*, 76/41). It would be better to say that the world is the illuminated field of givenness, and that within this field there are particular objects of sense.

With the notions of intention and light, Levinas infers, "we rejoin the notion of knowing which Western thought uses to interpret consciousness" (*EE*, 76-77/42). Although many thinkers (including Husserl, for instance) have admitted of other forms of consciousness besides the intellect, Levinas contends that the self is usually taken to be the site where knowledge attained. It is not the act of knowing that Levinas emphasizes, but the theory of freedom that comes with it. Knowing "is essentially a way of relating to events while still being able to not be caught up in them" (*EE*, 77/42). This ability to withdraw from the given signifies a conception of freedom. Knowing is taken to be the condition for any free action. Here we find a key moment in the development of Levinas's thought: the coinciding of knowledge and the will. From this point onward, he always identifies these two as belonging together. Levinas sums up this marriage between freedom and cognition in the following way:

This power of the agent to remain free from any bond with what remains present to it, of not being compromised by what happens to it, by its objects or even its history—this is precisely what knowing qua light and intention is. (*EE*, 79/43)

This freedom, however, is a false one. It is a conception of freedom, but not freedom itself. For one thing, it neglects the relationship with existence, which is the presupposition of this freedom. Later in the book Levinas remarks that worldly freedom "is a moment of a deeper drama which does not play itself out between a subject and objects—things or events—but between the mind and the fact that "there is", which it takes up" (*EE*, 143/85). Not only is worldly freedom neglectful of the relationship with existence, it does not allow for a conception of otherness. This account of worldly freedom carries over into *Totality and Infinity* where Levinas identifies rational autonomy with the Same and accuses the traditional account of rational autonomy as failing to respect the other person as Other. The notion of rational autonomy, Levinas argues in *Totality and Infinity*, lends itself to a philosophy of power in which the rational subject closes itself off to an encounter with otherness.

Another way to put this is to say that the relationship with the world, as referring back to the subject as the source of meaning, is a form of solipsism:

The intentionality of consciousness allows one to distinguish the ego from things, but it does not make solipsism disappear: its element—light—renders us master of the exterior world but is incapable of discovering a peer for us there. (*TO*, 48/65)

We find here, then, the identification of consciousness with solipsism. In *Totality and Infinity*, consciousness is described further as the domain of representation in which the subject remains essentially unchanged by what it encounters. He calls this form of immanence the “Same.”

Despite the negative features of the world, the relationship with the world in fact does have a positive role in Levinas’s thought. Although it is not readily apparent in *From Existence to Existents*, in *Time and the Other* Levinas describes the relationship with the world as the structure of nourishment. Levinas says there that the “morality of ‘earthly nourishments’ is the first morality, the first abnegation. It is not the last, but one must pass through it” (*TO*, 64). I submit that for Levinas the relationship with the world is in fact a middle term between the relationship with existence and the relationship with the Other. There is a sense in which the sincerity of intentions prepares one for the encounter with the Other. Levinas even states that “our existence in the world constitute[s] a fundamental advancement of the subject in overcoming the weight that it is to itself, in overcoming its materiality—that is to say, in loosening the bond between the self and the ego” (*TO*, 62). This necessity of the world becomes important in *Totality and Infinity*, although there Levinas does not present it as postponing the relationship with existence.

While it is true that in *From Existence to Existents* the world may be a middle-term between the relationship with existence and the relationship with the Other, in *Totality and Infinity* this is clearly not so. For one thing, Levinas abandons the existence-existent relationship in that work and begins with enjoyment and nourishment as the core of subjectivity. The account of nourishment we find in *Time and the Other* is deepened and further developed in *Totality and Infinity*, and in that analysis Levinas describes the basic mode of existence as happy and enjoyable. The painful existence of *From Existence to Existents* is abandoned, although it will resurface in his later works.

Commentators largely fail to mention that Levinas’s first detailed description of the relationship with the Other is actually found in *From Existence to Existents*. He writes: “In the world the other is indeed not treated like a thing, but is never separated from things” (*EE*, 60/30). Another person is given in his or her social situation. He has a

history and is a being who takes pains to clothe himself. Here Levinas introduces the notion of the “face,” which becomes one of the key technical terms in *Totality and Infinity*. The face, however, is here presented as a “form,” as the way that the other gives itself in the world. As in *Totality and Infinity*, the Other is described in its “nudity.” Nudity, Levinas tells us, “is the true experience of the otherness of the other—were the term experience not impossible where it is a question of a relationship which goes beyond the world” (*EE*, 61/31). Unlike things in the world, the meaning of the Other withdraws from my cognitive powers. It cannot be grasped in the same way as a thing. In this sense, Levinas remarks that “*the very positivity of love lies in its negativity*” (*EE*, 61/35). The Other is an “objectless dimension” and cannot be made into an object of nourishment. In the relationship with the Other, there is no return to the subject. The relationship with the Other is an insatiable desire that cannot be translated into a relationship of need and economy.

What Levinas has accomplished in this work—and this carries over to *Totality and Infinity*—is a completed inwardness that shuts itself off from transcendence, and so the task is to show how such an existent can be pulled out of the rut of existence and saved from the pain of being. The relationship with the world does not accomplish this break from Being. The Other is presented in *From Existence to Existents* as a hope in a hopeless state of existence, as an alterity that pulls the subject out of the instant in which it is riveted. Before we turn to how the Other accomplishes this break, we need to turn to the event of hypostasis, which is the very heart of Levinas’s account of subjectivity in this period.

Levinas’s account of the world contains the seeds of the account of enjoyment found in *Totality and Infinity*. We will see in the next chapter that in *Totality and Infinity* Levinas no longer identifies the relationship with the world as a postponement of the relationship with existence, but that he takes it as the starting point of his account of subjectivity. He does so at the cost of abandoning the “dual solitude” of his 1947 work. However, this dual solitude returns in his later works, where it is incorporated into his account of ethical subjectivity.

2.4 Hypostasis and Position

Consciousness, position, the present, the “I,” are not initially—although they are finally—existents. They are events by which the unnameable verb *to be* turns into substantives. They are hypostasis. (*EE*, 140/83)

The main goal of *From Existence to Existents* is to describe the instant in which

the anonymous verbal state of being turns into a particular, into a substantive. Levinas calls this event “hypostasis.” Hypostasis is not an event that the subject lives through consciously. As with the ethical relationship found in his later works, hypostasis is an event that is not initiated by the subject itself; it is a passive bestowal of singularity that does not originate in consciousness. Consciousness already presupposes that hypostasis has taken place. For this reason, Levinas admits that he cannot explain why hypostasis takes place, but only show that it does. “There is no physics in metaphysics. I can simply show what the significance of hypostasis is” (*TO*, 31/51). Hypostasis, for Levinas, does not refer only to the “there is” or to the existent, but to the very process of the former becoming the latter. Hypostasis does not only name the appearance of a new grammatical category, a substantive, but names the very movement in which an existent posits itself, takes a position. Since hypostasis names the event through which the existent gains its singularity, and because this event is not a one-time deal but happens again and again, Levinas sometimes refers to the existent itself *as* hypostasis. This is not an inconsistency, since for Levinas the existent is never simply a thing but is by definition always active. Hypostasis is a recurring event. The birth of the subject is a perpetual birth, one that is never settled, but always interrupts the anonymous state of existence.

The event of hypostasis is further described by analyzing yet another limit-experience: the vigilance of insomnia. Vigilance is a form of attention, but it is not an attention paid to a particular object or single event, but one paid to the anonymity of being. The vigilance of insomnia, Levinas writes, “is the very return of presence into the void left by absence—not the return of *some thing*, but of a presence; it is the reawakening of the “there is” in the heart of negation” (*EE*, 110). Of course, I can become aware of this insomnia, but in doing so I have already torn myself away from the anonymity of the “there is”. If insomnia is the experience of sinking into being, then consciousness is the end of this insomnia; it is the escape from anonymity. But does not the experience of insomnia presuppose some form of consciousness? Must I not be awake in order to experience insomnia? Levinas acknowledges this point and distinguishes between wakefulness (*la veille*) and consciousness (*la conscience*), a distinction without which his later account of selfhood would not be possible. While consciousness is the possibility of a relationship with things in the world, and is governed by light, the wakefulness of insomnia is the possibility of a relationship with anonymity, with darkness. Now, wakefulness is not the contrary of consciousness, but is something that consciousness can fall into: “Consciousness is a part of wakefulness, which means that it has already torn into it” (*EE*, 111/62). The distinction between wakefulness and consciousness leads us back to the consciousness-unconsciousness distinction that Levinas introduces in the chapter on the world. The conscious-unconscious pair is not to be thought of as opposite poles or as extremes. Levinas emphasizes that there is an essential proximity between them:

Consciousness, in its opposition to the unconscious, is not constituted by the opposition, but by this proximity [*voisinage*], this communication with its contrary: in its very élan consciousness becomes fatigued and interrupts itself, has recourse against itself. (*EE*, 116)

Bettina Bergo, in an article on the development of Levinas's ontological commitments, argues that Levinas's conception of the unconscious and its fluid relationship to the conscious are influenced by his studies in Strasbourg. There he was influenced by a French theory of psychology that rejected the Freudian theory of a hidden unconscious that operates behind the scenes of consciousness. Regarding this influence, Bergo writes,

In thus characterizing living consciousness as a spectrum, Levinas followed a French school of psychology that was deeply suspicious of the omnipresence of sexuality in Freud's *voie royale* to the unconscious: parapraxes, dreams and neuroses. For all that, Levinas required *an* unconscious in his own philosophical project (if only sleep), because, in this regard still a Husserlian, consciousness must emerge from itself, for him, before it inhabits a world.²⁶

Take the experience of falling asleep. Each person, at some point, has the experience of falling asleep while watching television or reading a book. A similar experience is that of waking up. In each case, consciousness either sinks into anonymity or rises from itself. Levinas calls that moment in which consciousness is between wakefulness and sleep Levinas calls "the wink" or scintillation, and it is a mid-point between seeing and not seeing. The retreat into unconsciousness and the emergence of consciousness "do not occur in two different moments." Both are a single event, "as in a wink, made up of looking and not looking" (*EE*, 116/65). Falling into consciousness is a "fainting away at the very focal point of its luminousness" (*EE*, 117/65). As Michael B. Smith suggests, this scintillation is to be understood as an original structure of presentation. This scintillation is the very way in which position is produced. It is produced in a moment that is between seeing and not seeing.

The manifestation of consciousness, of light, is not itself something that is given in vision. Subjectivity manifests itself thanks to an event that it is present for, but only a glimpse of this event is accessible to consciousness. Subjectivity is constituted by an origin that it cannot get behind, and in this respect Smith points out that scintillation is similar to "that of the infinite in the finite, later referred to [by Levinas] as 'the trace.'"²⁷ Here scintillation names the site where consciousness and the unconsciousness fall in and out of each other, and it is an event that consciousness itself cannot step outside of and

26 Bettina Bergo, "Levinas's 'Ontology' 1935-1974," *Emmanuel Levinas: Critical Assessments of Leading Philosophers*, ed. Claire Elise Katz (New York: Routledge, 2005), 26-7.

27 Michael B. Smith, *Toward the Outside: Concepts and Themes in Emmanuel Levinas* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 2005), 194.

thematize. In *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas describes embodiment and the dwelling as operating on the hinge of the representable and the non-representable. We can see that Levinas's "phenomenology of the invisible," as Dominique Janicaud aptly calls it, is already in its early stages in this 1947 work.

Levinas's theory of the unconscious here has an inestimable importance for his later thought, especially during the time of *Otherwise than Being*. There Levinas speaks of an ethical "oneself" that precedes the "ego" of conscious life. The term "recurrence" names the interminable event through which the ego finds itself put into question by a more fundamental form of selfhood. Here in 1947 the relationship with the Other does not have a place in the gradations of the wakefulness-consciousness spectrum. In his later works, however, subjectivity is already constitutive of the relationship with the Other. Moreover, wakefulness becomes identified with the Other-in-the-Same. And so the most basic form of awareness in Levinas's later works is not ontological, as it is here, but ethical.

Levinas's account of hypostasis can be read as a phenomenology of embodiment. To be conscious is to have a place in existence. It is to be "here." Levinas is here again pointing to an event that precedes the "I think" of consciousness. It is not that consciousness has a place because it thinks, but rather the capacity to think is granted by the fact that consciousness first has a place. As Levinas puts it, "there is not only a consciousness of localization, but a localization of consciousness, which is not in turn reabsorbed into consciousness, into knowing" (*EE*, 117/65). This "here" is a condition for knowing. Consciousness emerges from the "here" of localization. Or, "the localization of consciousness is not subjective; it is the subjectivization [*subjectivation*] of the subject" (*EE*, 118/66). Subjectivity is possible only because of its place in existence, a place that is the suspension of the anonymous state of existence. A place is not an abstract extension or a point in space. Before it is a point in space, place is a base, a "here" where one lies down and falls asleep. Consciousness arises as already existing in a place. A place supports the subject and it is from that point that the subject posits itself.

Now, for Levinas to have a body is to experience it as a happening, as an event. To take it as an event "is to say that it is not an instrument, symbol or symptom of position, but is position itself, that in it is effected the very transformation of an event into being" (*EE*, 123/70). By linking the event of embodiment with his earlier analyses of weariness and indolence, Levinas is thereby arguing that the body is rooted in the present as well, in the instant with no appeal to a future or time. Hypostasis and time are thus conceptually opposed. And so Levinas writes, "of itself time resists any hypostasis; the images of current and flux with which we explain it are applicable to beings in time, and not to time itself" (*EE*, 125/71). Levinas's project to speak of a body without the passing of time may strike some thinkers as odd, especially if one holds the common view that

existence and time go hand-in-hand. One of Levinas's chief philosophical goals in this work is to create a gulf between existence and time. He can only accomplish this by showing that the instant in which an act occurs is rooted in that instant, and that the experience of this instant does not speak to a general experience of time as duration.

After he establishes a connection between the body and the earlier analyses of weariness and fatigue, Levinas returns to a reconsideration of the nature of the instant. Levinas rejects the view that an instant is a limit between two times. More importantly, that view understands the instant under larger theory of time. This is a problem for Levinas because it covers up the singularity of the instant and how it is experienced. When I live through an instant, I do not experience time in general, but rather the instant in its atomicity. Levinas complains:

the instant in all modern philosophy gets its significance from the dialectic of time; it does not have a dialectic of its own. It has no ontological function other than that which, in the various doctrines, is given to time. (*EE*, 127/72).

Levinas contends that if we first start with a general theory of time and then apply that to an instant, then we end up understanding all instants as equal, with no central instant in which beginning occurs: "in abstract time there is an order of instants, but no central instant, there is not that instant par excellence which is the present" (*EE*, 129/74). An abstract theory of time does not capture the birth of the existent accomplished in the instant.

What of the instant itself? The present, Levinas argues, is an absolute. This is to say that it refers only to itself and does not pass into another moment or instant. An instant is a return to itself; it does not allow for its own annihilation. "Instant" is another name for the lag that was described as indolence. The present is unable to detach itself from itself, much as the existent is unable to detach itself from the brutal fact of existence that weighs it down. Levinas writes, "[t]he present, free with respect to the past, but a captive of itself, breathes the gravity of being in which it is caught up" (*EE*, 135/78). An instant, moreover, "is like a breathlessness, a panting, an effort to be" (*EE*, 135/78). The return of the present to itself, which is also the movement of the "lag" of the present in beginning that returns to its point of departure, is "the affirmation of the *I* already riveted to itself, already doubled up with a *self*" (*EE*, 135/79). From these passages, we get a fuller sense of how the instant and the relationship with existence both name the same event. An escape from existence, thus, is also the escape from the instant in which the "I" is riveted to itself. The present, the "I," and the instant are all moments of the same event (*EE*, 137/80).

To be an existent is to be rooted in the instant, and being in the instant is not a static state of affairs. The "I," Levinas claims, must be grasped "in its amphibiological

mutation from an event into an 'entity,' and not its objectivity" (*EE*, 136/79-80). Like Heidegger, Levinas questions the starting point of the Cartesian *cogito*. He complains that the Cartesian approach "does not contribute any teaching about the mode of existence proper to [the "I think"]" (*EE*, 136/79).²⁸ What Descartes fails to acknowledge, Levinas charges, is the importance of the present. Of course, Descartes does acknowledge that the *Cogito* expression is true only when I think it, but Descartes allegedly took the *Cogito* statement as a coincidence between thought and existence and did not inquire into the self's relationship with itself. Although Levinas does not accuse Descartes of opposing the self to the world, he identifies Descartes as part of the tradition that covers up the existent's relationship with itself. Descartes takes the self to be an indivisible substance, and this is where Levinas takes issue with the Cartesian approach.

In sum, we can see then that for Levinas human existence is set in motion by an event that does not originate through the existent's own initiative. To be an existent to be compelled to act, but the source of this compulsion is written into the relationship with existence, which is escapable and yet binding.

Of course, there is more to human existence than the relationship with existence and the world. There is the other person, who brings to the existent's life a meaning that originates neither in the world, *qua* light, nor in the relationship with existence. But how does the other person, as Other, bring something new to human existence, and why does Levinas call the relationship with the Other a relationship with transcendence?

2.5 Introducing the Other: pain, hope, time

The relationship with the Other is not the central theme of *From Existence to Existents*, but it is a theme that marks Levinas's first sustained attempt to consider the significance of the Other for human subjectivity. Since this appears to be Levinas's first attempt to think the Other, there are certainly ambiguities surrounding his analyses in the final sections of this work. My goal in this final section is to point the way for the next chapter by showing how for Levinas the relationship with the Other is to be seen as the promised escape from the relationship with existence, and that this promised escape opens up new horizons of meaning. Here, moreover, we find a concern that becomes a serious theme in Levinas's philosophy in the following decades: the possibility of preserving the singularity of the individual in the relationship with transcendence. Levinas wants to maintain the singularity of the subject, but at same time have this

²⁸ This claim is not only close to what Heidegger would say, but is itself a Heideggerian position that Levinas has adopted. See Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 25/46: "With the '*cogito sum*' Descartes had claimed that he was putting philosophy on a new and firm footing. But what he left undetermined when he began in this 'radical' way, was the kind of Being which belongs to the *res cogitans*, or—more precisely—the meaning of the Being of the '*sum*.'"

subject in a relationship with something that does not compromise this singularity.

What kind of subject has Levinas presented us with? It is a subject who is rooted in the instant, who is at each moment out of step with itself, condemned to a painful existence that it cannot escape but only take up however it chooses. As in the works from the 1930s, pain points to a limit-experience. In pain, sorrow, and suffering, Levinas claims in *Time and the Other*, “we once again find, in a state of purity, the finality [*définitif*] that constitutes the tragedy of solitude” (*TO*, 55/68-9). For Levinas, physical pain signifies the limit of the relationship with existence. It “entails the impossibility of detaching oneself from the instant of existence” (*TO*, 55/69). Levinas finds in pain a limit-experience that opens up the possibility of hope. In *Time and the Other*, this limit-experience is likened to the experience of falling into a state of sobbing from the excess of pain. He says that “where suffering attains its purity, where there is no longer anything between us and it, the supreme responsibility of this extreme assumption turns into supreme irresponsibility, into infancy” (*TO*, 60/72). Existence itself has no outlets, no avenues for transcendence. As Macbeth finds hope in the hopeless situation of his impending death (*TO*, 61/73), the existent finds hope in a hopeless existence. This hope “knocks on the closed doors of another dimension” (*EE*, 152/90-1). Levinas calls this dimension the order of time.

In *Time and the Other*, Levinas uses his discussion of suffering as a way of approaching the relationship with otherness, which he here introduces as a relationship with death. When suffering reaches its limits, when it becomes unbearable, we enter into a relationship with the possible annihilation of our existence. It is as if suffering anticipates something more than what the suffering itself contains. In suffering death comes to mind. This possibility of death, however, is not an anticipatable future, like the anticipation of a note in a melody, for death itself cannot be experienced. When death happens, the subject no longer exists, and if the subject exists then death has not yet happened. Death, Levinas reasons thus, cannot take place in the light of consciousness. The subject finds itself in a relationship with an otherness that withdraws from consciousness. This relationship with the otherness of death is, as Levinas calls it, a relationship with mystery.

Here Levinas makes a crucial move that anticipates his later works:

This way death has of announcing itself in suffering, outside all light, is an experience of the passivity of the subject, which until then had been active and remained active even when it was overwhelmed by its own nature, but reserved its possibility of assuming its factual state. (*TO*, 56/70)

The encounter with the Other is a passive experience, and Levinas immediately adds that he means “experience” here only in a manner of speaking. We thus see an early form of

what Levinas calls a “pure passivity,” a passivity that is prior to the active-passive opposition that gives priority to activity. But is there not passivity in the relationship with existence? Certainly, the event of hypostasis does not arise from the individual’s own initiative. The relationship with the Other, however, opens up horizons of meanings that the self’s relationship with itself cannot accomplish.

Levinas moves quickly from the otherness of death to the otherness contained in the erotic relationship with the other person. The relationship with the future is “accomplished in the face-to-face with the Other” (*TO*, 68-9/79). This move raises questions that Levinas himself does not answer. Is the otherness of death the same sense of otherness we find in human relations? Is one a species of the other? Can there not be different forms of otherness that make different claims on us? Why are all relationships with the Other a relationship with the future? While the relationship with death does announce a relationship with otherness, this relationship cannot be understood as another lonely moment of the subject’s existence. There is an otherness in death, but this otherness does not guarantee the survival of the “I.” For Levinas, only through Eros, and then through fecundity, can the survival of the “I” be maintained. The analysis of death is insufficient for Levinas, I think, because he cannot immediately infer the social relationship from it. In death, I am in a relationship with otherness, and eros, so to speak, humanizes this relationship with the Other.

In the erotic relationship with another person, another conception of time is to be found. In fact, in Eros we do not find only a conception of time, but time itself. In this period, Levinas argues that in the erotic relationship the Other appears in its “purity.” Purity, as we have seen, has become a key term in Levinas’s lexicon. We have seen him describe being in its purity, and now he is describing the Other in its purity. This attempt to describe the purity of a meaning places him squarely in the Kantian-Husserl transcendental tradition: Kant carries out a “critique of pure reason,” by which he means an inquiry into what the mind can know prior to experience. Husserl, in a similar vein, performs a transcendental reduction in order to arrive at the “pure ego,” which is the residuum of that reduction. Levinas’s concern with purity makes him an essentialist in a specific sense. It is true that in his later works “essence” refers to the work of being, but I call him an essentialist in a different sense: he is concerned with what is essential to the relationships with existence and the Other. He never abandons this appeal to the theme of purity.²⁹

The Other of the erotic relationship is the feminine. The feminine is the Other *par excellence*. For Levinas, sexual difference is not a difference between beings who share something in common, namely, the category of human being. Nor is it a contradiction, or

29 For a discussion of this essentialist tendency in Levinas’s thought, see Smith’s *Toward the Outside: Concepts and Themes in Emmanuel Levinas*, 5-6.

a relationship between opposites. The erotic relationship is between two individuals who cannot be represented under a higher concept; there is no fusion. Nor is the feminine a freedom that opposes mine; Levinas resists translating the relationship with the feminine in terms of power. Levinas associates power with possessing, knowing, and grasping, all of which negate the alterity of the Other and reduce it to the language of light, or what Levinas later calls the “Same” (*le Même*). The erotic relation is essentially a relationship with a mystery, a relationship with an Other who “always slips away” (*se dérobe à jamais*) from the light. Levinas also calls this the “modesty” of the feminine. This slipping away from the light, Levinas notes, is essential to the way the Other gives—or hides—itsself. The feminine is indeed given to me in flesh and bones, as a person who is here before me, but it is the mode of givenness/hiddenness that structures the relationship with her. We could say that the feminine is “given as absent”—to borrow a Husserlian phrase—but this is to treat the Feminine as a *noema* available to consciousness. The transcendence of the feminine, instead, “is a movement opposed to the movement of consciousness. But this does not make it unconscious or subconscious, and I see no other possibility than to call it a mystery” (*TO*, 80/88). Instead of saying that the feminine is an object that consciousness bursts towards, the feminine withdraws. The feminine, in this sense, disarms my powers. There is here an experience of powerlessness, of passivity, as noted in Levinas’s discussion of death. Because the Other is a mystery, there is a failure of communication in the relationship with the Other. It is as if the intentional ray of consciousness seeks a *noema* and keeps coming up empty. What consciousness grabs hold of here it loses, like the inability to hold onto a wet bar of soap that slips through one’s hands.

The mystery of the feminine is given most distinctly in the caress, which is an embrace that does not find what it seeks. Surely, to caress someone is to touch them, and this is an empirical event; it occurs in the light. But the aim of the caress is not simply to hold an object. It is a relationship that seeks more than what consciousness can contain.

The caress is the anticipation of this pure future [*avenir*] without content. It is made up of this increase of hunger, of ever richer promises, opening new perspectives onto the ungraspable. It feeds on countless hungers. (*TO*, 82/89)

The caress seeks more than what is given in the present, and for this reason Levinas calls it a relation with a “pure future.” In *Totality and Infinity* this feeding on “countless hungers” becomes the desire for the Infinite, a desire that cannot be satisfied. It is interesting to note that in this period Levinas is concerned with how the Other hauls, so to speak, the subject out of the relationship with existence. In *Totalty and Infinity*, the language of over-flowing and excess replaces the language of salvation and redemption. Except for the few references to eschatology in the preface to the 1961 book, the themes of messianism and redemption are largely abandoned. Even hypostasis itself does not appear in *Totality and Infinity*, only to resurface again in *Otherwise than Being* as an

ethical category.

The “I” is not lost in the relationship with transcendence. Levinas says that he is “seek[ing] a situation where nonetheless it is possible for [the ego] to remain an ego, and I have called this situation ‘victory over death’” (*TO*, 85/90-1). This victory over death signifies the capacity of the subject to remain alive through fecundity. This maintenance of the subject is not due to something that the subject does. The maintenance of the subject, Levinas argues, is accomplished in the event of paternity: “Paternity is the relationship with a stranger who, entirely while being Other, is myself, the relationship of the ego with a myself who is nevertheless a stranger to me” (*TO*, 85/91). A child is something I created, but it is not like a poem or a piece of property. A child is not something “I have” but something “I am.” This “I am,” however, is not the assertion of an identity. Rather, it is an assertion of difference, as if the law of identity depended on the fact of difference: “There is a multiplicity and a transcendence in this verb ‘to exist’, a transcendence that is lacking in even the boldest existential analyses” (*TO*, 86/91). Nor is a child an event I undergo, like sadness or suffering. A son is himself an ego that undergoes its own trials. Nor is the child simply an alter ego, another me that I can compare and contrast myself with. Viewing the child in this way would mark a return to the self; the son would lose his alterity. The return of the ego to itself, which takes place in hypostasis, is interrupted by the event of fecundity. Fecundity, in other words, begins from me but does not return to me.

The analyses of eros and paternity answer a crucial question for Levinas: how is a relationship with transcendence possible while still maintaining the singularity of the existent? This question, I will show in the next two chapters, is one of the most important questions of Levinas’s philosophy. The idea is in not only to escape existence, but still to remain singular in this escape and to maintain all the dignity I have as an individual.

In examining eros and fecundity, then, Levinas has arrived at the very event of transcendence, in which the chain between the ego and the self is broken, and time is accomplished. Let us look at the picture of the self Levinas has painted for us. First of all, human existence is a duality between the “there is” and what exists. Second, in eros and fecundity, however, the existence-existent duality becomes a movement of the Same, a return to the self, and existence takes on a different duality, that of existence and the Other. There are thus three elements to Levinas’s account of existence: existence-existent-Other. The existent is a postponement of the “there is,” but similarly, the relationship with the Other is somehow a postponement of the relationship with existence. This movement through the three terms Levinas calls a “dialectic”:

I have not proceeded in a phenomenological way. The continuity of development is that of a dialectic starting with the identity of hypostasis, the enchainment of the ego to the self, moving toward the maintenance of this identity, toward the

maintenance of the existent, but in a liberation of the ego with regard to self. The concrete situations that have been analyzed represent the accomplishment of this dialectic. (*TO*, 87/92)

This language of dialectic is abandoned in *Totality and Infinity*, never to reappear again in his works. What remains is the way that Levinas speaks of the relationship with the Other as a break from ontology.

The idea of “position” as a localization prior to consciousness is found in his articles around the time of *Totality and Infinity*, and the relationship between the ego and the self, along with the “there is,” returns with a renewed force in *Otherwise than Being*. What are we to make of these disappearances and reappearances? In what sense do Levinas’s analyses of existence and transcendence in the 1930s and 1940s inform his mature ethics of the Other? In what sense do they inform his later conception of the subjectivity of “recurrence”? These questions will guide my analyses in the last two chapters.

From Existence to Existents lays the groundwork for the central themes of Levinas’s later works. In *Totality and Infinity*, the relationship between the singularity of the existent and the anonymity of the “there is” presented in 1947 develops into an account of how the singularity of the existent is covered up by ontology. In that 1961 work, however, the relationship with ontology is not framed as a painful and restless “dual solitude.” Instead, Levinas moves towards showing that even at the level of solitude the subject is already beyond ontology. Moreover, this solitude is not painful, but is described as happy and independent. In this sense, *Totality and Infinity* is the odd work out in Levinas’s *oeuvre*, since *Otherwise than Being* (1974) rehabilitates the restlessness and pain of subjectivity in its account of ethical subjectivity. In any case, in the next two chapters I will show that the theme of singularity continues to be a core feature of Levinas’s thought, and that he turns from Heidegger’s ontological difference and turns to a distinction between “logical” and “chronological” priority in order to show how the singularity of the subject is rooted in an event that does not enter the light of consciousness.

Chapter III:
Anterior Posteriority and the Inversion of Intentionality
in Levinas's Account of Interiority

We saw in the last chapter that for Levinas the existent is essentially at odds with itself. In *From Existence to Existents* and *Time and the Other*, we saw that to be an existent is to be a singular being but at the same time to carry around an anonymous weight that reveals itself as the imperative to do something, as the impossible demand to escape an inescapable situation. Hypostasis is not an event that gives itself to consciousness as a theme. Rather, it is only accessible in those rare moments in human experience that reveal a cleaving between existence and the existent. Put otherwise, hypostasis is an event that the existent undergoes; the existent is essentially passive. Levinas's philosophy seeks to describe those passively lived moments that interrupt consciousness and call it into question.

In this chapter I will show that the themes of the "there is", hypostasis, and embodiment all play essential roles in Levinas's account of interiority in *Totality and Infinity*. More specifically, the "anterior posterior" condition that Levinas speaks of in *Totality and Infinity* is in fact a development of his earlier notion of hypostasis: hypostasis is an event that consciousness can only identify after the fact and which only gives itself indirectly in human experience. Like the notion of hypostasis, the anterior posterior condition of subjectivity effects a reversal of intentional consciousness by establishing the logical priority of a meaning that does not originate in consciousness and is only discoverable after the fact.

Furthermore, I will show how the structures of enjoyment, embodiment, and dwelling, all of which are structures of meaning that constitute interiority, effect a reversal of intentional consciousness (which Levinas also calls "representation") by grounding subjectivity in an affective sensibility that conditions intentional consciousness itself. There are two levels of sensibility in *Totality and Infinity*, where by sensibility I mean a form of meaning that does not require any active contribution from consciousness. In this vein, Levinas sometimes refers to a "conceptless experience" or to "meaning by itself" that does not rely on cognition. There is a form of sensibility that governs interiority, and then a form of sensibility that governs the ethical relationship. While the sensibility that governs interiority is not yet a relationship with transcendence—and is even ignorant of such a relationship—it prepares the subject for the possibility of goodness by opening it up to a form of otherness *within itself*. There is in interiority, then, a positive role that allows the encounter with transcendence to be possible. I will examine this positive role in this chapter.

3.1 Introducing *Totality and Infinity*

Totality and Infinity is widely known for its oppositions: Same and Other; totality and infinity; disclosure and revelation; politics and ethics; war and peace; ontology and metaphysics; and need and desire. While each of these dualisms cuts up the nature of human experience in a different way, they all stem from the same philosophical motivations. Levinas claims that Western philosophy has been concerned most often with only one way of thinking, while neglecting another way that opens up forgotten horizons of meaning. Western philosophy, in Levinas's estimation, has been concerned with totalizing, systematizing, and representing all of reality, including people, under unifying concepts through which beings lose their singularity. Levinas calls this way of doing philosophy the "Same" or "ontology." Thus Levinas writes, "Western philosophy has most often been an ontology: a reduction of the other to the same by interposition of a middle and neutral term that ensures the comprehension of being" (*TI*, 33-7/43).³⁰ As ontology, philosophy strips the singularity of the individual by failing to take that individual on its own terms; an individual's identity is defined only in relation to the totality to which it belongs. According to Levinas, in the concept of totality "individuals are reduced to being bearers of forces that command them unbeknown to themselves. The meaning of individuals (invisible outside of this totality) is derived from the totality" (*TI*, 6/22). One of the central goals of Levinas's works is to describe this singularity of the individual that escapes all totality. This singularity points to the individual as "Other," as "transcendent" to any inward play, and as "infinite" in that it cannot be contained by any system of relations.

On the surface, Levinas's project indeed seems quite straightforward insofar as he is arguing for the singularity of the individual. Furthermore, it is quite common to interpret Levinas as simply defending the singularity of the other person. Levinas can easily be interpreted as recommending to us that we should remember the singularity of the human and to avoid totalizing the Other. He appears to be telling us how we ought to do philosophy. However, Levinas's point is not that we ought to remember the singularity of the human, but rather that the singularity of the human *already* plays an active role in the constitution of human subjectivity itself. That is, Levinas's goal is to describe the structure of subjectivity as always already constituted by a relationship with otherness, and that the Other does give itself to the subject as non-containable and overflowing. In order to show this, Levinas digs deeply into the structure of subjectivity in order to locate hidden horizons of meaning that are presupposed in conscious life.

Levinas says that his project in *Totality and Infinity* is made possible by the philosophy of Edmund Husserl and that "the presentation and the development of the

30 Emmanuel Levinas, *Totalité et infini* (Paris: Le Livre de Poche, 1992). Translated by Alphonso Lingis as *Totality and Infinity* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 2007). Hereafter *TI*.

notions employed [in the book] owe everything to the phenomenological method” (*TI*, 14/28). However, Levinas seeks to go beyond what he sees as Husserl’s account of intentional consciousness, for which consciousness is a “consciousness of...” and for which each *noesis* is correlative to a *noema*. Levinas seeks to describe a “transcendent intention” that does not take the structure of a *noesis-noema* correlation (*TI*, 15/29). This transcendent intention is to be found in “the idea of the overflowing of objectifying thought by a forgotten experience from which it lives” (*TI*, 14/28). To describe this “forgotten experience,” Levinas cannot rely on the language of intentional consciousness. Rather, his difficulty lies in describing how a pre-cognitive meaning reveals itself in human experience without taking the form of an object of comprehension. In this sense, his philosophical goals are similar to those found in *From Existence to Existents*, where descriptive phenomenology is unable to describe adequately the affective experiences of lassitude, indolence, and hypostasis.

How is it possible to describe what every description presupposes, especially when this condition is rooted in a passivity that remains inaccessible to consciousness? The only way to describe such a meaning, as Levinas realizes already in *From Existence to Existents*, is to do so insofar as it reveals itself at some level of human experience. For this reason, Levinas is unable to talk about this forgotten horizon in and of itself as if it existed before it reveals itself to subjectivity: “Infinity does not first exist, and *then* reveal itself. Its infinity is produced as revelation, as a positing of its idea in *me*” (*TI*, 12/26). Earlier on the same page as this quote, Levinas explains that “the term ‘production’ designates both the effectuation of being . . . and its being brought to light or its exposition.” The discovery of the hidden horizon cannot be separated from the way that this meaning gives itself to the subject; in this Levinas remains a phenomenologist. We will see in the next chapter that this idea of production, for which the act and the content produced coincide, informs Levinas’s accounts of language and teaching.

In order to describe how an affective meaning gives itself, albeit incompletely, in subjective life, Levinas needs to be clearer about his method. To address this issue, he draws on Descartes’ method in the Third Meditation and introduces the difference between “chronological” and “logical” priorities. This difference is summed up by his puzzling formulation “anterior posteriority.” In the Second Meditation, Descartes discovers the *Cogito* as the indubitable first item of truth. The *Cogito* takes itself, if only for a moment, as the self-sufficient ground of knowledge. The *Cogito* is the first chronological discovery. In the third Meditation Descartes argues that God is needed in order for the subject’s clear and distinct ideas to be true. Chronologically, God is discovered after the *Cogito*. However, the discovery of God’s existence displaces the logical priority of the *Cogito*. The *Cogito*, as the origin of knowledge, is displaced by a pre-original meaning. Dennis Keenan explains it like this:

Descartes here discovers in a second movement—that is, “after the fact” or in the

critical reflection on the reflection characteristic of the first movement, the condition of what was initially taken to be “indubitable of itself by itself,” an absolute origin. Descartes discovers in the Third Meditation a pre-originary origin—the Infinite.³¹

At the very moment when the idea of God is acknowledged, consciousness finds itself at a distance to itself as the condition for its own thought. It is this second movement that Levinas sees as important for his own work: “That there could be a chronological order distinct from the ‘logical’ order, that there could be several moments in the progression, that there is a progression—here is separation” (*TI*, 46/54). Separation consists in taking the *Cogito* as the source of meaning, only to discover, in a single moment, “after the fact,” that the *Cogito* is grounded in something else. As Levinas puts it, “even its cause, older than itself, is still to come. The cause of being is thought or known by its effect *as though* it were posterior to its effect” (*TI*, 46-7/54). A little later he adds that, “the present of the *cogito*, despite the support it discovers for itself *after the fact* in the absolute that transcends it, maintains itself all by itself—be it only for an instant, the space of a *cogito*” (*TI*, 47/54). This “anterior posteriority” defines Levinas’s method in *Totality and Infinity*. Levinas writes *as though* the subject is first alone and in separation and *then* encounters the Other, but he in fact seeks to show that the subject is nevertheless always already constituted by a relationship with infinity. From the above passages, we can see that Levinas intends to show that the Other in fact conditions the very interiority that initially takes itself as a totality. Levinas brackets the relationship with the Other only to discover subsequently that it has been presupposed all along.

Anterior posteriority operates on two levels in *Totality and Infinity*: in the affective life of interiority and in the ethical relationship. In this chapter I am not concerned the relevance of “anterior posteriority” for Levinas’s ethical thought but would like to highlight its relevance for Levinas’s account of interiority. The importance of anterior posteriority for Levinas’s account of interiority, I think, has been largely neglected by Levinas scholars. By showing how it plays an important function in this part of Levinas’s account of subjectivity, I will show that for Levinas interiority is open to a relationship with otherness and that the structures of enjoyment, dwelling, and embodiment all prepare the subject for a relationship with the Other. I shall argue, then, for Levinas that the possibility of goodness already exists in the structure of interiority, but that it requires the encounter with the Other in order for it to be produced. For Levinas, the possibility of goodness cannot tell us exactly what the face-to-face encounter will be like, but only that it is possible. Subjectivity must be structured in such a way that allows the Other to reveal itself to the subject without becoming an object for a thought.

31 Dennis King Keenan, “Reading Levinas Reading Descartes’ *Meditations*” (1998), in *Emmanuel Levinas: Critical Assessments of Leading Philosophers*, ed. Claire Elise Katz (New York: Routledge, 2005), 164.

Levinas tries to accomplish this by having the Other reveal itself to the subject at a basic level of sensibility: it is not the subject of intentional consciousness that encounters the Other, but rather the subject of enjoyment.

The ethical event does not happen to a “conscious” subject. That is, it is not a subject with intentions (in the phenomenological sense) that finds itself encountered with a face. Rather, it is a subject who is already a being constituted by an affective relationship with the world. Specifically with respect to *Totality and Infinity*, Simon Critchley writes,

Levinas’s work is a reduction of the conscious intentional ego to the pre-conscious sentient subject of *jouissance*. Now, it is precisely this sentient subject of *jouissance* that is capable of being called into question by the other. The ethical relation, and this is important, takes place at the level of pre-reflective sensibility and not at the level of reflective consciousness. The ethical subject is a sentient subject not a conscious ego.³²

While it is true, of course, that the ethical relationship does call into question intentional consciousness, intentional consciousness must already be called into question at the level of interiority in order for the ethical relationship with a singular Other to be possible. Levinas’s point, then, is not that the Other is not knowable *per se*, but that the Other gives itself to a subject who is not initially a knower at all. To say that the Other is simply unknowable is to miss the point of Levinas’s account of interiority as a pre-conscious affectivity.

A questionable reading of Levinas on this issue is found in Merold Westphal’s recent book *Levinas and Kierkegaard in Dialogue*. In that book Westphal describes Levinas’s project as trying “to get from the side-by-side to the face-to-face,” from the “epistemological to the ethical.”³³ By “side-by-side” Westphal means the positing of the Other as an alter ego, thus restoring the primacy of rationality and judgment before the encounter with the Other. Westphal, in effect, takes rationality as that which the Face interrupts when the face-to-face encounter takes place. By reading Levinas in this way, Westphal misreads the role of interiority in Levinas’s philosophy as already beyond the “side-by-side.” At one point he even speaks of Levinas’s account of enjoyment as an instance of the “side-by-side” in connection with Husserlian intentionality.³⁴ Westphal accurately identifies Levinas’s ethics as an inversion of intentionality but does not

32 Simon Critchley, “The Original Traumatism: Levinas and Psychoanalysis” (1999), in *Emmanuel Levinas: Critical Assessments of Leading Philosophers*, ed. Claire Elise Katz (Routledge: New York, 2005), 74.

33 Merold Westphal, *Levinas and Kierkegaard in Dialogue* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008), 145-46.

34 Westphal, 145.

recognize that this inversion already takes place at the level of interiority before the encounter with the Face. Against Westphal, this chapter will show that Levinas's task does not consist in moving from epistemology to ethics, but rather from one form of pre-epistemological sensibility to another form of pre-epistemological sensibility.

One of the central theses of my work is that Levinas is first and foremost a philosopher concerned with the question of subjectivity. In order to examine the role of the anterior posterior for Levinas's account of interiority, I will need to say a few words about Levinas's conception of subjectivity in general. From there, I will move to a discussion of his accounts of enjoyment, embodiment, and dwelling.

3.2 From 1947 to 1961: Defending Subjectivity

In the first two chapters of this work I argued that in the earlier works for Levinas the self's relationship to itself is a serious philosophical question. Is this question still relevant for Levinas in *Totality and Infinity*? Although Levinas no longer describes the subject as out of step with itself, he is still quite interested in the nature of the self's relationship with itself. While the ideas of the "Other" and the "Face" are among the most important themes in *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas still insists that he is defending *subjectivity* (TI, 11/26). Responsibility can only be what it is if there is a subject who is constituted in such a way as to allow a relationship with otherness to take place. Simon Critchley captures my point nicely: "It is only because there is a *certain affective disposition towards alterity within the subject, as the structure or pattern of subjectivity*, that there can be an ethical relation."³⁵ If Levinas's philosophy is a defense of otherness, then it can only be a defense of otherness insofar as it is given to a "me." As Levinas himself puts it, "alterity is possible only starting from [*à partir de*] me" (TI, 29/40, emphasis in original). He adds later in the book that the differences between the Other and me are due to "the inevitable *orientation* of being 'starting from oneself' toward 'the Other'" (TI, 237/215, emphasis in original). If these passages are not enough, he adds a few pages later in italics, "*The individual and the personal are necessary for Infinity to be able to be produced as infinite*" (TI, 240-41/218). In sum, Levinas does not only happen to say in a few places that he is defending the subject as the site where alterity happens. He emphasizes it.

Nevertheless, Levinas's account of subjectivity does not resemble other accounts we find in the history of philosophy. Descartes is often considered to be father of the modern account of subjectivity. For Descartes, and thinkers who follow in his footsteps, subjectivity is essentially linked with consciousness and the capacity for self-reflection. For Levinas, following Heidegger, consciousness is not the defining feature of

35 Simon Critchley, "The Original Traumatism: Levinas and Psychoanalysis," 69.

subjectivity. Of course, consciousness is an essential feature of subjectivity, but for Levinas it is not the most important one. Consistent with *From Existence to Existents*, the heart of subjectivity is to be found in a pre-conscious form of awareness. How does this account of subjectivity function in *Totality and Infinity*? As in 1947, Levinas's account of subjectivity is tied with questions of identity and singularity.

As we saw in the last two chapters, for Levinas the question of subjectivity is rooted in a concern with the nature of self-identity. It is rarely noted that in the early pages of *Totality and Infinity* Levinas makes a few remarks about self-identification that serve to situate *Totality and Infinity* in relation to the 1947 book *From Existence to Existents*. Levinas notes that there are different ways we can understand the identity of the subject. First we can understand the subject as "the being whose existing consists in identifying itself, in recovering its identity throughout all that happens to it" (*TI*, 25/36). In this sense, identity belongs to a substance who is capable of representing its identity in a single act of thought. Identity, then, has a cognitive basis and is rooted in the "I think." Levinas rejects this account of self-identification. For Levinas, the identity of an individual does not depend on the capacity to capture that identity in a cognitive act. Moreover, this account of identity takes the subject to be an unchangeable substance that remains the same despite what happens to it; for Levinas the subject is essentially active and cannot be reduced to a substance. In these points, Levinas remains consistent with his earlier works.

A second way to understand the identity of the I runs as follows: "The I that thinks hearkens to itself thinking or takes fright before its depths and is to itself an other" (*TI*, 25/36). Levinas identifies Hegel's philosophy as advocating such a position. For Hegel, on Levinas's reading, this difference between the self and the I is no real difference at all. Levinas quotes Hegel, "the difference is not a difference; the I, as other, is not an 'other'" (*TI*, 26/37). Here Levinas adds:

The I that repels the self, lived as repugnance, the I riveted to itself, lived as ennui, are modes of self-consciousness and rest on the unrendable identity of the I and the self. The alterity of the I that takes itself for another may strike the imagination of the poet precisely because it is but the play of the same: the negation of the I by the self is precisely one of the modes of identification of the I. (*TI*, 26/37)

Levinas's initial target here is Hegel, but the reference to the "I riveted to itself" could be taken as a criticism of his own account of self-identification in *From Existence to Existents*. We might want to resist this interpretation because in 1947 Levinas would not say that the relationship with existence is grounded in a mode of self-consciousness. We recall that the weight of being makes itself felt prior to any act of consciousness. Nevertheless, in 1947 Levinas does provide an account of how pure being is "other" to

the subject. Pure being is foreign, harsh, and suffocating. These features of existence, for the earlier Levinas, can only be accessed in certain human experiences in which the “cleaving” between existence and the existent is accomplished. In *Totality and Infinity*, interiority is no longer constituted by the opposition between existence and the existent. Levinas, in other words, now rejects the position that an analysis of human existence must begin with the existence-existent opposition. The “I riveted to itself” is no longer a sufficient way to conceive of self-identification.

With the abandonment of the existence-existent dualism as the starting point of philosophical reflection, Levinas rehabilitates the phenomenological significance of the world. We recall that in *On Escape* Levinas had complained that the relationship with oneself has been neglected in favor of the relationship with the world. In 1947 he maintains that the relationship with existence is prior to the relationship with the world. We recall Levinas saying in *From Existence to Existents* that “it is one thing to ask what the place of the world in the ontological adventure is, and another thing to look for that adventure within the world itself” (*EE*, 64/33). There the relationship with the world comes after the relationship with existence. In 1961, *contra* his earlier works, Levinas claims that “it is necessary to begin with the concrete relationship between an I and a world” (*TI*, 26/37). In the earlier works, the subject is restless and out of step with itself. In 1961, the subject is essentially at home with itself in the world. The self is at peace. The subject of *Totality and Infinity* is one that enjoys bathing in the elements and has a home where it can withdraw and recollect itself. I will now turn to Levinas’s account of enjoyment.

3.3 Enjoyment

One reason for the shift in Levinas’s philosophy is his renewed interest in Husserl’s works in the 1950s. While in a couple of places in *From Existence to Existents* Levinas does say that his analyses go beyond phenomenological description, Husserl does not seem to be all too present in that book. *Totality and Infinity* seeks to go beyond Husserl’s notion of intentional consciousness just as much as it seeks to go beyond Heidegger’s account of Being-in-the-world. For Levinas, Husserl and Heidegger are now both cohorts of the Same. The former allegedly gives representation a privileged place in human experience, while the latter privileges the relationship with Being. Levinas’s renewed interest in Husserl, I would suggest, is directly connected to his reevaluation of the relationship with the world in *Totality and Infinity*. Elisabeth Louise Thomas explains the role of the world in *Totality and Infinity* in the following way:

Unlike the early works, Levinas does not conceive of this subjectivity in terms of a withdrawal from the anonymity of the *il y a* but as a withdrawal and reversal of intentional consciousness which constitutes the world as other on the basis of the

'I' as a formal identity. The otherness or transcendence of the intentional world is found to be part of the immanent world of subjectivity in so far as it reverts incessantly to the subject of enjoyment.³⁶

In *Totality and Infinity* Levinas describes interiority as a sensibility that undercuts all tool-based and knowledge-based relationships. The difference between 1947 and 1961 is that in the later work the notion of hypostasis is substituted with a reversal of intentional consciousness and is reworked as the anterior posterior condition that conditions intentional consciousness. That is, hypostasis is now given a phenomenological reworking and is redressed as an account of pure sensibility *qua* enjoyment and embodied existence. The origin of the subject is no longer a painful affair, but signifies the very core of subjectivity as enjoyment and independence.

The crux of Levinas's account of interiority is his account of enjoyment, which he argues is the basis of interiority. We live "from" or "on" (*vivre de...*) the world. Levinas's expression *vivre de...* signifies a basic involvement with the world that constitutes the interiority of subjectivity. It is not that we first see the world and enjoy it. Our capacity to see the world already presupposes a prior immersion in it. Levinas calls this relationship "enjoyment" (*jouissance*). Enjoyment names neither a relationship between a subject and a thing known, nor a relationship with something that points to some further end. To enjoy soup, to live from it, is not to adopt a critical attitude towards it. When I enjoy a good bowl of soup or a relaxing bath, I am absorbed in that experience. The experience points to nothing else but the very enjoyment of that experience. I live my enjoyment, I am my enjoyment. It is true that that enjoyment always depends on a content, but the content is not lived *as* the content of an intention (namely, the enjoyment). Nor is the thing enjoyed experienced as indispensable to my biological existence. Of course, if I do not eat I might die, but this fact does not capture the very experience of enjoying what might or might not be indispensable to my survival.

It might be said that enjoyment does have a goal, namely, nourishment. Again we do not need to know about the physiology of nourishment when experiencing it. Nourishment refers neither to a physiological process nor to a goal, but back to the subject of enjoyment:

Nourishment, as a means of invigoration, is the transmutation of the other into the same, which is in the essence of enjoyment: an energy that is other, recognized as other, recognized, we will see, as sustaining the very act that is directed upon it, becomes, in enjoyment, my own energy, my strength, me. Hunger is need, is privation in the primal sense of this word, and thus precisely *living from...* is not a

36 Elisabeth Louise Thomas, *Emmanuel Levinas: Ethics, Justice, and the Human beyond Being* (Routledge: New York, 2004), 53.

simple becoming conscious of what fills life. These contents are lived: they feed life. (*TI*, 113/111)

Levinas thus underscores the self-referring quality of enjoyment and nourishment. However, life does not simply live. Existence is not bare. We do not exist only for the sake of existing. For Levinas, the “from” or “on” of *vivre de...* bestows upon life a meaning of value. Life’s “essences makes up its worth (*prix*); and here value (*valeur*) constitutes being. The reality of life is already on the level of happiness, and in this sense beyond ontology” (*TI*, 112). This value of enjoyment is the basis of independence. This, as Peperzak points out, is an independence founded on dependence.³⁷ At one with the world I enjoy, my dependence affords me the possibility of being independent with respect to my material needs. As Joachim Duyndam suggests, this is not a spiritual independence, but a bodily independence, “the independence of the physical enjoyment of the things the body needs and depends on.”³⁸ It is this independence that Levinas calls “happiness” and he claims that it is the basis of ipseity, which refers to the singularity of the subject.

The personality of the person, the ipseity of the I, which is more than the particularity of the atom and of the individual, is the particularity of the happiness of enjoyment. Enjoyment accomplishes the atheist separation; it deformalizes the notion of separation, which is not a cleavage made in the abstract, but the existence at home with itself of an autochthonous I. (*TI*, 118/115)

Let us note again an implicit criticism of his earlier position from 1947 that inwardness consists of a “cleaving” between existence and the existent (*EE*, 9). Interiority is here defined as the “at home with itself” of a terrestrial subject. This “at home” already points to the fact that interiority is grounded in the event of dwelling, as we will see shortly. But Levinas describes the subject as “at home with itself,” this is not to say that the subject has a stable identity. Levinas distinguishes between formal identity and ipseity. The subject is not a stable identity undergoing modifications, but is essentially a being whose consciousness is constantly inverted and turned inside-out through specific affective structures of existence. In *From Existence with Existence*, the relationship with existence makes itself felt in those pivotal moments in which there is an upsurge of effort, and this ongoing event constitutes the structure of the existent’s existence. In *Totality and Infinity*, the structure of enjoyment becomes the basis of the subject’s identity. The effort and labor found in *From Existence to Existents* is now replaced by the event of enjoyment, which does not name a specific event that happens at a certain time and place. Rather, it is important to see that enjoyment refers to the very structure of subjectivity

37 Peperzak, Adriaan, *To the Other: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas* (West Lafayette, Indiana: Purdue University Press, 1993), 152.

38 Joachim Duyndam, “Sincerely Me. Enjoyment and the Truth of Hedonism,” in Benda Hofmeyr, ed., *Radical Passivity: Rethinking Ethical Agency in Levinas* (Netherlands: Springer, 2009), 74.

itself. When Levinas speaks of enjoyment he is not only speaking of the subject's relationship to an object of enjoyment, but of the relationship with this very relationship (*TI*, 114/111). This relationship does not guarantee a stable identity for the subject, but quite the opposite. The structure of enjoyment is the basis for the self as essentially active, as a continual withdrawal into itself.

Levinas does speak of enjoyment as a contraction and as a turning-back on oneself. We are not to take this turning-back as a function of the subject's disjointedness with itself. Solitude is not experienced as a painful disjointedness at the heart of human existence, but is now "a withdrawal into oneself, an involution" (*TI*, 123/118):

The I is the very contraction of sentiment, the pole of a spiral whose coiling and involution is drawn by enjoyment: the focus of the curve is a part of the curve. It is precisely as a "coiling," as a movement toward oneself, that enjoyment comes into play. (*TI*, 123/118)

Enjoyment is an involution that feeds off of itself. This is not a withdrawal into Being. If in 1947 the disjointedness of inwardness points to the inescapability of Being, then in 1961 inwardness is a distance with respect to Being. This is yet another way that *Totality and Infinity* breaks from the earlier works:

One becomes a subject of being not by assuming being but in enjoying happiness, by the interiorization of enjoyment which is also an exaltation, an 'above being.' The existent is 'autonomous' with respect to being; it designates not a participation in being, but happiness. The existent par excellence is the human being. (*TI*, 124/119)

Unlike in his earlier works, then, Levinas maintains that there is a break from Being at the level of interiority. Here the subject quits all participation in Being and withdraws into itself. This event of withdrawal, though, is not an intentional event. Ipseity cannot be represented. To represent ipseity is to lose it. As "above being," this exaltation works at a more basic level of existence than consciousness; it is non-assumable. In this sense, this involution prefigures the ethical self of *Otherwise than Being*, which is constituted by a constant recurrence into a non-assumable (non-)site of subjectivity.

Levinas's ego has an identity that it acquires only through its self-reference. Here the Other is not needed in order for the subject to be what it is. For this reason, Levinas calls the subject of enjoyment "atheist." The subject of enjoyment has a hungry stomach that is deaf to the Other. However, Levinas insists that ipseity is necessary for the relationship with the Other. How is this so? One answer is to be found in a short section, "The I of Enjoyment is Neither Biological Nor Sociological," in which Levinas distinguishes the identity of the individual from biological or sociological accounts of

identity. Levinas argues that the individual must be understood on its own terms, and not on the basis of a neutral concept such as “man” or “race.” Such third-person concepts strip away the ipseity of the I. For example, if the individual is understood as a member of a larger species, then its singularity is compromised: “The unicity of the I, its status as a conceptless individual, would disappear in this *participation* in what exceeds it” (*TI*, 124/120). In happiness the individual’s identity is not constituted by a relationship with an impersonal concept, but only by its very relationship with itself. If the individual were understood under the rubric of an impersonal concept, then it would follow logically that any other individual would follow under that concept too. In other words, in order for the Other to be understood on its own terms, it is first necessary that the individual who confronts the Other be understood on its own terms too. Accordingly, Levinas writes, “multiplicity can be produced only if the individuals retain their secrecy” (*TI*, 125/120). In this short section on biological and sociological identity—a section that only amounts to approximately a page-and-a-half—Levinas notes at least six times that the relationship from the Other proceeds from the I, and emphasizes that the only way to preserve the uniqueness of the Other is to begin with a unique subject. The uniqueness of the Other can only be secured if the subject who encounters the Other is also unique. Otherwise, there would be no plurality that maintains the singularity of each term. If the subject were part of a larger concept then it would not be possible for another person to be understood without reference to that concept. In this way, sensibility as enjoyment is the possibility for the relationship with transcendence.

Levinas distinguishes between the intentionality of representation and the intentionality of enjoyment. Representation, for Levinas, refers to the objectifying act through which an exterior thing loses its alterity. Representation “is the possibility for the other to be determined by the same without determining the same, without introducing alterity into it; it is a free exercise of the same. It is the disappearance, within the same, of the I opposed to the non-I” (*TI*, 129/124). By applying a neutral concept to what is encountered, representational consciousness reduces the Other to the Same, and in this sense “the object of representation is indeed interior to thought: despite its independence it falls under the power of thought” (*TI*, 128/123). Representation, accordingly, is “intelligibility,” a “total adequation of the thinker with what is thought, in the sense of a mastery exercised by the thinker upon what is thought in which the object’s resistance as an exterior being vanishes” (*TI*, 129/124). Although consciousness as representation initially approaches things as exterior to thought, that exteriority vanishes in the employment of a concept that aims at the comprehension of that thing. By grounding comprehension in prior concepts—which, no doubt, originate in prior objectifying acts (*TI*, 127/122)—representation discovers nothing new in experience: “The ‘act’ of representation discovers, properly speaking, nothing before itself” (*TI*, 130/125). Representation, Levinas claims further, is rooted in the very present in which an object is encountered. As a living present, representation takes itself as its own condition and the condition of all meaning. Another way of saying this is to say that the

subject of representation is devoid of time; it is a pure presence, or even an eternity. Of course, the subject ages, but this passivity of aging is not visible on the level of representation: “representation involves no passivity” (*TI*, 131/125). The subject who represents is uprooted from the world in which it dwells, and from the body in which it is concretized.

The intentionality of enjoyment, on the other hand, “consists in holding on to [*tenir à*] exteriority” (*TI*, 133/127) that the intentionality of representation reduces to the Same. This hold on exteriority in enjoyment is neither the physical grasping of an object nor the intellectual positing of a thing before me. Rather, the “hold” Levinas refers to involves the fundamental role of the body in human experience. We recall that in his earlier works the French verb *tenir à* refers to the subject’s capacity to “posit itself” or to “take a position.” The body is in fact the condition that displaces the fundamental place of representation in human experience. The body, Levinas claims, is “the whole weight of position” (*TI*, 133/126). We recall that in *From Existence to Existents* “position” does not refer to the fact that I happen to be a being who occupies a certain spatio-temporal location. Rather, for Levinas in 1947 position refers to the fact that I have a base, a point of orientation, a *here* from which I proceed. In 1961, this account of position remains largely intact:

To posit oneself [*se poser*] corporeally is to touch an earth, but to do so in such a way that the touching finds itself already conditioned by the position, the foot settles into a real which this very action outlines or constitutes—, as though a painter would notice that he is descending from the picture he is painting. (*TI*, 134/128)

My sensibility is here. In my position there is not the sentiment of localization, but the localization of my sensibility. (*TI*, 146/138)

Compare the above passages with the following passage from *From Existence to Existents*:

The possibility of sleeping is already seated in the very exercise of thought. It is not first thought and then *here*. It is, qua thought, here, already sheltered from eternity and universality. This localization does not presuppose space. It is the very contrary of objectivity. It does not presuppose a thought behind it which would have to grasp the *here*, which is an objective *here*—in that dialectic by which Hegel’s *Phenomenology* begins. The localization of consciousness is not subjective; it is the subjectivization of the subject. (*EE*, 118/66)

Even if *Totality and Infinity* presents embodiment as inseparable from the relationship with the world, the function of the body in Levinas’s analyses still remains pretty much

the same: the body is a condition for which consciousness is not present. Representation is always too late for its condition, which harks back to a past that is never present to consciousness. As Levinas puts it, “I *stand* [*me tiens*] in the world which precedes me as an absolute of an unrepresentable antiquity” (*TI*, 146/137). This appeal to an “unrepresentable antiquity” anticipates the “immemorial past” that Levinas refers to in his later work. Levinas incorporates this unrepresentable antiquity into his account of ethical subjectivity in his later work.

This account of embodied enjoyment presented in *Totality and Infinity*, I would argue, is where we find the anterior posteriority I discussed earlier. While representation might be first in the chronological order of experience, the intentionality of enjoyment is what we have “after the fact.” Embodied enjoyment is anteriorly posterior to the thought that would think it. The essence of the body, Levinas says, is to “*accomplish* my position on the earth” (*TI*, 125/128). Notice here the reference to accomplishment, which Levinas emphasizes in the original. Earlier in the Preface to *Totality and Infinity* Levinas identifies “accomplishment” as one way to describe a forgotten experience that cannot be captured by a thought aiming at an object (*TI*, 14/28). The reduction to a forgotten experience is the reduction to a meaning that conditions the very thought that thinks it. To posit oneself corporeally is to touch in a way “that the touching finds itself already conditioned by the position” (*TI*, 125/128). There is in embodied enjoyment a reversal of representation, a movement from the “I think” to a relationship with a meaning that does not involve a thought aiming at an object:

In “living from . . .” the process of constitution which comes into play wherever there is representation is reversed. What I live from is not in my life as the represented is within representation in the eternity of the same or in the unconditioned present of cogitation. If we could still speak of constitution here we would have to say that the constituted, reduced to its meaning, here overflows its meaning, becomes within constitution the condition of the constituting, or, more exactly, the nourishment of the constituting. (*TI*, 134-135/128).

The land I live off, the body I am, and the enjoyment I experience all condition my capacity to represent these features of existence. They are all ways that the anterior posterior—the discovery of a logical priority that grounds the chronological priority of cognition—operates at the level of interiority. There is in embodied enjoyment a meaning that overflows the thought that would think it.

The body plays an ambiguous role for Levinas because while it is at the same time a source of meaning, it also occupies a passive relationship to the world. Levinas calls this ambiguity of meaning “alimentation.” Alimentation is, Levinas says, “between representing and represented, constituting and constituted” (*TI*, 125/128). The ambiguity arises from the fact that alimentation cannot be represented as an object and only gives

itself in a glimpse, as if its presence is a sign of its absence; here we find an early version of what becomes the trace in Levinas's later thought. Levinas acknowledges that enjoyment cannot be reduced to alimentation and that there is often a cognitive element to enjoyment. But the state of being hungry and the experience of biting into food, for instance, point to something that cognition cannot capture. There is here an "accomplishment" that points to a meaning for which there is no object corresponding to a thought. Now, there is indeed a reduction of the other to the same here, since the food I eat becomes a part of me. But this reduction to the Same is not a reduction through representation. There is therefore in Levinas at least two fundamentally different forms of Sameness: the Sameness of affective enjoyment, and the Sameness of representation. It is important not to confuse the two:

Through labor and possession the alterity of nutriment enters into the same. *Yet it remains true that this relationship differs fundamentally from the inspiration of representation we spoke of above.* Here the relation is reversed, as though the constitutive thought were stimulated by its own game, by its free play, as though freedom as a present absolute commencement found its condition in its own product, as though the product did not receive its meaning from a consciousness that ascribes meaning to being. (*TI*, 136/129; emphasis mine)

The difference between enjoyment and representation is that the latter takes itself to be the condition for the meanings it constitutes. Representation, for Levinas, is unable to acknowledge the hidden horizons of meaning that constitute lived experience. In the case of enjoyment, the subject finds itself nourished by a condition that consciousness cannot bring to presence. As Levinas puts it in "The Permanent and the Human in Husserl," an article published one year before *Totality and Infinity*:

The fact of having a hand, tensing one's muscles, walking, settling on a land, the sedimentation of a certain history in the thinking Ego, were necessary in order for the representation of a space, a time, and a physical causality even to be formed. Thus we would be wrong in placing this prepredicative work into representation, for which it is a condition, and from which the thinking subject is already nourished before representing the world to itself. (*DEH*, 132 [English])

In this way Levinas establishes an account of interiority that does not rely on a cognitive relationship with the world. We could say that the subject finds itself grounded before it is able to ground anything else through its representations. The subject finds itself always already part of the world as soon as it opens its eyes, and that its capacity to see things through its open eyes presupposes that the subject is already part of something it did not choose to a part of.

Accordingly, in the relationship of enjoyment, the body is not to be understood in

isolation from the world. If Levinas treats the body in isolation from the world in *From Existence to Existents*, he does not do so in *Totality and Infinity*. In fact, alimentation, as a condition, requires the world as the “medium” (*milieu*) through which I nourish myself. I “live from” the medium and find myself nourished by it before having represented it. That is, the world for Levinas is not a matrix of things that I can use for certain ends, nor is it a field of co-potential *noemata* that I can thematize. The things of the world refer back to my enjoyment. I stroll along the beach without thinking about it objectively. I enjoy a good bowl of soup without reflecting on what it is good for or without contemplating the essence of its appearance. I find myself absorbed in the world I enjoy. I am a part of it and it becomes a part of me. The ego of enjoyment is its world. The world is the element in which I am always steeped (*TI*, 138/131). I open my eyes and already find myself part of the spectacle I enjoy. This basic inseparability from the world is one way that Levinas’s account of the world remains close to Heidegger’s, even if Levinas undercuts the alleged instrumental feature of his teacher’s account.

When we look further into Levinas’s account of the elemental, we find that the “there is” plays an important role. Like the “there is”, the elemental is anonymous. The elemental is the wind that blows, the land I live from, the infinite sea on which I sail. It is no-man’s land. The element is not a thing I can approach and examine. It is not given in a one-sided adumbration, like a spatio-temporal thing would be. The elemental does not even have any sides: “Hence we can say that the element comes to us from nowhere; the side it presents to us does not determine an object, remains entirely anonymous. It is wind, earth, sea, sky, air” (*TI*, 139/132). These descriptions of the elemental sound much like Levinas’s earlier descriptions of the anonymous “there is”. In *Totality and Infinity*, however, the elemental is the place where I find myself at home; it is not a site of horror. There is here no “dual solitude” between existence and the existent. The “there is”, nevertheless, is what the element extends into (*TI*, 151/142). If the element is the horizon of my enjoyment, then perhaps we can say that the “there is” is the horizon of the horizon of my enjoyment. It is never there in my field of enjoyment, but it makes itself felt like a threat. In my relationship with the elemental, there is always the question of the future of my enjoyment. This is not a future of anticipation (like in the experience of listening to a melody), but rather a future of which I have no idea. It reveals itself as the haunting possibility of there being no more enjoyment. The subject affirms itself as being who is at home with itself *against* this haunting possibility: “Against the anonymous ‘there is,’ horror, trembling, and vertigo, perturbation of the I that does not coincide with itself, the happiness of enjoyment affirms the I at home with itself” (*TI*, 152/143). Again, we can see that in his account of enjoyment, Levinas displaces the “I that does not coincide with itself” with a subject who is at home with itself in enjoyment.

If the “there is” still haunts the existent, then are there grounds for saying that enjoyment is an escape from it? Is enjoyment an escape from pure being? After all, Levinas does say that enjoyment is an “exaltation, an ‘above being’” (*TI*, 124/119).

Levinas claims elsewhere, however, that the relationship with enjoyment is not a relationship with transcendence, but rather a relationship *analogous* to transcendence (TI, 112/109). Enjoyment is only analogous to a relationship with transcendence because the “other” that I enjoy becomes part of me; it loses its exteriority. In enjoyment I determine the Other without the Other determining me, but in the relationship with transcendence the otherness of the Other is not assimilated into the Same.

As in his earlier works, though, the relationship with oneself does not fulfill the promise that a break from being should accomplish: the “there is” still remains as a threat to the security of egoist enjoyment. Enjoyment, however, is not to be considered an escape, since in enjoyment there is a movement towards oneself, an involution. Enjoyment is the affirmation of the subject’s singularity. This affirmation is accomplished as a separation, and this separation is a positing of independence and self-sufficiency. Elizabeth Louise Thomas explains my point precisely:

In enjoyment, the ‘I’ has identity as its content and in this sense, it lacks nothing. This autochthony, however, is nothing less than the positing of identity as a withdrawal from the world and, in a certain sense, a withdrawal from being. I would suggest it is above being in this movement of separation and withdrawal but this is not an escape from being—only a distance with regard to it. There is no event of transcendence in this distancing in enjoyment.³⁹

Separation, in other words, is a break from being, but it is not transcendence. The question now arises, though, how transcendence can be possible at all for a subject who is essentially withdrawn. If the relationships analogous to transcendence—such as embodiment and enjoyment—are not themselves examples of transcendence, what is it about interiority that makes transcendence possible?

3.4 Dwelling, Habitation, the Feminine

Levinas’s analyses in *Totality and Infinity* oscillate between formal descriptions and seemingly empirical descriptions. At one point he speaks of the anterior posterior and the method required to uncover hidden horizons, but then in other places he seems to apply his method to the concrete experiences of bathing, eating, and laboring. The further we get into Levinas’s account of interiority, however, we need to ask how Levinas’s account of psychism makes possible a relationship with transcendence and how this relationship plays out in human experience. In order for a relationship with transcendence to be possible, there must be something about interiority that makes it possible. There must be an opening, or what Levinas calls a “welcoming.” The home is

³⁹ Thomas, 63

meant to accomplish this welcoming.

Levinas notes that the home can be interpreted as a tool. The home, in this sense, serves as a place to live. It protects one from bad weather and from those who wish to cause harm. It is even possible to enjoy one's home. I can take delight in its coziness and lose myself in it much in the same way that I lose myself in a good bowl of soup. However, Levinas claims that these ways of understanding the home reduce it to an end of human activity. He writes, "the privileged role of the home does not consist in being the end of human activity but in being its condition, and in this sense its commencement" (*TI*, 162/152). The home, Levinas argues, is first of all the place from which one approaches the world. The subject "goes forth outside from an inwardness [*intimité*]" (*TI*, 162/152). It is true nonetheless that the home is a physical structure that exists in a spatio-temporal relation to other things. The home belongs to the world of objects. This fact, Levinas claims, does not nullify the more important fact that one's relationship with the world proceeds from the dwelling. As Levinas puts it, "concretely speaking the dwelling is not situated in the objective world, but the objective world is situated by relation to my dwelling" (*TI*, 163/152). Once again, we find another way that Levinas undercuts the privileged role of representation in human experience. The event of dwelling, Levinas says, "exceeds the knowing, the thought, and the idea which, *after the event*, the subject will want to contain what is incommensurable with a knowing" (*TI*, 163/153; emphasis mine). In its relationship with the dwelling, the subject again finds itself constituted by a condition that consciousness can only approach after the fact.

Levinas uses the term "recollection" (*recueillement*) to explain how the dwelling accomplishes "a suspension of the immediate reactions the world solicits in view of a greater attention to oneself, one's possibilities, and the situation" (*TI*, 164/154). To recollect is to postpone the relationship with the elements by withdrawing into a familiar domain. As Thomas points out, "recollection" (*recueillement*) is etymologically close to "welcome" (*accueil*),⁴⁰ so Levinas sees a conceptual relationship between recollection and welcoming (*TI*, 165/155). So, while recollection is a withdrawal into the interiority of the home, for Levinas it is meant to serve as a hinge that allows for a relationship with the outside from the inside. The home is the place from which the subject encounters the world, but it is also the site of gentleness and a place where human relationships can flourish. Similarly to the body, for Levinas, the dwelling is a zero-point and indicates a middle point between distance and connectness. Recollection corresponds with distance, while welcoming refers to the relationship with an outside. The home is precisely the hinge at the limits of the inside and the outside. Because the home cannot be reduced solely to the inside or the outside, its role is ambiguous. This is an ambiguity of distance and connectedness (*TI*, 167/156), and it is structurally similar to the ambiguity of the "aliment" I discussed earlier. This ambiguity, again, points to a condition that

40 Thomas, 70.

consciousness cannot translate into the lucidity of knowledge:

The feat of having limited a part of this world and having closed it off, having access to the elements I enjoy by way of the door and the window, realizes extraterritoriality and the sovereignty of thought; anterior to the world to which it is posterior. Anterior posteriorly: separation is thus not “known”; it is produced. (TI, 184/170)

The home circulates between visibility and invisibility (TI, 167/156), like the scintillation of light that characterizes hypostasis in *From Existence to Existents*. We see, moreover, that Levinas employs here the phrase “anterior posterior.” The event of dwelling is always already accomplished before I am able to step back and identify it as a condition. Enjoyment, embodiment, and dwelling are all instances of how this anterior posteriority is accomplished at the level of interiority. Of course, the anterior posteriority par excellence is the relationship with the Other, and we will examine that a little later.

For Levinas, the home is the site of familiar relationships. He uses the term “feminine” to describe the gentleness that comes with such relationships. The role of the feminine in Levinas’s philosophy has been an ongoing debate in feminist readings of Levinas’s philosophy.⁴¹ I will not enter these debates here, but wish only to explain what the function that the Feminine has in Levinas’s position. When Levinas says that the home has a feminine presence, he is not referring to the empirical fact of there being a female-gendered person in the home. Rather, he is pointing to the familiar relationships that constitute home life, and he sees these relationships as preparing the subject for a relationship with the Other, and does so in a way that the relationship with the world cannot accomplish. In the relationship with the Feminine, the subject finds itself opened up to the possibility of ethical meaning: “the discretion of this presence includes all the possibilities of the transcendent relationship with the Other” (TI, 166/155). The Feminine turns the egoist self away from itself and introduces it to something that does not begin in it. However, the relationship with the familiar human is not yet the relationship of language which constitutes the face-to-face relationship. The *tu* of familiarity is not yet the *vous* of the Face (TI, 166/155). Why does the relationship with a familiar person not ethical? One possible answer is that Levinas does not want to ground ethics in anything that establishes a totality between people. For Levinas, ethics is not grounded in familiarity but in difference and strangeness. He even compares the familiarity of the feminine with Martin Buber’s “Thou”: “The I-Thou in which Buber sees the category of interhuman relationship is the relation not with the interlocutor but with feminine alterity” (TI, 166/155). On Levinas’s reading of Buber, this familiarity translates into a reciprocity which undermines the absolute alterity between both interlocutors.

41 If the reader is interested in such debates, a good place to begin is *Feminist Interpretations of Emmanuel Levinas*, ed. Tina Chanter (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2001).

On the other hand, Levinas does speak of the gentleness of the dwelling as if it does have an ethical basis. He calls gentleness a “delightful ‘lapse’ of the ontological order” and says that gentleness is a way in which the Other reveals itself (*TI*, 161/151). He then adds that “inhabitation and the intimacy of the dwelling which make the separation of the human being possible thus imply a first revelation of the Other” (*TI*, 161/151). I would suggest that while the Feminine is not the Other strictly speaking, it does contain—to borrow from Levinas’s later language—a trace of the infinite. Like embodiment, alimentation, and the dwelling itself, the Feminine is ambiguous because it operates at the limits of interiority and exteriority. The Feminine, it turns out, is Other in some respects and not Other in other respects. This ambiguity, I think, is a function of the circulation between separation and connectedness in the home. On the one hand, Levinas sees the home as the accomplishment of separation, but on the other hand he presents its opened doors as the possibility for human relationships.

It is essential to realize that the meaning of Levinas’s account of the Feminine is restricted to the terms of Levinas’s own argument. To ask questions about the Feminine without reference to Levinas’s argument as a whole will inevitably result in a distortion of Levinas’s philosophical position, since Levinas is not concerned with what contemporary feminist philosophy consider to be gender issues and the oppression of women (although Levinas’s failure to address these issues might itself be considered a problem for his readers to worry about). In his argument Levinas presents the Feminine as the middle-term between the structures of interiority and the relationship with the Other. Comparing the Feminine to the Cartesian pineal gland, Diane Perpich sums up nicely the function of the Feminine in Levinas’s position:

Like the role of the pineal gland in Descartes’ “resolution” of the mind-body relation, the feminine face is a mechanism meant to serve as the interface between incommensurable orders. That Levinas employs the figure of *the feminine* to bridge the gap between ontology and ethics—a gap he elsewhere implies is unbridgeable—is not incidental.⁴²

On the one hand, Levinas wants the Same and the Other to be separate. They cannot form a number and cannot be represented by a neutral concept under which each would be lost. But, on the other hand, Levinas needs to provide an account of how an ego who “can close itself up in its egoism” with the “possibility of forgetting the transcendence of the Other” (*TI*, 188/172) can possibly have an opening that allows an encounter with the Other.

Perpich holds that “the figure of the feminine locates the place where the narrative

42 Diane Perpich, *The Ethics of Emmanuel Levinas* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008), 104.

of *Totality and Infinity* falls into ruins and cannot be put back together again.”⁴³ Perpich is correct in asserting that Levinas wants the Feminine to bridge the gap between different orders, but these are the orders of the two levels of sensibility found in *Totality and Infinity*. I, therefore, disagree with her assessment that this is a bridging between “ontology and ethics.” After all, was it not the purpose of the analyses of enjoyment, embodiment, and dwelling to show that interiority is already beyond ontology? Perpich, it appears, is making a mistake similar to Westphal’s, in that she is associating the structures of interiority with ontology.

In any case, Perpich is correct in pointing out that there is a gap between interiority and the relationship with transcendence. In order to address this gap, let us note that for Levinas the encounter with the Other does not take place in a vacuum, but takes place in the world itself:

But the transcendence of the face is not enacted outside of the world, as though the economy by which separation is produced remained beneath a sort of beatific contemplation of the Other... The ‘vision’ of the face as face is a certain mode of sojourning in a home, or—to speak in a less singular fashion—a certain form of economic life. No human or interhuman relationship can be enacted outside of economy; no face can be approached with empty hands and a closed home. Recollection in a home open to the Other—hospitality—is the concrete and initial fact of human recollection and separation; it coincides with the Desire for the Other absolutely transcendent. (*TI*, 187/172)

The encounter with the Other is necessarily a part of this world. Otherwise, such an encounter would not be possible. Levinas is clear too that the encounter with the face is a “mode of sojourning in the home,” and this again situates the ethical encounter at the limits between interiority and exteriority. But how is it, then, that the encounter with the Other implies hospitality on my part? Can I not refuse to be hospitable? Why must the encounter with the Other be the source of goodness? The question of the gap between interiority and the relationship with transcendence reveals itself as the question concerning how hospitality can be possible starting from an I who lives in enjoyment.

The answers to these questions are to be found in Levinas’s claim that hospitality coincides with the Desire for the Other. One of Levinas’s basic claims is that the subject is by its very constitution has a desire for the Other. We learn this in the very first chapter of the book. Unlike need, which a movement of assimilation into the Same, desire is a desire for what cannot be assimilated into the Same. It is a desire for what cannot be contained in any representation. If we keep in mind Levinas’s notion of the “sting of desire” from *From Existence to Existents*, we can see that he is offering a more

43 Perpich, 106.

basic form of openness that undercuts the openness of intentional consciousness. By desire, Levinas means a basic structure of subjectivity that is constituted by a direct relationship with something outside of it. Of course, for Levinas desire does not take a direct object in the same way that a thought does. Desire is the desire for what cannot become an object of thought. It is nevertheless unclear how this desire for the Infinite coincides with hospitality. Why should this desire which somehow begins in the home be ethical?

How could I ever be prepared to give to the Other person if I do not know what it is like to enjoy the world and have a home? My capacity to be hospitable to the Other presupposes a self-involvement and independence with respect to the world. Adriaan Peperzak puts it this way:

From Levinas's perspective, the satisfaction of human needs is necessarily associated with the fulfillment of our obligations because I cannot serve the Other concretely without offering the Other a meal, safety, a house, work, education, and sympathy. Being-for is being a body, having hands as well as a heart: it is building a home in which warmth and meals are available, and so on. I cannot be for-the-Other if I do not enjoy the world.⁴⁴

The key here is Levinas's account of separation. If I were a part of the world in enjoyment, and hence were not separated being, I would not be able to detach myself sufficiently enough to allow the purity of the Face to give itself to me. That is, the sensibility constitution of separation puts me in a position where I can receive a meaning that does not begin in me. Separation, as a break with the world, ensures that the meaning I receive from the Other will not be caught on-site by intentional consciousness and that it installs itself directly in the sensible (passive) part of my subjectivity. It is Levinas's account of interiority as sensibility that allows the meaning from the Other to bypass the radars of consciousness and to affect me in the purest sense possible. Duyndam, a student of Peperzak, puts it this way:

It is through enjoyment that I do not coincide with the totality of the world that results from my being a totalizing subject. So while the other remains separated from any totality by transcending it, I remain separated through enjoyment. Separation is crucial for the other to be really the transcendent other, and for me to be sincerely me, capable of meeting the other as other, that is, to be responsible.⁴⁵

44 Adriaan Peperzak, *Beyond: The Philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1997), 200.

45 Duyndam, 75.

It is clear then, that Westphal's interpretation of Levinas as moving from epistemology to ethics is not only a misrepresentation of his position, but in fact overlooks the crucial role that interiority plays in his philosophy. Without the affective life of interiority, Levinas would likely have to answer the question of how epistemology can move to ethics, but this is not Levinas's question. The problem is not how to understand the Other as something than alter ego, as Westphal frames it,⁴⁶ but rather how to present an account of subjectivity itself that allows the Other to give itself in a pre-epistemological way.

We would be mistaken to look for a causal link between the dwelling and representation, since Levinas is looking for conditions of possibility, rather than causal connections between structures of existence. Rather than looking for a way to move from one order to another, which appears to be a linear movement from one sphere of life to another, the question Levinas is trying to answer concerns what is necessary in order for goodness to be possible.⁴⁷ At any rate, there is at the heart of Levinas's *Totality and Infinity* an unresolved ambiguity about the precise relationship between the subject of enjoyment and the subject of responsibility. What happens to enjoyment and embodiment in the ethical relationship? It is interesting to note that in his account of the face-to-face relationship Levinas does not draw on the significance of the body at all, nor does he indicate how the relationship with the Other modifies my relationship with the world or the dwelling, except insofar as he says that the Other calls into question my enjoyment and possession of it. He does argue that separation has a positive role in human experience, but never tells us in that book what this positive role amounts to in relation to the Other. He seems to focus on showing that separation prepares the way for the relationship with Infinity, but then says little about how separation itself has a role in the ethical relationship as such. Perhaps it is better to put the question this way: what is the relationship between the anterior posteriority constitutive of interiority and the anterior posteriority constitutive of the ethical relationship? In order to address the precise relationship between the two orders of meaning, we need to look further into Levinas's account of the face-to-face relationship.

Although *Totality and Infinity* abandons the Heideggerian notion of ontological difference as its starting-point, the notion of the "anterior posterior" condition very much resembles the role that hypostasis plays in the 1947 book. This is seen most clearly in the way that *Totality and Infinity* speaks of the body in a way that remains consistent with the earlier work. Both works, then, distinguish between "chronological" and "logical" priorities in that the subject finds itself conditioned by a source of meaning that makes possible consciousness itself. This condition, moreover, is a principle that grants singularity: the subject finds that its singularity is granted by a passive event that can be

46 Westphal, 146.

47 I credit Dana Hollander for this interpretation of Levinas as seeking the condition(s) for the possibility of goodness.

accessed by consciousness, but never fully disclosed by it.

The next chapter will show that by taking Levinas's idea of singularity seriously we will be able to offer an account of his view of the face-to-face relationship that avoids the question of whether the face is empirical or formal. The question of singularity will be presented as a phenomenological question. I will argue in the following chapter that Levinas's account of singularity raises questions concerning the relationship between the singularity of the subject and the singularity of the self, and that these questions point to further questions concerning the role of context in his account of the interhuman relationship. This is to say that the idea of the anterior posterior condition opens itself up to a larger problem in Levinas's philosophy regarding the precise relationship between ontology and ethics, and the need for "context."

Chapter IV:
Singularity and the Face in *Totality and Infinity*

Last chapter I argued that the notion of the anterior posterior condition is central to Levinas's account of interiority in *Totality and Infinity*. This chapter will consider the relationship with the Other, with emphasis on the singularity of the Face. I will show that there is much debate in Levinas scholarship concerning how we are to understand the Face. Is it something we perceive empirically or is it a formal idea that is presupposed in every empirical encounter? Both? Neither? I will argue that the meaning of the Face must derive from the subject's concrete encounter with the other person, but that the meaning of the Face cannot be reduced to any single encounter. To present my case, I will draw on Levinas's 1960 article "The Permanent and the Human in Husserl" and show that Levinas's idea of the Face has a phenomenological inspiration, even if it goes beyond the letter of Husserl's texts. Rather than saying that the Face is a thing or simply an idea, I will argue that the Face is rather the *way* that the other person presents himself to me. I will emphasize the importance of singularity when presenting my case.

Towards the end of the chapter I will consider the problems that arise in Levinas's account of singularity, problems which I think remain unsolved in the 1961 work. First, I will consider the precise relationship between the singularity of the self and the singularity of the Other, and how Levinas's idea of the singular Other raises questions concerning the role of the "third person" in his philosophy. I will set the stage for the final chapter of this work by considering the relationship between a singularity without context and the need for a politics with context. I will show that *Totality and Infinity* fails to account for the third and that Levinas needed to reconsider the nature of singularity in order to address the question of the third in his work.

4.1 Ontology and Singularity

We recall that for Levinas ontology is the way of doing philosophy that strips an individual of its singularity by imposing on it a neutral term that ensures its comprehension. In the subject's relationship with the world ontology takes the form of *représentation*, which Levinas associates with Edmund Husserl's philosophy.⁴⁸ Levinas claims that Husserl subscribes to Franz Brentano's assertion that every intentional act is either a *Vorstellung* or founded on a *Vorstellung* (TI, 127/122).⁴⁹ Now, Levinas translates

48 This connection between epistemology and ontology is, I think, evidence of the fact that Levinas reads Husserl *through* Heidegger. Although Heidegger remains the main proponent of ontology, Levinas still sees Husserl as offering a phenomenological description of being. In *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas explicitly draws a connection between Heideggerian "disclosure" and the Husserlian "horizon."

49 Edmund Husserl, *Logical Investigations* (1900-01), trans. J.N. Findlay (New York: Humanities Press,

Vorstellung into French as “representation,” and so in English, Levinas’s French translation of the German term is easily rendered as “representation.” However, English translators usually translate the German (found in Husserl and Brentano) *Vorstellung* as “presentation,” and so for this reason Levinas’s term “representation” could also be translated, oddly enough, as “presentation.” On Levinas’s understanding of Husserl’s philosophy, when I encounter something consciousness fails to recognize the thing in its singularity. Levinas says that while knowledge through representation initially designates “a relation with being such that the knowing being lets the known being manifest itself while respecting its alterity and without marking it in any way whatever by this cognitive relation” (*TI*, 32/42) that it nevertheless ends up covering up this alterity. Knowledge is comprehension, and in comprehension a meaning is given to that thing. In comprehension the subject imposes on a thing a neutral concept, which is neither that thing, nor anything at all. The interposition of the third term means that the “thisness” of the being is translated as a “that.” The impersonal concept becomes a “light” that allows beings to become visible (the later Levinas even speaks of phenomenology’s “play of lights”). Representation, Levinas says, “is the possibility for the other to be determined by the same without determining the same, without introducing alterity into it; it is a free exercise of the same. It is the disappearance, within the same, of the I opposed to the non-I” (*TI*, 129/124). The “same” here refers to the subject who remains the source of its meanings. As the Same, the subject of representation comprehends the subject and conceptualizes it with a neutral term. Levinas says that the “object of representation is indeed interior to thought: despite its independence it falls under the power of thought” (*TI*, 128/123). Representation, Levinas generalizes, is intelligibility itself, a “total adequation of the thinker with what is thought” and a form of mastery and control (*TI*, 129/124). By grounding comprehension in prior concepts, representation discovers nothing new in experience: “The ‘act’ of presentation discovers, properly speaking, nothing before itself” (*TI*, 130/125). When representation does discover something new, it is immediately inscribed within the totality of meaning. For this reason, Levinas calls the “I” of representation a “pure spontaneity.” As pure spontaneity, the subject of representation is essentially impassive. The “I” of representation, then, becomes a self-determining meaning-giver who closes itself off to alterity.

Levinas argues that ontology and representation are lend themselves to the notion of freedom as rational autonomy. In Chapter I we saw that Levinas, as early as the 1934 article on Hitlerism, questions the idea of rational autonomy. In 1934 rational autonomy is identified with the ability to withdraw from the past and to determine oneself without being determined. In the period of *Totality and Infinity*, autonomy is described as remaining the Same without being determined by the Other. So, Levinas is able to establish a link between epistemology and autonomy: “if freedom denotes the mode of remaining the same in the midst of the other, knowledge, where an existent is given by

interposition of impersonal Being, contains the ultimate sense of freedom” (*TI*, 45). Autonomy and knowledge as representation preclude a relationship with transcendence. In this denial of transcendence, freedom thus cannot appeal to something else for its own justification. Freedom is not called into question. As Levinas puts it in his 1957 essay “Philosophy and the Idea of Infinity,”

Autonomy, the philosophy which aims to ensure the freedom, or the identity of beings, presupposes that freedom itself is sure of its right, is justified without recourse to anything further, is complacent in itself, like Narcissus. (*CPP*, 49)

Freedom as autonomy consists in asserting oneself as the sole source of one’s action. So, autonomy consists in breaking all ties with external influences that might taint one’s freedom. As in his earlier works (essays on Hitlerism and spirituality), Levinas questions the idea of freedom that takes the individual as a self-sufficient capsule who is not influenced by anything outside of itself. Autonomy, then, is an expression of ontology and the Same insofar as it takes the subject itself as a totality. The movement of the Same thus becomes the movement of subjectivity itself. Levinas continues:

Freedom will triumph when the soul’s monologue will have reached universality, will have encompassed the totality of being, encompassing even the animal individual which lodged this thought...The things will be ideas, and will be conquered, dominated, possessed in the course of an economic and political history in which this thought will be unfolded. (*CPP*, 49)

The theory of freedom which follows from ontology becomes the basis for a philosophy of power. If autonomous being is “sure of its right, is justified without recourse to anything further,” then this right becomes the right to dominate and control. We can understand, then, how it is that on the first page of the Preface to *Totality and Infinity* Levinas claims that in the concept of totality

individuals are reduced to being bearers of forces that command them unbeknown to themselves. The meaning of individuals (invisible outside of this totality) is derived from the totality. (*TI*, 6/21-22).

This account of freedom as autonomy and its alliance with the Same has serious political consequences. Ontology, representation, and freedom as autonomy lend themselves to a form of politics that establishes its values on the pretense that it is the sole source of such ideas. As a result, ethics becomes an expression of ontology, and thus takes a secondary role in philosophical thought. Ontology lends itself to the form of politics which derives its idea of the Good from its political agenda. Morality becomes rooted in politics. The universality which follows from ontology is anonymous and impersonal, and the individual becomes lost in it.

Totality and Infinity's goal is not merely to critique ontology, representation, and ontology, but to show how the critique of the subject's rational powers happen to the subject despite itself. The critique happens every day in various experiences which cannot be contained by the Same. Levinas calls this putting into question of ontology "ethics." In an important passage highlighting the critical essence of ethics, Levinas writes,

Critique does not reduce the other to the same as does ontology, but calls into question the exercise of the same. A calling into question of the same—which cannot occur within the egoist spontaneity of the same—is brought about by the other. We name this calling into question of my spontaneity by the presence of the Other ethics. (*TI*, 33/43)

Ethics is here identified as a calling into question of the subject's spontaneity. Note that Levinas is not presenting "an" ethical theory or a set of criteria from which we can deduce how to act towards other people in experience. Rather, for Levinas the ethical refers to the very source of meaning that makes any norms or prescriptions possible. I will say more about Levinas's conception of the ethical later in this chapter and the next.

How is the encounter with the Other experienced as a critique? Since it is the subject who is called into question, critique is not something the self does but an event it undergoes. Critique happens whenever we engage in a "relationship of conversation" (*TI*, 41/50) with another person. The other person is from the start given as singular and as outside of my powers of comprehension. The meaning of "other person," Levinas argues, cannot be reduced to a concept which begins in me. The "other" who calls me into question cannot give himself to me as a moment in my system of meanings. For this reason, Levinas calls the Other "Infinite" and "transcendent." Following Descartes, Levinas uses the term "Infinity" to refer to a meaning whose reality surpasses its idea. By "transcendent," he means that the Other is an idea that cannot be reduced to a finite concept or determination. He says that "the transcendent is the sole *ideatum* of which there can only be an idea in us" (*TI*, 41/49). Levinas calls the encounter with another person a learning experience (*TI*, 186/171). On Levinas's account, only the other person can teach me about the meaning of otherness. To explain this point Levinas distinguishes between "Cartesian" and "Socratic" forms of teaching. On Levinas's reading of Socrates, when I learn something I only recollect what my soul once knew but forgot upon entering the body. The student never learns anything he or she does not already know implicitly. For example, in the *Meno* Socrates demonstrates how an uneducated slave already has an implicit knowledge of geometry. The slave only learns what he already contains, and so the teacher merely takes the role of a mid wife, helping to give birth to an idea the person already possesses. For Levinas, on the contrary, the encounter with the Other is a learning experience in a genuine sense: the Other puts an idea in me that I did not contain

beforehand, even implicitly. But let us not take this learning process to imply that there is first the encounter with the Other and *then* the event of being taught. The event coincides with the content imparted.

If the encounter with the Other is a learning experience in a genuine sense, then it is clear that for Levinas it does not take the structure of representation. The Other is not an object I *initially* represent and situate within a horizon of meaning. Now, Levinas does not deny that the other person can enter my experience as something that can be known. In his 1951 article, “Is Ontology Fundamental?” Levinas says that the Other is a being and “counts as such” and that comprehension is bound up with the encounter with the other person. However, for Levinas the encounter with another person is constituted by a form of immediacy that always escapes knowledge. Consciousness, Levinas often says in his later works, comes on the scene too late to thematize the Other. For this reason, Levinas invokes the Kantian language of pure sensibility (*TI*, 143-44/135-36). He refers to a passive reception of meaning that affects me before the employment of concepts. But how does this immediacy tell us something about the relationship with the other person I meet on the street? How is this ethical?

To return to Levinas’s example of the teaching relationship, my encounter with the singularity of the other person cannot in any way depend on a fixed concept of singularity. If I did have a fixed concept of singularity and brought it into the encounter with the other person, then that concept would cover up the singularity of that person. Neither is the singularity of the other person the content of a judgment. I do not first encounter another person and then judge them as singular. Rather, it is the very person in his singularity—in his “nudity,” as Levinas puts it—who approaches me. The singularity of the other person is intimately bound with the very encounter, and this is what Levinas means when he says that the encounter with the other person is itself a learning experience. Moreover, singularity is not out there in the world waiting to be discovered. Levinas is not saying that there are billions of singularities walking the earth. Once again, the singularity is restricted to the very moment of the encounter.

This last point is important and is worth dwelling on. In the Preface to *Totality and Infinity* Levinas says that the book is a “defense of subjectivity...as founded in the idea of infinity” and “as welcoming the Other, as hospitality” (*TI*, 26-7). Although Levinas is careful to maintain that the idea of the Other does not begin in the self, he does say that “alterity is possible only starting from *me*” (*TI*, 29/40). Levinas here remains close to the phenomenological approach. He is not trying to give an abstract account of otherness but is describing it at the level of subjectivity. He calls the method of beginning with the subject “the inevitable *orientation* of being ‘starting from oneself’ toward ‘the Other’” (*TI*, 237/215, emphasis in original). That is, the singularity of the other person can only have meaning insofar as it is something that enters human experience at some level. The singularity of the other person cannot have any meaning

outside of the encounter. One might object that each encounter with another person helps us build a profile of singularity, much in the same way that looking at the different sides of a house helps us understand the identity of the house. Levinas, however, denies that the idea of singularity can be known in this way. There is indeed a sense in which we can anticipate the singularity of who will walk through that door in a few seconds, but the singularity of that person is bound with the encounter. My idea of singularity—and Levinas claims we all have one—would be quite indeterminate and would not fit the person who will actually walk through that door. In Levinasian language, the singularity of that person overflows any idea I have of him. The singularity of another person is what it is only through the enactment of the self-Other encounter.

For Levinas, the singularity of the other person is not a quality or accident of their being. Singularity does not belong to the Other like brownness belongs to the table. Nor is it something I can discover and point out if I ignore all the contingent features of that person. Someone familiar with Husserl's phenomenology might ask whether this singularity is something that can be accessed through a sort of reduction. For example, if I look at that table I can discern the essential features of my experience of the table by consciously putting aside any contingent features. The phenomenologist asks, "What are the necessary features of this experience without which this experience would not be the kind that it is?" For Husserl, if I put aside the contingent features of this experience of the table—such as the color, size, and texture—I can discern what is essential to the way it is given to me. To make a long story short, Husserl would say that my experience of the table requires that the table be given one-sidedly, that I can walk around it and gather different "profiles" of the table and thus grasp its identity. While contingent features such as size and color could always be otherwise, the essential features of an experience cannot be otherwise. I will not have an experience of a table tomorrow in which all sides of the table will be given at once.

Would a similar analysis work for the face? I think Levinas's account of the Face does share a few similarities with this form of reduction. After all, Levinas does say that the Face cannot be found in the color of the person's eyes, social status, or any other contingent feature of that person. However, the result of Husserl's reduction is a judgment that the subject performs. For Levinas, on the contrary, singularity is given immediately prior to any judgment. While the singularity of the other person does—to use Levinas's language—burst through all the "plastic forms" or "countenances" of the face, it is something that strikes the subject before any judgment is made. "The notion of the face," Levinas says, "brings us to a notion of meaning prior to my *Sinnggebung* [meaning-bestowal] and thus independent of my initiative and my power" (*TI*, 44/51). Levinas claims that the Face is not even experienced in the usual sense of the term. That is, it is neither seen nor touched:

The face is present in its refusal to be contained. In this sense it cannot be

comprehended, that is, encompassed. It is neither seen nor touched—for in visual or tactile sensation the identity of the I envelops the alterity of the object, which becomes precisely a content. (*TI*, 211/194)

By undercutting the role of representation in human experience, Levinas opens up ways to describe the immediacy of lived experience without translating those experiences into subject-object relationships. One way to put it is to say that Levinas is concerned with describing the thisness of the Other before consciousness thematizes it as that (*TI*, 60/65). We can put it yet another way by saying that Levinas seeks to describe the Face by itself, as self-referring (*TI*, 65/69), as *καθ' αὐτό* (*TI*, 44/51; 59/64-5). Levinas even calls the encounter with the face an “absolute” and “pure” experience (*TI*, 63/57).

For Levinas, the relationship of conversation puts the subject in a direct and immediate relationship with the singular Face. It is therefore necessary for us to look more closely into how the encounter with singularity functions at the level of interhuman relationships.

4.2 Language, Expression, and the Who

Levinas’s account of the ethical significance of language is greatly influenced by Martin Buber’s distinction between I-It and I-Thou relationships. For Buber, I-It relationships are relationships of knowledge. When I encounter something, I am able to control, dominate, and understand it within a system of references. The encounter with another person, however, affects me in a different way. The other person calls on me to respond in a way that things do not call on me. Levinas openly criticizes Buber’s I-Thou relationship as reciprocal (*TI*, 64/68). That is, on Levinas’s reading of Buber, the self is also a Thou for the other person. Levinas rejects this reciprocity between the Self and the Other. Nevertheless, Levinas agrees with Buber’s basic position that I-Other relationships are of singular importance. To explain this difference, Levinas, in a Buberian spirit, distinguishes between “what” and “who.” When I ask “What is *x*?” I ask about quiddity. To ask “What is *x*?” is to ask “As what?” (*TI*, 192-93/177). To recall my earlier discussion of representation, the answer to “what is *x*” situates that individual within an economy of concepts. The question “Who” implies a relationship in which the other person is taken on his own terms. Of course, I can answer the question “Who is *x*?” with the answer “Mr. So-and-so,” but this is to cover up how the Other gives itself to me in its singularity; it is to reduce the “who” to a “what.” However, when I speak to another person, am I not reducing them to the theme of the discussion? Does not the topic of discussion establish something in common between the speakers? Levinas denies this. He writes, “he to whom the question is put *has already presented himself*, without being a content...The face is not a modality of quiddity, an answer to a question, but the correlative of what is prior to every question” (*TI*, 193/177). When I speak to another

person, the fact that I am addressing them precedes anything I might say to them. The person I speak to does not initially fall under the topic of the conversation; if they do, they are nonetheless initially an addressee. The fact that there is a theme of discourse at all presupposes that there is someone to whom the theme is proposed. In this way, the other person is not initially something I speak about, but someone I address, someone I talk to.

Why must the I-Other relationship be ethical? Levinas's answer to this question is found in his account of the "ethical resistance" of the other person. I pick up, dominate, and exploit things. Things do not have the capacity to say 'no'. The other person, on the other hand, gives himself as someone who in principle can resist possession. Levinas calls this precise resistance to possession the "ethical resistance" of the Other. This resistance is a refusal to be negated. Levinas formulates this refusal with the well-known injunction: "Thou shalt not kill!" He often refers to the "defenseless eyes" of the other person who resists annihilation. Levinas is not saying that the other person tells me verbally not to kill them—although that might happen in certain circumstances. Levinas's point is that the other person gives himself as a refusal, as a withdrawal from possession. One could object that in human experience murder in fact does happen. Levinas would not deny this. He is not saying that murder does not or cannot happen, but rather that the idea of murder only makes sense when it is done to a being who expresses himself as a singular being: "I can wish to kill only an existent absolutely independent, which exceeds my powers infinitely, and therefore does not oppose them but paralyzes the very power of power. The Other is the sole being I can wish to kill" (*TI*, 216/198). It is important to note that by murder Levinas does not mean only the ending of another's life. In his 1951 essay "Is Ontology Fundamental?" Levinas identifies murder with the "partial negation" of the Other (*BPW*, 9). When I treat the other person either as an object of possession or as something understood within a horizon of co-potential meanings I am committing a form of murder, at least in a weak sense.

Throughout this chapter I have been hinting that Levinas's account of the encounter with the singular Face has a phenomenological inspiration. In the next section I will elaborate on this claim by considering an article that Levinas published only one year before the publication of *Totality and Infinity*, "The Permanent and the Human in Husserl." This article is significant because it returns to a theme found in Levinas's works from the 1930s, namely, the question of whether we should understand the meaning of the human by appealing to abstract concepts or whether we should stick to concrete experiences. This article provides us with evidence that for Levinas the singularity of the Face is both empirical and formal. On the one hand, the only way to encounter the Face is to do so in actual human experiences. On the other hand, no actual human experience can exhaust the meaning of the Face. This inexhaustibility points to a formal idea (albeit an indeterminate one) that no concrete encounter can ever contain. At any rate, the formal idea can only be what it is if there is that empirical encounter, but the

empirical encounter with the Face always points beyond itself. Both meaning refer to each other; they are implied by each other.

4.3 The Permanent and the Human in Phenomenology

In some ways Levinas's 1960 article "The Permanent and the Human in Husserl" resembles the articles on spirituality and Hitlerism from 1933 and 1934, respectively. As in those earlier articles, Levinas outlines two different ways of understanding human identity. First, Levinas describes the mathematical-idealist approach to man. Here the identity of man is lost in an impersonal order. As Levinas puts it, "when science penetrates this human world, it pulverizes it into atoms the better to mathematize it, suffocates it the better to eternize it" (*DEH*, 130). With Hegel, however, there comes a different way of understanding human identity. Hegel "affirm[s] the entry of the absolute into the becoming of human events" (*DEH*, 130). Unlike Kierkegaard, who accuses Hegel of losing the individual in the Absolute, Levinas in fact credits Hegel with bringing the absolute down to the level of the concrete. "Ever since then," Levinas says of Hegel's philosophy, "the intelligibility of the world is read in the imprint left on it by the work of mortals, in the perspectives opened up by cities and empires" (*DEH*, 130). As the work of mortals, reality becomes a reflection of human intelligibility: "*Thus what is human is not only the eye that perceives the image of the world, but also the light that illuminates it*" (*DEH*, 131). The identity of man, accordingly, is no longer rooted in an immobile concept but is now understood historically. Good and evil no longer have their source in reason but rather history itself: "To respond to the call of the times, this is what dominates the good and the moral" (*DEH*, 131). We have here a "philosophy without eternity" (*DEH*, 131) that does not swallow the individual in an impersonal system. In sum, then, Levinas presents us here with two ways of understanding man—through an eternal and immobile system like mathematics, or through the concrete historical situation.

Levinas maintains that each of these ways of understanding the human is important and that it would be best to combine them. And who better to unite them than the father of phenomenology himself, Edmund Husserl?

One of the most significant aspects of Husserl's phenomenology has been precisely its reuniting these two motifs of contemporary consciousness, namely its quest for the essential and its certainty of the importance of the concrete world in which life unfolds, and which cannot be relegated to appearances. (*DEH*, 131)

On Levinas's reading of Husserl, phenomenology affirms both the concrete world in which we dwell and the human being's quest for what is essential. How exactly does Husserl accomplish this?

Levinas argues that Husserl accomplishes this unity of the eternal and the concrete through the theory of intentionality. Levinas notes that the theory of intentionality does not rely on modern mind-body dualism.⁵⁰ Consciousness is not simply an immaterial substance trying to gain access to what is outside of it. Rather, intentional consciousness bursts forth into the world. It is at once in an immediate relationship with what is given. Reality, then, takes on a human meaning: “The real is the human and the inhabitable” (*DEH*, 132). For Levinas, though, the most important aspect of intentionality is the way that an intentional *noema* implies more than what is given at that moment. For example, the chair is given in spatio-temporal context, and that context also has a context of its own. With each actual *noema*, there comes a matrix of co-possible meanings that could become the core of my perception, should I change my gaze. Moreover, my capacity to thematize a *noema* implies that I myself be in a spatio-temporal location approaching the thing from a side. I have a body and experience my relationship with the world as an “I can.” These conditions are not thoughts or judgments but are in place before any thought or judgment is performed. That is, these implied horizons of meaning are not products of objectifying acts, or what Levinas in *Totality and Infinity* calls “representation.” These implied horizons, on Levinas’s reading of Husserl, are objective and necessary but are at the same time inseparable from our concrete experience of the world. The idea of intentionality preserves both the concrete situation of the subject in the world and the objective conditions which make human experience possible.

As we have seen, for Levinas the conditions for the possibility of human experience are not initially grasped as mental contents; they are not representations. In this way, Levinas reads more into Husserl’s account of intentionality than Husserl himself might have recognized. After Heidegger, Levinas argues that the concrete life that phenomenology uncovers affects the subject before consciousness can identify it and make a theme of it. He writes,

The fact of having a hand, tensing one’s muscles, walking, settling on a land, the sedimentation of a certain history in the thinking Ego, were necessary in order for the representation of a space, a time, and a physical causality even to be formed. Thus we would be wrong in placing this prepredicative work into representation, for which it is a condition, and from which the thinking subject is already nourished before representing the world to itself. (*DEH*, 132)

In Husserl’s phenomenology itself, then, Levinas finds the resources for the displacement of representation in human experience. What Levinas once saw as the virtue of Heidegger’s thought—a phenomenology of affective life that undercuts the privileged

⁵⁰ I refer the reader back to Chapter I, section 1.1.

status of representation—he now sees as possible within Husserl, even if Husserl himself did not explore these horizons.

Levinas sees in Husserl's philosophy a fundamental limitation regarding how non-presentational meanings are respected. Husserl's philosophy, in Levinas's view, is plagued with rules of method that threaten to turn phenomenology into a system. Husserl's reliance on eidetic seeing is a threat to the self-critical and open method which phenomenology, as Levinas sees it, is supposed to embrace (*DEH*, 92). While Husserl's philosophy does at first resist subsuming the human under "eternal" concepts, there is still allegedly a form of permanence in that philosophy that covers up the concrete life of the subject. Levinas cites Husserl's transcendental reduction as an example. Levinas, following Heidegger, considers Husserl's transcendental ego, the residuum of the reduction, to be an absolute subject who is disengaged from history. Levinas claims that the transcendental ego is no longer human because it is outside of the (bracketed) world in which it is situated. Levinas, in a Heideggerian vein, asks whether human beings "find themselves involved in the historical world even in the course of their operation of engagement" (*DEH*, 134). To take detached contemplation as the hallmark of phenomenology is to ignore the cultural, environmental, and historical influences on human existence. Levinas wonders about the possibility of describing selfhood while keeping in mind that this subject is immersed in structures of meaning which such descriptions cannot avoid presupposing.

Nevertheless, Levinas is willing to acknowledge that there is at least the potential in Husserl for a phenomenology that displaces the privileged role of representation in human experience. Levinas's questions here about the human and his enthusiasm about phenomenology's potential to do justice to both the savor for permanence and the respect for concrete existence carry over into the analyses of *Totality and Infinity*. Levinas, as we can see, takes seriously the question whether the human should be understood on the basis of either a formal idea or concrete situations. I argue that his desire to combine these two views here can be projected onto his account of the Face in *Totality and Infinity*: the Face is neither *only* a formal idea nor *only* concrete. Levinas wants to maintain both of these ways of understanding the Face: he wants the Face to be formal, but at the same time concrete.

4.4 The Face as Formal and Empirical

As Robert Bernasconi,⁵¹ Michael Morgan,⁵² and Scott Davidson⁵³ have all noted,

51 Robert Bernasconi, "Rereading *Totality and Infinity*," *Emmanuel Levinas: Critical Assessments of Leading Philosophers*, ed. Claire Elise Katz (Routledge: New York, 2005), 32.

52 Michael L. Morgan, *Discovering Levinas* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 45-6.

53 Scott Davidson, "Reflected Freedom: Levinas's Defense of Ethical Subjectivity" (doctoral dissertation,

there are generally two ways to take Levinas's face-to-face encounter. We could take it as a formal idea which does not have a basis in experience, or we could take it to be an empirical event between a subject and another person. Levinas's text supports both of these readings and this fact makes Levinas's 1961 book quite frustrating to read. On the one hand, in *Totality and Infinity* Levinas says that the relationship with Infinity "cannot, to be sure, stated in terms of experience" but he then says that it "accomplishes experience in the fullest sense of the word" (*TI*, 10/25). This apparent contradiction should not lead us to dismiss Levinas as a sloppy thinker who is unsure of the concepts he employs. So let us look into the matter more closely and see if we can resolve this contradiction. First let me consider how it is that Levinas's account of the face-to-face could be a form of empiricism.

There is evidence that the face-to-face names something that happens in everyday experience. We find references to the figures of the widow and the orphan. In his later works, Levinas refers to a moment in Vassily Grossman's novel *Life and Fate* when a Russian woman tears a piece of bread from her mouth and gives it to a German soldier. In an interview, Levinas says that the greeting of "hello" and the act of holding a door open for someone are examples of the Saying (a term found in his later work that plays a similar function as "expression" in *Totality and Infinity*). In *Totality and Infinity* he says that "metaphysics is enacted [*se jouer*] where the social relation is enacted—in our relations with men" (*TI*, 77/79). In the following paragraph he says that "the role Kant attributed to sensible experience belongs in metaphysics to interhuman relations." This reference to interhuman relations seems to imply that there is an empirical element to the face-to-face encounter.

For classical empiricism, our concepts must derive from something given in experience. Empiricists usually avoid using metaphysical concepts that do not have their basis in experience. Like such empiricists, Levinas makes an appeal to immediate experience, but for him this immediate experience is not the kind that the empiricists would be comfortable subscribing to. For one thing, the encounter with the other is not a sense-impression. Although the Other is singular, it does not fit the definition of an atomic impression. For Levinas, the Other is not given as an empirical datum.

If Levinas is an empiricist then perhaps he is one in the purest sense: the Other is a pure given without concepts. In this vein, Jacques Derrida says Levinas is offering a "renewal of empiricism."⁵⁴ But if the concepts this empiricism generates do not have their source in the usual sense of experience it is unclear whether we can call Levinas an empiricist at all. After all, the Other is never present to consciousness, but points to a meaning that is both prior to and beyond any possible experience. Strict empiricists

Duquesne University, n.d.), 7.
54 Derrida, *VM*, 190.

would not follow Levinas in this. It also does not help the empiricist reading that Levinas calls his philosophy “metaphysics,” which suggest that empirical data do not have the last say in his analysis.

An analysis of the empiricist reading, in other words, reveals that Levinas might be more of a rationalist than an empiricist, for the revelation of the Face is not something that can be given as a sense-data. This is the “formal” reading of Levinas’s thought and the proponent I have in mind is Dominique Janicaud. In “The Theological Turn in Phenomenology” Janicaud accuses Levinas of “initiating” philosophy with theology. He writes,

The dice are loaded and choices made; faith rises majestically in the background...All is acquired and imposed from the outset, and this all is no little thing: nothing less than the God of the biblical tradition. Strict treason of the reduction that handed over the transcendental I to its nudity, here theology is restored with its parade of capital letters. But this theology, which dispenses with giving itself the least title, installs itself at the most intimate dwelling of consciousness, as if that were as natural as could be. Must philosophy let itself be thus intimidated? Is this not but incantation, initiation?⁵⁵

On Janicaud’s reading of Levinas, we are forced to choose between what is given in vision and what is given through faith. Janicaud claims that to side with Levinas is to side with faith and thus to depart from phenomenology altogether. Are we really being intimidated, incanted, and initiated? Are we being duped by Levinas?

In a small section of *Totality and Infinity* called “The Metaphysical and the Human,” Levinas clarifies the roles of religion and the interhuman in his philosophy. First of all, Levinas contests “positive religions” which swallow up the individual in an impersonal Absolute. In such religions believers “accept being immersed in a myth unbeknown to themselves” (*TI*, 75/77). For Levinas, on the other hand, the idea of Infinity “is the dawn of a humanity without myths” (*TI*, 75/77). In the positive religions the relationship with God completely bypasses human relations. For Levinas, on the other hand, “the dimension of the divine opens forth from the human face [*visage humain*]” (*TI*, 76/78). On Levinas’s account, God gains his significance only through human relationships. God is only accessible through the work of “justice”⁵⁶ and we cannot know anything about Him “separated from the relationship with men. The Other

55 Dominique Janicaud, *Phenomenology and the Theological Turn* (1991), trans. Bernard G. Prusak (New York: Fordham University Press, 2000), 27.

56 Let me note here that in *Totality and Infinity* ethics and justice go together. In his later works, justice becomes the work of calculation performed at the political level. Accordingly, Levinas will still hold that my freedom is justified by the relation to the Other, but he will no longer play on the connection between “justice” and “justification” at the level of ethics.

is the very locus of metaphysical truth, and is indispensable for my relation with God” (TI, 78). What I would like to underscore here is not Levinas’s conception of God—which is of course interesting and important in its own right—but the primacy of the interhuman in his philosophy. *Totality and Infinity* is a defense of subjectivity as grounded in the Idea of Infinity, but this Infinity must come through the other person in order to be put in me. As Levinas puts it,

the establishing of this primacy of the ethical, that is, of the relationship of *man to man*—signification, teaching, and justice—a primacy of an irreducible structure upon which all the other structures rest...is one of the objectives of the present work. (TI, 77/79; emphasis mine)

Even if we accept that Levinas’s affirms the primacy of the interhuman, it is unclear what exactly he means by the interhuman. Is the “interhuman” something empirical?

I submit that the formal-concrete distinction reveals itself as a false dichotomy if we accept that Levinas is drawing on the phenomenological method. In the Preface to *Totality and Infinity* Levinas claims that “the presentation and the development of the notions employed owe everything to the phenomenological method” (TI, 14/28) and that “Husserlian phenomenology has made possible” the passage to metaphysical transcendence (TI, 15/29). Levinas then later adds that he is seeking a different kind of intentionality than the one found in Husserl, a kind of intention for which there is no correlation between a *noesis* and a *noema*. The “object” of such an intentionality is a “transcendent intention.” Levinas clearly sees himself as drawing on his background in phenomenology.

We recall that for Husserl intentional relationships cannot be reduced to the choice between formal and empirical ways of being given. There is an essence to each mode of appearance, and in this sense there is a “formal” quality to intentionality that operates as a condition for the possibility of experience. On the other hand, the essence of a mode of appearance cannot be divorced from the way that a thing is actually given in experience. For example, the “one-sidedness” of a thing given in vision cannot be understood by itself without appeal to *something* that is given in that way. However, phenomenology is not about the individual that gives itself. It is not the things *per se* that interest the phenomenologist, but the way that things are given. That is, phenomenology is concerned with meaning. As I emphasized in the first section of Chapter I, this concern with meaning puts the question of existence in abeyance. For our purposes, this means that the question of whether the Face is “formal” or “concrete” treats the Face as something that either does or does not exist, and this question is not one that interests Levinas. Rather, Levinas is concerned with the *way* that the other person gives itself to me essentially: “The way in which the other presents himself, exceeding *the idea of the other in me*, we here name face” (TI, 43/51). This is to say that the encounter with the

Face is a mode of experience by itself and is not something that we find as a content of experience. Rather, to experience another person is to encounter them as a Face. In any case, Levinas clearly goes against orthodox phenomenology in his subscription to a “pure sensibility” that cuts itself off from all horizons. The Face is a “transcendent intention,” but it is an intention that does not admit of any context or horizon. This appeal to a meaning without context opens up the question of the political in Levinas. How exactly does the Face function in actual contexts? How does a meaning without context announce itself in a context without betraying its purity?

4.5 The Problem of Context: Anticipating the Third

One of the central problems of *Totality and Infinity* concerns how two mutually exclusive domains of meaning can enter into any kind of relationship while preserving the singularity of each domain. Last chapter I considered the role of the Feminine as a third term that bridges the gap between the Same and the Other, but we saw that there are conceptual problems with this attempt. The problem of the formal and the concrete is structurally similar to this problem, and these issues point to yet a further problem concerning the relationship between singularity and context in *Totality and Infinity*. This problem will also allow us to dig further into the meaning of the “interhuman” for Levinas.

To Levinas’s credit, I believe he is correct in claiming that the meaning of the ethical should not be confined to such finite determinations. However, once Levinas strips these categories of their ethical signification, we need to wonder whether he is able to rebuild the world of context that his ethics explicitly brackets. Is he able to account for the fact that there are differences among people, and does his philosophy allow for the possibility of respecting these differences *as specific differences*? Could Levinas’s idea of the singular Face be, perhaps ironically, too abstract?

These questions lead us to what Levinas scholars typically call the problem of “the Third” in Levinas’s philosophy. Levinas acknowledges that the subject is never alone in the world with only one other person. There is always a third person who approaches me as a Face and who makes equal demands on me. In his later works, Levinas uses the third as a way of introducing ontology and politics into his philosophy. But he does not in *Totality and Infinity*. In this work, ontology and politics are largely casted as ways of doing philosophy that we should avoid. It is unsurprising, then, that when Levinas raises the question of the “third person” in *Totality and Infinity*, he presents it as a natural extension that follows from the ethical moment itself: “The third party looks at me in the eyes of the Other—language is justice...the epiphany of the face opens humanity” (*TI*, 234/213). The third person is here taken to be a part of the ethical moment itself, and so *Totality and Infinity* makes no explicit distinction between ethical singularity and political plurality; they are both contained together. Levinas adds that

humanity is a “fraternity” with a common father and that there is a kinship among men. This seems to go directly against the absolute separation between the Same and the Other presented earlier in the book. Levinas does emphasize that the Face remains the foundation of the plurality, and so this is a plurality built on singularity. It is difficult to see how this conception of fraternity allows Levinas to return to context and all the other finite categories and determinations that are bracketed in the idea of the ethical.

Years later, in the Preface to German edition of *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas admits that

there is no terminological difference in *Totality and Infinity* between mercy or charity, the source of a right of the other person coming before mine, in the first case, and justice in the second, where the right of the other person—but obtained only after investigation and judgement—is imposed before that of the third. The general ethical notion of justice is mentioned without discrimination in the two situations. (*EN*, 198)

Another way to put this is to say that at the heart of *Totality and Infinity* there is a confusion between the ideas of singularity (ethics) and context (politics). Because Levinas presents politics as an extension of the ethical, he robs himself of the tools to understand plurality without contradicting himself. The problem with *Totality and Infinity* is that it is unable to give politics and justice a role unto themselves distinct from the ethical. The relationship between the ethical and the politics becomes a central question in Levinas’s later works, and there we see that the political is given a positive role, but without that role being simply a moment of the ethical itself.

Perhaps the bigger problem is that we are demanding of Levinas’s Face something that his analyses preclude. The problems of context and vision point to the problem of language itself. Not only is *Totality and Infinity* unable to account for context, but any attempt to account for it means that the singularity of the other person is compromised in the process. *Totality and Infinity* struggles to preserve the Face as a pre-conceptual immediacy, but any attempt to describe this immediacy must involve the employment of concepts. As soon as we recognize this immediacy, that very recognition becomes a comprehension. Put another way, Levinas is using terms that depend on their contexts to describe what is essentially without context. Levinas makes matters worse when he tells us that spatial categories do not even apply to the relationship with the Other (*TI*, 191-92), but then he uses terms like “outside” and “exteriority” to describe the nature of the Other. No matter what we say about the singularity of the Other, we are doomed from the start. As Diane Perpich puts it in her recent book on Levinas, “singularity—understood as that in the other which refuses the mastery of representation—must appear as a theoretic object, but, simultaneously, it is required to

appear as that which cannot appear.”⁵⁷ The result is that Levinas can only describe the singularity of the Other negatively as non-conceptual, as invisible, as unlike anything else we could ever encounter or imagine. For the most part, these criticisms are first articulated by Jacques Derrida’s 1967 essay on Levinas “Violence and Metaphysics.” He writes that Levinas tries “to state infinity’s *excess* over totality *in* the language of totality” (VM, 112). Levinas’s philosophical project, it seems, has fallen apart at its very core. Has it not fallen into a hopeless mysticism?

The influence of “Violence and Metaphysics” on Levinas cannot be overstated. In the preface to the German edition of *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas himself complains about the “ontological language” that the work resorts to. It is not my intention here to evaluate Derrida’s influence on Levinas, but to point how Levinas himself acknowledges these conceptual and linguistic issues and uses them to his advantage in his later works. By doing this, I argue, Levinas develops an account of singularity that includes within it the necessity of vision, conceptualization, and an explicit awareness of the need to use language that translates and betrays the singularity of the Other. In *Totality and Infinity*, the ethical moment is in no way given to vision. In a later interview, Levinas clearly changes his mind on this point. Consider the following passage from an interview:

The interhuman realm can be construed as a part of the disclosure of the world as presence. But it can also be considered from another perspective—the ethical or biblical perspective that transcends the Greek language of intelligibility—as a theme of justice and concern for the other as other, as a theme of love and desire, which carries us beyond the infinite being of the world as presence. The interhuman is thus an interface—a double axis where what is “of the world” qua phenomenological intelligibility is juxtaposed with what is “not of the world” qua ethical responsibility.⁵⁸

The interhuman is now presented as a “double axis,” as the simultaneity of what is given in the world and of what is not. The interhuman realm can be construed as a form of disclosure and it can also be construed as something which does not give itself as an object in the world.

If in *Totality and Infinity* the meaning of the Face is something clear and distinct, in his later works its function in human experience becomes quite ambiguous. In his 1965 essay “Phenomenon and Enigma,” Levinas acknowledges this shift when he says that human thought has operated with concepts for which “the distinction between presence and absence” was not clear-cut. A little later in the essay he calls the

57 Diane Perpich, *The Ethics of Emmanuel Levinas* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008), 70.

58 Emmanuel Levinas, “Dialogue with Emmanuel Levinas” (1984), *Face to Face with Levinas*, ed. Richard A. Cohen (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1986), 20. Hereafter *FFL*.

“disturbance” of the face a “clash of two orders.” Levinas provides us with an example. Imagine being lost in your work and then someone rings the doorbell and interrupts you. You answer the door and find someone standing there. In *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas would say that here the Other gives himself in his nudity, uprooted from all contexts, uprooted from history itself. Four years after the publication of *Totality and Infinity*, however, Levinas says that “the other [cannot] appear without renouncing his radical alterity, without entering into an order” (*CPP*, 64). He explains,

That strident ringing of the bell is reabsorbed into significations; the break in my universe was a new signification that came to it. Everything is understood, justified, pardoned. And what of the surprise of that face behind the door? That surprise will be denied. Attention will be directed to the order that annuls the disturbance, the history in which men, their distress and their despairs, their wars and their sacrifices, the horrible and the sublime, are summed up. (*CPP*, 64)

In an encounter with the other person, I can deny the disturbance. I can reduce the whole encounter to a context of meanings. I can explain why the person knocked on my door, what they wanted, and provide an accurate account of the encounter.

In such an experience, however, we find that the singularity is covered up or ignored. The key to understanding this development is the notion of the “trace.” For the later Levinas, my access to the Face is not as clear and distinct as it appeared to be in the 1961 work. In the later works, singularity is necessarily covered up and given as a withdrawal. Instead, we only have access to a “trace” of that singularity. The trace refers to the way in which singularity interrupts human experience but without settling in that experience as a determinate meaning. Levinas says the trace is like an erased fingerprint or the footprints of an animal. The trace refers to the way in which something enters vision as *not* given to vision. In “Phenomenon and Enigma,” Levinas says that the trace “disturbs order without troubling it seriously” (*CPP*, 66). If it does not trouble seriously, we can potentially ignore it. It is as if nothing was there at all.⁵⁹ The trace, to quote a part of the essay’s title, is an enigma. By enigma, Levinas means “this way the other has of seeking my recognition while preserving his incognito” and “this way of manifesting himself without manifesting himself” (*CPP*, 114). This is to say that the face-to-face encounter no longer has the same dramatic effect on my existence. As Diane Perpich points out nicely,⁶⁰ Levinas even says in this essay that it is “vain to posit an absolute You” (*CPP*, 115). The singularity of the you now becomes ambiguous. At this point, we might be tempted to put Levinas’s philosophy aside and move on to something else. After all, how could an ethics rooted in ambiguity ever be helpful? Of what use is an

59 As my references indicate, I am indebted to Diane Perpich’s reading of Levinas’s later work as a philosophy of skepticism, presented in her recent book. Her book has proved invaluable for my analyses in this chapter.

60 Perpich, 2008, 115.

ethics that tells us we can ignore the singularity of the Face? Has Levinas simply given up on his earlier ideal?

Readers of Levinas's later philosophy, especially *Otherwise than Being*, know that he has not given up. In fact, his later works develops an account of infinite responsibility to the point where the subject is persecuted and traumatized. Nevertheless, in his later philosophy Levinas hangs on to the necessity of vision and conceptualization. This is seen most pointedly in his well known distinction between the "Saying" and the "Said." The "Saying" refers to what Levinas in *Totality and Infinity* calls "expression." It is the way in which the Other gives itself in its singularity. This "Saying," though, is now necessarily coupled with the Said, which refers generally to conceptualization, cognition, and totalization. The revelation of the other person to me is from the start always tainted by conceptualization and phenomenality. No matter what is "Said" about the Other, it is necessary to "un-Say" it in order to preserve the singularity of the Other. In *Totality and Infinity*, as we saw, Levinas refuses to taint expression with phenomenality. In his later works, phenomenality becomes the only way in which the singularity of the other person can become accessible.

Although the later Levinas openly admits that the singularity of the other person does not always strike the subject with the same force as described in *Totality and Infinity*, he still speaks of ethics as the experience of being called into question, of being interrupted and traumatized by something outside of the subject's powers. Moreover, for the later Levinas the relationship with the call to respond to the singularity of the other person is embedded at the very core of subjectivity itself. If in *Totality and Infinity*, ethics consists in the calling into question of my freedom and this happens when I encounter another person, in his later works subjectivity itself is essentially ethical. Levinas develops an account of subjectivity as essentially restless and as continually called to respond. He calls this restlessness "recurrence" and "trauma." This is to say that for the later Levinas the singularity of the subject and the singularity of the other person are both tied together in the same moment, and he returns to the restless subject from his earlier works to support this move.

4.6 Reduction, Essence, Vision

The difficult task of Levinas's philosophy is to show how the relationship with other people opens up a meaning that cannot originate in the world but must somehow be accessible in it. In the Preface to *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas characterizes his method as "proceed[ing] from the experience of totality back to a situation where totality breaks up, a situation that conditions the totality" (*TI*, 9/24). As a phenomenologist, Levinas begins with the experience of totality. This is his chronological starting-point, which, as I have explained last chapter, is displaced by the logical priority of the Other. Levinas's

method, then, consists in beginning with what is given in experience and to work back to a meaning that founds that experience.

As I showed last chapter, however, the encounter with the Other does not happen at the level of consciousness. The self who encounters the Other is already a passive self who is in a pre-conscious relationship with the world, the dwelling, and its own body. Here we find the second sense in which the self is constituted by a relationship that is anterior posterior to the thought that would locate it as a condition: the relationship with the Other justifies both justifies my existence and at the same time calls it into question. Hence there are for Levinas different levels of separation. The separation I have with respect to the anterior posteriority of enjoyment, embodiment, and dwelling are of a different level than that the separation accomplished in the anterior posteriority of the ethical relationship. Indeed, the former are analogous to the ethical relationship in that there is a relationship with otherness, but in the relationship with the Other I do not determine the meaning of the Other I am separated from. The Other disturbs my worldly existence and calls it into question. This disturbance is the “critical” element of the ethical relationship. The encounter with the Other effects “a discovery of one’s weakness or a discovery of one’s unworthiness—either as a consciousness of failure or a consciousness of guilt” (*TI*, 81/83). Just as for Descartes the first item of truth is displaced by the logical priority of God’s existence, for Levinas the priority of the consciousness of objects is displaced by the logical priority of the relationship with the Other: “The first consciousness of my immorality is not my subordination to facts, but to the Other, to the Infinite” (*TI*, 81/83). This is to say, then, that at an affective level I find myself responsible before I am able to actively cognize that responsibility as a fact about who I am. Moral responsibility is anteriorly posterior to the thought that would recognize and acknowledge it.

This last point is worth dwelling on. For Levinas the encounter with the Face does not require an act of acknowledgment. I do not have to recognize the Face and then judge that I am responsible for the other person. Rather, the very encounter with the Face is experienced as a commandment whether the subject consciously recognizes it or not. After all, this is what is implied by the claim that the act of teaching and the content imparted are both the same, prior to any judgment. This is one of the sticky points of Levinas’s position. If the encounter with the Other does not require any acknowledgement on my part, then what is stopping me from ignoring the Face and not encountering it at all? How could there be an encounter with a meaning that I do not have to acknowledge? Levinas would say that each individual does implicitly recognize the Face whether they realize it or not. That is, the Face is recognized not on a conscious level but on a pre-conscious level. We are already engaged in ethical existence before we realize we are. Indeed, this is a Heideggerian point that Levinas is making: we find ourselves in an affective relationship with other people before that relationship can be thematized. Levinas, like Heidegger, is in this proper sense a phenomenologist of

affectivity.

As a thinker working in the phenomenological tradition, Levinas can be seen as carrying out a methodological reduction. He admits this much when he says that he is “proceed[ing] from the experience of totality back to a situation where totality breaks up, a situation that conditions the totality itself” (*TI*, 9/24). Levinas’s idea of the anteriority posterior condition can be read as established through a reductive method. This is the reading proposed by Roger Burggraeve:

Levinas steps back from what is more readily visible—in this case, the egocentric approach to freedom and peace—only to see through it *zu den Sachen selbst*, in the conviction that in that vision, as evident and plausible as it seems at first sight, the true essence of peace and human rights are “covered over” and forgotten, even excluded. Hence does Levinas also speak methodologically of a “reduction”: what lies in plain evidence at hand must be unmasked and returned to its authentic, deeper meaning. In his writing, one finds repeated attempts to move beyond (*au-delà*), or better, before (*endeça*) in the sense of to the hither side, to the “underground” of the human subject, that is to say, under human freedom and self-interest, to a point where it appears that a human being is structured or “created” as an ethical “being to and for the Other,” called to recognize the right of the Other.⁶¹

However, Levinas’s approach cannot be understood only as this form of reduction since the “thing in itself” he seeks to uncover—namely, the Face—does not enter human experience at the epistemic level. To be precise, the Husserlian reduction is a conscious process of working back towards an essential meaning which naïve vision covers up. If we are to call Levinas’s method a reduction it is not one the subject carries out but rather one that *happens to* the subject. We will see this more clearly in the next chapter when I examine Levinas’s account of “recurrence.”

Accordingly, Roger Burggraeve and Michael B. Smith both maintain that there is an essentialist component to Levinas’s philosophy, as announced by his repeated references to nudity, purity and the “by itself,” or what I sum up with the term “singularity.” Smith puts it like this:

There is a sense in which Levinas’s philosophy may be said to be essentialist. First, it is essentialist in that meaning, or essence, is primary...Levinas, true to the spirit of the phenomenology of Edmund Husserl, sees his philosophical project as

⁶¹Roger Burggraeve, *The Wisdom of Love in the Service of Love: Emmanuel Levinas on Justice, Peace, and Human Rights* (1980), trans. David A. Boileau (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 2003), 86-7.

one of finding meaning: the meaning of life, of death, of being... It must be noted that in drawing attention to an essentialism in Levinas's thought I am not using the term "essence" in the special sense in which Levinas himself uses the term—as a verbal meaning of being, or his equivalent of Heidegger's *Sein*, as he explains in his introductory note to *Otherwise than Being*. If I were to adopt his usage, I would speak rather of the "eidetic" nature of his philosophy.⁶²

This essentialism, as we have seen, is found in many places throughout Levinas's philosophy. It in fact started off as an ontological essentialism. In his earlier works, we recall, Levinas describes the "there is" without reference to anything that is given in vision. In his account of interiority in *Totality and Infinity* Levinas refers to the "naked and indigenous" body. Finally, as we see, Levinas is an ethical essentialist in that he wants to identify and describe the pure and naked Face.

While this essentialism always remains in Levinas's thought, years later he became unsatisfied with the way he went about describing the Face in *Totality and Infinity*. That is, he became dissatisfied with the *eidetic* language he employed. In the Preface for the German translation of *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas contrasts his 1961 work with his 1974 work *Otherwise than Being* in the following way:

Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence already avoids the ontological—or more exactly, *eidetic*—language which *Totality and Infinity* incessantly resorts to in order to keep its analyses, which challenge the *conatus essendi* of being, from being considered as dependent upon the empiricism of a psychology. The status of necessity of these analyses certainly remains to be determined, despite its analogy with that of the essential. (*TI*, ii [French edition]; *EN*, 198 [English])

Although Smith acknowledges that he means essential in the *eidetic* sense and not the sense Levinas gives it in *Otherwise than Being* (see the Smith passage above), Levinas himself says that his *eidetic* approach in *Totality and Infinity* is in fact the same one that is put on the side of ontology in that 1974 work. That is, Levinas explicitly rejects Smith's distinction between essence in *Totality and Infinity* and essence in *Otherwise than Being*. We will have to wait until the next chapter to see how it is that Levinas puts essence on the side of ontology. Although Levinas is careful not to use the word "essence" to describe his project in *Otherwise than Being*, it cannot be denied that he is still pointing to the source of meaning as such, and still continues to announce this meaning as prior to representation. Levinas remains an essentialist but no longer uses that language of *eidetic* seeing to describe what is essential to the interhuman

⁶²Michael B. Smith, *Toward the Outside: Concepts and Themes in Emmanuel Levinas* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 2005), 6-7.

relationship. The turn to ambiguity is at the cost of the commitment to eidetic phenomenology.

Besides the use of ontological language in *Totality and Infinity*, let me note another problem that interpretations of Levinas, to the best of my knowledge, never mention: that Levinas never explains the relationship between the different senses of the posterior anterior in *Totality and Infinity*. The last chapter identifies a series of meanings which Levinas calls anterior posterior: enjoyment, dwelling, embodiment. Then there is the relationship with the Other, which appears to be the anterior posterior *par excellence*. Levinas leaves unclear the precise relationship between these different senses. What is the relationship of the *anterior posteriority* of the moments of interiority and that of the relationship with the Other? Is the relationship with the Other “more” anterior posterior than the ones found in interiority? Are they all equally anterior posterior? While Levinas is clear that interiority is needed for the idea of infinity and that the moments of interiority are analogous to transcendence, we are not told how the relationship with the Other affects the other senses of logical priority. By bringing the singularity of the self and the singularity of the Other together into a single conception of subjectivity, the later Levinas eliminates for himself many of these questions. At any rate, we will see that the developments of Levinas’s later thought creates newer problems of its own, but these problems nevertheless revolve around one single question, namely, the relationship between singularity and context in his philosophical thought.

Emmanuel Levinas, I have argued, is a philosopher of singularity, and the subject’s access to this singularity is found in an immediate and direct “pure sensibility,” which names a pure experience of the singularity of the Other prior to any application of concepts. There is a sense in which *Totality and Infinity* symbolizes a standstill between his earlier works on existence and his mature works on ethical meaning. While *Totality and Infinity* seems to hold on to some of the philosophical insights from his earlier works (embodiment, the need to go beyond a relationship with existence), it remains unclear in this work how Levinas’s earlier accounts of the relationship with existence function in his ethical philosophy. For example, the role of embodiment seems to have no ethical import, and it would have been insightful for Levinas to offer an account of how the face-to-face leads to an ethics of embodiment. What we find in *Totality and Infinity*, then, is an essential discord between his earlier convictions and his newfound interest in the Other as the source of ethical meaning. This discordance, I will argue in the next chapter, is addressed in Levinas’s later works. That is, Levinas moves towards a single account of singularity for which the singularity of the self and the singularity of the Other are accomplished in the same relationship, and he returns to his earlier account of human existence as restless and dramatic. In any case, I will argue that the question of singularity is not only still present in Levinas’s later thought, but it there becomes a central problem for him, especially with respect to the role of politics in his philosophy.

Chapter V:
Singularity and Context in Levinas's Later Philosophy

Totality and Infinity, we have seen, contains two accounts of singularity, and the relationship between them is largely unclear. It is unclear what happens to the sensibility of enjoyment in the ethical encounter. How could Levinas even begin to answer that question without somehow turning the relationship between the two into a dialectic through which the positivity of enjoyment is somehow preserved in the ethical relationship? Levinas obviously does not want to go the route of a dialectical synthesis, and so he, perhaps wisely, remains silent about what happens to the sensibility of enjoyment after the face-to-face encounter.

I will show that Levinas's later works avoid the problem of two sensibilities by recasting subjectivity as constituted by a single account of sensibility. No longer is the subject interrupted while bathing in the elements and recollecting itself in the home. In Levinas's later works, the subject is always already ethical from the start. This means that my singularity and the Other's singularity are both intricately tied, as if they were correlates of an intentional relationship. In Levinas's later philosophy, it is not possible to speak of my singularity without at the same time invoking the singularity of the other person.

This final chapter will evaluate the final destination of Levinas's philosophy of the subject by asking one question that has concerned Levinas scholars in recent years: can Levinas's philosophy of singularity address the significance of context in human experience? The first half of this chapter will lay the essential features of the account of ethical subjectivity found in the later works. I will show that for Levinas ethics is essentially "traumatic" in that it interrupts the life of the ego by awakening a deeper form of selfhood that cannot enter consciousness as a theme. From there, I will introduce the problem of the "third person" and politics in Levinas's philosophy. I will argue that Levinas's distinction between ethics and politics, with its emphasis on singularity, is unable to account for the specific contexts that constitute everyday relationships with other people, and for that reason, Levinas's account of singularity cannot adequately inform our moral and political judgments.

5.1 The Other-in-the-Same

In the 1961 work, "Language and Proximity" Levinas takes singularity to refer to a "thisness" that can never be adequately captured by consciousness. Consciousness, according to Levinas, takes a "this" and situates it within a context and confers upon it an identity: "Presence to consciousness is the fact that *this* which takes form in experience is

already alleged [*prétendu*] or understood or identified, hence thought *as* this or *as* that and *as* present, that is, precisely thought” (*DEEH*, 110/218).⁶³ Intentionality, on Levinas’s account, consists in identifying something and giving it a name. Intentional consciousness, with the act of meaning-bestowing, confers on the individual a universal concept that betrays the singularity of that individual. For Levinas, cognition consists in the act of putting things into words, of claiming the identity of something given. In this way, Levinas draws an explicit and necessary link between language, cognition, and ontology. “Thought,” Levinas infers in “Language and Proximity,” “can therefore reach the individual only through the detour of the universal. For philosophy as discourse, the universal precedes the individual” (*DEEH*, 222/*CPP*, 113).

Levinas wonders “whether, behind discourse, there does not lie hidden a philosophical thought distinct from discourse and refractory to its prestiges and pretensions, and whether there it does not aim at the singular which discourse cannot express without idealizing” (*DEEH*, 222/*CPP*, 113). Levinas does not say that we should abandon language or be silent. Unlike Wittgenstein at the end of *Tractatus*, Levinas would not say that we should remain silent about those things we cannot know. We cannot avoid using language, and Levinas insists that there is in fact a call to use it. The singularity Levinas seeks to describe is not the singularity of a thing, but rather the singularity constitutive of the ethical relationship. This singularity has a meaning that cannot be derived from a cognitive relationship. This is a singularity that never settles into a theme but in fact calls into question any attempt to tame or domesticate it (*OB*, 158/101).⁶⁴ The singularity of the ethical relationship remains an excess of meaning that overflows the thought that thinks it.

Levinas presents his position in “Language and Proximity” by first considering the nature of language as communication. As in *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas notes that communication is essentially aimed towards another person, who is the receiver of this communication. When I communicate to another person, I am not treating that person as a theme, as an object of cognition, but am rather addressing them. This basic situation of all interlocution Levinas now calls “proximity” (*proximité*), and he immediately distinguishes it from knowledge:

The hypothesis that the relationship with an interlocutor would still be a knowing reduces speech to the solitary or impersonal exercise of a thought, whereas already the kerygma which bears this ideality is, in addition, a *proximity* between

63 Emmanuel Levinas, “Langage et proximité,” *En découvrant l’existence avec Husserl et Heidegger* (Paris: Librairie Philosophique J. Vrin, 1967). Translated as “Language and Proximity,” *Collected Philosophical Papers*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1998).

64 Emmanuel Levinas, *Autrement qu’être ou au-delà de l’essence*. Paris: Le Livre de Poche, 1990. Translated by Alphonso Lingis as *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1998). Hereafter *OB*.

me and the interlocutor, and not our participation in a transparent universality. (DEEH, 224/CPP, 115)

By proximity Levinas does not mean spatial contiguity. Rather, proximity designates a form of openness that is prior to intentional consciousness. Proximity is a relationship with a singularity that gives itself to me outside of any theme or speech. It refers to the way that the other person concerns me prior to any attempts to cognize his or her appearance. The other person, Levinas says, is not known but approached. The other person is the one I address. Levinas adds,

One must then admit that there is in speech a relationship with a singularity located outside of the theme of the speech, a singularity that is not thematized by the speech but is approached. Speech and its logical work would then unfold not in knowledge of the interlocutor, but in his proximity. (DEH, 224/CPP, 115)

Because the other person is the one who is approached with a theme, the theme of discourse itself does not encompass the other person. Rather, the other person is approached in that he or she is the one to whom I propose a theme. In this Levinas remains consistent with *Totality and Infinity*.

Levinas's notion of proximity is in fact not very different from his account of expression from *Totality and Infinity*. We recall that expression puts the self in a relationship with the Other "by itself" outside of any context. Expression signifies a learning relationship in which the act and the content coincide. Likewise, "proximity is by itself a signification" (DEH, 224/CPP, 116). Later he adds that "the neighbor is precisely what has a meaning *immediately*, before one ascribes one to him" (DEH, 229/CPP, 119), and he even explicitly links his account of proximity in that essay with the account of the Face in *Totality and Infinity* (DEH, 229/CPP, 120). This proximity, this closeness without unity, has an ethical meaning for Levinas. As in *Totality and Infinity*, the ethical is constituted by an unbridgeable separation between the self and the Other.

Proximity, Levinas writes, "indicates a reversal of subjectivity" in a subject "that enters *into contact* with a singularity, excluding identification in the ideal, excluding thematization and representation—an absolute singularity, as such unrepresentable" (DEH, 224/CPP, 116). On Levinas's account, ethical meaning has its source in a relationship with a singularity that does not initially give itself as something to be known. As I pointed out in the last chapter, we are not to say that there first exists a singular Other, who I then encounter somewhere along the way. Nor is the singularity of the Other a determinate idea I have beforehand and bring into the encounter. Singularity is bound with the very encounter. Levinas is thus able to prevent himself from having to define the essence of singularity outside of any relationship with it, and in this sense he

remains a phenomenologist. Moreover, to define singularity without reference to any encounter would be to reduce it to a context of meaning that abstracts itself from the individual. As Levinas puts it, “The relationship moving from the I to the neighbor cannot be fixed in any quiddity, but is stabilized on what has a meaning without resorting to ideality, on the enigma of a face” (*DEH*, 232/*CPP*, 122-23). In sum, the question of singularity establishes a line of continuity between *Totality and Infinity* and Levinas’s later works. However, there is one stark difference between the way singularity is presented in these two periods: in the later period the self’s singularity is inseparable from the singularity of the Other. How could this be the case? To answer this question, let us turn to Levinas’s account of subjectivity as Other-in-the-Same.

After I examine the meaning of the Other-in-the-Same, I will turn to a discussion of the Saying-Said distinction from the perspective of his account of subjectivity. I will argue later that the self-ego and Saying-Said distinction provide us with a clue how to read the ethics-politics distinction in Levinas’s philosophy. I will argue that Levinas scholarship has largely misunderstood the function of politics in Levinas’s philosophy, and that we must not take Levinas as trying to explain how we move from ethics to politics, since ethics for Levinas cannot be a site from which we can “begin” and move into politics. Rather, we are from the start in a “political” existence, albeit a political existence kept in check and interrupted by the traumatic nature of the ethical. The next section will explain what the themes of trauma and recurrence signify for Levinas’s later philosophy.

5.2 A Restless Subject: Trauma and Recurrence

Totality and Infinity presents the subject as capable of closing itself up. In fact, as we have seen, Levinas argues in that book that this closure, as separation, is needed in order for the relationship with Infinity to be possible:

But the separated being can close itself up in its egoism, that is, in the very accomplishment of its isolation. And this possibility of forgetting the transcendence of the Other—of banishing with impunity all hospitality (that is, all language) from one’s home, banishing the transcendental relation that alone permits the I to shut itself up in itself evinces the absolute truth, the radicalism, of separation. (*TI*, 188/172-3)

In that book, the Other reveals itself in its purity to a self who is locked up inside itself. The problem of *Totality and Infinity* consists in finding a way to let the Other inside, and to make sense of how this “revelation” takes place.

Levinas’s later works tell a different story about subjectivity. The Other is

already inside the Same, and so the narrative that would be needed to explain its entrance (or revelation) is no longer needed.⁶⁵ As Peter Zeillinger puts it,

the encounter with the other is therefore no longer premised on atheism and autarky, but anarchically located within the self. The other concerns me precisely because the other is *not* absolutely outside-of-me; the other is the other-within-the-same, within me, the essence of my humanity.⁶⁶

Or, as Merold Westphal puts it,

When in reflection I turn my intentional arrows back toward myself in order to recognize myself, to define myself, and to choose myself, in short, to say ‘I,’ I discover the Other already there between me and myself. And to make matters worse, it is not only my wife, my kids, my colleagues, and my students whom I find there. The winds blowing from that ‘more ancient volcano’ of which Derrida speaks have blown the widow, the orphan, and the stranger as well, those whom I would just as soon not notice. There they sit, on opposite sides of my inner sanctum, perhaps, making clear that by their mere presence that only as related to them, whether by irritation and indifference or by welcome and hospitality, can I be related to myself. This is not just breaking and entering. It is kidnapping. I have been taken hostage.⁶⁷

In his later works, Levinas rejects the idea that the self can shut itself up and be ignorant of a relationship with transcendence. He claims that “subjectivity is structured as the other in the same” (*OB*, 46/25). By redefining the subject as already structured by otherness, Levinas eliminates from his philosophy the two levels of sensibility that governed the analyses of *Totality and Infinity*. There is in his later works only one account of sensibility. Unlike in *Totality and Infinity*, the issue is indeed now how ethical selfhood is to be distinguished from the ego who knows, thinks, and represents. He remains consistent with his early work in that representation is inverted in the ethical relationship, but no longer seeks to show how one level of sensibility can open itself to another level of sensibility. In any case, Levinas still maintains that the encounter with the Other does not happen on the level of consciousness. The subject is now “anarchically” constituted by otherness in that consciousness is not the origin of the self-Other relationship. The relationship with the Other harks back to an “immemorial past” (Derrida’s “more ancient volcano”) that has never been a present. What was called the

65 In the final pages of *Otherwise than Being*, Levinas even writes that “the unnarratable other loses his face as a neighbor in narration. The relationship with him is indescribable in the literal sense of the term” (*OB*, 258/166).

66 Peter Zeillinger, “Radical Passivity as the (Only) Basis for Effective Action. Reading the ‘Passage to the Third’ in *Otherwise than Being*,” in *Radical Passivity*, 95.

67 Westphal, 82.

“anterior posterior” condition is no longer needed, since Levinas is not interested in showing us how an atheist ego founds the condition that supports its thoughts after the fact. Yet the notion of the “immemorial past” and subjectivity as “anarchy” serve a similar purpose for Levinas’s philosophy: they undercut the role of representation in human experience.

What does it mean to say that the Other is in the Same? It would be tempting to take the claim that the Other is in the Same as a form of humanism in that there is a piece of humanity in each person. However, this is not the route that Levinas takes:

Subjectivity is the other in the same in a way that also differs from that of the presence of interlocutors to one another in a dialogue, in which they are at peace and in agreement with one another. The other in the same determinative of subjectivity is the restlessness of the same disturbed by the other. (*OB*, 46-7)

Subjectivity is not at rest with itself, but is constituted by restlessness. To be a subject is to find oneself again and again recurrently called to respond to the Other. Levinas thus rehabilitates the emphasis on pain and restlessness found in his earlier works. For the later Levinas, however, this restless is ethical in nature, not ontological.

Levinas’s claim that the subject is restless depends on a rehabilitation of two themes found in his works from the 1940s: the non-coincidence of the subject with itself and a distinction between a primary state of awareness and consciousness as such. In 1947, the existent is defined as a “dual solitude” that is constantly reliving the event of hypostasis whenever it falls asleep or wakes up. At the core of Levinas’s account of the existent is the idea of “wakefulness” (*la veille*), which we saw in Chapter II is a basic mode of awareness. Wakefulness precedes consciousness, but consciousness participates in it. The later Levinas, as in his 1947 book, seeks a form of wakefulness that precedes consciousness.⁶⁸ We are not to take this wakefulness as an unchanging state, or even as a “self” I can become and grasp as my own. Nor does this wakefulness refer to subjectivity in isolation from others, but is from the start a relationship with the Other. Wakefulness signifies a “relation between the Same and the Other that cannot be interpreted as a state, not even as a state of lucidity, a relation that must be granted to vigilance, which, as anxiety, does not rest in its theme, in representation, in presence, in Being” (*DEH*, 168). Wakefulness is not a state of mind I can assume in the way I might be bored or anticipate the next note in a melody. He says that wakefulness “*ceaselessly* puts the priority of the same into question” (*DEH*, 177; emphasis mine).

So, what is this wakefulness? If I cannot assume it, how is it experienced? To

⁶⁸ See, for instance, “From Consciousness to Wakefulness” (1974) and “Philosophy and Awakening” (1977), both of which appear in *Discovering Existence with Husserl*.

answer this question Levinas employs two technical terms: recurrence and trauma. The ethical self is not a constant state of awareness, but is something that reveals itself in human experience at very specific moments, and even when these moments occur, the conscious self is not able to make sense of them. For Levinas, the ethical experience resembles a traumatic experience in which the subject finds itself with a meaning that catches it off-guard. Levinas sees the moment of trauma as a reduction from the ego to the self. It is in the moment of trauma when the subject catches a glimpse—or, as Levinas would put it, a trace—of what can never be given to consciousness as a theme. This trace reveals to the subject the purist sense of its selfhood.

Accordingly, Levinas explains the event of recurrence in this way:

This recurrence would be the ultimate secret of the incarnation of the subject; prior to all reflection, prior to every positing, an indebtedness before any loan, not assumed, anarchical, subjectivity of a bottomless passivity, made out of assignation, like the echo of a sound that would precede the resonance of this sound. The active source of this passivity is not thematizable. It is the passivity of a trauma, but one that prevents its own representation, a deafening trauma, cutting the thread of consciousness which should have welcomed it in its present, the passivity of being persecuted. (*OB*, 175/111)

Of importance here are the link between recurrence and the “deafening trauma” that is the source of a “bottomless passivity.” Note the reference to the “echo of a sound that would precede the resonance of the sound,” as this again reminds us of how the anterior posterior condition of subjectivity is now rooted in the very structure of the Other-in-the-Same. Moreover, this passivity has an “active source” in that it happens again and again recurrently. In his 1974 article “From Consciousness to Wakefulness,” Levinas refers to wakefulness as a “burning without consumption of an inextinguishable flame” (*DEH*, 168), which we should take as a testament to the constant experience of endlessly being put into question. In one sense, ethics for Levinas is not something we initially theorize about, and then apply to the world. On the contrary, it is something that happens to the subject and traumatizes it over and over again. This traumatization has already happened before consciousness wakes up and recognizes it—and when it does recognize it, the meaning of this trauma can only be given in glimpses. At the end of the above passage, Levinas says that the recurrence and traumatism he speaks of are given in the “passivity of being persecuted.” The trauma of subjectivity points to the remorse that gnaws away at the self (*OB*, 182/115) and to the pain of being accused. Levinas’s ethical self is far from the rational deliberator we find in Kantian ethics or the hedonistic moral calculation of classical utilitarianism. This is a painful subjectivity.

If the subject is always already constituted by a relationship with the Other, then the demands of the Other on the Same are like a form of torture. Paradoxically, what

commands me from the outside reveals itself to me as a command from within. In this sense, for Levinas, I am in fact closer to the Other than I am to myself, and this closeness to the Other constitutes what it means to be the very self that I am. Referring to the traumatic nature of Levinas's self, Critchley writes:

Under the effect of the traumatism of persecution, the deafening shock or the violence of trauma, the subject becomes an internally divided or split self, an interiority that is radically non-self-coincidental, a gaping wound that will not heal, a subject lacerated by contact with an original traumatism that produces a scarred interiority inaccessible to consciousness and reflection, a subject that *wants* to repeat compulsively the origin of the trauma, a subject that becomes what Levinas calls a recurrence of the self without identification.⁶⁹

Through the themes of recurrence, trauma, and the Other-in-the-Same, then, Levinas rehabilitates the self-difference that is found in his earlier works, but that are seemingly abandoned in *Totality and Infinity*. The recurrence of the self is given as the experience of wound, outrage, vulnerability, and pain. While in his earlier works, the relationship with existence is painful, in his later works it is the ethical experience that is painful. The persecuted and traumatized self, further, loses its places as the nominative "I" who is autonomous. As persecuted, the Levinasian subject's autonomy is put into question. The self is now the accused and subjected. The subject is, as Levinas puts it, a hostage to the Other, and I find myself already "substituted" for the other person without choice. This is to say that my freedom is what it is only in relationship to the other person who makes demands on me: freedom is heteronomous. The subject is not constituted by the capacity to consent to responsibility. Responsibility for Levinas does not arise from a free commitment, in which case my freedom would be something connected to rationality and thus representable: "The responsibility for the other cannot have begun in my commitment, in my decision" (*OB*, 24/10). This heteronomy is not simply the imposition of a law on the subject from the outside. As I have already shown, this is a law that already calls the subject into question from the inside. Subjectivity is therefore already a "substitution" for the Other, by which Levinas again means a passive structure of existence that precedes any actual decision to substitute oneself for the Other: "The self, a hostage, is already substituted for the others. 'I am an other'... The ego is not an entity 'capable' of expiating for the others: it is this original expiation" (*OB*, 187/118). And here we finally arrive at the theme of the critical part of this chapter, namely, the reference to action.

For the later Levinas, the structure of subjectivity already includes a response to the Other. Subjectivity *is* the response to Other, but without this response being a product of the will or of rational deliberation. In this response, the subject finds itself

69 Critchley, "The Original Traumatism: Levinas and Psychoanalysis," 79.

constituted by a relationship with the Other, but without its selfhood being lost in this relationship. Levinas connects passivity of proximity with recurrence and substitution in the following way:

This passivity undergone in proximity by the force of an alterity in me is the passivity of a recurrence to oneself which is not the alienation of an identity betrayed. What can it be but a substitution for the others? It is, however not an alienation, because the other in the same is my substitution for the other through responsibility, for which, I am summoned as someone irreplaceable. I exist through the other and for the other, but without this being alienation: I am inspired. This inspiration is the psyche. The psyche can signify this alterity in the same without alienation in the form of incarnation, as being-in-one's-skin, having-the-other-in-one's-skin. (*OB*, 181/114)

The recurrence to oneself, which is a movement inwards from the ego to the self, is at once a movement outside of oneself as a response to the Other. Here again we find Levinas returning to a familiar concern: the idea of the relationship with transcendence that preserves the singularity of the subject. As in *On Escape*, the break from ontology is now found in the very structure of inwardness, except now that inwardness itself has the Other placed inside of it. In this way, Levinas is now able to establish a relationship with an "outside" without either that outside subsuming the individual under a general concept, and also without that Other becoming a moment of my conscious life. These two concerns, namely, that of preserving the subject's singularity and the Other's singularity, are now captured in a single account of sensibility.

Levinas argues that this basic structure of the Other-in-the-Same is itself the structure of goodness. Goodness is not something accidental to subjectivity, but is built into its very relationship with the Other: "the self is goodness" (*OB*, 187/118). What could Levinas mean by this? Surely, he is not saying that humans are naturally altruistic. Essential to Levinas's position here is the claim that "no one is good voluntarily, no one is a slave of the Good" (*OB*, 216/138). Levinas wants to leave open the possibility that one can choose not to help the Other. While the self cannot choose whether it responds at all, it is still free to choose how it responds. Levinas's claim that the self is goodness cannot in any way be a claim about whether humans are intrinsically altruistic, for that would link goodness with the will. For Levinas, on the contrary, goodness refers to the anarchy of the subject itself, to the underside of subjectivity as constituted by a responsibility that eludes thematization. From the Levinasian perspective, altruism and egoism presuppose the fundamental responsibility that makes them possible (*OB*, 195/197). Goodness, for Levinas, is not born of the will, but is what makes any willing possible. But if this pre-willing subject is essentially a "good" subject, then Levinas is confined to saying that doing the Good is a blind impulse that eludes the grasp of cognition. The ethical moment, then, involves acting without understanding.

Indeed, one of Levinas's own favourite examples illustrates this point nicely. In his novel *Life and Fate*, Vassily Grossman describes a situation in which a Jewish woman offers bread to a German soldier:

The woman could no longer see anything at all except the face of the German with the handkerchief round his mouth. Not understanding what was happening to her, governed by a power she had just now seemed to control, she felt in the pocket of her jacket for a piece of bread that had been given to her the evening before by a soldier. She held it out to the German officer and said: "There, have something to eat." Afterwards, she was unable to understand what had happened to her, why she had done this. Her life was to be full of moments of humiliation, helplessness and anger, full of petty cruelties that made her lie awake at night, full of brooding resentment. . . . At one such moment, lying on her bed, full of bitterness, she was to remember that winter morning outside the cellar and think: "I was a fool then, and I'm still a fool now."⁷⁰

For Levinas, this story depicts an example of a "small goodness," of a goodness without reason or promise. The point here is that the woman did not choose to be good. Goodness happens without reason and without choice. The woman found goodness happening and did not understand it when it did. It is this kind of goodness that Levinas's philosophy takes as its concern, those private moments in the midst of evil when goodness happens and takes the self and the Other out of their context. The subject who thinks, calculates, and deliberates finds itself overtaken by a sudden moment of goodness that catches its calculative cognitive capacities off-guard. Since such little acts of goodness are not matters of rational deliberation. The genuine expression of responsibility is the event in which I act despite myself, when I find myself committed to something that has never entered my mind as a theme. I find myself committed without having chosen to be so.

It should be clear by now, then, that this ethical selfhood Levinas is describing only arises in those key traumatic moments of human experience. There is never a point in which I can "become" this self and live life as a Levinasian. Levinas is not presenting a moral theory that we can adopt for ourselves, for there is no prescription here, no recommendation for how we should treat others. But what kind of ethical theory is Levinas presenting? Is it even an ethical theory at all?

70 Vassily Grossman, *Life and Fate*, trans. Robert Chandler (New York: Harper & Row, 1985), 805-6.

5.3 Levinas's Ethics

Now that we have covered Levinas's account of subjectivity as "Other-in-the-Same," we can consider the sense in which this account of subjectivity can be properly called an "ethics." Does Levinas's ethical theory provide a framework that would allow us to deduce particular norms and maxims that we can apply in concrete situations? On the one hand, Levinas does tell us that the Face reveals itself as the commandment "Thou shall not kill!" and we will be told that this is a concrete imperative that can have binding force in concrete moral experience. Moreover, he often includes that we do not approach the Other with empty hands. However, if this commandment not to kill is all that we have to go by, then there is much ambiguity concerning what counts as killing, and Levinas does not seem to provide us with a criterion to make a judgment. Could the ethical resistance, with its commandment not to kill, be the grounds of an ethical philosophy that can inform human agency? In an interview, Philippe Nemo asks Levinas about the sense in which his philosophy can be considered ethical. Here is Levinas's response:

My task does not consist in constructing ethics; I only try to find its meaning [*sens*]. In fact I do not believe that all philosophy should be programmatic....One can without doubt construct an ethics in function of what I have just said, but this is not my own theme. (*EI*, 92)

His theme, he says, is to find the *sens* of the ethical, by which he means the very meaning of the ethical itself. Phenomenologically speaking, *sens* does not only refer to the linguistic definition of a term, but to the very condition or structure that makes it possible for something to be given as it is. In his book on Levinas and Husserl, Drabinski explains further the phenomenological underpinnings of this *sens*:

The *sens* bestowed from the unique and comparable is ethical sense: my sense of myself as a moral consciousness, the sense of ethical subjectivity. Levinas's conception of a bestowal of sense from the alterity of the Other both alters and preserves something fundamental about phenomenology: a *sich besinnen* which, in this case, uncovers the origin of ethical sense in the accusing face.⁷¹

Levinas's task consists in describing the meaning of the ethical that originates in the very encounter with the Other. The *sens* Levinas speaks of is different than the one he attributes to Husserl; it is not a meaning that originates from the subject itself, but is rather given to the subject from the Other. Levinas's *sens* is precisely an inversion of Husserl's meaning-bestowal act. Before all choices, before all commitments, I find myself faced with a meaning that could not have originated in me. Drabinski rightly

71 Drabinski, 2001, 8.

draws a direct link between this account of sense and the traumatic structure of ethical subjectivity:

The recurrence of the oneself is the experience, with all due qualifications on the term, to which Levinas gives testimonial description. My traumatic awakening initiates an account of what comes to be called ethical subjectivity. The Other, we might say, traumatically provokes the *intersubjective reduction*. This reduction begins the phenomenological accounting for how one awakens to one's self, in moral consciousness, already possessed and obsessed by the Other. What is the sense and origin of this traumatic awakening? This is Levinas's most originary phenomenological question.⁷²

The ethical moment is a form of reduction in that I find myself in a direct relationship with a deep part of my selfhood that can never enter consciousness as a present theme. This reduction is not one that the phenomenologist carries out in an effort to describe what is given in pure intuition, but is rather one that happens to the subject. The ethical *sens* is an encounter with what singles me out and puts me in a direct relationship with another singularity.

Regarding the reduction to wakefulness, Levinas writes,

The reduction, repeating as it were the disturbance of the Same by the Other who is not absorbed into the Same—and who does not escape from the other—describes the awakening, beyond knowledge, to an insomnia or watchfulness [*Wachen*] of which knowledge is but one modality...Wakefulness starting from the other—the Other person—that ceaselessly puts the priority of the same into question. (*DEH*, 177-8)

The reduction begins with consciousness and then moves back to wakefulness, which is the ceaseless questioning of the Same by the Other. Levinas's reduction begins with the conscious ego, but then traces back to a fundamental feature of selfhood of which the ego can only catch a glimpse.

This account of ethical subjectivity as a bestowal of sense from the Other, I submit, cannot be the basis for an ethical theory as such. Nowhere in his works does Levinas suggest that his account of ethical subjectivity can be applied to resolve ethical conflicts in particular cases. By understanding Levinas in this way, I stand with Fabio Ciaramelli,⁷³ Simon Critchley, Robert Bernasconi, and Diane Perpich,⁷⁴ among others,

72 Drabinski, 2001, 8.

73 Fabio Ciaramelli, "Levinas's Ethical Discourse between Individuation and Universality," in *Re-Reading Levinas*, ed. Simon Critchley and Robert Bernasconi (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 85.

74 Diane Perpich, 2008, 124-25.

who hold that Levinas's philosophy cannot yield a specific ethical theory. As Critchley and Bernasconi put it, Levinas's philosophy

cannot be said to provide us with what we normally think of as an ethics, namely a theory of justice or an account of general rules, principles and procedures that would allow us to assess the acceptability of specific maxims or judgments relating to social action, civic duty, or whatever.⁷⁵

Levinas's philosophy, rather, is a description of the conditions that must be in place for any such theories to be possible.

Although many scholars agree that Levinas's philosophy cannot yield a specific ethical theory, there are nevertheless numerous attempts to derive from Levinas's philosophy a specific *political* theory. But if his ethics does not provide what is needed for a specific moral theory, I cannot see how we can expect Levinas to be able to provide a political theory—especially since he holds that any political theory must be grounded in the *sens* of the ethical. Because I do not think that there are enough resources in Levinas's philosophy upon which to build a political theory (although it is possible to construct one by drawing on Levinasian themes), I will not pursue that route here. Rather, my question concerns whether Levinas's account of the political threatens his emphasis on the singularity of the Other, and, on the contrary, whether his ethics can inform the contexts that constitute political life. Levinas holds that the political—by which he means the relationship with multiple others, with “the third”—is necessary. What does this necessity do for the singularity of the Face? Can we have a politics built on trauma?

5.4 Putting the Third in Context: Ethics, Politics and the Non-Place of Singularity

Proximity, we have seen, designates a relationship of singularity. The ethical relationship is a movement “from uniqueness to uniqueness” (*EN*, 199). However, in experience I always find myself among more than one person, and this fact does violence to the infinite responsibility that I have to the singular Other. I find that I am faced with a third person and I must choose, compare, and decide between an Other and another Other. This Levinas calls the problem of “the third,” who troubles my responsibility. If ethics is by definition a relationship between two singularities, how can it in any way inform the multiple competing demands placed on the subject by many others? Does Levinas's philosophical approach fall apart at this point?

⁷⁵ Simon Critchley and Robert Bernasconi, *Cambridge Companion to Levinas* (Cambridge University Press: New York, 2004), 27.

The question concerning the third, as we saw last chapter, is raised already in *Totality and Infinity*: “The third party looks at me in the eyes of the Other—language is justice” (TI, 234/213). Levinas adds that in the eyes of the Other the whole of humanity looks at me. Can the third be derived directly from the face-to-face encounter? If the Face is self-referring, it is not clear how it could refer beyond itself. If the Face does refer to a third person, then its self-referring nature appears to be betrayed. The idea of singularity would then take on a new meaning: singularity would refer beyond the singular. A valid inference from here would be that the singularity of the Face implies the Face of every other person. At this point, singularity and plurality become confused, and Levinas’s distinction between the Other and the third falls flat on its face. Levinas attempts to spare himself of these contradictions by speaking of a “human fraternity” that “involves individualities whose logical status is not reducible to the status of ultimate differences in a genus, for their singularity consists in each referring to itself” (TI, 235/214). This is a plurality without a totality, a plurality rooted in singularity. In *Totality and Infinity*, this plurality rooted in singularity is implied by the ethical relationship itself. It is as if the third constitutes the unthematized horizon that lurks behind every one-on-one relationship. In *Totality and Infinity*, then, the third is not associated with a distinct domain of meaning called the “political,” but falls on the side of ethics. Hence in 1961 Levinas associates ethics with justice. *Totality and Infinity*, therefore, does not have a clear distinction between the ethical and the political, and Levinas acknowledges this problem in the preface to the German edition of *Totality and Infinity*:

there is no terminological difference in *Totality and Infinity* between mercy or charity, the source of a right of the other person coming before mine, in the first case, and justice in the second, where the right of the other person—but obtained only after investigation and judgement—is imposed before that of the third. The general ethical notion of justice is mentioned without discrimination in the two situations. (EN, 198)

In his later works, Levinas avoids the contradictions that stem from the presence of the third person in the Face by reconsidering the relationship between the singular and the plural. In his later works, justice falls on the side of politics, which cannot be reduced to a moment of the ethical.

In his later works, Levinas no longer claims that the third is already present in the face, but that the relationship with the third person is constitutive of a different domain of meaning—the one that he associates with ontology, the Said, and totality. If it were the case that I was faced with only one other person on a desert island, Levinas says in various interviews, I would owe that person everything. But since I live in a world with more than one person, I find myself called to choose, judge, and compare between equals.

It appears that one of the main functions of the third is to make room for context and plurality in human experience. However, it is not at all clear if Levinas's conception of the political reaches deeply enough into and addresses the very context of human relationships. By context I mean the social and historical milieu that every encounter with another person involves: each person has a social identity, comes from somewhere, and has a story to tell. If my relationship with the Other is free of context, then my relationship with another Other, the third, should be free of context as well. Even if I am faced with multiple Others, the relationships with each of these Others, according to Levinas, should be relationships with singularities. The introduction of the third person, then, does not and cannot immediately solve the problem of how context is introduced into human experience. What is it that bridges the gap between an ethics without context and a politics with context?

In a 1989 interview, Levinas says,

But we are never, me and the other, alone in the world. There is always a third; the men who surround me. And this third is also my neighbour. Who is nearest to me? Inevitable question of justice which arises from the depth of responsibility for the unique, in which ethics begins in the face of that which is incomparable. (*RTB*, 115-6)

Here we find evidence that for Levinas the relationship with the third is always there from the beginning. Levinas also says that the question "Who is nearest to me?" becomes an issue at this point. But if the "depth of responsibility for the unique" cannot be understood as a contextual relationship, then we have no criterion with which to decide who is nearest to me. An event without context cannot in any way help us decide a contextual question. Moreover, ethics for Levinas, as we have seen, is a non-thematizable event that does not reveal itself to the light of consciousness, so it cannot provide us with a clear rational criterion to help us decide context-based questions.

Perhaps the answer to my dilemma concerning the place of context in Levinas's philosophy is found that in quoted passage above: "But we are never, me and the other, alone in the world." If we take Levinas as "moving" from the ethical to the political, it is unclear how context can be introduced. That is, it is not clear how the simple addition of the third person who troubles the ethical relationship brings with it the context that would allow us to judge and compare between equals. I do not think that the problem of context can be solved by treating Levinas's ethics-politics relationship as a "movement" from the former to the latter. Rather, I argue here that the problem of context can only be adequately addressed if we grant that we are always already immersed in context, and that the encounter with the Face interrupts the contexts in which we already find ourselves in. Further, I hold that if we take Levinas as saying that we are "first" in a relationship with singularity and then "afterwards" in a relationship with a third, that we

risk misinterpreting Levinas's account of the ethics-politics relationship.

If the third person is always there from the start, then we can add to this that we always find ourselves as political beings from the start, but that our political existence is not an end in itself. To say that we are political beings from the start is not to say that politics has priority, but only that the ethical moment can only be what it is if there is a context in which it can reveal itself. In this way, I think, we can take the ethics-politics relationship as its own form of the Other-in-the-Same and as analogous to the Self-ego relationship in the individual. It is not by coincidence that Levinas consistently aligns ethics with the self and the ego with consciousness and politics. To illustrate how the political is where we actually begin in experience, let me consider Levinas's important distinction between the Saying and the Said.

The structure of the Saying-Said relationship resembles the self-ego relationship, and it can teach us something about the ethic-politics relationship. Levinas calls the Saying a "modality of the subjective" (*OB*, 48/26) and he explicitly links the Saying with the singularity constitutive of ethical proximity. "Saying," Levinas writes, "is a denuding, of the unqualifiable *one*, the pure *someone*, unique and chosen; that is, it is an exposedness to the other where no slipping away is possible" (*OB*, 85/50). The Said, on the other hand, includes everything that Levinas associates with the ego: consciousness, totality, representation, knowledge, etc. Especially important for us is Levinas's insistence that the Saying always requires a Said. The Saying cannot be captured by a specific Said, but there is nevertheless as necessary risk. The Saying must be expressed in a Said:

The correlation of the saying and the said, that is, the subordination of the saying to the said, to the linguistic system and to ontology, is the price that manifestation demands. (*OB*, 17/6)

But is it necessary and is it possible that the saying on the hither side be thematized, that is, manifest itself, that it enter into a proposition and a book? It is necessary... It must spread out and assemble itself into essence, posit itself, be hypostasized, become an eon in consciousness and knowledge, let itself be seen, undergo the ascendancy of being. (*OB*, 75/43-4)

This is to say that there cannot be a Saying without a Said. There cannot be a pure Saying that is absolved from any context of meaning. With respect to ethics and politics, this is to say that there cannot be any ethics at all without a political context in which it expresses itself. While the Saying does have metaphysical priority over the Said, the possibility of there being a Saying in experience depends on there being a context that finds itself interrupted. The reduction begins with ontology, with ontology finding its condition and possibility in the ethical relationship. As in the reduction from

consciousness to wakefulness mentioned earlier, Said and the Saying are mutually dependent.

This correlation between the Saying and the Said resembles the relationship between ethics and politics. In a 1983 interview, Levinas tells us that “charity is impossible without justice, and that justice is warped without charity” (*RTB*, 181). This is to say that ethics and politics mutually rely on each other. Because of this mutual reliance, as Michael Morgan points out,⁷⁶ for Levinas the relationship between ethics and politics cannot be broken down into successive stages. Levinas says that

justice itself is born of charity. They can seem alien when they are presented as successive stages; in reality, they are inseparable and simultaneous, unless one is on a desert island, without humanity, without a third. (*RTB*, 165-66)

The point is that while ethics has priority over ontology when it comes to the source of meaning, in human experience the purity of the ethical relationship is intricately tied to the context of everyday existence. This is a point I need to emphasize, because it is one that Levinas scholarship has continually overlooked. Drabinski, for instance, claims that there is in Levinas “the *movement* from the ethical to the political.”⁷⁷ This is a common interpretation of Levinas’s ethics-politics distinction, and I do not find in Levinas a “movement” of this sort. Levinas’s point, I suggest, is a phenomenological one in the following way: *sens* cannot be separated from the way that it gives itself in experience. We already find support for this position in *Totality and Infinity*, where Levinas claims that Infinity does not first exist and then reveal itself, but rather that the meaning of Infinity is inseparable from the way that it gives itself. Although the ethical moment cannot be a function of history or any context, there must nevertheless be context—relationships with many others who place demands on me—in order for the ethical relationship to be possible.

Nevertheless, starting from ontology does not imply that ethics must be understood from an ontological perspective. While Levinas insists on the simultaneity of the two domains of meaning, he does not want simply to give them equal importance. He still wants to give the ethical relationship priority, lest the responsibility for the Other be forgotten, as it might be in war: “the relation to the Other, as a relation of responsibility, cannot be totally suppressed, even when it takes the form of politics or warfare. Here it is

76 Morgan, 111.

77 John Drabinski, “The Possibility of an Ethical Politics,” in *Emmanuel Levinas: Critical Assessments of Leading Philosophers*, vol. IV (Routledge: London, 2005), 188; also pp. 205, 206. See also Joëlle Hansel, “Levinas and Bergson on Justice and Infinity,” in *Levinas in Jerusalem: Phenomenology, Ethics, Politics, Aesthetics*, ed. Joëlle Hansel (Netherlands: Springer, 2009), 125, 138; Simon Critchley, “Introduction,” *Cambridge Companion to Levinas*, 23, 25; and Bettina Bergo, *Levinas Between Ethics & Politics: For the Beauty that Adorns the Earth* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 2003), 35-6.

impossible to free myself by saying 'it's not my concern.' There is no choice, for it is always my concern" (II, 247).⁷⁸ The excess of meaning constitutive of the Saying, then, allows Levinas to give it a metaphysical priority over the Said. This is to say, then, that politics can only be what it is if it is rooted in a pre-original Saying. While I will not examine here what kind of political theory that Levinas's philosophy supports, it is clear that the two different kinds of priority found in *Totality and Infinity*—the chronological and the logical—are still relevant for Levinas's account of the relationship between ethics and politics: we can only get to the Saying by beginning with the Said, but yet the meaning of the Said is rooted in a non-representable relationship to the Saying. Ethics is anteriorly posterior to the political. While the political has a chronological importance, the ethical has a logical one. We begin always in a relationship with the third, but the relationship to the third is logically grounded in the relationship with singularity. So, we can say in one sense that Levinas does indeed "begin" with ethics and move to politics, but in another sense we can say that he begins with the political Said and moves back to the ethical Saying.

To return to the Saying-Said distinction again for a moment, the manifestation in the Said is the price that the meaning of the Saying must pay. There is always a call to translate the Saying into a Said, and such translation always brings with it a betrayal of the Saying. As a result, there is always a need to "un-Say" the Said in an effort to preserve the singularity of the Saying. This un-Saying, however, is not something that the subject chooses to carry out. The un-Saying is accomplished in those traumatic moments of interruption in which the Said finds itself called into question: "For the saying is both an affirmation and a retraction of the said...It is the ethical interruption of essence that energizes the reduction" (OB, 75-6/44). So, the reduction from the Said to the Saying, along with the retraction of the said, are accomplished in a passive event that the subject undergoes. We should take Levinas as telling us not that we should un-Say the Said or that we should learn to Say in a better way (whatever that would mean), but that Saying is what happens. Subjectivity *is* Saying, subjectivity is the response to singularity that absolves itself from context. Likewise, for Levinas there is always the need for the political to be interrupted by the ethical in precisely the same way. As Drabinski puts it, "the function of ethics, of goodness, is to remind politics of its origin and the place of its justification...Ethics puts politics in question as both other than politics and the foundation of justice."⁷⁹ The function of the ethical is not to allow us to construct a system, but precisely to prevent us from taking any system as self-sufficient and as answering all the questions concerning the ethical.

It is possible to question Levinas about whether the ethical itself even enters

78 "Ideology and Idealism," in *The Levinas Reader*, 1st edition, ed. and trans. Sean Hand (Oxford: Blackwell, 1989), 247. Hereafter *II*.

79 Drabinski, 2000, 193.

human experience. How can we be sure that there is a Face, that there is a call to responsibility? Concerning this question, Perpich points out correctly that for Levinas the ethical moment is itself a confrontation with a skepticism of this sort. The trauma of the ethical, as Diane Perpich puts it, calls one to “practice weighing and giving reasons”⁸⁰ and that this call to provide justification one’s place itself includes a questioning of whether there is an ethical meaning at all: Far from casting doubt on the possibility of ethical life through such questions, skepticism is in fact its prolongation. It is the *enactment* of ethical life.”⁸¹ In this way, Levinas himself says that ethics consists in an “apology,” a back-and-forth dialogue between skepticism and reason, which involves the recurrent representation and fossilization of the Saying into a Said, and its continual break-up in skepticism. Just when we think we have answered the skeptic, skepticism returns (*OB*, 260-1/168). Now, we must note here that Levinas is not saying that he is a skeptic, nor is he saying that we should be skeptics. Rather, the movement between reason and skepticism is always already built into human experience. The ethical moment is not a moment of truth, a moment in which I see the light, but a moment in which I find myself questioned, and also a moment when I might find *myself* questioning the legitimacy of the ethical.

For Levinas, the ethical is a recurrent experience which I find my ego and its representations called into question despite myself. Perhaps paradoxically, this calling into question by the ethical even involves a calling into question of my already formed understanding of the ethical. Indeed, Levinas is so often portrayed as a thinker who has a strong faith in the ethical that his own remarks about the need for skepticism are often overlooked by commentators on Levinas’s work. If anything, Levinas’s philosophy is a philosophy of perpetual beginning, a philosophy in which we cannot be self-satisfied and assume we have reached the *telos* of our ethical existence. There is always more work to be done; there is no respite from the restlessness of the ethical. It is this restlessness of the ethical, I think, that is one of the unique and driving messages of Levinas’s philosophy, and one that he captures so poignantly in his later works. But can this skeptical ethics of restlessness inform the specific contexts the subject finds itself in? In what follows, I argue that for Levinas it cannot.

Levinas is certainly correct in maintaining that we are always already among many people, and that it is never the case that the encounter with the Other is a simple one-on-relationship. I encounter the Other in a society among many others. This means, by implication, that I am from the start embedded in a socio-historical context. It is also the case that each person that I meet has a history, that each person has a story to tell, and comes from somewhere. However, for Levinas these social and historical facts do not explain why I am responsible for each singular person I encounter. In any case, when I

80 Perpich, 2008, 149.

81 Perpich, 2008, 145.

find myself having to choose between two singular beings—when I have to settle a dispute between friends, strangers, family members, etc., I must employ specific criteria in order to resolve such disputes. Levinas's account of the ethical tells us that the recognition of singularity is essentially behind the very call to judge. If I see two strangers fighting, and I do not recognize one of those people as singular beings, then the decision is really a non-decision. But if I recognize two singular beings for what they are, how can this encounter with two singularities in any way help me solve a dispute? Any criterion I employ cannot have its source in the ethical moment itself, since the Face does not tell me what I should do—but only *that* I should do something. Even if we grant that there always is a context, and even if we reject the “movement” from the ethical to the political, we are still at an impasse with respect to the need for context. Even if we begin with context, the encounter of singularity is still divorced from that context and can in no way inform it.

If it is the case that the singularity of the Other interrupts the context of my social and political existence, then this interruption must in some way inform me that I should not treat the Other as merely a thing and that that I have an immediate responsibility towards them. But if this responsibility itself does not inform the context of an encounter, then it is not clear how the “skepticism” Levinas speaks of can operate. The Face reminds me that I should not treat it as a thing, but beyond this it cannot help me decide who to help and who to be responsible for. As I have pointed out, it is not the function of Levinas's philosophy to inform our decisions in this way. But how is able to decide what is right and wrong in particular cases if the ethical moment does not owe its meaning to the context in which it is given?

The problem I am pointing to is illustrated by Levinas himself during an appearance on a radio program in 1982. He was brought on the program with the hope that he would shed some light on the Israel-Palestine conflict. The interviewer, Shlomo Malka, asked him whether the Palestinian is the Other. Here is Levinas's response, which in recent years has puzzled a number of Levinas scholars:

My definition of the Other is completely different. The Other is the neighbour, who is not necessarily kin, but who can be. And in this sense, if you are for the Other, you are for the neighbour. But if your neighbour attacks another neighbour or treats him unjustly, what can you do? Then alterity takes on another character, in alterity we can find an enemy, or at least then we are faced with the problem of knowing who is right and who is wrong, who is just and who is unjust. There are people who are wrong. (*EP*, 198)⁸²

The obvious problem with this response is the way that it draws a connection between the

82 “Ethics and Politics,” *The Levinas Reader*, 294. Hereafter *EP*.

Other and the possibility of becoming one's kin. What happened to the stranger, the one with whom I have nothing in common? But the problem I would like to highlight is a related, but different one. Levinas does not only speak of kinship here, but of an Other who can become an enemy and of the possibility that there are people who are wrong. What criteria do we use to judge who is right and who is wrong, and how do those criteria have their source in the encounter with singularity? Levinas does not provide us with the answers to these questions. Moreover, it is unclear how Levinas's ethics of infinite responsibility before the singularity of the Other can inform the *political* judgment that a specific group of people are not worthy of being "others" to me in the ethical sense. The problem with Levinas's remarks is not only that he seems to contradict the letter of his text, but that he is making political judgments that his account of the ethical cannot possibly give us a licence to make. Moreover, if we say that such judgments are merely political ones that do not threaten the core of Levinas's ethical commitments, Levinas at least owes us an explanation of how these judgments are consonant with the essential tenets of his thought.

While his project is noble in that he is defending the singularity of the human, Levinas is unable to use this notion of a singularity without a context to explain how we are able to make serious context-based judgments concerning how we should act, the values we should have, and how we are to judge who is right and wrong. I reach this conclusion while acknowledging that the ethical for Levinas is meant to have an interruptive force, but adding that this interruption of the political by the ethical must in some way inform the contexts in which we find ourselves or else the ethical becomes nothing more than a vacuous imperative without content. Levinas's conception of the ethical cannot have that kind of force, and for that reason I conclude that Levinas's account of singularity is quite vacuous and can have no real force in actual human encounters. For this reason, I am unable to call myself a Levinasian.

The question of singularity has philosophical importance for Levinas as early as his works from the 1930s and over the decades it develops into an account of ethical meaning that culminates into his later works on ethical subjectivity and the need for politics. The merit of Levinas's philosophy is that he wants to take the human being on its own terms and to root ethical meaning in nothing other than the irreducible singularity of the other person. While this irreducible singularity, as a defense of the intrinsic value of the human being, forces us to reconsider the meaning of the human and has relevance for identity politics, there is an irresolvable gap in Levinas's philosophy between the meaning without a context, and the fact that we each encounter does in fact happen in a "here" and "now" in a particular context. How would Levinas respond to labor disputes, oppression of women and minorities, and teenage gang violence? Levinas's goal to free ethical meaning from its historical and social context is noble, but it comes at the price of neglecting the actual contexts in which human interactions take place. If the traumatism of the ethical cannot inform these particular contexts, then we have every reason to be

suspicious of Levinas's so-called ethical philosophy.

Conclusion:
Singularity, Restlessness, and Subjectivity

Throughout this dissertation, I focused the themes of singularity and restlessness as providing insight into Levinas's account of subjectivity. I argued that Levinas's account of the Other found in his later works is motivated by these themes, and that his account of otherness relies on a specific account of subjectivity. In order for an encounter with the Other to be possible, the self must be constituted in such a way as to allow for this encounter to be possible. That is, for Levinas the subject is essentially passive and the themes of singularity and restlessness both inform this account of subjectivity. As a way of summing up the main points of this dissertation, I will pull together the main points of the chapters and elaborate on how restlessness and singularity play important roles throughout the development of his philosophy.

The theme of singularity is widely recognized as an important theme in Levinas's ethical thought. However, its significance for his earlier work is often overlooked. For the early Levinas the question of singularity is framed as an internal conflict with one's own identity; to be singular is to find oneself with a need to escape the brutal fact of existence. Escape is not something that the subject wills, but accomplished by those acute experiences that reveal existence in its purity: weariness, malaise, and pain. Such experiences expose the individual in its singularity over and against the anonymity of the "there is." Singularity is not accomplished by any choice or conscious thought but by an event the subject undergoes despite itself. Singularity, then, is not something I choose, but for Levinas something the subject finds itself with. Already in these early works, the individual finds itself chosen to be singular, despite its own intentions.

In *Totality and Infinity*, the theme of singularity splits into two accounts. On the one hand, there is the self who is outside of all biological and social identities, and on the other hand there is the Other who is likewise given "by itself", uprooted from history, in its pure singularity. As I argued in Chapter IV, one problem with *Totality and Infinity* concerns how to think these two singularities together. In *Totality and Infinity* the singularity of the self does not owe itself to the relationship with the Other; the self is already singular when it is bathing in the elements and enjoying the world—and is in fact singular because of structures of meaning. The self is already singular going into the face-to-face relationship, and Levinas fails to explain how the face-to-face relationship affects the singularity of the self, or even how the self's relationship with the world is modified, save his claim that it calls that relationship into question. The singularity of the self appears to have no clear relationship with the singularity of the Other. I presented Levinas's later works as addressing the aforesaid problem in *Otherwise than Being*, in which the singularity of the self and the singularity of the Other are both given as a unitary phenomenon. That is, in *Otherwise than Being*, the subject is the "Other-in-the-

Same”, always already affected by the Other, and singular because of this “immemorial” event that never enters consciousness as a present. As in the early works, singularity happens to the subject despite itself, except now it is an ethical event that is inseparable from the Other who commands me to responsibility. While in the early works it is a question of how to escape being, in the later works Levinas argues that the escape from being has always already happened. Moreover, consistent with his earlier works, this “immemorial” escape is not accomplished by the subject’s own initiative.

The development of the theme of singularity is closely related to that of restlessness. As singularity, for the early Levinas, restlessness is not accomplished through the work of the subject; it does not arise from a decision. Rather, to be restless is to find oneself in a commitment to respond without having chosen that commitment. In his earlier works, this restlessness has its source in the “feeling of identity” in which the individual is riveted to its own bodily identity. Levinas agrees with Heidegger’s basic insight that to be an individual is to “have to be”, but unlike Heidegger he presents this having-to-be as a suffocating burden that calls for the need to escape. The imperative to be is at once the imperative to escape being as such. For Levinas, this imperative to escape does not have its source in an external force. Rather, it is constitutive of subjectivity itself and manifests itself in those passive experiences in which I find myself at odds with myself. As the event of singularity, restlessness reveals itself in experiences such as malaise, pain, and weariness. Such experiences reveal a “cleaving” between existence and the existent. They reveal the weight of existence as a necessary relationship I cannot escape, albeit one that is essentially foreign and impersonal.

The burden of existence is felt as a non-chosen commitment to exist. In *From Existence to Existents* Levinas claims that the experience of weariness

is like the reminder of a commitment to exist, with all the seriousness and harshness of an unrevokable contract. One has to do something, one has to aspire after and undertake. In spite of the false smile of the skeptic who, having suspended his judgments, abstains from acting and from aspiring to anything, the obligation of this contract remains incumbent on us like an inevitable ‘one must.’ It animates the need to act and to undertake, makes this necessity poignant. Weariness is the refusal of this ultimate obligation. (*EE*, 32/12)

In this way, the commitment to exist is not itself a choice but is the condition for the possibility of acting; it is the ground of *praxis*. It is not a matter of choosing existence, nor is it even a matter of taking it up a certain way. Rather, Levinas’s point is that no matter what we do we are taking up existence in a certain way, and we cannot escape the gravity of existence.

Let us jump to Levinas’s later works and establish a few connections. As we saw

last chapter, for Levinas responsibility is not a choice. Rather, the subject finds itself chosen to be responsible without having the choice to accept it. Obsession, which is Levinas's term for the way that the subject is claimed by responsibility prior to an awareness it, is "a responsibility that rests on no free commitment, a responsibility whose entry into being could be effected only without choice" (*OB*, 180/116). As the relationship with existence, for Levinas it is not a matter of choosing to be responsible. While one can choose how to respond to another person, the commitment to respond is not something the subject can choose. The connections between Levinas's earlier and later works are evident in the language he uses. It is not accidental that Levinas describes ethical subjectivity by using the terms "gravity," "seriousness," "drama," and "restlessness"—all of which describe the relationship with existence in the earlier works. Just as I cannot choose the relationship with existence, I cannot choose the brutal fact of ethical responsibility. The "reminder of commitment to exist" develops into a "trauma" that the subject can never represent to itself as a thought.

If in the early works, the subject finds itself again and again hypostasized and seeking to escape the anonymity of existence, in the later works the subject is recurrently and traumatically called to respond to the Other. As in the earlier works, this trauma is not explained by an external force that simply imposes itself on a subject. Rather, the call to respond to the Other is now framed as a movement from the ego to the self—a movement that the earlier works identifies with the relationship with existence. In the relationship with the Other, I become closer to my own (non-representable) self. As David Weston points out, Levinas's claim in *Otherwise than Being* that "there is a non-coinciding of the ego with itself, restlessness, insomnia...pain which confounds the ego or in vertigo draws it like an abyss, and prevents it from assuming the other that wounds it" seems like something he would say in his earlier works regarding the relationship with existence. The very structure of the relationship with the Other is already found—even with the same language—in Levinas's earlier account of the "there is". The early account of the relationship with existence and the later account of ethical subjectivity both rest on an account of subjectivity as restless. That is, the early and later Levinas maintains that subjectivity is not defined by the individual's capacities, actions, or rationality, but is rather by a pre-epistemic feeling of restlessness, a restlessness that is at the heart of subjectivity. The later works, similarly, describe ethical subjectivity as a primordial restlessness. This ethical restlessness, like the desire for Infinity in *Totality and Infinity*, cannot be satisfied: the more I do for the Other, the more restless I become, and the more responsible I become. If in *From Existence to Existents* I cannot lay down the brutal fact of existence like I can a piece of luggage, in his later philosophy and I cannot put aside my infinite responsibility for the Other.

It is important to note that the affective sources of meaning that constitute singularity and restlessness are not events that can be resolved into relationships of knowing, for which there is a object corresponding to a thought. Chapters II and III

largely deal with how Levinas is able to describe forms of meaning that do not reveal themselves completely to consciousness. While in *From Existence to Existents* hypostasis names that “wakefulness” through which the individual wrests itself away from the anonymity of the “there is” and posits its singularity, in *Totality and Infinity* the earlier theme of hypostasis develops into an account of the “anterior posterior” condition. Levinas draws from Descartes a distinction between chronological and logical forms of meaning. For Descartes, the Cogito comes chronologically first, but God, as the condition for the Cogito, is discovered after the fact. This idea of discovering a condition “after the fact” is essential to understanding Levinas’s account of subjectivity. While the self affirms itself first in the order of time, the relationship with the takes a logical priority. In *Otherwise than Being*, this “logical priority” develops into the account of the immemorial past and informs Levinas’s notions of trauma and recurrence. Furthermore, the account of the anterior posterior condition anticipates the distinction between time as “synchrony” and “diachrony”, the latter of which refers to the way that the relationship with the Other cannot be situated in a time-series or a present.

In Levinas the themes of singularity, restlessness, and subjectivity are all united by the idea that to be an individual is to find one’s existence rooted in passive forms of meaning that do not arise out of a decision or conscious act. These themes have a direct impact on the idea of the political in Levinas’s later thought. While for Levinas the subject is indeed a historical being, selfhood cannot be reduced to a function of one’s historical context. That is, for Levinas selfhood is uprooted from history and is essentially a meaning without context. Levinas introduces politics into his philosophy as a way of rehabilitating contextual forms of meaning that his ethical thought puts to the side. So, for Levinas politics and context are essentially intertwined: as soon as it becomes a matter of what to do in this particular situation, or a matter of how to decide between two people who each place equal demands on me, then there is a call to move beyond ethics into politics and justice. To be clear, then, for Levinas ethics has nothing to do with making decisions in particular situations, but instead concerns the encounter with singularity that each particular situation potentially covers up. Levinas is not concerned with how to practice ethics, but with the sense or meaning of it. In this, Levinas remains a phenomenologist, for he is inquiring into the essential meaning of the ethical.

For Levinas, the meaning of the ethical should not rely on any historical context. The subject and the Other are for Levinas uprooted from history and are pure meanings without context. However, it is the case that each encounter with another person does take place in a particular context, and that it is necessary to decide exactly what to do. Levinas’s idea of the ethical does not and cannot inform such concrete situations, and if we accept the terms of Levinas’s position, it need not inform them. After all, Levinas’s task is to describe the meaning of the ethical in general, what must be necessary in order for there to be ethical meaning at all. In this sense, Levinas is a member of the

transcendental tradition. Given that the ethical is itself not rooted in a context, there must be some way for it to “reveal” (Levinas’s own term) itself in history. After all, in the preface to *Totality and Infinity* Levinas says that the idea of Infinity is reflected in history, even if its meaning cannot be reduced to it. This is to say that Levinas is not affirming a transcendent realm of meaning, but is rather addressing the subject’s very experience of itself and the world. Through the notions of hypostasis, anterior posteriority, trauma, and recurrence, Levinas names events that indeed can and do happen in particular times and places, but which can never reduced to any particular occurrence.

The introduction of the “third” in Levinas’s later philosophy is meant to address the fact that we are always faced with a plurality of others, each of whom, in their singularity, approach me as a Face with the call to infinite responsibility. However, since each singular Face is a meaning without context, it is not clear how the relationship between a subject and many singular faces can in any re-introduce context in Levinas’s philosophy. Since for Levinas the political cannot determine its own direction, and must take its cue from the ethical, it is not possible for a context-free ethical meaning to any force in any specific situation. Although, as Kant, the ethical is experienced as an imperative, there is no content in that imperative that can inform our everyday decision-making. Levinas’s idea of the ethical has a normative force, but it is unable to produce norms. The impotency of Levinas’s philosophy to inform specific situations is a symptom of his decision in his earlier philosophy to define human identity outside of all contexts. Indeed, we can already see in *On Escape* the contextual problems that a philosophy that is beyond Being faces. The earlier works on escape are indeed close to his later account of subjectivity, since they both rely on the same position that the individual’s identity cannot be pinned down to a single definition. In this, Levinas remains close to existentialists such as Sartre, although Levinas does not follow Sartre in maintaining that the relationship with the Other is a source of conflict.

If it is the case that Levinas fails to account for context in the way I would like him to, then why should we even bother with Levinas at all? Why not turn to some other thinker who resists the quasi-theological language and the murky waters of the phenomenological method—which, let us be honest, has been modified and tinkered with by so many thinkers that the term “phenomenology” no longer has a clear meaning? The central merit of Levinas’s philosophy is not in anything he succeeds in doing. Rather, it is the critical force of his philosophy that makes it a powerful tool. If I am not mistaken, Levinas is the first thinker to argue that ethical meaning has priority over truth. This is not to say that human beings are essentially good, or that everyone is a saint, but rather that the recognition of goodness has a more fundamental role in human relationships than the recognition of truth. This is not to say that facts can be reduced to values, to use the language of contemporary ethical discourse, but rather that the recognition of goodness (the later Levinas prefers “holiness”) is not something that can be captured in any theoretical attitude towards the world. Rather, as soon as one recognizes goodness, it has

already does its work on the subject. Again, goodness is recognized “after the fact.” It might come second in the order of knowledge, but for Levinas it comes first in the order of logic.

This account of ethical affectivity, I think, is perhaps the most important idea in Levinas’s philosophy. Levinas refers to a scene in Grossman’s *Life and Fate* in which an elderly woman suddenly gives her last piece of bread to a hungry Nazi soldier, and does so without reason or understanding. Ethics is not something we choose or have to understand, but rather something that happens to us. Each ethical moment is a reminder of a commitment, a trace of an irrevocable contract that animates a “one must.” This goodness without reason or promise is at the heart of Levinas’s philosophy, and like the earlier works, it points to those acute experiences in which I find myself at odds with myself, with an imperative to act, even if in the end I choose not to. Levinas’s philosophy is not meant to tell us to be good people, nor is it meant to tell us why we should be moral. Rather Levinas’s task consists in describing those acute moments in which we find ourselves with an imperative to respond. Whether one chooses to help the Other is one question. Levinas’s position is not affected by the empirical fact that one can and does choose to ignore the other person. Rather, Levinas’s point is that even the choice to ignore the other person already presupposes that I implicitly recognize that there is a demand to respond. I cannot choose the brutal fact of having to respond, although I can choose how to respond. And in each case, the encounter with the Other is potentially a situation in which I am called to justify myself, to give an account of myself (to borrow the language of Judith Butler). It is this imperative to respond, as beyond reason and without understanding, that animates the thought of Emmanuel Levinas.

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