Levinas: Subjectivity, Affectivity and Desire.

Thesis Summary

The thesis argues that Emmanuel Levinas’s later concept of ethical subjectivity, explicated in his late work *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*, can really only be understood by taking into account the very early work *On Escape*. The thesis argues that the concept of ethical subjectivity emerges from his work via his attempts to articulate transcendence. Transcendence itself is ultimately identified with ethics. My thesis traces his continued attempts at a satisfactory conception of transcendence through the early works (*Existence and Existents* and *Time and the Other*), and via his other major work *Totality and Infinity*.

*On Escape* articulates a very specific notion of need in terms of a need for escape which forms the conceptual seeds of Levinas’s idea of transcendence, and which will ultimately become his notion of metaphysical Desire. His notion of ethics as the arresting of the spontaneous ego’s conatus by the face of the Other, will turn out to ultimately requires the articulation of ethical subjectivity. The notion of ethical subjectivity is made possible, and thus his work reaches maturity, by the introduction of the notion of the trace. I argue that the idea of subjectivity as openness and vulnerability and the notion of an otherwise than being can be traced to the early work.

My thesis takes as its starting point Levinas's engagement and criticism of the philosophy of Martin Heidegger. I argue that Levinas can best be understood as always in some sense in conversation with Heidegger.
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Introduction

Ethics or metaphysics

One of the central problems faced by anyone reading Emmanuel Levinas’s philosophy as a whole is how the earlier work is to be understood in the light of the later. How are we to re-read *Totality and Infinity* (*Totaïte et Infini*) (1961), with its use of ontological language, in the light of *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence* (*Autrement qu’être ou Au-delà de l’essence*) (1974) which explicitly rejects such language in favour of what he calls ‘ethical language’? Or how are we to understand Levinas’s claim in *Time and the Other* that the feminine is the absolutely other when it is given a rather subordinate role in *Totality and Infinity* in favour of the face? And how are we to read Levinas’s early works— I am thinking specifically of the rather Heideggerian *On Escape* (*De l’évasion*) (1935) — in the light of the later explicitly anti-Heideggerian works?

My reading of Levinas is predicated on the assumption that there is a consistent trajectory to his thought and thus that the apparent contradictions can be largely reconciled in a reading that sees his work as centring round certain principal motifs. Put another way I see Levinas’s work as concentrating on certain crucial questions and his various positions as the trying out of different, but crucially related, ways of dealing with such questions. Specifically I will argue that a concern with the nature of the human, and particularly with human subjectivity thought largely in terms of the body, prior to its social constitution, is central to Levinas’s thinking. This will come as no surprise to those who know Levinas’s work. What I hope will come as news is the way I trace Levinas’s notion of subjectivity right back to his early Heideggerian works. I thus propose to read Levinas against a Heideggerian backdrop. We will see a Levinas more complicated and troubling than is often thought, but nevertheless a Levinas who clearly formulates, from various different angles, a specific vision of what it is to be a human being.

It is usual to see Levinas as a philosopher who prioritises ethics, an ethics that centralises the role of the face of the Other: and this is certainly a correct characterisation. The titles of two fine books devoted to Levinas illustrate this: The collection entitled *Ethics as First Philosophy* edited by Adriaan T. Peperzak and the comparative study *Interpreting Otherwise than Heidegger: Emmanuel Levinas’s Ethics as First Philosophy* by Robert John Sheffler Manning. Both of which I have benefited from immensely. I am far from disagreeing with this reading. Yet there has also developed an equally important set of readings which emphasise the role of transcendence over ethics in Levinas’s thought. Stella Sandford is perhaps the first to clearly articulate this, certainly she is exemplary. In her excellent study *The Metaphysics of Love: Gender and Transcendence in Levinas* she writes:

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My contention – one not entirely absent from in the existing literature on Levinas, but here elaborated in much greater detail – is that for Levinas ethics is the way to metaphysics, that ‘ethics’ is the phenomenological elaboration or experiential attestation of a more fundamental metaphysical claim that would reassert the necessity of a thinking of ‘transcendence’ as a first principle.4

Levinas’s own words seem to confirm this reading. In Jacques Derrida’s sympathetic reading of Levinas, Adieu to Emmanuel Levinas, the author testifies to the fact that in conversation Levinas confided to him that: “You know, one often speaks of ethics to describe what I do, but what really interests me in the end is not ethics, not ethics alone, but the holy, the holiness of the holy.”5 If it is legitimate to identify metaphysics with the search for transcendence — and I will argue that this is the case for Levinas — and also identify the quest for transcendence with the attempt to glimpse the holy, which I think is also the case, then it would seem that Levinas is a metaphysician first and an ethical philosopher afterwards. It might therefore appear that I am trying to have it both ways when I say that I also fully endorse this reading of Levinas’s work. I hope my thesis will show that I am not trying to have it both ways but that in an important respect it is both ways: ethics is transcendence and transcendence is ethics. We can illustrate this by referencing a remark that Levinas made in an interview with François Poiré. At a certain point the interviewer tries to get Levinas to specify the precise location of his theme of responsibility for the Other:

Q.: But this theme of responsibility, is it a metaphysical or a moral theme?

A.: I don’t know the difference to which you are referring.6

Clearly a third year undergraduate could make a stab at distinguishing these areas of philosophy, but the point is that as Levinas understands them there is no clear dividing line: ethics is metaphysics and metaphysics is ethics. Now since my subject is ‘ethical subjectivity’ then it follows from what has been said that the thesis could with equal justice have ‘metaphysical subjectivity’ in the title. As we will see the way Levinas’s thought is articulated from early to late would seem to favour such a designation. But when we reach Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence we will see that the early work requires re-reading in the light of the later and in this way a more coherent narrative emerges.

We cannot however claim that it was Levinas’s intention when writing On Escape, for example, to begin a theme which can be most fruitfully understood in the light of later writings. This would be to attribute a level of prescience to the author which is clearly unreasonable. However we should, I believe, see him as groping toward an articulation of the human which only really comes to fruition in the later works and so is already present in rudimentary outline at the beginning. I want to show that his early concentration on Heideggerian themes led him in a completely different direction to Heidegger, toward a kind of humanism, but a humanism that does not centralise

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4 Sandford (2000), p. 1
5 Derrida(1999), p. 4
6 Emmanuel Levinas (2001), p. 56
reason, freedom or the self. Rather, to quote the title of one of his important books, it is a *Humanism of the Other (Humanisme de l'autre homme)*.  

By way of introduction I want to first sketch out the very broad contours of Levinas’s philosophy so that I can introduce specifically Levinasian terms. I follow this line in order that, later, I might be able to focus in on specific aspects of his thinking without distracting digressions on the way he uses certain crucial terms and concepts. Once I have done this I will outline the structure of the thesis and specify the relation between the chapters.

**Experience as Encounter with Otherness**

As with most original philosophers Levinas understood his own philosophy as throwing into question the whole of Western philosophy as it had being traditionally conceived. This in turn required him to have some kind of summary of what this tradition amounted to. By virtue of such a summary and the critique he deployed against the tradition, he found it necessary to both use concepts that belong to this tradition, and to radicalise or reinterpret their import. So in order to clarify the very broad outlines of his thinking, it will be useful to dwell upon the significance he bestowed upon two very general concepts, the concepts of ‘Same’ and ‘Other’. This will help us to introduce those other distinctively Levinasian concepts as we proceed. Levinas adopts and adapts these concepts from Plato’s *Sophist*, where they feature as the highest of the categories of being.

I will clarify them by looking mainly at his 1957 paper ‘Philosophy and the Idea of Infinity,’ (*Totality and Infinity (Totaite et Infini)* was published in 1961) which is in any case an excellent introduction to his overall thinking. Levinas begins by claiming that, ‘Every philosophy seeks truth.’ He concedes that this is too general and empty to be definitive of philosophy, but also characterises, for example, scientific thought. Nevertheless he draws out from this broad characterisation two possible directions that the ‘philosophical spirit’ can take. Primarily he insists that *truth implies experience*. If this is a defence of empiricism then it remains a vague empiricism since no definite content has yet being given to the notion of ‘experience.’ However given the notion of ‘experience’ we can specify that for experience to be experience, even at this very formal level, it is necessary that the experiencer encounter something distinct from him or her self. In Levinas’s terminology; it is necessary that he or she encounter something Other. Yet this distinctness, this Otherness, proves to be quite demanding for Levinas. We might feel that when we encounter nature or the world, external to our minds, as philosophers often put it, we are dealing with Otherness. But for Levinas this is not the case:

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7 Levinas (2006b)
8 We will see that there are significant exceptions to this ‘whole’.
9 I use capitals in order to emphasise the philosophical centrality of these concepts in Levinas’s philosophy. It should be added, however, that in order for them to function philosophically they must retain much of their ordinary connotation. The concept of ‘the Other’ will always be capitalised in this thesis if it has the specifically Levinasian sense. This is not always Levinas’s practice but it will help with clarity.
10 Plato (1993), 254b-256b
12 Ibid
For experience deserves its name only if it transports us beyond what constitutes our nature. Genuine experience must even lead us beyond the nature that surrounds us, which is not jealous for the marvellous secrets it harbours, and, in complicity with men, submits to their reasons and inventions; in it men also feel themselves at home. Truth would thus designate the outcome of a movement that leaves a world that is intimate and familiar, even if we have not yet explored it completely, and goes towards the stranger, towards a beyond, as Plato puts it. Truth would imply more than exteriority: transcendence.¹³

On this understanding truth comes about by virtue of a dynamic that leads us beyond the familiar and homely, towards the unfamiliar the strange; towards what Levinas will call transcendence. The motivation for this dynamic is not simply intellectual curiosity but what he will designate ‘metaphysical Desire.’¹⁴ We will see presently that the idea of a neutral intellectual curiosity about such matters is opposed to the whole spirit of Levinas’s thought. In this way the ‘philosophical spirit’ leads us out towards Otherness. Thus, if this is a form of empiricism—and it seems right to call it one—then, for all its formality, it is a very demanding one. Certainly it goes beyond classical empiricism, since it requires more than an encounter with that which is outside of our minds, something given: it requires that we stand in relation to, and move towards, absolute alterity. Such a way of understanding experience implies that our encounter with Otherness is such that it teaches us something new which locates it beyond the notion of knowledge as recollection (anamnesis) central to the nature of Socratic teaching.¹⁵ It thus challenges a tradition which understands philosophy in terms of a dialogue of the soul with itself and the philosophe as a midwife to a priori but forgotten ideas. If experience is to teach us anything then it requires that it be made possible by Otherness as an instructive newness or surprise. Moreover, as we will see, such a conception, as Levinas’s sees things, goes beyond phenomenology. It is this beyond, this transcendence, which Levinas designates by the term ‘Other,’ and it is the articulation of this and the movement toward it, which his philosophy attempts to achieve. The goal is far from modest:

Philosophy would be concerned with the absolutely other; it would be heteronomy itself. Let us go further. Distance alone does not suffice to distinguish transcendence from exteriority. Truth, the daughter of experience, has very lofty pretensions; it opens upon the very dimension of the ideal. In this way philosophy means metaphysics, and metaphysics inquires about the divine.¹⁶

Thus philosophy is essentially metaphysics, in the sense that metaphysics is understood as knowledge or movement toward the beyond and even the divine. I specify this fact of a movement toward Otherness in order to emphasise that such experience is not simply a passive

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¹³ Ibid: We should note that the subtitle of Totality and Infinity is ‘An Essay on Exteriority’ and that there ‘Exteriority’ refers precisely to the transcendence to which it is here opposed. Levinas (1969)

¹⁴ Often he will refer to it as merely ‘Desire’, with a capital. I will deal with this notion in depth later.

¹⁵ See for example Plato (1993), 263e4 and 264a9 and many other places.

contemplation of something wholly Other; rather it constitutes a form of practical engagement in a way that we will try to explain. It follows that the term ‘metaphysics’ is rendered very differently in Levinas’s corpus than how he regards the tradition as having understood it. Largely he understands traditional philosophy to be closed in on itself and, as he says; ‘narcissistic.’\footnote{Ibid, p. 49} However it should be noted that he would insist that his is the more originary meaning: and the same could be said of ‘the divine.’

Truth and Freedom

Truth as a philosophical quest can also be conceived in a different way. According to this understanding in order for philosophy to achieve truth it must be \textit{free} to pursue its thoughts wherever they lead. It must therefore be unconstrained in its exercise. If the thinker is not free then it seems to follow that he or she is constrained by coercion, seduced by the charms of rhetoric or passively absorbing opinion (\textit{doxa}). In such a situation Levinas will claim that the thinker is not in the lucid element of thought, but the opaque element characteristic of the intoxication of what Levinas calls ‘participation.’\footnote{Levinas borrowed the concept of ‘participation’ from the work of the anthropologist Lucian Lévy-Bruhl. It designates a pre-rational mystical mentality characteristic of the savage mind. In such a state the human individual does not differentiate him or her self from other people, animals or other parts of nature. It is characteristic of pagan ritualistic or magical states of mind. See ‘Lévy-Bruhl and Contemporary Philosophy’ in Levinas (2006a), pp. 34-45} In other words; the philosopher is dominated in his or her thinking by another; whereas insofar as thought is free, in the sense specified, it must remain in itself. That is to say; it cannot be alienated from itself as source of its own thoughts. It follows that for the thinker to be a thinker it is necessary that he or she remain self-same throughout his or her philosophical peregrinations. This self-sameness, fundamentally the \textit{for-itself}, is required to be the source of all rational thinking, of all truth. This is essentially the formal requirement fulfilled by the \textit{Ego Cogito} of Descartes, the ‘I think’ of Kant, the Transcendental Ego of Husserl, the \textit{être-pour-soi} of Sartre and the Absolute Idea of Hegel and so on:

What else is this freedom but the thinking being’s refusal to be alienated in the adherence, the preserving of his nature, his identity, the feat of remaining the same despite the unknown lands into which thought seems to lead? Perceived in this way, philosophy would be engaged in reducing to the same all that is opposed to it as \textit{other}. It would be moving towards \textit{auto-nomy}, a stage in which nothing irreducible would limit thought any longer, in which, consequently, thought, not limited, would be free. Philosophy would thus be tantamount to the conquest of being by man over the course of history.\footnote{Emmanuel Levinas ‘Philosophy and the Idea of Infinity,’ in Levinas (1998d), p. 48}

It is this that Levinas refers to as the philosophy of the Same. His claim is that the dominant majority of Western philosophies have essentially followed this latter pattern while, by virtue of that very fact, suppressing the former (i.e. Movement toward Otherness). ‘The choice of Western
philosophy has most often been on the side of freedom and the same.\(^{20}\) This, according to Levinas, remains true of Heidegger’s philosophy which explicitly grounds truth on freedom, even if such freedom is not seen as a ‘property of human beings.’\(^{21}\) Indeed Heidegger is a central and perhaps culminating figure in this notion of autonomy and thus the major figure for Levinas’s polemic. Undoubtedly having in mind Heidegger’s ‘On the Essence of Truth’\(^{22}\) Levinas writes:

> To be sure, for Heidegger man’s freedom depends on the light of Being, and thus does not seem to be a principle. But that was also the case in classical idealism, where free will was considered the lowest form of freedom, and true freedom obeyed universal reason. The Heideggerian freedom is obedient, but obedience makes it arise and does not put it into question, does not reveal its injustice.\(^{23}\)

Thus Levinas integrates into the question of the pursuit of truth, or philosophy, an ethical questioning. In encountering transcendence the self is not simply speculatively struck by the Other but deeply affected to the point of this Otherness taking the form of a command. We will see presently how this is characterised and how Otherness throws freedom into question and accuses it of injustice.

It should here be insisted that the choice between autonomy and heteronomy, between Same and Other, is not a choice between the rational and the irrational, but between two readings of the rationality of the philosophical spirit. Much of Levinas’s critical work is devoted to exposing Western philosophy as an opting for autonomy and thus what he calls the economy of the Same, whereas his constructive work is an attempt to develop a philosophy which pays due respect to Otherness. In this way Levinas tries to produce a philosophy which, as he understands the term, can rightly be called *metaphysics*.

The self-sameness of thinking characteristic of this second understanding of the philosophical spirit—that of autonomy—requires some elaboration. I have indicated that the ego appears to be the site where the reduction of the Other to the Same takes place. The ego here, in the first instance, is to be understood as the knowing subject, for-itself and autonomous. Thus the I, as narcissistically self-involved, is the power of reducing all Otherness to the Same. Levinas writes:

> The fact that being unveils itself, that it shines forth, that its being consists in being true, implies that the contours of being fit into the human scale and the measures of thought. Truth is the original adequation that all adequation presupposes. Indeed, the I of knowledge is at once the Same par excellence, the very event of

\(^{20}\) Ibid

\(^{21}\) Martin Heidegger ‘On the Essence of Truth’ Translated by John Sallis in Heidegger (1998) p. 143

\(^{22}\) Ibid, pp. 136-154

identification and the melting pot where every Other is transmuted into the Same. It is the philosopher’s stone of philosophical alchemy.24

The philosophy of the Same is therefore predominantly a philosophy of the autonomous knowing ego. The adequation of being to thought is the precursor to bringing everything down to human size, and thus ultimately to the philosophy of finitude characteristic of one way of reading the early Heidegger and also of Existentialism. There can be little doubt that Levinas is assimilating this philosophy of the Same to a philosophical trajectory which will culminate in one way of understanding the Nietzschean notion of the will to power.25 This notion has its origins in the very manner that philosophy got kicked off:

Was not philosophy born, on Greek soil, to dethrone opinion, in which all tyrannies lurk and threaten? With opinion the most subtle and treacherous poison seeps into the soul, altering it in its depths, making of it another.26

Participation

Thus philosophy grew in opposition to opinion; to plant knowledge (episteme) where there once grew the poison ivy of mere opinion (doxa). Philosophy, as the philosophy of the Same, developed to create and defend autonomous subjects capable of thinking for themselves. Such a development can hardly be deplored; it appears to free us from the superstition of opinion, which, according to Levinas, is an exposure to forms of violence:

But this penetration and this prestige of opinion presuppose a mythical stage of being in which souls participate in one another, in the sense that Lévy-Bruhl has given to the term. Against the turbid and disturbing participation opinion presupposes, philosophy willed souls that are separate and in a sense impenetrable. The idea of the same, the idea of freedom, seemed to offer the most firm guarantee of such a separation.27

If indeed the philosophy of the Same was ‘willed’ to escape the primitive intoxication of participation, then given Levinas’s use of the word ‘alchemy’28 to characterise the art by which the knowing I transmutes all Otherness into the Same, it perhaps follows that this philosophy is not quite sober enough. This is indeed Levinas’s contention. What he wishes to do is lead philosophy

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24 Emmanuel Levinas ‘Transcendence and Height’ in Levinas (1996b), p. 13. The reference to ‘unveiling’ and much else in this passage alludes to the philosophy of Martin Heidegger who, it would seem, did more than any other philosopher to dislodge the knowing ego from its place of prestige in philosophy. We will see that as Levinas reads him, Heidegger did not really depart from the philosophy of the Same.
25 There are, of course, other readings of Nietzsche which are more in line with Levinas’s way of viewing things here. I am thinking particularly of the Michel Foucault reading where the ego itself is the outcome of the power-play of impersonal forces.
27 Ibid
28 See citation above, footnote 11.
back to a point before there was a split between the theoretical and the practical. But this situation before such a breach should not be construed in Heideggerian terms, as a comprehending comportment toward entities in the world that are ready-to-hand. Rather he wishes to indicate an experience wherein Otherness is encountered such that it pertains both to the true and the good, in a way that predates autonomy of thought and act. We will see where he locates such a founding moment.

As an exploration of the spiritual history of mankind this understanding of participation, as a stage where opinion rules, might perhaps seem a little dubious. What Levinas seems to be driving at, however, is that opinion, uninformed by reasoned thinking for oneself, originates and spreads like fashion or disease; by way of contamination or osmosis. Without a closed region of the ego, essentially shut in and thus shutting out, the self is conceived as a permeable mass of affectations and passions, without any determinate direction. Thus a direction can be imposed on the self by virtue of ecstatic rites and the general magic which pervades the seemingly immutable social milieu. He thus reads the emergence of philosophy as commencing with Socrates’s rationalism and optimism. For Socrates autonomous reason is capable of getting hold of the true and the good by virtue of its own exercise. The role of the philosopher is that of midwife: ‘This is Socrates’s teaching, when he leaves the master only the exercise of maieutics: every lesson introduced into the soul was already there.’ In a sense Levinas’s way of reading the inauguration of philosophy is similar to that given by Nietzsche in The Birth of Tragedy. There Nietzsche understands pre-Classical Greece to have been dominated by a Dionysian stage, where intoxicating rites and the unleashing of savage urges were central. Hellenic culture emerges, for Nietzsche, out of the necessity of taming these urges and making the horror of life, or more specifically of death, bearable. To this end they invented the Olympian gods:

In order to live at all the Greeks had to construct these deities. The Apollonian need for beauty had to develop the Olympian hierarchy of joy by slow degrees from the original titanic hierarchy of terror, as roses are seen to break from a thorny thicket.

For Nietzsche it was Euripides and Socrates who were responsible for ruining this carefully constructed aesthetic world—necessary for controlling without suppressing our barbaric urges—by introducing an optimistic view of human beings as reasonable and autonomous.

Levinas does not share Nietzsche’s nostalgia for pre-Socratic Greece, but traces his intellectual heritage to a different ancient world: that of Israel. He nevertheless seems to share a sense that the initiation of a culture dominated by reason understood in terms of the exercise of autonomous freedom was inaugurated on Greek soil in opposition to a more primitive stage. Yet he does not

29 See Chapter 1
31 Nietzsche (1967)
32 Ibid, p. 30
accept Nietzsche’s diagnosis of this Socratic move as being the commencement of a decadent civilisation, represented by Platonism and Christianity, unable to find the strength to live in a tragic culture.

The more primitive formations which Classical Greek philosophy appeared to oppose were tribal social formations which were permeated with the myths of blood, soil and rootedness. Levinas will identify the primitive urges present in such formations with those that the Nazis exploited, and for which, on Levinas’s reading of him, Heidegger still felt nostalgia. Philosophy, as a questioning of the old gods, is a threat to social formations which grow on the soil of such superstitions. Was this not why Socrates was put to death? Or put another way: it could be argued that societies prior to the inauguration of the democratic state in Athens were exclusively founded on myths. The new rational order was instituted precisely to combat such mythical foundations and set out from rational principles. Such institutional changes required that humans be rational animals in the sense of autonomous thinkers and agents.

**Philosophy’s Recourse to Neuters**

According to Levinas the *ego cogito* is the site of the Same par excellence, ‘the natural crucible of this transmutation of the other into the same.’ However the manner in which Western philosophy has been able to transform all Otherness into the Same is what Levinas calls: ‘its recourse to neuters’. By this Levinas is making the point that entities in their alterity are grasped by means of *mediation*. The singularity of the unique one is subsumed under a general concept, or is conceived in terms of a myriad of relations, it is never encountered immediately and from its own nature. By this means the Other is turned into a theme to be comprehended. The Other is taken hold of, grasped, as we say, or, as I just said, *comprehended*:

> It fits under a concept already, or dissolves into relations. It falls back into the network of a priori ideas, which I bring to bear, so as to capture it. To know is to surprise in the individual confronted, in this wounding stone, this upward plunging pine, this roaring lion, that by which it is not this very individual, this foreigner, that by which it is already betrayed and by which it gives the free will, vibrant in all certainty, hold over it, is grasped and conceived, enters into a concept. Cognition consists in grasping the individual, which alone exists, not in its singularity which does not count, but in its generality, of which alone there is science.

Thus this recourse to neuters amounts to reducing all Otherness to the Same. If the ego is the crucible wherein all Otherness is transmuted into the same, then it is by the use of neuters that this is achieved. The unique individual is not allowed to remain in its, his or her singularity but is subsumed under a concept, or understood in terms of its interrelations with others.

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34 Ibid, p 50
As a complaint about the use of neuters this is most effective when we are talking about individual human beings. By virtue of this movement of rationalisation or generalisation a conception of subjectivity is achieved which has the effect of marginalising difference. But for Levinas the problem cannot simply be addressed by allowing for a postmodern respect for the plurality of sorts. Rather he wishes to get hold of a ‘thought’ which is able to accept Otherness in its singularity. Indeed, as we will see, it is precisely here, at the point of respecting the human individual in his or her uniqueness, that Levinas locates the site of our encounter with absolute Otherness. Certainly he notes ‘this upward plunging pine, this roaring lion’ and so on, but I think that initially it is with respect to other people that the point has the most impact. We are aware of how offensive it is to be understood merely in terms of our race, sex, class, occupation, physical appearance or some other superficial aspect which as it were neutralises our uniqueness. We know that we should not be dealt with as if we were nothing but a number; number being the ultimate neutral. Our relations with other people suffer damage not only when they conceptualise us badly, but when they conceptualise us at all. We do not fit exhaustively into a set of generalities. When someone says ‘I knew you’d say that’, or ‘That’s typical of you’ our feelings are rightly hurt. The complex and onerous business of dealing with another individual is shirked by such phrases; this is a recourse to neuters that allow the Other to be predicted and controlled. From this it is a matter of degrees to treating the human individual as an object or mere obstacle. In other words it is by virtue of such recourse that the possibility of exploitation is born. Levinas sums up: ‘Reason, which reduces the other, is appropriation and power.’ This offers us a clue to the nature of this quest for Otherness; it appears to be an endeavour to encounter singularity. This singularity, as we will see, is exemplified by what Levinas calls the face of the Other person. I will come to this presently.

The Idea of the Infinite

According to Levinas the tradition of Western Philosophy has been largely dominated by philosophies of the Same. Yet there has been within this very tradition occasional recognition of the absolutely Other; of transcendence. There is the notion of the good as above Being (epekeina tēs ousias) in Plato’s writings and there is the notion of the idea of the infinite in me in Descartes third Meditation. Let us take the latter. In the Third Meditation, after subjecting his belief in the external world to radical doubt, Descartes concludes that it is possible that the whole world originates from him. Or, as Levinas puts the matter, ‘Descartes thought that by myself I could account for the sky and the sun despite all their magnificence.’ What Descartes actually says is:

As regards the ideas that represent other people, animals or angels, I understand easily that they could be fabricated from ideas that I have of myself, of physical things and of God, even if there were no people, animals or angels in existence.

38 Ibid
37 The most explicit passage in this vein is Republic 509b. Plato (1987)
38 Descartes (1998), pp. 43-46
39 Emmanuel Levinas ‘Transcendence and Height’ in Levinas (1996b), p. 15
As regards the ideas of physical things, there is nothing in them that is so great that it seems incapable of having been derived from myself.\textsuperscript{40}

This is a clear expression of what I have been calling the philosophy of the Same. The \textit{Ego Cogito} is self-enclosed and requires no outside help to dream up the world. It is thus free in its activity.

However when Descartes comes to consider in this light the idea of God he does not draw the same conclusion. Rather he concludes that such an idea, because it is the idea of an ‘infinite substance’,\textsuperscript{41} could in no way have originated from himself; being as he is a finite being. In other words he finds that the idea of the infinite is in a certain sense beyond the capacity of thought. As Levinas puts it: ‘In thinking infinity the I from the first \textit{thinks more than it thinks}.\textsuperscript{42}’ This paradoxical formulation reflects the enigmatic nature of this idea, which becomes central to Levinas’s philosophy. For Levinas the idea of the infinite has not been discovered by us, cooked up by us, or come to us by virtue of recollection (as Plato might think) rather, ‘It has been put into us.’\textsuperscript{43} Descartes formulates the matter in terms of God as craftsman and the human being as the products of His work:

Evidently it is not surprising if God, in creating me, endowed me with this idea so that it would be, as it were, the artisan’s trademark imprinted on his work. Nor is it necessary that the mark be distinct from the work itself.\textsuperscript{44}

Hence the idea of infinity, as Descartes understands it, is not distinct from the human. Yet it overflows our capacity to contain it in thought. Therefore the idea of infinity is precisely what we have been looking for; a notion which points to a radical Otherness and which cannot be integrated into the ego. Yet one to which we stand in a certain enigmatic relation. However Levinas does not retain the terminology of ‘artisan’ and ‘work’, nor does he consider the thought as a proof of God’s existence, as Descartes seems to have. Rather, as he puts it: ‘But what we find most distinctive is the Cartesian analysis of the idea of infinity, although we shall retain only the \textit{formal} design of the structure it outlines.’\textsuperscript{45} This formal structure of the idea of infinity is precisely the model for Levinas’s philosophy of Otherness. The relationship to infinity, testified to by the presence of the idea of infinity, retains radical separation. The structures produced by the philosophy of the Same Levinas will refer to as ‘Totality’, and those that characterise the philosophy of Otherness he will designate in terms of ‘Infinity’. It is from here that he derives the title of one of his most famous works \textit{Totality and Infinity}.\textsuperscript{46}

\textsuperscript{40} Descartes (1998), pp. 36-37
\textsuperscript{41} Ibid, p. 38
\textsuperscript{42} Emmanuel Levinas ‘Philosophy and the Idea of Infinity’ in Levinas (1998d), p. 54
\textsuperscript{43} Ibid
\textsuperscript{44} Descartes (1998), p. 43
\textsuperscript{45} Emanuel Levinas ‘Philosophy and the Idea of Infinity’ in Levinas (1998d), p. 53
\textsuperscript{46} Levinas (1969)
This notion of infinity, even though only formal at present, requires a bit of unpacking. Descartes understands the infinite in the Third Meditation as that which has all perfections, and thus he identified it with God. Levinas, despite retaining only the formal aspects of the concept, does not deny this identification. Yet for him the divine cannot really be understood as a substance, which is how Descartes understands God. He nevertheless retains the superlative interpretation of the idea of the infinite. At the end of the Third Meditation Descartes writes:

I should pause here for a brief while to contemplate God himself, to consider his attributes and to contemplate and adore the beauty of this immense light insofar as the eye of my darkened mind can tolerate it.\textsuperscript{47}

Usually this is seen as the philosopher paying lip service to official religion or as a rhetorical flourish to end a chapter, essentially marginal. But Levinas, in what we might understand as a kind of clôtural\textsuperscript{48} or deconstructive reading, asks whether we might not see it as an essential part of Descartes philosophical view. He writes:

And yet, at the end of the Third Meditation – a text which I have always exploited – Descartes comes to admire the divine Majesty, as if, suddenly, he had glimpsed a face behind the arguments. One could take this as a turn of phrase, as a fine ending to a chapter, but one can also perhaps take it seriously.\textsuperscript{49}

We will need to see what, for Levinas, taking this seriously means. Thus it is necessary to give some concrete content to this formal structure. What could possibly constitute a concrete example of the relationship with infinity? In order to reach this, it might be useful to turn once more to the philosophy of the Same and bring out the nature of Levinas’s criticism in more detail.

The Philosophy of the Same as Conatus Essendi

The philosophy of the Same, as I have so far characterised it, is more than a mere theoretical stance. I have indicated that its exercise of freedom is akin to the will to power and that its manner of conceptualisation is insensitive to singularity. Levinas makes the point that freedom unchecked is rapacious:

And here every power begins. The surrender of exterior things to human freedom through their generality does not only mean, in all innocence, their comprehension, but also their being taken in hand, their domestication, their possession. Only in possession does the I complete the identification of the diverse. To possess is, to be sure, to maintain the reality of this other one possessed, but to do so while suspending its independence. In a civilization which

\textsuperscript{47} Descartes (1998), p. 43
\textsuperscript{48} For an exposition of clôtural reading see Critchley (1992) especially Chapters 3 and 4
\textsuperscript{49} Emmanuel Levinas ‘Transcendence and Height’ in Levinas (1996b), p. 25
the philosophy of the same reflects, freedom is realized as a wealth. Reason, which reduces the other, is appropriation and power.\textsuperscript{50}

Thus the philosophy of the Same realises intellectually, and thus justifies, the will to power as the usurpation of the whole world. It is, to state the point rather strongly (but no stronger than Levinas often does), a totalitarian and colonialistic philosophy.

A further characteristic of such philosophy, according to Levinas, is its certainty of the right to its freedom. Levinas was fond of quoting Pascal: "That is my place in the sun." That is how the usurpation of the whole world began.\textsuperscript{51} According to Levinas the philosophy of the Same intellectually justifies such usurpation, because it accepts no barriers to its exercise of freedom. The right to such freedom is ‘justified’ by the power to exercise such freedom. Since such philosophy reflects the nature of Being according to Levinas, Being is in turn identified with the \textit{conatus essendi} of Spinoza. This, as Levinas points out is; ‘The celebrated “right to existence” that Spinoza called \textit{conatus essendi} and defined as the basic principle of all intelligibility.’\textsuperscript{52}

The only thing therefore that may challenge this power of usurpation is a greater power, which acts as an obstacle to its progress. But this does not, by the nature of the case, question its right merely its might.

\textbf{Is it Righteous to Be?}

A philosophy of the Other throws into question the right to existence and the ‘place in the sun.’ Its manner of approaching the question of existence, therefore, is radically different from the philosophies of the Same: ‘Not the questionable nature of the question that asks: “Why is there being rather than nothingness?” but of the question that is contranatural, against the very naturalness of nature: “Is it just to be?”\textsuperscript{53} The language here is ethical; it speaks of ‘rights’ and ‘justifications’ rather than of ‘being’ and ‘nothingness.’ Hence the philosophy of the Other is primarily an ethical philosophy. An encounter with Otherness, which, as we have seen, is identified with the infinite and transcendent, calls into question the spontaneous activity of the Same. This calling into question, Levinas will insist, is precisely the sense of the ethical. I say the sense of the ethical because Levinas is not in the business of laying down ethical rules or principles of conduct. In a conversation with Philippe Nemo, Levinas remarks: ‘My task does not consist in constructing an ethics; I only try to find its meaning’.\textsuperscript{54} Thus his criticism of the philosophy of the Same is ethical, not merely in the sense that it points out the immoral consequences of the exclusive

\textsuperscript{50}Ibid, p. 50
\textsuperscript{51}Levinas (1998a), p. vii, Levinas (2001), p. 53,98,208,225,253 and many other places. What Pascal actually says is: ‘\textit{Mine, thine. This is my dog,}’ said the poor children. ‘That is my place in the sun.’ There is the origin and image of universal usurpation.’ Pascal (1986), p. 47
\textsuperscript{52}Emmanuel Levinas ‘Dialogue with Emmanuel Levinas’ in Cohen (1986), p. 24
\textsuperscript{53}Emmanuel Levinas ‘The Meaning of Meaning’ in Levinas (1987b) p. 92 This reference to the question of why is there Being rather than nothing is a clear allusion to Heidegger.
\textsuperscript{54}Levinas (1982) p. 90
adherence to such thinking, rather his insistence is that it \textit{ignores the sense of the ethical}. As we will see this is to ignore the basis of sense.

How the ethical enters the world is a troubling question. That the world is made up of what \textit{is} seems obvious. That what \textit{ought} to be or \textit{should} be makes up part of the fabric of our world is slightly more dubious. Nonetheless, that there is in our world a sense of the ethical, and that its origin is simultaneous with the emergence of mankind is something perhaps the majority would concede. I think few people would doubt that there is such a thing as right and wrong, good and evil. To ask about the meaning of ethics, in this context, is to ask about the origin and structure of that which is ethical. Hume has insisted that we cannot rationally derive what ‘ought’ to be from what ‘is’ the case.\textsuperscript{55} Many moral philosophers have spent a good deal of time trying to do just that. Thus a central question of moral philosophy has been whether moral judgements are objective, and are thus reflected in knowledge (\textit{episteme}), or whether rather they are subjective and thus a matter of mere opinion (\textit{doxa}). If they are in some sense known; and thus objective, as Socrates seemed to have thought, then it would seem that in fact we can derive an ‘ought’ from an ‘is,’ for both belong on the same logical level; and thus Hume is wrong. Levinas’s unique move is to reverse the terms of the problem: for him the ethical is somehow prior to the factual. To put the matter in Levinasian terms; the relation to the objective presupposes a prior relationship to the infinite.

\textbf{Face}

We have seen that for Levinas the philosophy of the Other is an ethical philosophy. But we have not yet clarified quite what this means. In order to do so I will need to introduce his concept of the \textit{face}.\textsuperscript{56} The ‘face’ is Levinas’s term for the other person qua Other.\textsuperscript{57} It is the other person, as face, which is the concrete site of the infinite because the other person is always beyond my reach. The other person is experienced directly, yet this experience is somehow the enigmatic experience of an absence, therefore Levinas will call it an \textit{enigma} and oppose this to phenomena.\textsuperscript{58} He writes:

\begin{quote}
If signifying were equivalent to indicating, the face would be insignificant. And Sartre, though stopping short of a full analysis, makes the striking observation that that the Other is a pure hole in the world. The Other proceeds from the \textit{absolutely Absent}. Its relation with the \textit{absolutely Absent} whence it comes does not \textit{indicate}, does not reveal the Absent and yet the absent has signification in the face.\textsuperscript{59}
\end{quote}

The face then is Levinas’s word for this presence of the absolutely absent. Otherness is manifest in the world as face. It is the concrete manifestation of the infinite and, as such, the encounter with

\textsuperscript{55} Hume (1969) p. 521
\textsuperscript{56} We will return to this central concept in more detail in the body of the thesis.
\textsuperscript{57} Throughout the thesis the word ‘Other’ with a capital will be used to indicate the other person, since it is in this way that absolute Otherness is understood by Levinas.
\textsuperscript{58} See Emmanuel Levinas ‘Enigma and Phenomenon’ in Levinas (1996b), pp. 65-79
\textsuperscript{59} Levinas (2006b), p. 39
the face *puts in* me the idea of the infinite as we have tried to understand it. This structure is quite complicated, Levinas explains:

> The idea of infinity is not an incidental notion forged by subjectivity to reflect the case of an entity encountering on the outside nothing that limits it, overflowing every limit, and thereby infinite. The production of the infinite entity is inseparable from the idea of infinity, for it is precisely the disproportion between the idea of infinity and the infinity of which it is the idea that this exceeding of limits is produced. The idea of infinity is the mode of being, the infinition, of infinity.⁶⁰

To encounter a face is thus to come across something that cannot be incorporated into my ego’s world. Nor can the face be mediated by recourse to neuters; to do so is to avoid the face. Thus the face challenges my imperialist possession of the world. It is this challenge to my *conatus essendi*, and the philosophy of the Same which reflects this, which is the meaning of the ethical as Levinas understands it. The world is not mine alone. This is the concretion of the structure we have been describing from the beginning, it is true *experience*. Levinas writes: “Experience, the idea of infinity, occurs in the relationship with the other. The idea of infinity is the social relationship.”⁶¹ This relationship is straightaway ethical. The challenge to my possession of the world is not the challenge of a greater power than my own, the face is powerless. It is, as Levinas often calls it, *naked*. Of course this is not to deny that a struggle for possession or recognition can take place, as in Hegel’s phenomenology of the Master and Slave.⁶² Rather, under such circumstances of war, the ethical is suspended.⁶³

Or to put it another way; the face is not encountered. The other, in these circumstances, is not encountered as face, which is to say; as Other. To repeat; the Other eludes my grasp. Using the term ‘Stranger’ to designate the Other qua face Levinas says tersely:

> But the Stranger also means the free one. Over him I have no power. (…je ne peux *pouvoir*) He escapes my grasp by an essential dimension, even if I have him at my disposal.⁶⁴

It is precisely this ‘essential dimension’ that Levinas designates as face. Even if the Other is my slave there remains the disturbing freedom of the face which comes to accuse me. This is an infinite dimension in the sense that it is utterly beyond my grasp. Levinas writes:

> To be sure, the other is exposed to my powers, succumbs to all my ruses, all my crimes. Or he resists me with all his force and all the unpredictable resources of his own freedom. I measure myself against him. But he can also – and here is where

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⁶² Hegel (1977), pp. 111-119
⁶³ Levinas (1969), p. 21
⁶⁴ Ibid, p. 39
he presents me his face – oppose himself to me beyond all measure, with the total uncoverness and nakedness of his defenceless eyes, the straightforwardness, the absolute frankness of his gaze.\textsuperscript{65}

The point here is that the other person as face does not oppose me as a power at grips with my own power, rather the face opposes as a \textit{weakness and vulnerability}. Such opposition throws my spontaneous freedom into question by making me \textit{ashamed}. It is this moment of shame before the face of the other person that is the origin of the ethical. As such the face is the portal through which the ethical enters the world; a truly extraordinary manifestation. It ‘appears’ as if from another place, yet it is right here: ‘like a being who opens a window where, nevertheless, his face is already traced.’\textsuperscript{66} The face therefore places my powers into question, or, more precisely it is no longer a question of powers. As Levinas puts it: ‘I am no longer able to have powers’ (‘Je ne peux plus pouvoir’).\textsuperscript{67} My freedom is no longer the issue; rather the shame makes the relevant question; ‘what can I give?’ not ‘what can I have?’ ‘What is absolutely other does not only resist possession, but contests it, and accordingly can consecrate it.’\textsuperscript{68}

The sense of the face, what the face says, Levinas will insist is ‘You shall not kill’.\textsuperscript{69} There is one place I cannot go, and that is the place of the Other. There is one thing I cannot possess; and that is the Other. The face of the Other, Levinas will say, is also a \textit{temptation} to murder. To be tempted in this way is to not see the other as face. As such it is misconstrued as something else to come to grips with. It is perhaps the psychopath who is constitutionally blind to the ethical sense of the face.

Not only does the other plead with me with those ‘defenceless eyes’ he or she \textit{orders} or \textit{commands} me. The other is not only naked and indigent he or she is also an \textit{authority} over me. In this sense there is an asymmetry between myself and the Other. As Levinas explains:

\begin{quote}
But then the other is not simply another freedom; to give me knowledge of injustice, his gaze must come to me from a dimension of the ideal. The other must be closer to God than I. This is certainly not a philosopher’s invention, but the first given of moral consciousness, which could be defined as the consciousness of the privilege the other has relative to me. Justice well ordered begins with the other.\textsuperscript{70}
\end{quote}

For Levinas the ethical relationship, exemplified in what he calls the ‘face to face’, is true experience without the mediation of concepts. It is not a kind of cognitive awareness by virtue of which we come to know values or principles. Rather the ethical relationship is \textit{affective}. It is also, in an important sense, \textit{prior} to cognitive relations. But the affectivity characteristic of this relation

\textsuperscript{66} Levinas (2006b), p. 31
\textsuperscript{68} Levinas (1969), p. 38
\textsuperscript{69} Emmanuel Levinas ‘Philosophy and the Idea of Infinity’ in Levinas (1998d), p. 55
\textsuperscript{70} Ibid, p. 56
is unique in its kind. It is a sense of shame before the Other which reveals to me that here a demand is present. I owe the Other more than I deserve myself. This can be seen by virtue of the fact that I can demand more of myself than I have the right to demand of the Other. Ultimately Levinas will say that I owe the Other everything, I will try to show why this outrageous claim is made. We can see however why the philosophy of the same with its appeal to autonomy is inadequate, the problem it tries to solve—that of insulating us from the elemental influences that ruled primitive society—also has the result of tending to insulate us from the appeal of the Other. As such we become alienated from what is a central and defining experience of our humanity.

The notion of the ‘face’ refers to the singular individual that I straightforwardly face. As such this ethical singularity is reminiscent of Kant’s moral philosophy; at least when the Categorical Imperative is formulated in terms of respect for persons. Thus it is what is often called the second formulation of the Categorical Imperative that we find to be close to Levinas’s account. The formulation in terms of universalizable maxims does not, of course, fit the account at all. In the *Grounding for the Metaphysics of Morals* the second formulation is as follows:

> Act in such a way that you treat humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of another, always at the same time as an end and never simply as a means.\(^{71}\)

Or, otherwise put:

> Now I say that man, and in general every rational being, exists as an end in himself and not merely as a means to be arbitrarily used by this or that will.\(^{72}\)

It is this understanding of a person, in terms of respect for him or her as an end in him or her self, which evokes singularity. For it is with regards to people as ends that they resist universalization. Looked at from the Levinasian point of view to treat people as ends in themselves is to resist subsuming them under a neuter or incorporating them into the economy of my ego. In other words to resist transmuting the Other into the Same. This would amount, in Kantian terms, to being used by this or that will. It is for this reason that Levinas writes: ‘In any case, that which we catch sight of seems suggested by the practical philosophy of Kant, to which we feel particularly close.’\(^{73}\) It is important however to note that such closeness is not due to an affinity in how they construe subjectivity. In Kant respect for Others is grounded on a respect for the rationality they instantiate. Thus Kantian ethics is once again an appeal to a generality and it is certainly, and emphatically, a philosophy of autonomy. Levinas on the other hand understands our ethical relation to the Other to be grounded on their existence as *face*. The way I understand *face* is in terms of the corporeal physical real presence of the unique individual person and since it is from

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\(^{71}\) Kant (1981), p. 36

\(^{72}\) Ibid, p. 35

\(^{73}\) Emmanuel Levinas ‘Is Ontology Fundamental?’ in Levinas (1996b), p.10
outside of me that the ethical imperative is derived Levinas’s ethics is fundamentally heteronomous. 74

From Sensibility to Persecution
In the later work we will see that my responsibility to the Other becomes an increasingly persecutory command wherein I am held hostage by the other to the point of being responsible for the Other’s very responsibility. In shifting up the gears to the nth degree Levinas seems to create a vortex into which I appear in danger of being sucked, a vortex very like what Levinas calls the *il y a*, usually translated as the *there is*. The *il y a* is Levinas term for existence without existents; a faceless and horrifying presence which subsists after the absence of all beings. 75 This persecuting Otherness is not here sketched in terms of the second person who faces me. Rather the face is given as a conduit through which a trace of what Levinas calls illeity is able to bring me to order. It is in terms of this illeity that Levinas moves closer to a transcendence with more resemblance to the holiness of the holy. I will try to show in what way this *illeity* is distinguishable from the *il y a*.

My argument will turn upon the fact that subjectivity in Levinas is not construed in terms of the instantiation of rationality or consciousness; it is not a *for itself*. Subjectivity in its most fundamental manifestation is the very fact of our incarnation, our corporeal bodily being. Our corporeality is determined as a sensibility vulnerable to pleasure and pain. As such we are needy beings. The very dynamism of subjectivity will be understood by Levinas in terms of what it is to be beings that have *needs*. It is precisely as a needy and vulnerable being that the Other makes an ethical demand upon me. But also, and crucially, from the point of view of my thesis, it is in terms of such sensible vulnerability and need that subjectivity will ultimately be understood by Levinas. Moreover, and importantly, subjectivity itself at its most fundamental level will be understood in terms of ethics. *Subjectivity is ethical subjectivity*. This means that it is in terms of our corporeality that ethics will be understood by Levinas. To anticipate we will see that it is precisely in terms of what it is to have needs that Levinas will see our movement toward Otherness: that is; our Desire for the transcendent. As such we can say that though it is correct to say that the essence of subjectivity is ethics, it is more precise to say that the essence of subjectivity is the desire for transcendence and this desire is consummated in the ethical. On the other hand—and this is part of the paradoxical nature of Levinas’s philosophy—it will turn out that subjectivity is the desire for transcendence *precisely because it is ethical*.

The body is therefore conceived by Levinas in terms of the affectivity of a sensible content. On the one hand this will be displayed in enjoyment which forms our fundamental way of being at home in the world and separated, but on the other—and this is central—the body will be conceived as affected by the Other as *face*. Such affectivity also takes place in sensibility and is such that it forms a part of our bodily corporeality that pre-dates any possible incorporation into consciousness. Accordingly Levinas will later refer to it as *immemorial*. Sensibility will therefore be

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74 For a thorough and excellent comparison of Levinas with Kant see Chalier (2002)

understood as slipping under the network of conscious syntheses and even under the Husserlian ground-floor synthesis of temporal awareness. The sensible happens before consciousness. This mode of corporeal immemorial affectivity is also the first word and the word is an ethical and (disturbingly) religious word. We will examine what this means and how it contributes to the notion of ethical subjectivity which is fully developed in Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence.

Heidegger

My argument aims to show that ethical subjectivity grows out of reflections that owe their origin to Heidegger. But Heidegger is soon left behind; even if never forgotten. The memory of Heidegger haunts Levinas’s work. A central part of the dark enigma that Levinas calls ‘Heidegger’ is the latter’s affiliations with National Socialism, and thus his consequent associations with the holocaust. The fact that one of the greatest philosophers in the history of the West could be a Nazi stands as one of the darkest question-marks over philosophy itself. It is this I suspect—thought through with the utmost responsibility, and never drawn to a comfortable conclusion—that makes for much of the impetus for Levinas’s thought, and indeed for the drama of his prose. It is undeniable that his work: ‘is dominated by the presentiment and the memory of the Nazi horror.’

Might we not conjecture that given Levinas’s one-time affection for Heidegger’s philosophy, an affection that never resulted in an out and out rejection of its object, he felt a little as though he had been eating at the table of murderers? This is perhaps a rather strong way of putting the point, but who can put a limit on our sense of guilt? Indeed it is part of Levinas’s way of seeing things that there is no such limit and that the artificial limit of the necessity of living in the world is the poorest of alibis.

My thesis will therefore argue that a correct understanding of Levinas will locate transcendence in the ethical, and that such transcendence can only be fully understood if we have grasped the nature of ethical subjectivity. But it will emphasise the fact that such an understanding is only really available if we take the very early work into account, because it is here that the idea of the human as motivated primarily by an urge to transcendence is first given nascent formulation. Everything flows from the initial analysis of needs which we will give in chapter 3. But before we reach this analysis we will require some preliminaries to be in place. I therefore beg the indulgence of the reader for the first two chapters, which are preparatory for the story I wish to tell.

My chapters will be arranged as follows:

Chap 1 Heidegger and Being-in-the-World

This chapter functions in a similar way to the introduction but in this case in order to clarify where Heidegger is coming from (as Levinas reads him). Once again general concepts are clarified in order to save me from distracting regresses later. This is necessary because my reading of Levinas sees his work as developing from, and in contrast to, his own reading of Heidegger.

76 Emmanuel Levinas ‘Signature’ in Levinas (1997), p. 291
Chap 2 Corporeal Enjoyment

This takes up the notion of enjoyment (jouissance) in Totality and Infinity and tries to show how Levinas rewrites Heidegger’s way of seeing our being-in-the-world as a consequence of this notion. Several things are emphasised here: 1. Enjoyment is not an instrumental relation. 2. It is not cognitive. 3. It is sensible in nature. 4. It is pre-social. 5. It constitutes a mode of separation which does not amount to a dialectical opposition. 6. It is already (as Levinas would say) beyond Being; because it does not have existence as its goal and we might even risk life for the things we enjoy. 7. Enjoyment takes place in a medium which is somehow not objective and not subjective: the elemental. 8. Enjoyment should be understood largely in bodily terms. This is a kind of primary stab at the nature of subjectivity which is more than how it is socially constituted. It will be complicated later, but Levinas always starts with enjoyment. 9. Enjoyment constitutes the affectivity attendant upon the satisfaction of needs.

This will prove important to me because the notion of sensibility runs right through Levinas’s work and is crucial to understanding ethical subjectivity. But it will also help us to see in what way enjoyment constitutes a kind of proto-transcendence.

Chap 3 Needs in On Escape

Here I try to show why the affectivity of enjoyment is attendant upon the satisfaction of needs by arguing that Levinas understood need in terms of the need for escape from an oppressive self. Enjoyment or pleasure is apparently such an escape. Need, as the need for escape, is therefore construed as the unstable core of the self which drives subjectivity out of itself toward transcendence or Otherness. The source of this discomfort is traced to Heidegger’s notion of thrownness (Geworfenheit) but Levinas lingers at this point and does not immediately move on to possibilities in the way Heidegger does. He therefore construes the essence of subjectivity in terms of the desire for transcendence in a radical sense, rather than the concernful propulsion into a future. Here I also explain some of Levinas’s early concepts of shame and nausea in the light of this understanding of the self.

Chap 4 Need and Desire

I then need to make clear that need is to be distinguished from Desire. Needs can be satisfied by the objects that we enjoy whereas Desire is an insatiable hunger for the beyond. Desire is initiated by the encounter with the Other as face. Need ultimately rests on Desire, and Desire becomes the central driving force to subjectivity which is driven out of itself toward the Other in a movement which is ethical. So it is clear that Desire cannot really rest upon our thrownness but must somehow have its source in Otherness. How this is so will have to await Chapter 8 of the thesis.

Chap 5 The Il y a

Here I turn back to the section of Totality and Infinity concerned with enjoyment in the light of this reading of subjectivity and explore how something disconcerting intrinsic to the elemental mars enjoyment and drives us to have recourse to labour, possession and dwelling. Labour, and the pains of labour, will lead to a consideration of fatigue and indolence which are understood by
Levinas as being weighed down by our own being. Dwelling on the other hand functions to separate us even further from the elemental which in its ultimate disconcerting indeterminacy is identified with the il y a. The il y a is therefore introduced as a kind bad infinity, a neutral alterity which repulses and horrifies us. The question may well arise then, given what we have said about subjectivity, whether it is not this neutral alterity that really drives us toward alterity. I will need to suspend an answer to this question.

But in dealing with these topics in one go, I draw out two other very important concepts wherein Levinas is close to locating alterity: Death and the feminine. The pain of labour introduces the notion of pain in general which is where Levinas locates our (instinctive) awareness of death. The domestic setting is precisely where he locates the feminine. These two are connected conceptually for Levinas. Whereas Heidegger conceives of our ultimate possibility in terms of death, Levinas challenges this in Time and the Other by use of the concept of the feminine. He connects them by virtue of the fact that both are characterised in terms of mystery. But they are connected in another way; both result in a kind of link to the anonymous (what Levinas is prone to call the night). In the case of death this is reasonably obvious and he connects it with the thought of the il y a. Whereas with the feminine this is more complicated and emerges in consideration of the erotic. For example he writes: ‘Alongside of the night of the anonymous rustling of the there is extends the night of the erotic, behind the night of insomnia the night of the hidden, the clandestine, the mysterious, land of virgins, simultaneously uncovered by Eros and refusing Eros— another way of saying: profanation.’

Chap 6 Eros and Fecundity
This leads me to consider Levinas’s thoughts on Eros and fecundity. This is central because it clears the way for a conception of subjectivity in terms of obsession by the other. The notion of the erotic in Levinas results in a familial drama which to me is wholly unacceptable in its sexism and carrying over of traditional prejudices. But Levinas’s conceptual innovations in relation to it remain fascinating. The notion of fecundity too is impressive by virtue of the paradoxical yet central way he thematizes the relation of parent and child. He says, for example, ‘I am my son,’ thus preparing the way for an identity which retains separateness and the notion of substitution.

Chap 7 The Trace
This is a turning point. Totality and Infinity leave it hard to understand how we are able to encounter something absolutely other without that other being integrated into me; we need the notion of the trace. This will help us move to the later, darker, Otherwise than Being, philosophy.

Chap 8 Ethical Subjectivity
We are also hard pushed, given Totality and Infinity, to see how we can articulate that which is absolutely other without thereby drawing it into a conceptual totality. The language of Otherwise than Being is designed for this purpose and the distinction there drawn between the saying and the said.

77 Levinas (1969), pp. 258-259
Centrally I will show that the subjectivity which is characterised as ethical subjectivity in the later work has its origins in the very early *On Escape*. The circle is closed by showing how in *Otherwise than Being and Beyond Essence* Levinas understands subjectivity as always already invaded by Otherness at its very core. It is obsessed, persecuted and therefore substituted for the other at the very heart of its bodily incarnation. It is because of this that it is driven out of itself toward the Other. Thus we can see that the need to escape from ourselves is now written in terms of the body being a hostage to the Other. Sensibility is here given descriptions much nearer to those of pain rather than enjoyment: we are backed up to ourselves, our skin is too tight for us, ‘exposed under accusation that cannot be assumed’\(^7^8\), ‘I am another.’\(^7^9\) The saying of the Other is their very vulnerability as subject to pain and death which gets under *my* skin before I have time to go out conceptually to meet the assault. This is the first word: it might be translated as ‘help.’

**Conclusion**

I will sum up my argument and try to show what I have done.

**Appendix**

I have also included an appendix which deals with the controversial issue of Levinas’s use of the concept of ‘the feminine’ and attempts to begin to address feminist criticism of his work.

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\(^7^8\) Levinas (1998a), p. 118

\(^7^9\) Ibid
1. Heidegger and Being-in-the-World

The Importance of *Being and Time*

First we need to see what it was that Levinas found in Heidegger and how the latter was appropriated and criticised by Levinas. I therefore begin with a short exposition of the philosophy of Martin Heidegger.

*Totality and Infinity* is a work which proceeds along the lines of the phenomenological method. Indeed one of the foremost influences on Levinas’s work is the phenomenology of Edmund Husserl. Levinas in fact devoted his first book, his doctoral thesis, to the work of Husserl. But it does not follow Husserl’s procedure to the letter; Levinas is no uncritical follower of the master. In the preface Levinas explains:

> The presentation and development of notions employed owe everything to the phenomenological method. Intentional analysis is the search for the concrete. Notions held under the direct gaze of thought that defines them are nevertheless implanted in horizons unsuspected by this thought; these horizons endow them with meaning—such is the essential teaching of Husserl. What does it matter if in the Husserlian phenomenology taken literally these unsuspected horizons are in their turn interpreted as thoughts aiming at objects! What counts is the idea of the overflowing of objectifying thought by a forgotten experience from which it lives.

This forgotten experience from which objectifying thought lives is the characteristic of the pre-reflective *lifeworld* (*Lebenswelt*), to borrow a term from Husserl’s later works, in which we are submerged. Yet this notion of a *lifeworld* departs from what Levinas understands as Husserl’s intellectualism. This is indicated by his remark which interprets Husserlian phenomenology taken to the letter as understanding such horizons in terms of ‘thoughts aiming at objects.’ In questioning this understanding of phenomenology, Levinas finds an ally in Heidegger, though we will see that he departs from Heidegger in the very interpretation of this *lifeworld* and this will send him on a very different trajectory.

It is therefore in my view fruitful to read much of Levinas’s *Totality and Infinity* as a response to Heidegger, or, more specifically, as a response to *Being and Time* (*Sein und Zeit*). It is of course true that the two thinkers are very different: as standardly understood Heidegger is concerned with the meaning or truth of Being, and thus favours *ontology* as first philosophy, whereas Levinas

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80 Levinas (1998c)  
81 Levinas (1969), p. 28  
82 It is clear by his very use of the term ‘lifeworld’ that Husserl himself had also, by the time of *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology*, departed from his own earlier intellectualism. But Levinas and Heidegger thought that the departure was not radical enough. Indeed Levinas will later argue that Heidegger’s own departure was not radical enough. See Husserl (1970)  
83 Heidegger (1985a)
is concerned with the question of Otherness or alterity and explicitly states that ethics is first philosophy. Nonetheless it is clear from his earliest writings that Levinas admired Heidegger’s work. This is already visible in his The Theory of Intuition in Husserl’s Phenomenology, even at this early stage he questions what he sees as Husserl’s prioritising of our relation to the world in terms of intellectual apprehension:

Is our main attitude toward reality that of theoretical contemplation? Is not the world presented in its very being as a centre of action, as a field of activity or of care—to speak the language of Martin Heidegger?\(^{84}\)

This remark indicates that Levinas’s sympathy with Heidegger is sympathy with his view that our central relation to the world is not to be understood in terms of propositional knowing or thinking. Such a view seems to have as a consequence that the task of philosophy is not seen in the first instance as epistemology, but what Heidegger calls ‘ontology.’ Yet as we have indicated Levinas does not consider ontology to be first philosophy. Hence the relation between the two thinkers is more problematic than their initial agreement on challenging the centrality of the cognitive would indicate.

It is well known that Levinas later moved away from Heidegger’s philosophy, but I would insist that his writing, and particularly Totality and Infinity, is best understood in terms of this very movement away and thus in terms of how he went beyond or controverted Heidegger’s insights. In Existence and Existents Levinas makes the point like this:

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.\(^{85}\)

I will say later in more detail in what way I believe this passage is to be read. What I am claiming at the moment is that generally Levinas’s writings, at least up to and including Totality and Infinity, are best understood as attempts to come to terms with Heidegger’s insights while attempting to move beyond them. It is my conviction that we can get a clearer understanding of this movement if we begin from what I consider to be a central conceptual point around which this movement away turns. This is the section of Totality and Infinity which is concerned with enjoyment (jouissance). Such considerations will quickly lead us to an elaboration of how Levinas understands needs which will bring us close to the heart of my thesis. Because it is in relation to the tension set up by needs, and the consequent movement of life in an attempt to transcend itself, that I perceive the essence of Levinas’s ethical rethinking of subjectivity. Later we will see that needs are awakened and given to an insomnia of unrest by virtue of the very heart of subjectivity being

\(^{84}\) Levinas (1998c), p. 119

\(^{85}\) Levinas (1978), p. 4
characterised in terms of metaphysical Desire. We will see what ultimately sets this in motion. But to get this picture clear we need to see how Levinas set out from a clime that was very much that of Martin Heidegger.

What Levinas admired about Heidegger was *Being and Time*, considering it ‘one of the finest books in the history of philosophy — I say this after years of reflection. One of the finest among four or five others...’\(^8^6\) So unless otherwise stated when I refer to Heidegger I mean the Heidegger of *Being and Time*. This is not quite as precise as one might wish, since that book bristles with possible interpretations; and scholars are far from agreeing as to what the philosophy of *Being and Time* is. Also Heidegger’s lecture courses delivered around the time of the writing and publication of *Being and Time* (some of these were attended by Levinas), which have now come into publication, can be seen either to supplement or complicate a reading of *Being and Time*.\(^8^7\) My practice will therefore be relatively restricted: I will read *Being and Time* as I understand Levinas to read it. My concern is not anyway with getting Heidegger right (if this is a possibility) but to elaborate a reading of Levinas in the light of the his reading of Heidegger.

So it is *Being and Time* that impressed Levinas, finding the later work much less impressive: ‘Not, you well know, that it is insignificant; but it is much less convincing.’\(^8^8\) What I understand Levinas to find in *Being and Time* is what he is identifying by the ‘concept of ontology and of the relationship which man sustains with Being.’\(^8^9\) We have already noted that what he finds favourable in Heidegger is the latter’s opposition to intellectualism; it is here that he finds this opposition articulated. What is to be studied is human being in all its entanglements with the world. Therefore we do not abstract from the actual engagement of real living beings with their environment, but by specifying human being itself as being-in-the-world (*Das Seiende* we return to life in all its richness. ‘Dasein’ is Heidegger’s word for the being that each of us is and it specifies the fact that such beings are always already in a world. Thus ‘Dasein’ refers to what was traditionally referred to as ‘subjectivity.’ Heidegger however avoids such terminology since it takes its significance from a traditional view of man which he is at pains to oppose, the view of man as an internal subject staring out onto an external world, the view standardly attributed to Descartes. For Heidegger Dasein’s being is coextensive with its being-in-the-world.

Dasein

*Being and Time* is a work of ontology and thus raises the question of the meaning of Being\(^9^0\) as such, the analysis of Dasein as being-in-the-world (*In-der-Welt-sein*) is therefore a preliminary but

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86 Levinas (1982), p. 37 This was said in 1981
88 Levinas (1982), p. 41
89 See Note 87
90 I have adopted the practice of using the word ‘Being’ with a capital when translating Heidegger’s ‘Sein’ and ‘beings’ when translating ‘das Seiende,’ unless I am quoting and the author has a different practice. This is complicated by the fact that Levinas often uses the term ‘existence’ almost in the same way as ‘Sein’ and ‘existents’ as ‘das Seiende.’ I say ‘almost’ because, as my thesis makes clear, these are not coextensive terms
necessary task for Heidegger. What makes it necessary is the fact that Dasein already has a kind of unreflective pre-understanding of the meaning of Being. This pre-understanding is demonstrated in Dasein’s very activity and comportment toward entities in its world. As Levinas elaborates the matter:

Henceforth the comprehension of being does not presuppose a merely theoretical attitude but the whole of human comportment. The whole human being is ontology. Scientific work, the affective life, the satisfaction of needs and labour, social life and death – all these moments spell out the comprehension of being, or truth, with a rigour which reserves to each a determinate function. Our entire civilization follows from this comprehension, even if this comprehension was a forgetfulness of being.91

Yet it appears to be precisely this elaboration of Dasein’s being-in-the-world that so impressed Levinas, because it allowed for a phenomenological account of the human which was not restricted to an account of thoughts aiming at objects. The human is not to be understood in abstraction from its world but grasped in its concrete being-there (Da-sein). This opposition to Cartesian dualism, a dualism which grasps the human in terms of both inwardness and thought, is therefore characteristic of both thinkers.

Given this opposition it is perhaps tempting to opt for some kind of naturalistic or scientific reductionism. But such a temptation is resisted by Heidegger, and this again is a point on which Levinas showed agreement and admiration. Both realise that the problem of the human spirit is central, given the disenchantment of modern scientific world views; and what they both see as the consequent threat of nihilism. As Levinas puts the point:

The concern to avoid the reification of the spirit, to give it a place in being independent of the categories that are valid for things, animates all modern philosophy from Descartes to Heidegger.92

In Being and Time this concern is dealt with by insisting that the way of being of objects that are presented to the subject in intentional mental acts, what Heidegger calls the present-at-hand (Vorhandenheit), is not the only way of being: and, importantly, not the human way of being. Instead of beginning from the presupposition of subjectivity as a conscious inwardness, Heidegger begins by an analysis of what it is to be in the world the way Dasein is. A consequence of this analysis is that Heidegger does not begin by asking how we get hold of the world in thought or perception; rather he attempts a phenomenological description of how we get hold of it in our practical dealings. The human hand takes on a central philosophical role that had probably hitherto been reserved for the eye.

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92 Levinas (1978), pp. 101-102
World
This presupposes a conception of ‘world’ which differs significantly from traditional conceptions. The world is not seen as a massive spatial receptacle for objects (what Heidegger will call the present-at-hand), the way that Descartes and the tradition found it natural to conceive of it. Rather the ‘world’ in Heidegger is understood in ontological terms. That is to say the world is revealed as being closely related to Dasein’s activity and is thus understood in terms of Dasein’s environment (Umwelt). This certainly seems to imply a spatial relation of ‘surrounding’ world, but in Heidegger space itself should in the first instance be understood in existential terms. This means that the notion of ‘world’ is best understood in terms of such phrases as ‘the world of sport,’ ‘the academic world’ or ‘art world’ to emphasise the fact that our world is a world in which we are involved. It follows that the ‘in’ of Heidegger’s ‘being-in’ (In-Sein), in his heavily hyphenated ‘being-in-the-world’ (In-der-Welt-sein), does not primordially pertain to the meaning of ‘in’ in sentences like: ‘he has a stone in his shoe’ or ‘the parcel is still in the car’, but rather to those in sentences like ‘he is in love’, ‘she is in advertising’ and ‘most people live in quiet desperation’. The ‘in’ of ‘Being-in’ therefore stresses the fact that it has to do with involvement rather than spatiality. Or rather, the abstract notion of spatiality which pertains to geometric space is derivative of the more concrete and familiar lived space of our immediate world of concern (besorgen). An outline of the nature of this environging world is given by virtue of the relations in which things stand to Dasein, this is what Heidegger refers to in terms of the ‘worldhood of the world’ (Die Weltlichkeit der Welt).

The Ready-to-Hand
For Heidegger the things with which Dasein’s world is primarily populated are objects of use or handling, they are objects of Dasein’s concern (besorgen). These are handles for opening doors, hammers for hammering nails and computers for writing papers or surfing the net. Very generally they constitute tools or equipment (Zeug) which Dasein handles in its everyday life. The way of being of such equipment is not that of present-at-hand objects that are given in representational thinking and perception. Rather it is understood in terms of their very serviceability (Dienlichkeit), that is: what function or purpose they serve. They are essentially given over to human practical activity. The Being of such equipment, grasped in a practical comportment, Heidegger refers to as the ‘ready-to-hand’ (zuhanden). Such serviceability is not visible if we treat this equipment as an itemisation of present-at-hand objects. It is by taking hold of the hammer and hammering that its function becomes ‘apparent.’

The kind of Being which equipment possesses—in which it manifests itself in its own right—we call “readiness-to-hand” [Zuhandenheit]. Only because equipment has this ‘Being-in-itself’ and does not merely occur, is it manipulable in the

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93 I use the term ‘existential’ to translate Heidegger’s ‘existenzial’ which specifies the universal structures which pertain to Dasein’s mode of being. This is opposed to the notion of ‘existentiell,’ which translates ‘existenziell,’ and specifies those particular everyday possibilities open to Dasein given its specific ‘location.’ In Kantian terms the existential refer to conditions of the possibility of every existentiell.
broadest sense and at our disposal. No matter how sharply we just look [Nur-noch-hinsehen] at the ‘outward appearance’ ["Aussehem"] of Things in whatever form this takes, we cannot discover anything ready-to-hand.\(^94\)

Such items of ready-to-hand equipment are not given in isolation from other such items: hammers refer to nails, nails to wood and wood to the job at hand and so on. In this way ready-to-hand tools form a circuit or system of references or assignments, as Heidegger puts it: ‘Taken strictly, there ‘is’ no such thing as an equipment. To the being of equipment there always belongs a totality of equipment, in which it can be this equipment that it is.’\(^95\) The totality of such a system of referential items is what Heidegger means by a world. It is precisely in terms of this ready-to-hand relation to the world that Heidegger undercuts the theoretical or intellectualist model of our relation to our world characteristic of Cartesianism and the tradition, wherein we are conceived as subjects (in here) being confronted with objects (out there). The ready-to-hand locates Dasein in a world in a more primordial way than the way in which a subject is presented with a present-at-hand object. Accordingly the way Dasein grasps the ready-to-hand objects of its environment is in a purely practical comportment which does not require the mediation of a representational mental content. One opens doors, drives cars, and plays musical instruments without producing a representation of what one is doing. Indeed if you were to think about how you were walking, for example, you would be more likely to trip. As Heidegger makes the point:

> The ready-to-hand is not grasped theoretically at all, nor is it itself the sort of thing that circumspection takes proximally as a circumspective theme. The peculiarity of what is proximally ready-to-hand is that, in its readiness-to-hand, it must, as it were, withdraw [zurückzuziehen] in order to be ready-to-hand authentically.\(^96\)

What shows up for us is not the tool but the work. The tool itself becomes inconspicuous, in other words ‘the more we seize hold of it and use it, the more primordial does our relationship to it become, and the more unveiledly is it encountered as that which it is—as equipment.’\(^97\) It is in this sense then that Dasein primarily has a world and thus is the type of being it is. Hence Dasein is understood in the first instance not as a thinking representing thing but as a practical coping being. It should not however be thought that such coping is somehow blind or zombie-like. Dasein’s ready-to-hand dealings have their own kind of sight which Heidegger refers to as ‘circumspection’ (Umsicht). Circumspection is the way that Dasein grasps or understands the relations of assignment in which the ready-to-hand has its meaning. For example while I am typing this I do not look at the keys but at the screen. The movement of my hands follows a pattern which only becomes obtrusive if I were hit a wrong key or the equipment break down in some way. This possibility of a breakdown indicates the point at which theoretical thinking can emerge. Because my engaged coping can go wrong it is possible to notice the items of equipment as

\(^94\) Heidegger (1985a), p. 98  
\(^95\) Ibid, p. 97  
\(^96\) Ibid, p. 99  
\(^97\) Ibid, p. 98
present-at-hand items. The engaged involvement of circumspection breaks down, the item of equipment loses its usual transparency and becomes obtrusive; this underlies the possibility of theoretical seeing.

**Being-with-Others**

In locating Dasein as proximally amongst the ready-to-hand Heidegger also undercuts another traditional philosophical problem, the problem of other minds. In what way are we to understand how Heidegger sees our relation to other Daseins? Dasein’s being-in-the-world is, along with its being alongside and amongst things, also a being-with-all-the-others, a being-with (Mitsein), and it is this primordially. In other words being-in-the-world is not simply being amongst the equipment that goes to make up the world, and next to things, but also to be with other Daseins. Being with things and equipment is, as Heidegger would put it, equiprimordial with being with Others. In this Heidegger decisively breaks from the traditional Cartesian view of the self as isolated subject, staring out onto the world around it and wondering if it is alone. Dasein is not a substance, as we will see, and it is not alone.

We are thus primordially related to other beings who also have the kind of being of Dasein, and this via the very significance that the equipment has for us. As Heidegger puts it: ‘Along with the equipment to be found when one is at work, those Others for whom the work is destined are encountered too.’ He continues; the work is:

> [A]n essential assignment or reference to possible wearers, for instance, for whom it should be ‘cut to the figure.’ Similarly, when material is put to use, we encounter its producer or ‘supplier’ as one who ‘serves’ well or badly. When, for example, we walk along the edge of a field but ‘outside it’, the field shows itself as belonging to such-and-such a person, and decently kept up by him; the book we have used was bought at So-and-so’s shop and given by such—and-such a person, and so forth.

Thus other people are primarily encountered via the equipment or things we use or, we might say; via a medium or common ground. It is by virtue of this way of seeing things that Heidegger avoids the old philosophical problem of other minds, consequent on the Cartesian view. In other words; in our everyday dealings with our environing world other people are always already encountered via their relation to this environment, ‘they are,’ as Heidegger says, ‘what they do [sie sind das, was sie betreiben].’ Thus the error committed by the philosopher who asks about our knowledge of other minds is not simply that this mode of philosophical questioning presupposes that the mind is somehow inner or hidden in a way reminiscent of Cartesianism, rather it also presupposes that the other is much more Other than Heidegger is willing to accept. For him Others are wholly familiar. He writes:

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98 Ibid, p. 153
99 Ibid, pp. 153-154
100 Ibid, p. 163
By ‘Others’ we do not mean everyone else but me—those over against whom the “I” stands out. They are rather those from whom, for the most part, one does not distinguish oneself—those among whom one is too. 101

This, as we will see, constitutes a central point around which Levinas’s criticism of Heidegger turns. For Levinas our relation to other people is not given its due in Heidegger (to say the least). If this is an insight on Levinas’s part it is not simply that he finds a hole in Heidegger’s analysis which he thinks needs plugging. Rather he will rewrite Heidegger’s analysis of being-in-the-world in the light of a fundamental insight into what he takes to be a failing of ontology as a whole.

The Ontological Difference

It is clear that Heidegger’s analysis takes its lead from what he takes to be the compelling nature of a fundamental philosophical intuition. This intuition is the single star102 that Heidegger claimed to have followed throughout his philosophical career. Indeed to call it a ‘career’ would, in Heidegger’s eyes, diminish the nature of the task of thought, we should call it a path. This intuition does not take the form of a vision of the nature of reality as such. Rather it takes the form of realising that something has gone unquestioned and thus overlooked in Western Philosophy at least since Plato (what Heidegger will come to call ‘metaphysics’), and this is the question of the meaning of Being. Heidegger’s whole philosophical outpouring can be seen in terms of an attempt to reawaken (or perhaps awaken) a sense of this question. This led him to formulate what Levinas considered the greatest insight of his philosophy, the distinction between beings and the Being of beings, or the ontological difference (or sometimes the onto-ontological difference). Levinas notes that: ‘The most profound thing about Being and Time for me is this Heideggerian distinction.’ 103

Yet the distinction is elusive. On the one hand we have beings of various kinds: things, people, ideas etc. and on the other we have Being in Heidegger’s sense. The branches of thought which study beings are called by Heidegger ‘ontic’ studies, whereas that which studies the Being of these beings is called ‘ontology.’ How are we to capture this elusive thought? To begin with we should note that ontic studies tell us about the qualities or properties of its subject matter. But once we have listed all of these (if such a thing is possible) we are still left with the fact that whatever it is is. It is this isness that Heidegger wishes to speak about. Being, in this sense, is not therefore a thing among things, it is therefore not a noun, and Levinas will refer to it as a verb (perhaps the ultimate verb): ‘the verb “to be” –as event, an event which neither produces that which exists, nor

101 Ibid, p. 154
102 ‘To head toward a star—this only.

To think is to confine yourself to a single thought that one day stands still like a star in the world’s sky.’

Martin Heidegger ‘The Thinker as Poet’ in Heidegger (1971), p. 4
103 Levinas (1987a), pp. 44-45
is the action of what exists upon another object. It is the pure fact of existing which is event.\textsuperscript{104} Idealist philosophers have argued that what it is to be is to be an idea or mind, whereas materialist philosophers have argued that what it is to be is to be a material object. From Heidegger’s point of view it is not simply that these philosophical positions have got the wrong answer, rather they have missed the crucial question. It is not what is that is of fundamental philosophical importance, but that it is. Such philosophies remain ontic. The fact that something is and the difference that it makes that it is is the crucial philosophical mystery: why is there something rather than nothing? In a sense this question flickers on the edge of comprehension but, on the other hand, it clearly makes a difference that there are beings rather than nothing. In his refutation of the Ontological Argument Kant famously claimed that existence is not a predicate; it is not that we can name all the qualities of a thing and then add as another quality its Being. Nonetheless this does not stop its Being making a crucial difference, as Kant clearly recognised: ‘A hundred real thalers do not contain the least coin more than a hundred possible thalers.’\textsuperscript{105} Indeed not, but one can only spend the real ones, and this makes a world of difference.\textsuperscript{106}

Concern and Care

This digression into the ontological question is not arbitrary but connects to the insistence we have specified that Dasein always already has a kind of comprehension of Being, albeit a dim and inarticulate one. The fact is that Being makes a difference to us, we are the kind of Being who can raise the question of Being, particularly the Being of our own Being. As Heidegger puts it:

Dasein is an entity which does not just occur among other entities. Rather it is ontically distinguished by the fact that, in its very Being, that Being is an issue for it.\textsuperscript{107}

Many questions might be raised about what it is for our own Being to be an issue for us and we will do so as the thesis progresses. But Heidegger connects this fact to the claim that Dasein has some understanding of Being already by virtue of the fact that it is able to raise the question of its own Being as a question. Dasein’s Being is ontological in the sense that the difference it makes that it has Being rather than not is a definite issue for it. Dasein understands what it is to Be. ‘Understanding of Being is itself a definite characteristic of Dasein’s Being. Dasein is ontically distinctive in that it is ontological.’\textsuperscript{108} It is precisely here then that Heidegger links the analytic of Dasein, as ‘fundamental ontology,’ to the question of the meaning of Being in general: and he does so rather quickly: Dasein is an issue for itself. Therefore Dasein has a relationship to its own Being, and this relationship is one of Being (it is itself in an active sense). Consequently Dasein in some way understands itself in its Being. Therefore Dasein’s own Being is somehow disclosed to

\textsuperscript{104} Wahl (1949) p. 50
\textsuperscript{105} Kant (1985), p. 505
\textsuperscript{106} For an ontological reading of Kant’s Critique of Pure Reason, which gives an interpretation of how Kant understood Being, see Heidegger (1997)
\textsuperscript{107} Heidegger (1985a), p. 32
\textsuperscript{108} Ibid
This connecting of Dasein being an issue for itself to Dasein being a Being who comprehends its own Being, reveals Dasein as essentially self-interpreting on the basis of its self-directed concern. What is therefore clear is that Heidegger connects the question of Being to the question of comprehension, albeit a type of comprehension that is given a new twist in Heidegger and even if this question of comprehension is often formulated in terms of incomprehension and oblivion. The question of Being moves around a centre whose conceptual poles are comprehension and incomprehension. This is what Levinas means when he writes: ‘Being and Time has argued perhaps but one sole thesis: Being is inseparable from the comprehension of Being (which unfolds as time); Being is already an appeal to subjectivity.’

It might seem that Heidegger has too quickly established this link between the fact that Dasein is an issue for itself and the fact that it always already has some kind of comprehension of Being. However it is the very movement of Being and Time, its very articulation of the Being of Dasein and its way of being-in-the-world, its modes of authenticity and inauthenticity, which are used to fill out and establish this claim. Yet he attempts to establish much more than this claim, he tries to show that a certain comprehension of what it is to be or Being is a prerequisite for the understanding of any being whatsoever. Being, as Heidegger understands it, is the basis for our understanding of anything. Just as the visual world would not be possible without the ubiquity of light so the world of entities would not be intelligible to us if we were not somehow already acquainted with an understanding of Being. Being is the light which illuminates beings.

We will need to spell out what type of understanding Dasein has. We have seen that Dasein is proximally submerged in a world of ready-to-hand equipment with which it is concernfully dealing. What is the point of it doing so? Why does Dasein hammer, write or walk up stairs? Clearly the existentiell answer will vary with each case: he is hammering to finish putting up the fence before dinner, she is writing because the muse has taken her or he is walking up stairs because he thought he heard a floorboard creak. All of these are matters of concern (Besorgen) to Dasein. Accordingly Heidegger will say that Dasein’s involvement in its world is primarily a matter of concern (Besorgen) and not cognition. It is because of such concern that Dasein is involved with its world rather than simply alongside it. Concern is understood by Heidegger very broadly:

[H]aving to do with something, producing something, attending to something and looking after it, making use of something, giving something up and letting it go, undertaking, accomplishing, evincing, interrogating, considering, discussing, determining . . . All these ways of Being-in have concern as their kind of Being.

If however we think that this does not cover every way of being-in-the-world because there are ways of being where one has no concern, where one is, as young people say, ‘not bothered,’ or simply taking it easy, then Heidegger will be there to correct you:

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109 ibid
110 Levinas (1969), p. 45
111 Heidegger (1985a), p. 83
Leaving undone, neglecting, renouncing, taking a rest—these too are ways of concern; but these are all deficient modes, in which the possibilities of concern are kept to a ‘bare minimum’,\(^{112}\)

As an existential of Dasein, concern covers all our ways of dealing with our environing world, even when such dealing is an abstention from such activity, this merely reduces it to a deficient mode. Things matter to Dasein in a way that they do not matter to mere things. The point being that all these ways of being concerned with things in one’s world are ways in which Dasein has of taking itself to be: how Dasein understands itself determines the type of activities (or in-activities) that it engages in.

Concern is therefore the reason that Dasein comports itself toward entities in its world. Heidegger distinguishes different modes: there is concern (Besorgen) for things within Dasein’s world, solicitude (Fürsorge) for other beings that have the kind of Being of Dasein (other people) and care (Sorge) for being-in-the-world as such. Care amounts to Dasein’s care for itself as Da-sein, since this is essentially what Dasein is i.e. being-in-the-world. It is also the case that care takes ontological priority over the other modes of concern. This coupled with the fact that Dasein’s Being is an issue for it, and that ‘the Being of any such entity is in each case mine’,\(^{113}\) will allow Levinas to understand care as Dasein’s self-directed concern for its own Being. In an early piece on Heidegger he writes:

> Being is precisely what is revealed to Dasein, not under the form of a theoretical concept that one contemplates, but in an internal striving, in a concern that Dasein has for its very existence. And, inversely, this way of existing where “existence is at stake” is not something blind onto which knowledge of the nature of existence would have to be added, but this existence, in taking care of its own existence, amounts to the understanding of existence by Dasein.\(^{114}\)

Dasein’s basic way of comporting itself toward entities within its world is therefore not cognitive but affective: things matter to Dasein, and they matter because of, on the one hand, the type of Being Dasein takes itself to be and, on the other, the fact that Dasein has an internal striving to maintain itself in its Being. But since such a striving must be manifest in the structure of Dasein’s world and cannot be a hidden inwardness, it follows that care must be discovered in Dasein’s way of Being.

\(^{112}\) Ibid
\(^{113}\) Ibid, p. 67 We will need to say a little more about ‘mineness’ presently.
\(^{114}\) Levinas (1996a), p. 9 emphasis mine.
Dasein’s Essence is Existence

Heidegger famously insisted that Dasein’s Being is its existence or that: ‘The essence [“Wesen”] of this entity lies in its “to be” [Zu-sein].’\textsuperscript{115} We have to some extent seen this, but it needs some more spelling out so that a clearer picture of being-in-the-world can emerge:

The essence of Dasein lies in its existence. Accordingly those characteristics which can be exhibited in this entity are not ‘properties’ present-at-hand of some entity which ‘looks’ so and so and is itself present-at-hand; they are in each case possible ways for it to be, and no more than that. All the Being-as-it-is [So-sein] which this entity possesses is primarily Being. So when we designate this entity with the term ‘Dasein’, we are expressing not its “what” (as if it were a table, house or tree) but its Being.\textsuperscript{116}

This means that Dasein is not a thing or a substance. Rather Dasein is its possibilities of Being; Dasein is pure possibility (or, at least, almost, as we will see). It is precisely this point that Sartre is making when he complains of the waiter who is ‘playing at being a waiter in a café.’\textsuperscript{117} The ‘bad faith’ of the waiter lies in the fact that he is pretending that this role is a fixed actuality, whereas as a human being it is one of his many possibilities.\textsuperscript{118} Such possibilities are pursued by Dasein via its world. We have said that the equipment that makes up Dasein’s world forms a system or totality which, only by virtue of its interconnectedness, reveals the items of the world. Thus in taking hold of a hammer Dasein pursues one possibility among many by virtue of an always already interpreted world. Each of Dasein’s pursued possibilities can be understood as a project, so long as we don’t understand by this that Dasein is in possession of a conscious plan by virtue of which it presses on. Rather, as we have seen, the possibilities of Dasein’s world are given in a practical comportment that does not require representations.

But the world in which Dasein pursues its projects is not one that it has chosen, certain brute situations obtain which Dasein must take account of. Hence Heidegger will say that Dasein is thrown into the world. Such thrownness (Geworfenheit) is a fundamental element in Dasein’s being: for example, my personal background, the culture I live in and the language that I speak, are not chosen by me, I inherit them. But these are not simply facts about me in the way that 2+2=4 or that grass is green. I can change them and I can adopt various attitudes toward them, I can choose to identify more strongly with them or I can rebel against them. They are nevertheless facts about me in a very important sense; they form what Heidegger will call Dasein’s facticity (Faktizität). This therefore refers to the fact that our existence is always to some extent formed by the past. But thrownness also indicates that we are not somehow positioned before our possibilities, as some kind of outside observer, but find ourselves right in the midst of them, already involved. Thus we care about our situation before we choose to be in the situation. The fact of being thrown into our

\textsuperscript{115} Heidegger (1985a), p. 67
\textsuperscript{116} Ibid
\textsuperscript{117} Sartre (1969), p. 59
\textsuperscript{118} These thinkers are of course otherwise very different.
world is thus the foundation of affectivity which is central to Heidegger’s understanding of Dasein’s being.

States-of-Mind or Moods
As thrown into the world we are always in some kind of mood or state-of-mind (Befindlichkeit). Such moods are affective states, but they are not considered by Heidegger to be internal to the subject, as affective states have largely being understood by the tradition. Rather moods do not simply tell us about the way that Dasein feels, they tell us about the way the world is. They are considered by Heidegger to be modes of attunement (Gestimmtheit) which show the world to us in differing ways. When we are in love the world is a beautiful place full of promise; when we have lost a loved one the world is bleak, cold and without comfort. This way of seeing things is reminiscent of the early Wittgenstein’s remark that: ‘The world of the happy man is a different one from that of the unhappy man.’ Such affectivity is also an existential of Dasein, such that Dasein is always in some kind of mood:

The fact that moods can deteriorate [verdorben werden] and change over means simply that in every case Dasein always has some mood [gestimmt ist]. The pallid, evenly balanced lack of mood [Ungestimmtheit], which is often persistent and which is not to be mistaken for bad mood, is far from nothing at all.

Even when we feel we are in no mood at all, this is not the case; this ‘pallid, evenly balanced lack of mood’ is really a mood. Again it can be conceived as a deficient mode.

So Dasein is thrown into the world and inherits the facticity which is the legacy of the past. The past therefore is not simply that which has gone before, and is now passed, but is tied to Dasein’s being-in-the-world. This is because Dasein is not (pace Sartre) simply presented with its possibilities against the background of a blank canvas but is always already involved with a world. This is what Heidegger means when he says that Dasein is essentially historical. Indeed Heidegger’s title betrays the fact that his work is not only about Being but also, and relatedly, about time. As we will see Dasein turns out to be care, and care is shown to be structured in a temporal way. By virtue of thrownness we can see how Dasein is, in a certain sense, its past.

Thrown Projection as Understanding (Verstehen)
Given its concernful thrownness into a world, Dasein is presented with possibilities, and because of the patterns of meaning that it inherits it can carry out particular projects. By doing so Dasein is engaged in a futural activity, it seize the ready-to-hand hammer in-order-to (das Um-zu) mend the fence, to keep the garden cordoned off, so as to claim this home as ‘mine.’ This is done as a way toward-which (das Wozu) Dasein projects itself into its possibilities: All this because it sees itself as a homeowner and family man, for example. This is all done in the light of how Dasein

119 Wittgenstein (1961) 6.43
120 Heidegger (1985a), p. 173
understands itself as a for-the-sake-of-which (das Wor-umwillen) it is the way of Being that it so adopts to be.

This primary “towards-which” is not just another “toward-this” as something in which an involvement is possible. The primary ‘toward-which’ is a “for-the-sake-of-which”. But the ‘for-the-sake-of’ always pertains to the being of Dasein, for which, in its Being, that very Being is essentially an issue.121

In the light of its thrownness Dasein takes hold of such possibilities that pertain to its sense of who it is, which may settle the issue that it itself is, and thus result in inauthenticity; or unsettle this issue and thus reach toward authenticity. (We will deal with these important existentials presently). Dasein’s ability to activate its possibilities in a project, and thus project itself into the future, Heidegger refers to as understanding (Verstehen). This should not however be confused with intellectual comprehension or knowledge. It is a kind of know-how, and if we ask what it is, in general, that Dasein knows-how to do, the answer is to exist. Here existence takes on a transitive sense where one exists as a movement of existing, one understands one’s world the way one lives-one’s-life. Accordingly we can say that Dasein is thrown-projection. If thrownness is the ground of Dasein’s past then projection is the ground of its future. Dasein therefore does not have the kind of Being of present-at-hand objects, nor does it have the kind of being of the ready-to-hand, rather Dasein has the kind of Being that is captured by the notion of thrown-projection. Ultimately Heidegger will understand Dasein in its totality in terms of care:

The formally existential totality of Dasein’s ontological structural whole must therefore be grasped in the following structure: the Being of Dasein means ahead-of-itself-being-already-in-(the-world) as Being-alongside (entities encountered within-the-world). This Being fills in the signification of the term “care” [Sorge], which is used in a purely ontologico-existential manner. From this signification every tendency of being which one might have in mind ontically, such as worry [Bersorgnis] or carefreeness [Sorglosigkeit], is ruled out.122

Actually Heidegger does this a lot: he uses a term which gives the impression of a certain type of signification, such as being a particular state of the soul or a morally loaded term, and insists that he uses it in a purely ontological or ontologico-existential way. We can see why he does this if we remember that he is directing us to a way of seeing the human which is completely different from the traditional. We will see however that he is not always entirely convincing in this and, moreover, that he exploits the moral or emotive overtones of a term only to insist that he is not using it in the ordinary way. This I think is most clearly in evidence in his discussion of authenticity and inauthenticity.

121 Ibid, pp. 116-117
122 Ibid, p. 237
The They (Das Man)

Dasein is submerged in a world into which it is thrown and in which it projects itself understandingly toward a future. The future therefore takes on a certain priority for Dasein, but by virtue of being so submerged Dasein does not always choose its future in the clear light of the fact that it is Dasein. Rather Dasein becomes so entangled with its world that it ends up interpreting the significance that things have in terms that are inherited by its thrownness. In other words: ‘Being-in-the-world, as concern, is fascinated by the world with which it is concerned.’ Moreover it tends to see things the way everyone else sees things, do things the way everyone else does and generally share the views of what Heidegger calls the they (das Man). Heidegger will say that Dasein is fallen (Verfallen) into the world. Fallenness is seen by Heidegger as a basic structure of Dasein and he insists over and over again that we should not read any moral implication into it:

The term ‘falling’ designates a movement of the being of the happening of Dasein and once again should not be taken as a value judgement, as if it indicated a base property of Dasein which crops up from time to time, which is deplored and perhaps eliminated in advanced stages of human culture.

Fallenness is Dasein’s way of being involved with the moment in the manner of doing things the way one (das Man) does them. Dasein is submerged in the crowd and adopts a way of interpreting the situation that is already laid out for it. Just as thrownness indicated the past and projection the future, so fallenness for Heidegger specifies the present. Thus we have the three ecstasies of time as aspects of the structure of Dasein’s being-in-the-world. In its fallenness Dasein is so entangled with the Beings that make up its world, indeed enthralled by them, that it mistakes its own kind of Being for the kind of Being that the things in its world have. It thereby takes itself to be a present-at-hand object, albeit a very special one. It is here that the mistaken philosophies that follow the Cartesian pattern are seen to be born. Heidegger does not simply claim therefore that such philosophies make a mistake; he gives us a kind of pathology of the origin of this mistake. He thus

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123 Ibid, p. 88 This notion of being fascinated by the world has its precursor in Husserl. In Husserl (1970) he tells us that we live in an “infatuation” with the world. p. 176

124 Hubert Dreyfus has insisted that Heidegger’s discussion of ‘falling’ is fundamentally confused between a structural sense of the term, which renders ‘falling’ a mode of Dasein’s Being-in-the-World as such, and a psychological sense which he inherits from Kierkegaard, and which is essentially an inauthentic mode of Being-in-the-World. See Dreyfus (1991), chap 13. This is so because Dreyfus believes that we can separate the insights of Division One of Being and Time into our Being-in-the-world as such, from the more existential considerations of authenticity and inauthenticity which largely arise in Division Two. I do not have space to discuss the merits or otherwise of such a reading. Suffice it to say that this is very far from Levinas’s reading.

125 Heidegger (1985b), p. 274

126 It is a very important question as to why Dasein mistakes itself specifically for the kind of being that is present-at-hand, when, as we have seen, what is nearest to Dasein is the ready-to-hand. Heidegger asks this question about Being in general, rather than simply Dasein’s Being, near the end of Being and Time but does not there answer it. He writes: ‘Why does Being get “conceived” “proximally” in terms of the present-at-hand and not in terms of the ready-to-hand, which indeed lies closer to us?’ (Heidegger (1985a), p. 487)
tries to show why we find the Cartesian picture so natural. It makes the fundamental ontological mistake of not examining the being of the entity which it purports to disclose, but instead understands it in terms of the being in which it hides. It is the task of Heidegger’s hermeneutic interpretation of Dasein to bring it out of its hiding and back to itself: ‘communicating Dasein to itself in this regard, hunting down the alienation from itself with which it is smitten.’

A kind of fetishisation takes place here wherein Dasein is alienated from its Being as Dasein. There is something unsettling about being Dasein which falling manages to divert and distract us from. The way of Dasein’s being is groundless: because Dasein has no fixed nature but its essence is its existence, it vaguely senses itself as if floating over an abyss. It is, as it were, grounded on nothingness. Existence therefore takes on an uncanny (Unheimlich) aspect which is what Dasein flees by drifting along with the they (das Man) and into fallenness:

Yet the obviousness and self-assurance of the average ways in which things have been interpreted, are such that while the particular Dasein drifts along towards an ever-increasing groundlessness as it floats, the uncanniness of the floating remains hidden from it under their protecting shelter.

How then is the they (das Man) to be characterised? Heidegger specifies three related elements: idle talk, curiosity and ambiguity.

**Idle talk**

Idle talk specifies that mode of discourse that is disengaged from actual interpretation of things. The words ‘idle’ in the sense that they do no real work. Gossip, I suppose, is the most obvious example: the tittle-tattle that goes to make up the celebrity ‘news’ in the tabloids. But Heidegger is not restricting the term to these obviously vacuous types of chatter. What he wants to specify is the fact that most talk, and indeed writing, is dominated by the type of ‘understanding’ that is characteristic of the way the they (das Man) interprets things. He speaks with contempt of the fact that:

For everything which must be done nowadays, there is first a conference. One meets and meets, and everyone waits for someone else to tell him, and it doesn’t matter if it isn’t said, for one has now indeed spoken one’s mind. Even if all the speakers who thus speak their minds have understood little of the matter, one is

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127 Heidegger (1999), p. 11
128 For a discussion of nothingness as an important Heideggerian concept see ‘What Is Metaphysics?’ in Heidegger (1978), pp. 91-113 and see Chapter 5 of the present Thesis.
129 The word ‘Unheimlich’ contains connotations of not-being-at-homeness, along with strangeness and weirdness.
130 Heidegger (1985a), p. 214
of the opinion that the cumulation of this lack of understanding will nevertheless eventually generate an understanding.\textsuperscript{131}

Yet he insists that all this ‘should not be interpreted as a moral sermon or the like.’\textsuperscript{132} What we can understand by this is that idle talk is characteristic of the kind of opinions that are spread in virtue of the fact that ‘they say’ it. Nothing is understood very deeply in this kind of talk. One can hardly deny the prevalence of this type of idling. But this lack of understanding is due to the fact that the subject under discussion is not really made one’s own. One is not truly involved with that which is spoken or written of, it is simply a \textit{topic}.

\textbf{Curiosity}

Curiosity is along the same lines. It specifies the desire we have to see things simply for the sake of seeing them, or to have something to (idly) talk about. When describing Dasein’s ready-to-hand coping we specified that the manner in which it understands its world was via \textit{circumspection} (\textit{Umsicht}). Circumspection is a kind of sight (or we might say \textit{in-sight}) that Dasein has into the network of meaningful relations which constitute a world. But, as Heidegger emphasises, we should not understand this in purely visual terms: we talk of seeing what someone means, we say we see how it sounds, see how it feels etc. So the extension of seeing involves more than simply being visually presented with something: As Heidegger puts it: ‘seeing is here used in the wider sense of concerned and caring appresentation.’\textsuperscript{133} More to the point the reach and dexterity of the hand brings ‘things’ into \textit{view} or makes them readily available (or ready-to-hand). If however one stops being involved and simply stands idle, then sight is somehow freed from circumspective understanding. It can then roam where it will. In so doing it only attends to outward appearance and does not really get involved in any serious way with what it sees. A pathological form of this would be scopophilia or voyeurism, and we can see how such disengaged looking is involved in the responsibility-free pleasures of pornography. What Heidegger is saying is that curiosity, as part of fallenness, is already on the road that leads to these pathologies. Reality TV of the voyeuristic variety would undoubtedly horrify Heidegger.

\textbf{Ambiguity}

Ambiguity refers to the fact that because everything becomes a matter for idle talk and curiosity it becomes impossible to distinguish that which is understood from that which is not. We might say that idle talk is a fallen mode of discourse, curiosity is a fallen mode of understanding and thus that ambiguity is a fallen mode of interpretation. In ambiguity we can no longer see what is important and what is not. We cannot therefore decide which possibilities to take hold of and remain resolved upon them. We are in a sense overrun with possibilities each, along with its opposite, soliciting us toward it. The world becomes bemusing. We are like a child in a room full of toys who does not know which to play with first and thus flits from one to another without really getting involved in any game.

\textsuperscript{131} Heidegger(1985b), pp. 272-273
\textsuperscript{132} ibid
\textsuperscript{133} ibid, p. 274
Dasein in the mode of fallenness thereby loses itself. It is a mode of alienation, but curiously one which is part of the structure of Dasein's being-in-the-world: As Heidegger puts it: 'proximally and for the most part Dasein is absorbed in the “they” and is mastered by it.'

This kind of fallenness is a way of tranquilising Dasein against the unsettling effect of being Dasein. How then is Dasein to be awakened from this dogmatic slumber?

Dasein is understood in terms of its possibilities; these are not such that which of the possibilities to be taken hold of is laid out in advance. But fallenness makes it seem that such possibilities are settled by the way of seeing things that comes natural to the they (das Man). Thus Dasein is able to interpret its Being in terms of a present-at-hand way of Being; wherein what it is is settled by virtue of its apparently fixed qualities. It follows that what provokes an awakening to an awareness of its Being is an unsettling 'experience' which will point to its being in terms of pure possibility. Such an 'experience' is given by the mood (Stimmungen) of anxiety (Angst).

Anxiety

Heidegger contrasts the mood of anxiety to that of fear: we are afraid in a twofold manner we are afraid of that which threatens (the wolf) and we are afraid for ourselves. Fear, despite being concerned with the self, is directed towards something specific in the world: the wolf's teeth. Fear is therefore always about a particular state of my world. Anxiety, by contrast, is not about a particular state of the world but about being-in-the-world as such. Anxiety is the anticipation of a state from which we pull back but which, when asked what we pull back from, we can only say we don't know, or it was nothing. This 'nothing' is exploited by Heidegger to derive from anxiety a sense of the uncanniness that is at the heart of Dasein.

When dread (ängst) has run its course we say, 'It was really nothing.' This kind of talk strikes the very heart of the matter. It was nothing; the of-which of dread (ängst) is nothing, that is to say, nothing that takes place in the world, nothing definite, nothing worldly. But since it can nevertheless be oppressively present in an obtrusiveness, it is much more than something threatening for fear, for it is the world in its very worldhood.

Anxiety reveals the nature of my world in general and not some specific state of the world. In doing so it reveals, at least momentarily, that the world depends upon the Being of Dasein for its sense. But the Being of Dasein, given as the source of the worldhood of the world, is thereby revealed in its uncanny groundlessness, it cannot get its sense from anything within the world since the very worldhood of the world depends upon its Being. Nor can the world be seen to rest upon one of the possibilities of Dasein, for these possibilities all take place within a world. Thus

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135 Heidegger (1985b), p. 290
the source of the world is revealed in terms of pure possibility, or Being possible as such. This, in worldly terms, is of course nothing actual.\textsuperscript{136}

\textbf{Authenticity and Inauthenticity}

Anxiety therefore reveals the Being of Dasein to Dasein and thereby allows for the possibility of Dasein’s awakening from its fallen state. Such a fallen state is described by Heidegger in terms of ‘\textit{inauthenticity (Uneigentlichkeit)}’; whereas the awakening to the fact that my being is my own being to choose is entitled ‘\textit{authenticity (Eigentlichkeit)}.’ Authentic Dasein can be awakened by the mood (Stimmungen) of anxiety (Angst). This can happen in our relation to our own deaths; and thus the notion of death, or rather being-towards-death, takes on a central enlightening role in Heidegger as we will see. Of course Heidegger is not claiming that an awareness of our mortality will inevitably awaken us to the fact of our Being as Dasein and thereby bring us into an authentic relation to our mineness (\textit{Jemeinigkeit}). Rather because death is seen as a special and ultimate kind of possibility of Dasein’s it is better placed to be exemplary of Dasein’s ownmost (\textit{eigenst})\textsuperscript{137} possibilities.

Dread (Angst) is nothing other than the pure and simple experience of being in the sense of being-in-the-world. This experience can, though it does not have to—just as all possibilities of being come under a ‘can’—assume a distinctive sense in death or, more precisely, in dying. We then speak of the \textit{dread of death}, which must be kept altogether distinct from fear of death, for it is not fear in the face of death but dread as a disposition to the naked being-in-the-world, to pure Dasein. There is thus the possibility, in the very moment of departing from the world, so to speak, when the world has nothing more to say to us and every other has nothing more to say, that the world and our being-in-it show themselves purely and simply.\textsuperscript{138}

It is a common experience, and probably more common the older we get. We are busy working away with some project or worrying about some domestic affair. Suddenly we feel a twinge in the chest or a sense of faintness, and we are reminded of our mortality. The project or the worry fade insipidly or turn into a comic spectacle before our eyes. Why worry? Why do I rush about so to earn a living when I am really rushing towards death? Of course the mood fades and we pick up our tools and our troubles and carry on with the farce. The ultimate possibility of Dasein for

\textsuperscript{136} Much of this thinking of anxiety, like so much else in \textit{Being and Time}, derives from a reading of Kierkegaard, as Heidegger acknowledges: ‘The man who has gone farthest in analysing the phenomenon of anxiety—and again in the theological context of a “psychological” exposition of the problem of original sin—is Søren Kierkegaard.’ (Heidegger (1985a), p. 492, n. iv)

\textsuperscript{137} The etymological connections between ‘\textit{Eigentlich}’, ‘\textit{Jemeinigkeit}’ and ‘\textit{Eigenst}’ are clearly of significance here and point toward the idea that becoming authentic should be understood as coming \textit{into one’s own} in the sense of \textit{that which is most mine}, despite the fact that my being-in-the-world dispossesses me of that which is most mine. I should, as Nietzsche advised, become who I am.

\textsuperscript{138} Heidegger (1985b), p. 291
Heidegger is its being-towards-death, its ultimate, its ownmost and that which cannot be outstripped. He will accordingly call it ‘the possibility of the absolute impossibility of Dasein.’

Guilt and the Call of Conscience

One more area must be covered before I move on to Levinas’s criticism and reworking of Heidegger. If a sense of death is to awaken us to a sense of the importance of authentically being Dasein then it must in some sense be the case that we are already suspecting the way that death ought to be seen. For the they (das Man) is prodigiously resourceful in its capacity for turning Dasein away from its ownmost and making it fall into inauthenticity, as we know. But even within this fallen state Dasein can ‘hear’ an unsettling voice calling it back to itself, asking it to own up. It is a silent voice which disturbs by virtue of its very silence. This is what Heidegger names the call of conscience (Gewissensruf). This call translates the ordinary notion of having a conscience, but in Heidegger it is given an ontological interpretation. The call is just the opposite of idle talk, rather than saying a lot about nothing it says nothing about a lot. It indicates something very important to Dasein by virtue of the fact that it remains silent. Yet we might insist that silence is precisely the lack of talk, and this in a sense is correct. The call of conscience is a lack and it indicates, by that very fact, a lack in Dasein. The call of conscience turns out to be the self, calling itself to responsibility. If we ask what the self says to itself, Heidegger’s answer is that the voice of the call is indeed silent, but this silence is a very articulate silence and it calls out above the hubbub of the incessant idle talk of ‘the they’ that the self is guilty. But what is the self guilty of simply by virtue of being Dasein?

Once again guilt here should not be interpreted in any moral or ethical sense. For Heidegger, as we know, Dasein is always possibility, or put another way, we are always the outcome of the choices we make, even if we choose not to make choices. But in choosing one possibility I thereby neglect innumerable others, and therefore find myself in a kind of deficit on the basis of the non-being of the neglected possibilities. As Heidegger puts it:

“This nullity we have in mind belongs to Dasein’s Being-free of for its existentiell possibilities. Freedom, however, is only in the choice of one possibility—that is, in tolerating one’s not having chosen the others and one’s not being able to choose the others.”

Dasein as we know is thrown; it does not choose itself from the ground up but is presented with certain possibilities as a brute given. As Heidegger explains:

“In being a basis—that is, in existing as thrown—Dasein constantly lags behind its possibilities. It is never existent before its basis, but only from it and as this basis.”

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139 Heidegger (1985a), p. 294
140 Ibid, p. 331
Thus “Being-a-basis” means never to have power over one’s ownmost Being from the ground up. This “not” belongs to the existential meaning of “thrownness.”

In other words Dasein, which as such has to lay a basis for itself, can never get the basis into its power, and yet, as existing, it must take over Being-a-basis. Thus because Dasein by its very nature is called to be its own choices, and yet again by its very nature cannot be them, at least not all of them and not all the way down, conscience reminds it that it is in deficit, always owing. This is the call of ‘guilty,’ of that silent voice of conscience which inevitably finds Dasein no matter how much it tries to hide in the noise of the crowd. Dasein can never get behind itself and will itself from the ground up, nor can it take hold of any possibilities without neglecting others, and thus is always guilty. Dasein is therefore haunted by its lost possibilities and its thrown facticity. It’s as if these neglected possibilities crowd in on Dasein like so many unborn children silently haunting the mother of the actual child and marring her innocent enjoyment of the birth. But again Heidegger insists that this has no ethical implications, but is a pure ontological description. It is this kind of ontological guilt that Heidegger believes underlies all other kinds of ontic or ethical guilt. As he puts it; ‘The primordial “Being-guilty” cannot be defined by morality, since morality already presupposed it for itself.’

It is only by being attentive to this call of conscience and in accepting our guilt—a heeding and accepting that Heidegger rather clumsily calls wanting to have a conscience—that we become responsible. In this way Dasein pulls away from ‘the they’ self and, as he says: ‘It has chosen itself.’ It is only in this way that it can become authentically resolute.

Conclusion
An exhaustive account of Heidegger’s philosophy, or even of Being and Time, would be impossible in this kind of space, perhaps in any amount of space. This therefore concludes my exposition of Heidegger’s philosophical understanding of our Being-in-the-world. We will have occasion to focus in on, expand upon and criticise, elements of this account as we move along. It will also become clear what Levinas takes to be significant omissions from Heidegger’s account. We shall now turn our attention to a central one of these omissions—enjoyment (jouissance).

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141 Ibid, p. 330
142 It is worth noting that Derrida has taken up and developed this understanding of guilt, especially in his work The Gift of Death, supplementing it with insights from Levinas’s work. See Derrida (1996)
143 Heidegger (1985a), p. 332
144 Ibid, p. 334
145 Ibid, p. 334
2. Corporeal Enjoyment

In this thesis, I have indicated that I want to provide a reading of Levinas’s account of subjectivity in which it is seen as both ethical and as requiring transcendence, aspects which I see as inextricably linked. To build up this picture of subjectivity we need to start out with an account of sensible enjoyment, and the way in which this account distances Levinas from Heidegger, for it is enjoyment in which subjectivity is seen as first emerging from anonymous existing. It is this emergence which is the movement which makes transcendence and ethics possible, even if in the first instance it is seen in contrast to ethics.

Levinas’s notion of Enjoyment (Jouissance)

Despite the genuine value of Heidegger’s discovery of Dasein’s ready-to-hand way of comporting itself towards entities in the world, such comportment remains on the level of both activity and comprehension. Albeit that such activity is no longer the activity of the mind and comprehension is not of the order of disengaged contemplation. With Levinas there is a relationship with our environment which is not of the order of comprehension and yet underpins such a possibility.

‘We live from “good soup,” air, light, spectacles, work, ideas, sleep, etc. . . .’ These are not objects of representations. We live from them.’ 146 Is how Levinas opens the section of Totality and Infinity entitled ‘Living from...’ (Enjoyment) The Notion of Accomplishment’. 147 To live from these things is to enjoy them. It is through enjoyment that the self is primarily related to its world, which is not therefore a world in the Heideggerian sense. It is enjoyment which, on Levinas’s account, hollows out the inner space which he here calls ‘ego.’ The ego is our separateness, from the world and from Others. It specifies the very emergence of the independent self from what he will describe as ‘the anonymous.’ Enjoyment or ‘living from . . . delineates independence itself, the independence of enjoyment and of its happiness, which is the original pattern of all independence.’ 148 Enjoymnt as it figures in Totality and Infinity is an account of what Levinas refers to as the process of separation. This notion of enjoyment is understood to constitute our primordial way of being-in-the-world. But, again, this does not amount to a world in Heidegger’s sense. 149 Understood as our primary relation to our world it is a contestation of, on the one hand the notion that our most fundamental relation to the world should be understood in terms of representational thinking, a view Levinas attributes to Husserl and, on the other hand, the view that it should be understood as an instrumental relation, wherein our world is conceived as an interrelated system of equipmental items to be manipulated to some end, as in Heidegger’s Being and Time.

The primary figure for enjoyment is eating and it is in terms of eating and hunger that it gets its first nascent formulation in Levinas’s earlier work Existence and Existents:

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146 Levinas (1969), p. 110
147 Ibid, pp. 110-114
148 Ibid, p. 110
149 See Chapter 1
Let us take some time to look at the example of food; it is significant for us because of the place it occupies in everyday life, but especially because of the relationship between desire and satisfaction which it represents, and which constitutes what is typical of life in the world. What characterizes this relationship is a complete correspondence between desire and its satisfaction.¹⁵⁰

In eating what is desired completely corresponds to the desire, the desired agrees with the desire. It is, to play on words, agreeable (agréable). This fundamental mode of agreement is not an affirmation, as if it were correlative to negation. Rather it is prior to all possible affirmation and negation. As Levinas explains:

The primordial relation of man with the material world is not negativity, but enjoyment and agreeableness [agrément] of life. It is uniquely with reference to this agreeableness—unsurpassable within interiority, for it constitutes it—that the world can appear hostile, to be negated and to be conquered.¹⁵¹

In Totality and Infinity Levinas will not use the term ‘desire’ for this relation where an object satisfies a want, but refer to it in terms of ‘need.’ This is so because he will come to reserve a special usage for the term Desire (which he will usually capitalise) which we can illustrate by means of a comparison he formulates: ‘Compare eating to loving, which occurs beyond economic activity and the world. For what characterizes love is an essential and insatiable hunger.’¹⁵² This insatiable hunger he will call Desire. In contrast to Desire in this sense, the complementary nature of hunger and the satisfaction of hunger are essentially a perfect fit, and thus contentment. It is precisely this initial relation of contentment in the world that Levinas means by enjoyment (jouissance). Though eating is the primary figuration of enjoyment its extension is much wider. It applies to all sensible relations to the world, though it ultimately extends beyond what we would ordinarily call the sensible. We have noted that we live from not only “good soup” but also ‘air, light, spectacles, work, ideas, sleep, etc.’ The ‘etc.’ specifies a continuity such that anything in our world can be enjoyed: ‘I but open my eyes and already enjoy the spectacle.’¹⁵³ Prior to vision being a means of cognition of the world it is already an enjoyment of the world, as spectacle. That which Heidegger had stigmatised as curiosity, and which he understood as a fallen state of Dasein, is here given a positive value. Rather than such enjoyment of a scene — the feasting of one’s eyes on it— being a breakdown of circumspective understanding or vision, it is more fundamental than such instrumental understanding and has a positive function.

¹⁵⁰ Levinas (1978), pp. 34-35
¹⁵¹ Levinas (1969), pp. 149-50. I will return in Chapter 5 to that which makes the world appear hostile.
¹⁵² Levinas (1978), p. 35 I will deal this very important distinction between need and Desire in more detail in Chapter 4.
¹⁵³ This ‘anything’ requires a qualification: anything, perhaps, but pain.
¹⁵⁴ Levinas (1969), p. 130
Enjoyment not Representation

To enjoy a stroll, to relish our soup or to feel the sun on our face is not to represent these things to ourselves, but to enjoy them. We have seen that as Levinas reads him Husserl prioritised objectifying acts in his account of our relation to the world.\textsuperscript{155} As he reads Husserl the object presented to thought is understood as a noemata of an intentional noetic mental act. As such the object of the act is constituted by virtue of a \textit{ Sinngebung} (sense-bestowal) issuing from the self as transcendental ego. In this way the object of the act appears in the light of a consciousness as if it were consciousness’s own creation, and this, for Levinas constitutes the source of the ‘temptation to idealism.’\textsuperscript{156}

Thoughts, in the sense of representational thoughts, do not weigh on the self. In a sense the object of representation is indeed interior to thought: despite its independence it falls under the power of thought. We are not alluding to the Berkeleyan ambiguity between the sentient and the sensed within sensation, and we are not limiting our reflection to objects called sensible; it is rather a question of what in Cartesian terminology becomes the clear and distinct idea. In clarity an object which is first exterior is \textit{given} that is, is delivered over to him who encounters it as though it had been entirely determined by him. In clarity the exterior being presents itself as the work of the thought that receives it.\textsuperscript{157}

This \textit{mastery} of objects by virtue of the constitutive activity of thought is central to how Levinas reads Husserl’s notion of objectifying acts. The object \textit{given} to thought, qua given, shows no resistance to the activity of \textit{ Sinngebung}. ‘This mastery is total and as though creative; it is accomplished as a giving of meaning: the object of representation is reducible to a noemata.’\textsuperscript{158} Thus representational thinking, despite the apparent passivity of receptivity by virtue of the object being given, is in fact, to the contrary, active in its constitution of—its mastery over—the represented object. It is for this reason that Levinas will define representation as ‘a non-reciprocal determination of the other by the same.’\textsuperscript{159} For the self (same) is not changed by the object it represents to itself, in fact it is precisely in its power to represent that the self remains self-identical. ‘To remain the same is to represent to oneself. The “I think” is the pulsation of rational thought.’\textsuperscript{160} This stands in contrast with enjoyment, not merely by virtue of the fact that the direction of the flow of sense is reversed: the world that we enjoy is not given as if it were the work of the subject, that is to say, it is not constituted by virtue of the subjects \textit{ Sinngebung}. Rather the point is that enjoyment \textit{is itself constitutive of the subject}, or I should rather say a certain level

\textsuperscript{155} See Chapter 1
\textsuperscript{156} Levinas (1969), p. 123
\textsuperscript{157} Ibid
\textsuperscript{158} Ibid, p. 124
\textsuperscript{159} Ibid, p. 126
\textsuperscript{160} Ibid, p.126 This theme has been touched upon in the Introduction.
of subjectivity, rather than being constituted by it. This constitution of the subject is specifically its emerging in a position on the earth in its very materiality. It is thus starting from our sensible corporeality that spatial relations can be understood and not in terms of our location vis-à-vis a pre-comprehended environing world of equipment. Levinas writes:

The intentionality of enjoyment can be described by contrast with the intentionality of representation; it consists in holding on to the exteriority which the transcendental method involved in representation suspends. To hold on to exteriority is not merely equivalent to affirming the world, but to posit oneself in it corporeally. The body is elevation, but also the whole weight of position.

In enjoyment exteriority is assumed, but in such a way that in contrast to representation it is, in Levinas’s terminology; ‘to enter into a relation with it such that the same determines the other while being determined by it.’ Thus reflection on the material element which is the medium of enjoyment cannot get it entirely in its grasp, because enjoyment and the object of enjoyment (the aliment) is partly constitutive of the possibility of reflection and so cannot be wholly contained within it. ‘The aliment conditions the very thought that would think it as a condition.’

Enjoyment is *Sincere* and not *Fallen*

The relation of enjoyment is fundamentally, as Levinas will say, ‘sincere.’ This contrasts with Heidegger’s account of being-in-the-world wherein submersion in the world is, on the one hand inauthentic or ‘fallen’ (Verfall), and on the other merely instrumental. We have seen that the primary figuration of enjoyment is eating and, as Levinas puts it, “The man who is eating is the most just of men.” By this he means that in enjoyment one harbours no ulterior motives, rather one goes straight to the object. What we enjoy we do not enjoy for the sake of something else, as we use an implement or tool in-order-to... and for-the-sake-of..., rather to enjoy my soup is to enjoy eating the soup. Enjoyment is for its own sake. As such enjoyment does not refer one to a system of interrelated significant items as does Heidegger’s world (Welt) of referential totalities. Rather enjoyment refers us to a set of independent finalities which are enjoyed for their own sake. Levinas underlines this point:

What seems to have escaped Heidegger—if it is true that in these matters something might have escaped Heidegger—is that prior to being a system of tools, the world is an ensemble of nourishments. Human life in the world does not go beyond the objects that fulfil it. It is perhaps not correct to say that we live to eat,

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161 We will see that this is the point of the emergence of subjectivity but that it has its essence at a deeper level. An account of this deeper level, essentially ethical subjectivity, will have to await Chapter 8.

162 Ibid, p. 127

163 Ibid, p. 128

164 Ibid

165 Levinas (1978), p. 35

166 Ibid, p. 35
but it is no more correct to say we eat to live. The uttermost finality of eating is contained in food.\textsuperscript{167}

Accordingly prior to the establishment of a world of utilisable items the world consists of an ‘ensemble’\textsuperscript{168} of ends in themselves which Levinas describes as ‘nourishments,’ or ‘aliment.’ On the other hand it should be emphasized that we do not enjoy the things of our world\textit{ in order to} nourish ourselves, we do so gratuitously: ‘To stroll is to enjoy the fresh air, not for health but for the air.’\textsuperscript{169} The relation therefore is reasonably complex: I am related to my food, in that I am eating it, but I am also related to this relation itself, in that I am enjoying the eating of it. These relations form a closed circle which does not point outside itself, it is sufficient unto itself; it is this that Levinas means by calling it sincere: ‘All this is not for the sake of living; it is living. Life is sincerity.’\textsuperscript{170} Each happiness comes for the first time.\textsuperscript{171}

According to Levinas tools, in Heidegger’s sense, do have a finality, they refer, through countless intermediaries back to Dasein itself, back to the Being (\textit{Sein}) of Da-sein. The point of the equipmental totality which constitutes Dasein’s world (\textit{Welt}) is the sustaining of Dasein itself in its own being or in be-ing the being it is. The problem of equipment is the problem of a circuit which terminates in the care (\textit{Sorge}) for one’s own Dasein. ‘In turning on the bathroom switch we open up the entire ontological problem.’\textsuperscript{172} Yet getting into the bath, soaking in the tub, cannot exhaustively, or even for the most part, be described as a means of washing dirt from the body, though it is that. Rather one\textit{ enjoys} a good soak; one\textit{ relaxes} in the water that washes over us. But for Heidegger ‘tools refer to one another to finally refer to our care for existing.’\textsuperscript{173}

\textbf{Enjoyment is Beyond Being}

Levinas wants to remind us that the things that make up the content of our lives, the things we enjoy, are always beyond bare existence. So much so that we might rather die than be without them. Moreover the care for our existence, and the anxiety over the nothingness at the heart of this existence, are not the way we live our lives. On the contrary; ‘We behave like the frightful bourgeois in the midst of Pascalian, Kierkegaardian, Nietzschean, and Heideggerian anxieties. Or we are crazy.’\textsuperscript{174} Our enjoyment of life is our love of life which continues despite any awareness we might have of the ‘meaninglessness’ of this life: ‘The man condemned to die straightens out his uniform before his last walk, accepts a final cigarette, and finds an eloquent word before the

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{167} Levinas (1987a), p. 63
  \item \textsuperscript{168} The use of the word ‘ensemble’ rather than ‘system’ indicates that the objects of enjoyment, qua enjoyables, do not form into a system.
  \item \textsuperscript{169} Levinas (1987a), p. 63
  \item \textsuperscript{170} Levinas (1978), p. 36
  \item \textsuperscript{171} Levinas (1969), p. 114
  \item \textsuperscript{172} Levinas (1987a), p. 63
  \item \textsuperscript{173} Ibid, p. 62
  \item \textsuperscript{174} Ibid, p. 59
\end{itemize}
Enjoyment is life itself, and life is love of life. ("One minute more, Mr. Hangman"). It is what fills life either with joys or sorrows. Contrary to Heidegger:

Life is an existence that does not precede its essence. Its essence 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. Happiness is not an accident of being, since being is risked for happiness.

Moreover we should add that despite Heidegger’s analysis tools themselves are not of a pure and simple utilitarian character. ‘They are always in a certain measure—and even hammers, needles, and machines are—objects of enjoyment, presenting themselves to “taste”, already adorned, embellished.’ Who buys a car on the basis of pure utility? Or who chooses furniture on the basis of its pure practicality? The advertising industry would be of little use if we were not swayed by the enjoyable ‘adornments’ of the objects we buy. One only need observe the relish with which a typical alpha male handles the ‘power’ tools in a DIY store to realise that these are also designed to ‘taste’. Levinas’s claim is that the totality of tool-like equipment described by Heidegger has as its end the production of the things that we enjoy for their own sake. That is to say, not for the sake of something else and not for the sake of our care for our existence; but also that these tools, in themselves, constitute a prolongation of such items of enjoyment.

**Enjoyment and Care (Sorge)**

It is not the case, however, that enjoyment merely replaces or grounds Heidegger’s notion of care (Sorge), as if Heidegger simply got the motivation for human action wrong, or did not dig deep enough into it. Rather, as I have indicated, Levinas will insist that enjoyment is already ‘beyond being.’ ‘To be I is to exist in such a way as to be already beyond being, in happiness.’ One way to understand this is to understand enjoyment, in continuity with pleasure, as a form of escape from the brute fact of existing. This can be shown to be the case because, as we have noted, Being is risked for happiness. Indeed Levinas is not convinced by Heidegger’s view that representational thinking emerges as a deficient mode of engagement.

The objectivity of the object is thereby being underestimated. The ancient thesis that puts representation at the basis of every practical behaviour—taxed with intellectualism—is too hastily discredited. The most penetrating gaze can not

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175 Ibid, p. 60
176 Levinas (1969), p. 149
177 Ibid, p. 112
178 Ibid, p. 110
179 Ibid, p. 120
180 I will explain this matter in more detail in Chapter 3.
181 We will see what this means in detail in Chapter 3.
discover in the thing its function as an implement; does a simple suspension of action suffice to apperceive the tool as a thing?\footnote{182}

The *thingly* nature of the object, its objectivity and materiality, is not simply a function of its suspension and disengagement from a pre-comprehended world (Welt) of ready-to-hand items. This is to underestimate the sense we have of a things materiality. We encounter its materiality before we encounter it as tool in the enjoyment that we can have of it. If we again take the example of eating Levinas will point to the gustative sensation as not merely the means by which we know what we are eating: ‘The signification proper to gustative sensation consists somehow in “breaking through” the knowledge gathered, to as it were penetrate into the inwardness of things.’\footnote{183} The point is that Heidegger’s analysis does not see the life that is lived as enjoyment and therefore underestimates the role of bodily contact and corporeal being in our lives. Not all things in life are tools, and not the things we relish the most, not even the ‘tools’ we relish the most. Is your bed a tool for sleeping on? Of course one can describe it in this way, but we lose the sense of how we enjoy lying in bed. There is no sign at all, for example, of food in *Being and Time*:

> The implement has entirely masked the usage and the issuance at the term—the satisfaction. *Dasein* in Heidegger is never hungry. Food can be interpreted as an implement only in a world of exploitation.\footnote{184}

This last remark indicates something very important. In conditions of great scarcity or deprivation food, for example, ceases to be an enjoyable and becomes a necessity. We find that we need to eat simply to survive (not that we didn’t already know this). But in the ordinary run of things we do not eat in order to survive nor dress in order to clothe ourselves against the elements, we eat because it is lunch time or because we are hungry and we enjoy it, we dress to adorn ourselves and some of us, at least, love our clothes. Moreover to a large extent we do live in a world of exploitation. Levinas is fully aware of this, even if the proletariat—at least in the prosperous West—no longer lives on a bare subsistence. The point is however that a bare subsistence is hardly life at all, or it is a life without the content that makes life liveable and lovable:

> It is in times of misery and privation that the shadow of an ulterior finality which darkens the world is cast behind the object of desire. When one has to eat, drink and warm oneself in order not to die, when nourishment becomes fuel, as in certain kinds of hard labour, the world also seems to be at an end, turned upside down and absurd, needing to be renewed. Time becomes unhinged.\footnote{185}

Under such circumstances we too may become ‘unhinged’ and this would be perfectly understandable, our world would go to pieces. The world lived as enjoyment on the other hand is not a state of exile but of being at home, which ‘far from deserving to be called a fall, has its own

\footnotesize{\begin{itemize}
\item \footnote{182} Levinas (1969), p. 94
\item \footnote{183} Emmanuel Levinas ‘Language and Proximity’ in Levinas (1998d), p. 117
\item \footnote{184} Levinas (1969), p. 134
\item \footnote{185} Levinas (1978), pp. 36-37
\end{itemize}}
positive function: the possibility of extracting oneself from anonymous being.\textsuperscript{186} We will see later when we deal with the *il y a*\textsuperscript{187} what this anonymous Being is and in what way it constitutes a threat. In short enjoyment is here seen as lifting us above animal existence which is understood as inseparable from its environment, under the constant pressure from urges and in permanent contact with what it lives from. Enjoyment on the other hand achieves the primary separation of a being alone with itself and thus distinct from its environment:

It frees itself from all the weight of the world, from immediate and incessant contact; it is at a distance. This distance is converted into time, and subordinate a world to the liberated but needy being. There is here an ambiguity of which the body is the very articulation. Animal need is liberated from vegetable dependence, but this liberation is itself dependence and uncertainty. An animal’s need is inseparable from struggle and fear; the exterior world from which it is liberated remains a threat.\textsuperscript{188}

We will see later\textsuperscript{189} that this threat re-emerges in the very medium of enjoyment itself.

**Enjoyment and Need**

However the view which takes food as fuel nevertheless hits upon something very important, food responds to a need, a need expressed in hunger. Of course one eats because one can get hungry, one does not always eat because one is hungry. If one never hungered one would never eat. Without need enjoyment would never emerge at all, hence needs remains an essential part of the self. We tend to envisage need as an emptiness needing to be filled, as in the empty stomach. Needs are not all like this;\textsuperscript{190} nevertheless need is usually construed as a negativity, as it is in Plato.\textsuperscript{191} As such it is interpreted as a reflection of our finitude and want, and thus as a yearning gap in the otherwise luxurious plenitude of being. But Levinas asks; ‘Must we remain at a philosophy of need that apprehends it in poverty?’\textsuperscript{192} Rather we should realise that man is happy for his needs. It is in the relationship of the need to its satisfaction—which Levinas refers to as ‘a pre-established harmony with what is yet to come to us’\textsuperscript{193}—that enjoyment arises. We will see therefore that Levinas rethinks needs themselves rather than claiming that it is characteristically human ‘to enjoy in a way that satisfies no need,’\textsuperscript{194} as Ted Toadvine seems to think. Admittedly

\textsuperscript{186} ibid, p. 37
\textsuperscript{187} Chapter 5
\textsuperscript{188} Levinas (1969), p. 116
\textsuperscript{189} Chapter 5
\textsuperscript{190} Levinas discusses need in great detail in *On Escape* as we will see in Chapter 3, where he understands it as over-fullness and a need for escape.
\textsuperscript{191} There are many instances of this identification of need with negativity in Plato, Levinas cites *Philebus* 46a see Plato (1982)
\textsuperscript{192} Levinas (1969), p. 116
\textsuperscript{193} ibid, p. 145
Levinas will claim that: ‘To enjoy without utility, in pure loss, gratuitously, without referring to anything else, in pure expenditure—this is the human.’ But this is not equivalent to removing the driving force of need from such gratuity, but in rethinking need such that sense can be made of such gratuity. ‘The permanent truth of hedonistic moralities,’ as Levinas calls it, is not revealed in the fact of the possibility of going beyond need, but:

   to not seek, behind the satisfaction of need, an order relative to which alone satisfaction would acquire a value; to take satisfaction, which is the very meaning of pleasure, as a term. The need for food does not have existence as its goal, but food.

Thus needs are not purely negative, not something we would be better off without having. This would be to confuse a need with the need to be rid of the need, whereas the satisfaction of a need accomplishes happiness. As Levinas puts it; ‘Happiness is accomplishment: it exists in a soul satisfied and not in a soul that has extirpated its needs, a castrated soul.’ It does not follow of course that there is no unhappiness in life, Levinas was well aware that there is far too much. However unhappiness in life gets its sense from a previous or possible happiness, the happiness of agreeableness (agréablement). Pain, for example, is sadly a great part of many people’s lives, and Levinas is fully aware of the evil of pain. Nonetheless: ‘Far from placing the sensible life in question pain takes place within its horizons and refers to the joy of living.’

**Enjoyment and Sensibility**

We have introduced the notion of the sensible life into the account of enjoyment; and indeed enjoyment takes place in, or rather is, sensibility itself. Thus it follows that for Levinas the sensible should not be construed as a neutral given or sense-data as it was understood in classical empiricism. Sensibility is primordially an affectivity, this affectivity is enjoyment. Thus all sensible qualities retain this affective dimension. It follows that sensibility does not primarily have a cognitive function. Before being the source of information about the world, the sensible is a source of enjoyment. If we continue our understanding of enjoyment in terms of eating, then it follows that we enjoy sensible qualities in the way we enjoy chocolate or cold drinks. In a late essay by Levinas he explains this relation by recourse to gustation:

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195 Levinas (1969), p. 133
196 Ibid, p. 134
197 Ibid
198 Ibid, p. 115
199 See Emmanuel Levinas ‘Useless Suffering’ in Levinas (2006a), pp. 78-87
We have chosen the example of gustative sensation because this schema of consumption is found in all forms of sensibility; to feel the world is always a way of being nourished by it.\textsuperscript{201}

As we have indicated Levinas refers to the sensibility of enjoyment in terms of ‘aliment.’\textsuperscript{202} Thus sensibility is a way of feeding off the world, a manner of living from.... Enjoyment therefore characterises our sensible submersion in the world. But what is the stuff of sensible enjoyment?

Of course when we enjoy a stroll in the fresh air it is the air that we enjoy, when we enjoy the spectacle of the sunset it is the reds and the oranges that we enjoy and when we sink our teeth into the bread it is the food that we enjoy. In each of these examples we can argue that there is a transmutation of the substance of the world, the air, the bread and cheese and the colours, into our own substance. It is this that is indicated by the use of the word ‘nourishment.’ The only anomaly is the case of the sunset, where it would not seem natural to understand this in terms of a taking into our bodies of the colours. But, as we have already noted, for Levinas, all forms of sensibility are ways of being nourished by the world. He thus asks, for example ‘if the expression “to eat up with one’s eyes” has to be taken as pure metaphor.’\textsuperscript{203} Later we will see that Levinas moves away from the prioritising of sight, characteristic of western philosophy, and even moves away from Heidegger’s centralising of the movement of the hand, towards a conceptualisation of sensibility in terms of touch. We will also see in what way touch is implicated in transcendence and how Levinas tries to connect a phenomenology of touch with sensibility more generally. In this way the apparent gap between the self and the sunset that subjectivity is said to ‘eat up’ is closed. Sensibility, as we have noted, is not what is neutrally given, but is an affective involvement in the world. We live these qualities; ‘the green of these leaves, the red of this sunset.’\textsuperscript{204}

So if we wanted a label for this vitalistic and non-cognitive view of the sensible we might call it an ‘existential adverbial view.’ One exists, or lives, one’s sensibility in the particular sensible modality in question.

**Enjoyment and the Elemental**
This transmutation of the substance of the world into my substance, into me, comes about by virtue of the ambiguity inherent in the body—at the same time both free and needy. Separated from the world I still form part of it by virtue of the body’s materiality, this materiality is expressed among other ways in needs. The substance that I take in in enjoyment is not however the object qua object, nor as we have seen, is it the object as tool. Rather it is the very materiality of these things, materiality independent of form. Levinas calls this formless matter which underpins the

\textsuperscript{201} Emmanuel Levinas ‘Language and Proximity’ in Levinas (1998d), p. 118 we will need to return to this important paper in Chapter 8

\textsuperscript{202} Levinas (1969), p. 128

\textsuperscript{203} Emmanuel Levinas ‘Language and Proximity’ in Levinas (1998d), p. 117

\textsuperscript{204} Levinas (1969), p. 135
sensible world ‘the elemental’, and talks also of ‘the element’ and ‘the elements’ in the plural. ‘The element has no form containing it; it is content without form.’

Thus the element is indeterminate; it is a medium in which we are submerged: ‘But the adequate relation with the element is precisely bathing.’ This can be best illustrated by virtue of the air, or the sea, or the sky, these are not things precisely, nor are they implements. Things, as Levinas understands them, are what can be possessed, as we will see later when we come to discuss labour, possession and the dwelling. They are objects which we are able, at least in principle, of carrying off. They are, he says, ‘furnishings’ (Meubles). The elements are essentially non-possessable; they are not contained within sides. Nevertheless they do, in a manner of speaking, show us a side. The sky or the sea presents a surface to us which extends beyond the horizon. There is nothing equivalent to going round the back as there is with objects properly so-called:

To tell the truth the element has no side at all. One does not approach it. The relation adequate to its essence discovers it precisely as a medium: one is steeped in it; I am always within the element.

Thus the element is non-possessable and constitutes a medium in which we bathe or are steeped. As Levinas says the elements lay ‘escheat, a common fund’. But we need not conclude that the element is essentially natural, the city, town or village constitutes the elemental background from which things come to me. They are found in space, in the air, on the earth, in the street, along the road. But it is precisely by virtue of the formless materiality of the elemental, the fact of it being raw stuff, that it is the substance of the enjoyment which fills our lives. It is bodily there. We can sink our teeth in it, breathe it in, drink it, splash about in it, and live in it. It is unformed matter, very like the Greek notion of the apeiron. This places emphasis on the material presence of the world, a presence which gets lost or covered over in representational thinking as Levinas understands it. ‘Things come to representation from a background from which they emerge and to which they return in the enjoyment we can have of them.’

But the elemental also backgrounds, and gives a point to, the technical finalities that are articulated in Heidegger’s account of the world (Welt). This world, as a system of interrelated and essentially comprehended equipment, entirely loses sight of the raw materiality of the world we deal with. It remains too phenomenological, in the sense that it brackets out the ‘natural attitude’ of enjoyment that exists between my life and the elemental materiality of the world and my body.

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205 Ibid, p. 131
206 Ibid, p. 132
207 Chapter 5
208 Levinas (1969), p. 131. A footnote tells us that the French word also means “movables” and this is retained in the use to which Levinas puts the word.
209 Ibid, p. 131
210 Ibid, p. 131
211 Ibid, p. 130
212 Ibid, p. 130
Yet the world in its materiality seeps back in through the brackets as soon as I open my eyes and enjoy the spectacle, take a cup of tea or let the sun warm my face. That is to say, my body reminds me of the materiality of reality.

It does not follow however that the element is without quality, merely that the quality it manifests is somehow indeterminate. In a sense it is pure quality:

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. Indetermination here is not equivalent to the infinite surpassing limits; it precedes the distinction between the finite and the infinite. It is not a question of a something, an existent manifesting itself as refractory to qualitative determination. Quality manifests itself in the element as determining nothing.213

Thus the medium of enjoyment is the elemental and our interaction with the world at the level of enjoyment is, in the first instance, sensibility. Yet we can also, as Levinas notes, enjoy or live from our ideas.214 We have already seen to some extent how ideas or representations differ from enjoyment but we still live them.

Enjoyment and Subjectivity
It is important to emphasise that it is this dimension of sensible life as enjoyment which articulates the primary contours of subjectivity as Levinas articulates it. Because enjoyment is an affectivity attendant upon the satisfaction or frustration of needs it is that which hollows out the space which we call subjectivity. The self in the first instance is not therefore a cognitive subject or I think, nor is it the practical I can characteristic of Merleau-Ponty’s analysis. Rather it is egoistic life, self-absorbed in the satisfaction of its needs; it is ‘without ears’ writes Levinas ‘like a hungry stomach.’215 Levinas calls it an egoism. It is quite simply a pulsation of sensible life, which is characterised in terms of a pro and contra movement toward the elements of such a life. Subjectivity in this first instance216 is made up of needs and the mode of immediately satisfying these needs. Thus subjectivity coils into itself as an egoism which is driven by its own sense of pleasure or pain: ‘Sensibility is the very narrowness of life, the naïveté of the unreflected I, beyond instinct, beneath reason.’217 It is more than animal life in the gratuity of its enjoyment, it is a kind of euphoric freeing of the self from the incessant pressure of survival which is said to characterise animal existence: ‘It frees itself from all the weight of the world, from immediate and incessant contacts; it is at a distance.’218 Yet it remains below reason, which, as we will see later, requires

213 Ibid, p. 132
214 Ibid, p. 110
215 Ibid, p. 134
216 I keep using the qualification ‘in the first instance’ because, as we will see in Chapter 8, that this is not Levinas’s last word on the nature of subjectivity. It nevertheless remains the first word throughout his philosophical development.
218 Ibid, p. 116
the social relation. Unlike Heidegger’s Dasein, which is always already in a social milieu with other beings who have the kind of being of Dasein, subjectivity as an egoism is in the first instance alone. Sensibility as egoistic enjoyment of the elements is what Levinas will refer to a *separation*. It constitutes the type of separation which does not depend upon its opposition to something else: for it is not in opposition to the elements that the ipseity 219 of the ego emerges. Rather it emerges in its agreement with (the *agreeableness* (*agréablement*) of enjoyment) these elements. ‘The unicity of the I conveys separation. Separation in the strictest sense is solitude, and enjoyment—happiness or unhappiness—is isolation itself.’220 Nor does it stand in conflict with Others: ‘It is solitude par excellence. The secrecy of the I guarantees the discretion of the totality.’221 It is therefore important to Levinas that he can evoke this kind of separation which does not result from the opposition or negation of another, since it is this that allows him to articulate a plurality of beings that does not collapse into a larger synoptic totality. Such a synoptic vision, given in a common medium, would threaten his account of an absolutely exterior Otherness. Given this way of understanding how separation is to be described it is perhaps unfortunate that Levinas uses the word ‘egoism’ to describe this situation, since this might suggest ethical considerations. This level of description of subjectivity however is given in terms of an *amoral* carefreeness. It is a kind of Eden before sin.

**Enjoyment and Representation**

We have noted that one of the formative influences on Levinas’s philosophy was the phenomenology of Edmund Husserl. Husserl’s analysis of sensibility locates it within the framework of intentional consciousness. Intentionality specifies the minds directedness onto content. To believe is to believe *that...*; to hope is to hope *that...* and so on for other so-called propositional attitudes, where the ‘*that...*’ clause is filled out with the specification of the intentional object of the mental state in question. Husserl calls these objects of intentional acts ‘noemata’ and the attitude of the act ‘noetic.’ The mental is not understood in terms of an imminent inwardness, or internal space. Rather the mental is essentially that which is directed towards something outside of itself which is the object of thought. Intentionality, in Husserl, is central to what it is to be a subject, in fact subjectivity *is* intentionality. ‘*Intentionality is what makes up the very subjectivity of subjects.* The very reality of subjects consists in their transcending themselves.’222 The sensible is given to consciousness by sensible intuition which corresponds to empirical experience or perception. But perception is not simply made up of the receptivity of the given, as if the mind (intentional consciousness) were *purely* passive with regard to it. Rather the sensible given is primarily constituted in a ‘passive synthesis’ which amounts to the holding together of the sensible in a temporal tract. The synthetic *activity* of the mind retains past moments in the now that is given and anticipates later moments in protention, perception

219 ‘Ipseity’ is Levinas’s word for I-ness or subjectivity. But since subjectivity will turn out to be essentially ethical, whereas the egoism of enjoyment is amoral, there remains a kind of essential ambiguity in its use.  
220 Levinas (1969), p. 117  
221 ibid, p. 118  
222 Emmanuel Levinas (1998c), p. 41
therefore always has a certain temporal thickness due to this synthesis in retention and protention. Thus perception is characterised as the perception of a temporally organised experiential expanse, rather than being the dislocated succession of instants, or rather a meaningless sensible *now-impression*. In this way a tract of experienced time is available. The sensible, for Husserl, is primarily encountered in the passive synthesis of time in perception. Synthesis is the mode of identification, it converts the mass of chaotic sensible bombardments into perception of...; i.e. intentional consciousness.

Representations proper constitute a higher level of ‘active synthesis’ wherein objects are thought *about*, considered or judged. This active synthesis, for Levinas, as we have noted, makes the object of thought appear as if it came from us. Thought has such a grip on its object that the *otherness* of the object is dominated and subdued to thought. As we know, Levinas considers that there is an even more fundamental level of sensibility than that displayed in the passive synthesis of perception—which he largely assimilates to representations— that is, the level of enjoyment. It is therefore prior to temporal synthesis achieved in Husserl’s passive synthesis. The time of the fundamental encounter with the element could therefore be said to be *immemorial*²²³, because it exceeds all possible memory and reflection and is rather constitutive of their possibility.

For Levinas representational thinking is transcendentally constituted and thus is such that ‘the object represented appears to reflection to be a meaning ascribed by the representing subject to an object that is itself reducible to the work of thought.’²²⁴ Representational thinking is thus the truth of idealism, as we have indicated; it therefore stays very much within what Levinas calls the circle of the Same. In such thinking the self never really leaves itself, never truly encounters Otherness. All thinking takes on the structure of the Husserlian noetic-noematic matrix, and as noema is a “meaning given.”²²⁵ Therefore in so far as enjoyment is a structure of the self or Same, or a movement which represents a return to the self or Same, representation constitutes a *continuity* of enjoyment. In both cases the realm of the Same is not punctured or transcended. Reason therefore—which is the very principle of representational thinking—remains a structure of the Same. To this extent, despite its universality, or rather because of it, reason, as a principle of the Same, does not extend to Otherness:

> By encompassing everything within its universality, reason finds itself once again in solitude. Solipsism is neither an aberration nor a sophism; it is the very structure of reason. This is not just because of the “subjective” character of the sensations that it combines, but because of the universality of knowledge—that is, the unlimitedness of light and the impossibility for anything to be on the outside.²²⁶

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²²³ We will encounter this notion of the ‘immemorial’ again in Chapter 8
²²⁴ Emmanuel Levinas (1969), p. 124
²²⁵ Ibid, p. 125
²²⁶ Levinas (1987a), p. 65
This unlimitedness of light is the all-consuming quality of representational thinking which is structured in terms of a sense bestowal (*sinngebung*) in the Husserlian sense. ‘Its first movement is negative: it consists in finding and exhausting in itself the meaning of an exteriority, precisely convertible into a noemata.’

Thus reason is not only and characteristically ‘subjective,’ it is precisely that which is *not*—in a sense to be specified—subjective, but rather the very crucible in which all otherness is converted into the Same. Because of this, reason is prone to conversion into one of the ‘insidious forms of the impersonal and neuter,’ wherein the individual human being is only a means by which an impersonal reason seeks self-knowledge, as in forms of absolute idealism. There is a paradox here wherein the very nature of reason is on the one hand solipsistic and on the other ‘insidiously’ universal. This air of paradox can be dissipated by recalling that the separation of the I does not take place in the cogito but in the affectivity of enjoyment.

When the I is identified with reason, taken as the power of thematization and objectification, it loses its ipseity. To represent to oneself is to empty oneself of one’s subjective substance and to insensibilize enjoyment. By imagining this anaesthesia limitless Spinoza conjures away separation.

Reason understood as the power of thematization characteristic of representational thinking, while constituting a continuity of enjoyment is at the same time a break with it. It constitutes a continuation insofar as it does not break with the circle of the Same, and is thus wholly amenable to our needs, yet it constitutes a break from such enjoyment by virtue of the fact that it *actively* bestows sense upon the world. It is on the basis of this latter characteristic that Descartes, who identified the self with the cogito, and thus with thinking, could understand the self as wholly separate from the body. He thus found himself encumbered with the insurmountable problem of the possibility of psycho-physical interaction.

Reason itself depends on separation, which it then in a sense nullifies. Reason in this sense is understood by Levinas to be the outcome of complex structures which depend upon the social relation, but it should also be added that, paradoxically, *social relations themselves depend upon reason.*

Levinas continues:

But the joy of this intellectual coincidence and the freedom of this obedience mark a cleavage line in the unity won in this way. Reason makes human society possible; but a society whose members would be only reasons would vanish as society. What could a being entirely rational speak of with another entirely rational being? Reason has no plural; how could numerous reasons be distinguished? How could a Kantian kingdom of ends be possible, had not the rational beings that compose it retained, as a principle of individuation, their exigency for happiness, miraculously

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228 Ibid, p. 272
229 Ibid, p. 119
230 I will say something about how this is so in Chapter 6 and Chapter 8
saved from the shipwreck of sensible nature? In Kant the I is met with again in this need for happiness. 231

We will not be able to clear up this apparent paradox—of reason emerging from the social relation while at the same time the latter depending upon reason—until we have finished our examination of Levinas’s philosophy and we will see that both depend upon the more fundamental structure of the trace. What this indicates is that we should not be reading Levinas in terms of a straightforward notion of constituted and constituting, even if his language, of necessity, lends itself to such a reading. We may be tempted here into reading Levinas as giving us layers of the self with the sensible at the bottom and reason growing up above on the basis of social interaction. But this would be a mistake. The notions of enjoyment and reason constitute moments of an account which are only separable by abstraction. Each rests on the more fundamental idea of ethical subjectivity which, as we will see later, 232 is characterised in terms of Desire.

Beyond Being

In order to see what underlies his positive evaluation of the affectivity of enjoyment and its limitations, we need to examine Levinas’s concept of ‘need’ in more detail. We have indicated that the satisfaction of needs is more than the filling of a gap in an otherwise full being. Enjoyment is not therefore the simple reestablishment of a corporeal harmony but a movement ‘beyond being’, as Levinas puts it. This is central to my thesis; if enjoyment were seen as simply the reestablishment of a previous harmony then it would not constitute an element in the movement which I will argue is characteristic of transcendence. The claim that enjoyment is beyond being is partly established by the fact that existence can be, and often is risked, for happiness. Mere existence is not worth much to us: ‘When reduced to pure and naked existence, like the existence of the shades Ulysses visits in Hades, life dissolves into shadow.’ 233 But this is only a first step in understanding what he is driving at with his use of the seemingly paradoxical phrase ‘beyond being.’ In reality it is only by gaining an understanding of his notion of ‘need’ and its contrast to ‘Desire’ that we are able to clarify these difficult ideas. In order to do this I will turn to a very early and neglected work of Levinas’s On Escape. 234

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231 Levinas (1969), p. 119
232 Chapter 8
233 Levinas (1969), p. 112
234 Levinas (2003)
3. Need in *On Escape*

The Origin of the Concept of ‘Need’ in *On Escape*

Needs Not a Lack

To become clear about how the sensible functions in Levinas’s philosophy; how it, on the one hand constitutes a relation of satisfaction of needs by incorporation into the self of the elements, but on the other—as I intend to demonstrate—that it leads us beyond the same to alterity, it will be necessary to explicate an important distinction that Levinas introduces right at the opening of *Totality and Infinity*, the distinction between need and Desire. We have already indicated this divide in comparing eating to loving, and we will also see that it is love (in the sense of Eros) that Levinas first uses to clearly express this distinction. As we will see the erotic—and this is demonstrated particularly when considering the caress—is the most convincing initial locus of Desire. This distinction is also prefigured in his earliest writing *On Escape* (*De l’évasion*) to which I devote this chapter. There the two notions have not yet been riven apart and so Levinas often uses the term ‘need’ where it would be more appropriate—according to *Totality and Infinity*—to use the term Desire. In *On Escape* needs, or more specifically need in the singular, is construed in terms of the need to escape, the need for, what Levinas there calls ‘excendence.’ Need is a need to get the hell out. I will take up the question of precisely what we are in need of escape from presently.

Needs are usually understood in terms of a lack, something like a gap yearning to be filled. The model here would be hunger. It is this model that might be thought to be at work in our articulation of the notion of enjoyment (jouissance) in the previous chapter. The empty stomach is felt to be an uncomfortable void that a good dinner would fill. In thus sating ourselves our being would once again feel replete and thus content. As Levinas writes: ‘In the first place, need seems to aspire only to its own satisfaction.’ As we have insisted in reading Levinas’s notion of enjoyment (jouissance) as an expression of our worldly life, need and its satisfaction constitute a perfect fit. But at this early stage in the development of his philosophy, Levinas, as I have already

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235 Section I of *Totality and Infinity* is entitled ‘The Same and the Other’, Section A. is entitled ‘Metaphysics and Transcendence’, and this is followed by a further subtitle 1. ‘Desire for the Invisible.’ It is this desire for the invisible that constitutes Levinas’s notion of Desire as opposed to need.

236 I capitalise the word ‘Desire’ since this is the practice Levinas follows and it helps to distinguish his specific sense of the term from its ordinary connotations.

237 Actually Levinas’s first published work was his doctoral thesis *The Theory of Intuition in Husserl’s Phenomenology*. This is, of course, a treatise on the philosophy of Husserl and thus a work in the history of philosophy. His first published work that can truly be said to articulate his own new philosophy—in however nascent a form—is indeed *On Escape*.

238 Levinas (2003), p. 54 A footnote tells us that the word ‘excendence’ is ‘modelled upon “trans-scendence,” adjoining “ex” or “out” to the Latin *scandere*, “to climb”. OE, p. 115

239 Ibid, p. 58
remarked, had not yet drawn the distinction between need and Desire. Thus the notion of Desire is still entangled with the analysis of need.\footnote{I will clarify this distinction in Chapter 4} This idea of need as an emptiness in our being, which Levinas attributes to Plato,\footnote{See Levinas (1969), p. 116: ‘Plato has fixed the negative notion of need: it would be a less, a lack that satisfaction would make good.’} is contested in On Escape. It is true that, as we have seen, the absolute negativity of need is also denied in Totality and Infinity. But in this early writing the very notion of conceiving need in terms of a lack is phenomenologically challenged, as Levinas remarks: ‘That would suppose that need is just privation.’\footnote{Levinas (2003), p. 56} This is an error that he explains in this manner:

And yet this whole psychology of need is a bit hasty. It too quickly interprets the insufficiency of need as an insufficiency of being. Thus it assumes a metaphysics in which need is characterised in advance as an emptiness in a world where the real is identified with the full. This is an identification that threatens any thinking that could not distinguish between existence and the existent, all thinking that applies to the one what instead should have meaning for the other.\footnote{Ibid, p. 58}

Hence it seems that for Levinas in On Escape the error in question arises because we do not properly apply the ontological difference, the distinction between existence and the existent, or, as Heidegger would say, between Being (Sein) and beings (das Seiende). In ignoring this distinction we are led to identify ‘the real’ with the ‘full’. In other words, this presupposes an ontology which does not first inquire into the fundamental nature of Being itself, but, instead, interprets Being (Sein) in terms of beings (das Seiende). Levinas contests this identification in ways similar to Heidegger, as I will try to show in what follows. The hastiness of the psychology therefore derives from not examining the Being of the entity that has need (Levinas would say the existence of the existent). But rather understanding such a Being as an entity, one existent among others. In so doing it is easy to conclude that this Being has the same kind of Being as those entities that Heidegger would call present-at-hand. That is to say—very roughly—in understanding human beings as if they were objects, albeit objects of a very special kind, and this is so because instead of examining the nature of the Being of that entity which we ourselves are, an understanding of that Being as present-at-hand, our usual representative of existents, and of the world as likewise present-at-hand, and thus as presence, is simply inherited and taken over from the metaphysical tradition. We will see soon in what way this constitutes a mistake, but very roughly, Levinas associates need with our being or existence, that is, he considers it an ontological category (close to what Heidegger would call an ‘existential’), whereas this ‘hasty psychology’ attributes needs to the existent qua existent, and thus understands it as an ontic category. In making this association between Levinas and the question of the ontological difference I am claiming that his thinking at this stage is very close to Heidegger’s philosophy.
Need and Thrownness (Geworfenthheit)

Where he differs however is on points of emphasis. While Heidegger understands Dasein in terms of the dynamic of possibilities in the world (Welt) Levinas stresses the priority of needs and does not conceive of the primary dynamic of the self in terms of being-in-the-world. We can see why this is so if we note the specific difference between how they respectively inscribe the human into existence. Heidegger primarily understands the human Dasein in terms of its abilities to manipulate equipment, whereas Levinas (in writings which admittedly post-date On Escape, but can be conceived as being anticipated by it) describes the self as emerging by virtue of its taking on the burden of its existence, which he identified with the material weight of the body. This weight, exemplified in effort and fatigue,\textsuperscript{244} is also characterised as the self being *en chained* to itself. This enchainment is our being encumbered with our bodies by virtue of our needs. Thus, for Levinas, needs express more primordially our relationship with existence, and should therefore be given priority consideration in examining the question of the ontological difference. In fact, as we will see, Levinas radicalises the ontological difference, as Heidegger understood it, into an ontological separation. The existent is separate from, and thus distinct from, its existence. For we can conceive of—to some extent at least—existence without existents, in terms of the *there is (il y a).*\textsuperscript{245} Referring to this distinction between *Being (Sein)* and *beings (das Seiende)* Levinas writes:

> The most profound thing about *Being and Time* for me is this Heideggerian distinction. 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* [mineness] 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. However, there is a notion—*Geworfenthheit*—“expression of a certain Heidegger,” according to Jankelevitch—that is usually translated “dereliction” or “desertion.” One then stresses a consequence of *Geworfenthheit.* One must understand *Geworfenthheit* 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 can never become master of existence. It is precisely because of this that there is desertion and abandonment.\textsuperscript{246}

*Geworfenthheit,* which I prefer to translate as ‘thrownness,’ is —as we have seen— for Heidegger, a structural element in Dasein’s being-in-the-World. In Heidegger *Dasein’s* thrownness (which is also translated as ‘dereliction’) refers to the fact that it did not choose its existence but always

\textsuperscript{244} I will return to the concepts of effort and fatigue in Chapter 5.

\textsuperscript{245} Although I have introduced this notion in the Introduction a fuller treatment must await Chapter 5.

\textsuperscript{246} Levinas (1987a), pp. 44-45

\textsuperscript{247} See Chapter 1
already found itself existing. As such it is understood as riveted to this existence, as we will see. In an early writing on Heidegger, Levinas explains:

Dereliction, the abandonment to imposed possibilities, gives to human existence a character of fact in the most specific and most dramatic sense of the term, in relation to which the empirical “facts” of science are only derivative; it is a fact that is understood as such by its affectivity. Having being thrown into the world, abandoned and delivered up to oneself—such is the ontological description of “fact”.

This being a fact is also termed by Heidegger ‘facticity’ and Dasein’s thrownness into its facticity is revealed to it by its affectivity or moods (Stimmungen). For Heidegger as we know Dasein is always in some mood, even if the mood is a pallid apparent lack of mood.

**Thrownness and the Body**

Part of the aforementioned facticity—a very important part—is the fact of having a body, and having a body, it might be argued, is the most primordial fact of our existence. But it is a fact that Heidegger overlooked or neglected to thematize, though it has to be admitted that he did recognise that our “bodily nature” hides a whole problematic of its own.”

This ‘whole problematic’ is addressed by Levinas, in *On Escape*, in terms of needs. The body, as we have already specified, has needs. Despite Heidegger’s neglect of the body the proximity between him and Levinas here is very close. For Heidegger too thrownness reveals Dasein to itself (moodwise) primarily as a burden. There is a weight to Dasein’s facticity which mood reveals and which Dasein flees. In a section of *Being and Time* entitled ‘The Existential constitution of the “There”’ Heidegger expresses the point like this:

> The pallid, evenly balanced lack of mood [Ungestimmtheit], which is often persistent and which should not be mistaken for a bad mood, is far from nothing at all. Rather, it is in this that Dasein becomes satiated with itself. Being has become manifest as a burden. Why that should be, one does not know. And Dasein cannot know anything of the sort because the possibilities of disclosure which belong to cognition reach far too short a way compared to the primordial disclosure belonging to moods, in which Dasein is brought before its Being as “there”. Furthermore, a mood of elation can alleviate the manifest burden of Being; that such a mood is possible also discloses the burdensome character of Dasein, even while it alleviates the burden.

The conception of thrownness as primarily a burden and weight from which we wish to flee, found in Heidegger, is the locus from which Levinas will indicate a need for escape. This burdensomeness

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248 Levinas (1996a), p. 10
249 Heidegger (1985a), p. 143
250 Heidegger (1985a), p. 173 We should note here Heidegger’s evocation of the mood of elation which will feature more prominently in Levinas’s account.
is not revealed in cognition but in what Heidegger calls “states-of-mind” (*Befindlichkeit*), which are exemplified in what I have being referring to in terms of *moods*. In the same section Heidegger identifies something very important about *states-of-mind*, from our point of view. In continuation of the above characterisation of thrownness as a burden he concludes:

> Ontologically, we thus obtain as the first essential characteristic of states-of-mind that they disclose Dasein in its thrownness, and—proximally and for the most part—in the manner of an evasive turning-away.\(^2\)

This ‘evasive turning-away’ is, as it were, the moment in which the sense of a felt need to escape (*l’évasion*) that Levinas wishes to concentrate on comes to the fore in Heidegger.

For Heidegger however thrownness is only a part of Dasein’s structure, a fuller characterisation would also include *understanding* (*Verstehen*),\(^3\) that is to say, Dasein’s pre-theoretical grasping of possibilities in thrown *projection*, which should be understood as Dasein’s ecstatic pressing into the future. Dasein is always outside itself, moving toward its future. Yet despite the non-intellectualist nature of *understanding* in Heidegger’s sense, it still emphasises Dasein as *ability*, for it remains a kind of *know-how*. Whereas Levinas is trying to suggest that the notion of thrownness seems to imply a more originary relation with existence wherein the existent is separate from existence, yet at the same time is abandoned to it. Rather than characterising the existent in terms of ability this would warrant an understanding in terms of needs, because it emphasises the passivity of the existent in relation to existence. It is in this way that the body, as an element of thrownness, is thematized: not primarily in terms of *ability* or *I can* but in terms of passivity.

Thrownness, as we have begun to understand it, specifies the originary groundlessness, and thus *absurdity*, of existence. It identifies the vertiginous (Levinas, as we will see, will say nauseating) fact that we cannot get behind our facticity and convert it into our free assumption. We cannot will or chose ourselves from the ground up and this humiliates our freedom. It is this situation as we have noted that is central to Heidegger’s notion of *guilt* and the *call of conscience*. Moreover it is precisely this situation that Levinas is specifying in the first line of *On Escape*: ‘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.’\(^4\) Facticity is this ‘brutal fact of being.’ Absurdity in this sense has its roots not in the nothingness that underpins thrownness rendering Dasein a null basis of a nullity as Heidegger would have it: ‘It itself, being a basis, is a nullity of

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\(^1\) Ibid, p. 172 ‘State-of-mind’ ought not mislead us into thinking that *Befindlichkeit* should be construed as a mentalistic cognitive concept. Rather the term ‘*Befindlichkeit*’ contains the connotation of finding oneself, as in such phrases as ‘how do you find yourself today?’ meaning ‘how is it going with you today?’

\(^2\) Ibid, p. 175

\(^3\) The third structural element of Dasein is *fallenness* (*Verfallen*). Since this refers to our entanglement in the world, and seems to suffer from a certain ambiguity in Heidegger, it need not concern us here.

\(^4\) Levinas (2003), p. 49
itself. Rather for Levinas, absurdity has its roots in the raw fact of existing without respite. The
body, as a brutal fact, as the weight of existence, constitutes the raw presence of need prior to the
grasping of any possibilities in Heidegger’s sense of the term. It is not simply a nullity because it is
an absence of possibility, rather it predates all possibilities, is seen as a brute presence that will
perpetually return to haunt all our projects with the stupidity of an undemonstrated premise,
when we are tired, or ill, or hungry or merely affected in some way.

Thus it is in terms of thrownness that Levinas, at this stage of his writings, understands the
existent in its relation to existence. Moreover it is in relationship to thrownness that he first
approaches the question of need. Yet we should not make the mistake of thinking that this is a
psychological question, it is strictly and crucially ontological. Thrownness does not specify a
disposition of the human (Dasein) qua psychological being, or qua finite being, but elaborates an
element of Being as such:

The banal observation that man is by birth engaged in an existence he neither
willed nor chose must not be limited to the case of man as a finite being. He
translates the structure of being itself.

Hence it is not by virtue of his finitude that man is thrown into existence, as if an infinite being
might be able to get behind its facticity and will itself all the way from the base. Rather it is the
very existence of the existent that is implicated in thrownness. I will try to show what this means.

It might be useful here to clarify terminology. That Levinas understands the ontological difference
otherwise than Heidegger helps us to understand the difference in terminology which might
otherwise appear quite confusing. Levinas does not refer to the existent as ‘Dasein’ because this
would be seen as begging the question as to the nature of the existent because the term ‘Dasein’
already refers to the existent in terms of its there (Da) in-the-world. Whereas Levinas is attempting
to think a relation to existence more originary than being-in-the-world, which, I would contend, is
a relationship with our-selves, or our bodies.

Need as Ontological
Specifically here Levinas is contesting Heidegger’s notion that the existent—Dasein in Heidegger—is
always out ahead of itself in thrown projection. With regard to this, Levinas writes: ‘The
propensity towards the future and the “out-ahead-of-oneself” contained in the vital urge mark a
being destined for a race course [voué à une course].’ The use of the term ‘vital urge’ in this
quote brings to mind Bergson, who Levinas no doubt has in mind, but the use of the “out-ahead-
of-oneself” is a clear enough allusion to Heidegger. If it is the case that Levinas conflates two very
different philosophers here, it is because both give a certain priority to the future in their
characterisation of existence, whereas Levinas’s concern, at least at this stage, is with the present.

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256 We will see later that he comes to reject throwness as the basis for subjectivity.
257 Levinas (2003), p. 69
258 Ibid, p. 54
What is central here is that the grasping of possibilities, in virtue of understanding (Verstehen), constitutes for Heidegger the movement of projection, which for him is the very experience of freedom. Whereas for Levinas such projection, as out-ahead-of-itself, does not constitute a true escape from thrownness, and thus is not the experience of freedom, but remains very much that of bondage. This bondage is the seemingly irrevocable bond to our own being. This is so because wherever we go or whatever we do we always take our selves with us:

Existence is an absolute that is asserted without reference to anything else. It is identity. But in this reference to himself [soi-même], man perceives a type of duality. His identity with himself loses the character of a logical or tautological form; it takes on a dramatic form, as we will demonstrate. In the identity of the I [moi], the identity of being reveals its nature as enchainment, for it appears in the form of suffering and invites us to escape. Thus, escape is the need to get out of oneself, that is, to break the most radical and unalterably binding of chains, the fact that the I [moi] is oneself [soi-même].

The paradoxical nature of this need to break with oneself will perhaps dissipate when we realise that the I [moi] refers in the first instance to the self as consciousness-of or the Kantian I think, as subject of experience, and characteristic of the notion of an autonomous subject. Whereas the oneself [soi-même] refers to the self as subject of, or rather subject to, fatigue, sensibility, affectivity, hunger and therefore need. This notion of the I chained to itself will be retained by Levinas and continues to be an element in Totality and Infinity. There we read:

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.

It is clear that the “‘out-ahead-of-one-self” contained in the vital urge’ does not achieve this break from the self as a weight for itself. But merely places us on the ‘race course.’ Or rather, destines us for such a task:

The urge is creative but irresistible. The fulfilment of a destiny is the stigma of being: the destination is not wholly traced out, but its fulfilment is fatal, inevitable. One is at the crossroads, but one must choose. We have embarked. With the vital urge we are going towards the unknown, but we are going somewhere, whereas with escape we aspire only to get out [sortir].

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259 Ibid, p. 55
260 I say ‘in the first instance’ because Levinas’s notion of subjectivity is subject to development as we will see.
261 Levinas (1969), p. 37 indeed we will see it in a different guise in Levinas (1998a)
262 Levinas (2003), p. 54
The reference to the crossroads indicates that Levinas conceives this ‘out-ahead-of-oneself’ in terms of a fate of which, though we are ignorant of the outcome, is already inevitable, as in a Greek tragedy. He therefore does not conceive of the resolution of the problem of thrownness— of the need for escape, as he understands it— in terms of the grasping of possibilities in thrown projection. In fact he, as it were, dwells on the problem much longer by tarrying in thrownness and examining the need characteristic of it.

In this way Levinas centralises need. As we have seen he considers the view that need is in fact a privation to be an error produced by being insufficiently attentive to the ontological difference. Thus we might say that need, as it is wrongly interpreted by those who cannot ‘distinguish between existence and the existent,’ is understood as the urge to re-establish rest; or, more precisely fullness of presence. Whereas, for Levinas, need takes on an ontological meaning due to our primordial thrownness, and this meaning derives not from an urge towards presence and fullness, but an urge to escape the brutal fact of existing. Need, at this ontological level, is conceived in terms of an urge to escape this primordial thrownness, pure and simple. It does not therefore principally direct us to objects of satisfaction, but prefigures all of our projects in Heidegger’s sense.

We can see why this is so if we recall that Heidegger’s notion of projects rests upon his conviction that our primordial mode of being-in-the-world is the practical ready-to-hand coping with equipment. Thus the world is conceived fundamentally in terms of instrumentality. This naturally leads to a notion of Dasein as pursuing projects which press into the future. Thrownness is the inherited facticity of the world into which we are abandoned. We are located (there, the Da of Dasein) in the world only to take on the role in the world to which such thrownness assigns us, whereas, for Levinas, our primordial relation to the world is not conceived in terms of instrumentality. Rather he conceives it in terms of the enjoyment of nourishments or aliments which do not have an instrumental value, but satisfy needs immediately. In the analyses that make up On Escape the notion of nourishments is not fully developed, so we are still stuck (and ‘stuck’ is the right word) in the question of need. However the prioritising of this question is a function of Levinas’s insistence that a pure instrumentality does not characterise our primordial being-in-the-world.

Let us turn to the analysis of need in this primordial ontological sense. We have already remarked that need is often interpreted as lack, and thus, as Levinas puts it too quickly interprets the insufficiency of need as an insufficiency of being. Given what we have been saying about need being manifest in primordial thrownness, what sense can we make of such thrownness lacking

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263 The crossroads is a clear enough reference to Sophocles’s Oedipus, and the oedipal crossroads is itself a clear enough symbol of the irrevocable fate to which we are destined by virtue of our ‘choices.’ It is perhaps connected to this conception of man’s destiny that Heidegger finds such virtue in the pre-Socratic Greeks and in Sophoclean tragedy. We might also find a connection with his disastrous political involvements.

264 See note 8 above

265 Levinas (2003), p. 58
anything? Such thrownness, as Levinas understands it, is the very fact of existence and he will add; ‘The very fact of existence refers only to itself.’\textsuperscript{266} Thus qua existence we cannot speak of it lacking, or for that matter gaining, anything: in so far as it is it simply is, a point profoundly elusive in its simplicity, but central to Levinas’s early analysis of need. He connects need to existence (Being) itself and not simply to the existent. We have already noted that: ‘Existence is an absolute that is asserted without reference to anything else.’\textsuperscript{267}

In the meantime, it is worth our while to describe the structure of need. After what we have just said about the notion of being, it is clear that even if the ground of need were to consist in lack, then this lack could not affect the “existence of the existent,” to which one can neither add nor remove anything. In reality, need is intimately tied to being, but not in the quality of privation. On the contrary, need will allow us to discover, not a limitation of that being that desires to surpass its limits in order to enrich and fulfil itself, but rather the purity of the fact of being, which already looks like escape.\textsuperscript{268}

Accordingly the need here referred to does not specify particular needs (what we might call \textit{ontic needs}); such that they are directed at objects of fulfilment in the way we understood need as it features in Levinas’s account of enjoyment. Rather we are dealing with what we might call \textit{ontological need}, which of course must be connected with ordinary, common or garden needs. Levinas’s primary contestation is that need should not be understood as referring to a lack. As he tries to show, need—understood purely phenomenologically—does not display this characteristic. (We must remember that here Levinas is still developing the idea of Desire and that the demarcation between it and needs is not yet in evidence). He begins a phenomenology of need by pointing out that ‘Need becomes imperious only when it becomes suffering. And the specific mode of suffering that characterizes need is malaise, or disquiet.’\textsuperscript{269}

\textbf{A Phenomenology of Need}

I should add here—to avoid a possible objection—that Levinas is considering need from the point of view of the affectivity characteristic of it. There are of course senses in which need has no affectivity. I might very well need a hammer or more money and this need not be accompanied by any specific affectivity on my part. But Levinas is talking specifically of the \textit{experience} of need; he is practicing phenomenology and not conceptual analysis. In other words he is specifying \textit{what it is like} to have needs, what our \textit{experience} of need is. As a phenomenologist this would be seen to constitute the primary nature of needs.

A related point about experience and the manner of approach to the ontological question may also be appropriate. I have said that Levinas inherits from Heidegger a concern with the

\textsuperscript{266} Ibid, p. 57
\textsuperscript{267} Ibid, p. 55
\textsuperscript{268} Ibid, p. 57
\textsuperscript{269} Ibid, p. 58
ontological difference. Related to this is the belief that philosophy is primarily ontology; that it is fundamentally concerned with the question of the nature or meaning of Being, which, according to Heidegger’s introduction to *Being and Time* had been largely ignored or forgotten. Now despite the fact that Levinas is famous for considering ethics to be first philosophy, when writing *On Escape* it is a kind of ontology that is his major concern.\(^{270}\) It is in essence the ontological question itself that is being considered:

> 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 pure being? Does it have the universality Aristotle conferred on it? Is it the ground and limit of our preoccupations, as certain modern philosophers would have it? On the contrary, is it nothing else than the mark of a certain civilisation, firmly established in the fait accompli of being and incapable of getting out of it? And, in these conditions, is *excendence* possible, and how would it be accomplished? What is the ideal of happiness and human dignity that it promises?\(^{271}\)

What is clear from this complicated passage is that the question of ‘the need for escape’ is conceived by Levinas to be a means of access to the problem of ‘being qua being.’ Moreover, by virtue of its questioning tone, we can see that the ontological question is suspected of being something of a preliminary. Rather than being the fundamental question, as Heidegger conceived of it, it is being asked whether it might not be the mark of a certain situated mode of understanding, connected with a certain mode of life and connected to a social form. With hindsight we know that Levinas believed that this is so, and that the question of Being gives way in the later writings to the question of an ‘otherwise than being;’ a notion already prefigured in the concept of *excendence.* This *excendence* specifies our escape, and it will turn out that this escape is essentially the escape from Being, a movement beyond Being, as we have already indicated, however paradoxical this may initially seem.

Nevertheless the question (of Being) is raised in a fundamentally Heideggerian spirit, albeit that it at the same time raises questions as to Heidegger’s demarcation of the ‘ground and limit of our preoccupations.’ Part of this Heideggerian spirit— which we have already said something about—in dealing with this question, is the conviction that an experience of Being qua Being is not given in representational thinking, is not possible in direct cognition, but rather that it comes to us in certain affective dispositions, what Heidegger refers to as *moods* or *states-of-mind* (*Stimmungen*). For Heidegger the affective disposition or mood (*Stimmung*) that reveals Being to us in its purity is *anxiety* (*Angst*), this is so in *Being and Time* but spelled out in more detail in ‘What is

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\(^{270}\) We will see later that he questions that ontology is in fact fundamental, by questioning the primordiality of thrownness.

\(^{271}\) Levinas (2003), p. 56
To anticipate, we will see that for Levinas it is nausea. Thus when we talk of experiences generally we are intimating affective dispositions, as we are when we specify the malaise characteristic of need. Levinas, at the time he wrote *On Escape*, agrees with Heidegger that these dispositions are modes of understanding of our being. He explains: ‘But, for Heidegger, these dispositions cannot be states: they are *modes of self-understanding*, that is to say, of *being right-there.*’ This ‘*being right-there*’ is an etymological translation of Heidegger’s ‘Dasein’ and specifies that *Dasein exists or lives* its affective disposition. We have already begun to develop this point in relation to thrownness. He continues:

But affective disposition, whose understanding is in no way detached, shows us its fundamental nature. The affective disposition shows us the fact that Dasein is riveted to its possibilities, that its “right-there” is imposed upon it. In existing, Dasein is always already thrown into the midst of its possibilities and not positioned before them.

The Inadequacy of Satisfaction to Need

So Levinas introduces need via the affective disposition which reveals need to us, and this affective disposition is an access to our own being more direct than empirical knowledge. As he insists, need truly makes itself felt (‘becomes imperious’) when it is experienced as a mode of suffering, as ‘malaise or disquiet.’ Thus the disquiet of hunger, for example, is the pangs and yearnings for food. This ‘for’ specifies the fact that the hunger is directed onto the world in search of an object of satisfaction (off we go to the kitchen), that it has an intentional structure. As Levinas puts it: ‘Need turns towards something other than ourselves.’ But he wants to focus on the moment of malaise itself, on how it is, as he puts it ‘in the instant in which it is lived.’ Primarily he will point out that: ‘Malaise is not a purely passive state’ but rather:

The fact of being ill at ease [*mal à son aise*] is essentially dynamic. It appears as a refusal to remain in place, as an effort to get out of an unbearable situation. What constitutes its particular character, however, is the indeterminacy of the goal that

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272 Martin Heidegger ‘What is Metaphysics?’ in Heidegger (1978), pp. 91-112 and see Chapter 5 of this thesis.
273 Levinas (1996a), p. 10
274 Ibid
275 Levinas (2003), p. 58
276 Ibid, p. 66: This phrase, ‘in the instant in which it is lived,’ is, as I see it, pivotal in Levinas’s early writing and specifies that the analysis is phenomenological rather than empirical. The distinction here is extremely important, it tries to specify *what it is like* to feel, say need, without any reference to what we ‘know’ needs are. The temporal dimension indicated by the word ‘instant’ specifies the fact that need, or whatever, is articulated only in terms of its specific affectivity and not in its relation to satisfaction, which comes afterwards. The phrase (or what it implies) carries a good deal of weight in the analyses of *On Escape*. It functions as a kind of phenomenological reduction which ‘brackets’ or places in ‘parentheses’ those elements of an affective disposition which we connect with it on the basis of empirical knowledge, as we will see by examples.
this departure sets for itself, which should be seen as a positive characteristic. It is an attempt to get out without knowing where one is going, and this ignorance qualifies the very essence of the attempt.277

Thus need does not know the object of its satisfaction but simply wishes to escape from its ill-at-ease-ness. But can this be right? Can we characterise hunger, for example, without reference to food? Can we conceive it simply as yearning, without these yearnings being understood as yearnings for food? Certainly to characterise something as ‘hunger,’ in this specific and, we might say, literal sense, requires our grasping it as a felt need for food. But Levinas is not characterising it in this specific sense, he is not characterising need in any specific sense, but merely in the felt sense of malaise that is characteristic of need as such. The new born child yells and cries; he or she needs something. The breast or the bottle is given and the child is content, need is satisfied. Now the child certainly could not say that it was food that he or she wanted. Are we to assume that he or she nevertheless knew this? Of course not! But then are we to deny that it was hunger that he or she felt? No. It was indeed hunger.

What Levinas is driving at is that the malaise characteristic of need, as it is purely felt in the present, is not a need for... where we might fill in the gap with a specific object. Purely and simply of itself, need is a need to get out, a need for escape. ‘There are,’ he points out;

needs for which the consciousness of a well-defined object—susceptible of satisfying those needs—is lacking. The needs that we do lightly call “intimate” remain at the stage of a malaise, which is surmounted in a state closer to deliverance than to satisfaction.279

Not all needs are needs for some thing, food or drink for example. The ‘shameful’ needs, the need to go to the toilet (and it is relevant that it is shameful and surrounded by euphemistic language)280 or—to use an example closer to Levinas’s text—to vomit (equally shameful) are needs that do not have an object, but deliver us from their grip by means of evacuating things from our bodies. But— and this is Levinas’s point— it is not always obvious what we need even when we feel a need. Again we can reference the new-born child, and with good reason:

To be sure, it is not usually this way. But only extrinsic experiences and lessons can give to need the knowledge of the object liable to satisfy it, just as they add ideas about the need’s value. Therefore, the increasing specialisation of needs and their

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277 Levinas (2003), pp. 58-59
278 I am not happy to claim that ‘hunger’ in a literal sense is hunger for food, whereas a hunger for knowledge or love, say, are metaphorical. I see no compelling reason why this might be so.
279 Levinas (2003), p. 59
280 This shamefulness and the disgust at dirt, excrement and vomit—our nausea when confronted with them—could go some way to explaining why in characterising the body, its passivity, in this needy sense, has generally being overlooked by phenomenologists. Of course such areas are not overlooked by psychoanalytic thinkers who Levinas can in some ways be seen as confronting in this work, as we will see.
objects, which itself grows clearer and clearer, more and more refined, develop only as a function of learning and education.\footnote{281}{Levinas (2003), p. 59}

It is noteworthy that Heidegger never considers infant Dasein, simply because, in a sense, until a child is encultured it does not really have Dasein in it. Dasein is therefore always, to some extent, adult. Arguably Dasein is also largely understood in terms of the able bodied and of what we might call those of sound mind. This is fine as far as it goes, but as I see it Levinas is attempting, by virtue of his consideration of need and of sensibility, to reintroduce a kind of humanism into philosophy which does not understand the human merely as a product of culture. On the other hand, nor does it conceive of the essence of the human as reason or even ability.

Needs find their satisfaction in the world. The human being learns how to satisfy his or her needs. But need itself remains at the heart of the human like an ill-defined yearning. This yearning is not as such a yearning for...but an urge to escape. ‘In itself, need does not foreshadow the end. It clings fiercely to the present, which then appears as a threshold of a possible future.’\footnote{282}{Ibid} Need, in and of itself, is not endowed with anticipation, but ‘clings fiercely to the present’ and sees the possibility of a future only in escape. Suffering has only the suffering for its object.

But equally importantly, from our point of view, need is never truly satisfied. Levinas makes the point like this:

Moreover, the satisfaction of need does not destroy it. Not only is it reborn, but disappointment also follows their satisfaction. We are in no way neglecting the fact that satisfaction appeases need. However, it is a matter of knowing whether this ideal of peace lies within the initial demands of need itself. We note in the phenomenon of malaise a different and perhaps superior demand: a kind of dead weight in the depth of our being, whose satisfaction does not manage to rid us of it.

What gives the human condition all its importance is precisely this inadequacy of satisfaction to need.\footnote{283}{Ibid, pp. 59-60}

Need, in the first instance, is conceived in terms of a need to escape, and not in terms of a lack. To justify, reinforce and clarify this contention Levinas will thematize: ‘the primordial phenomena of need’s satisfaction: pleasure.’\footnote{284}{Ibid, p. 60}

**Pleasure**

It is only in specialised circumstances that one seeks pleasure. When one is hungry it is not the pleasure of eating that one is directed to but the food. Nevertheless the satisfaction of needs
comes about in a positive affectivity, we take pleasure in eating etc. This point alone — that the satisfaction of need has an accompanying affectivity — is itself of significance to Levinas’s analysis. It is not hard to imagine the human condition being different. Hunger, for example, might have been nothing more than the awareness — either insensible or cognitive — that food is required in order to sustain life. This would then result — either causally or rationally — in the activity of seeking means of sustenance. With this goal achieved then ‘need’ (in this new, neutralised sense) would cease. But this is not how things are. Need, in the human sense, has an affective dimension, it is suffering or malaise and the satisfaction of need is also affective, it is pleasurable. Need, as affective, stands in a definite relationship to pleasure, it is this relationship which, as Levinas remarks: ‘allows us to say that need is a search for pleasure.’

Moreover, the very fact that the satisfaction of need is accompanied by an affective event reveals the true meaning of need. There is no simple act that could fill the lack announced in need. In effect, the simple act presupposes a constituted being; it is not the affirmation itself of that being. Affectivity, on the contrary, is foreign to notions that apply to that which is, and has never been reducible to categories of thought and activity.

Affectivity is here understood, not in terms of ‘thought and activity,’ or even of ‘that which is’ but in terms of their break-up. In other words affectivity—specifically pleasure—is conceived as somehow a dissipation of our being, or as getting out of ourselves. It is precisely pleasure as a modality of dispersal or break-up that Levinas wants to insist answers to the malaise characteristic of need. There are two specific points that Levinas emphasises about pleasure. He insists that it is not a state but a movement:

Pleasure appears as it develops. It is neither there as a whole, nor does it happen all at once. And furthermore, it will never be whole or integral. Progressive movement is a characteristic trait of this phenomenon, which is by no means a simple state.

It must therefore be understood as a dynamic phenomenon whereas, on the other hand, satisfaction seems to specify a definite state. The satisfaction of a need then is accompanied by a specific affective movement, and this is pleasure. But this movement ‘does not tend towards a goal, for it has no end.’ Rather it ‘exists only in the enlargement of its own amplitude.’ This brings us to the second point. Levinas insists that this movement is a movement away from the self, it: ‘is like the rarefaction of our existence [être], or its swooning.’ Thus pleasure appears as

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285 Ibid, p. 60
286 Ibid, p. 62
287 Ibid, p. 61
288 Ibid
289 Ibid
290 Ibid
a lightening of the burden of the self that Levinas insists is characteristic of our being, exemplified in fatigue and effort, and here seen as a characteristic of our thrownness. With this, then, we have an analysis of pleasure which characterises it in terms of apparent escape from the self. As such it appears to answer to the requirements of need if we understand need in terms of the need for escape. Thus the dynamism of pleasure does not conform to the demands of specific needs (what we have called ‘on c needs’) as to a state of sa sfac on. Rather it answers to — or appears to answer to — an ever restless ontological need which Levinas insists characterises our essen al nature. It is as if in pleasure we feel our very substantiality dissipating and we leave ourselves behind. The term ‘ecstasy,’ which refers in ordinary speech to the most extreme pleasure, etymologically means standing outside of oneself. Levinas makes the point like this: ‘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.’ It is in this sense that Levinas will understand enjoyment (jouissance) and it is in this sense that he characterises it as already beyond being. This therefore responds to the question we raised at the end of the last chapter.

Is this account of pleasure plausible? It does have a certain appeal. If we consider those areas of life devoted to the pursuit of pleasure we find that they are pervaded by notions such as ‘escapism’, ‘drunkenness’, ‘forgetting oneself’ and so on. Drunkenness as a form of pleasure might otherwise be quite baffling, yet on this account the fact that the drunk achieves a kind of abandonment is itself characteristic of pleasure. The dangerous and lurid pleasures of drug taking might also easily fit into this account. Sexual pleasures are often described in terms of abandonment. Dancing, laughing and orgiastic practices also seem to fit very well. On the other hand, when we come to consider what we might call the calmer pleasures the account begins to lose its plausibility. Watching a good film, reading a book or the simple pleasures of eating and drinking, though they may take us out of ourselves for a while, do not seem to be attended by what Levinas calls ‘an atmosphere of fever and exaltation’. Yet we certainly take pleasure in these things and many other equally calm pursuits. He might reply that, of course this is true, but that in so far as these are pleasures they nonetheless fit his account. So in the case of watching a film or reading a book, so long as they are not pure escapism, then the pleasure will not be unalloyed with other elements. The same might be said of eating or drinking: if we observe someone after a week in a desert drink, or a half starved person wolf down their food, then we might be more inclined to endorse Levinas’s thinking on this point.

This latter point can be further bolstered. The philosopher and Auschwitz survivor Jean Améry has testified that under conditions of extreme deprivation the smallest pleasures bring about a kind of

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291 It is for this reason that Heidegger uses the term for Dasein’s out-ahead-of-itself in the temporal modality of the future.
292 Levinas (2003), p. 61
293 There is far more to sexual pleasures than this as we will see in Chapter 6
294 Levinas (2003), p. 60
euphoria. In his *At the Mind’s Limit*, after describing the barbaric and inhuman condition of his Concentration camp, he writes:

> Now there were, to be sure, exceptions, which arose in certain conditions of mental intoxication. I recall how an orderly from the sick barracks once gave me a plate of sweetened grits, which I greedily devoured and thereby reached a state of extraordinary spiritual euphoria...It was a genuine state of intoxication, evoked by physical influences. Subsequent conversations with my campmates allow me to conclude that I was by no means the only one who under such conditions briefly attained inner fortification. My fellow sufferers frequently experienced such euphoria too, whether while eating or while enjoying a rare cigarette. Like all intoxications they left behind a dreary, hangover-like feeling of emptiness and shame.\(^{295}\)

These cases were not the taking of experience enhancing drugs nor the over indulgence in alcoholic drinks. They were the simple eating of grits or other food, or the smoking of a rare cigarette. Under such circumstances of extreme deprivation— and Levinas had some familiarity with life as a captor of the Nazis— the ‘atmosphere of fever and exaltation,’\(^{296}\) as he puts it, seems more pronounced, which indicates that our ordinary condition is already beyond the ‘bare fact of life’ which, Levinas insists, ‘is never bare.’\(^{297}\) This is why he can claim that enjoyment is already beyond the bare necessities of life and thus beyond Heidegger’s notion of care (*Sorge*) as he reads it. For care in Heidegger is conceived as the care for existence. Whereas:

> Life is not the naked will to be, an ontological *sorge* for this life. Life’s relation with the very condition of its life becomes the nourishment and content of that life.\(^{298}\)

We have seen this in Chapter 2 and now we can see how this is connected to the very nature of needs. This will help us to understand what Levinas is driving at by his formulation of a ‘beyond being,’ a formulation which will only become totally clear when we reach Chapter 8. For now we should note that it is because of the fact that enjoyment and happiness help us to (temporarily) escape the bare (brute) fact of existing that Levinas can formulate such sentences as: ‘For happiness, in which we move already by the simple fact of living, is always beyond being, in which the things are hewn.’\(^{299}\) And:

> 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.”

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\(^{295}\) Améry (1999), pp. 9-10 I will have something more to say about this feeling of shame presently.

\(^{296}\) Levinas (2003), p. 60

\(^{297}\) Levinas (1969), p. 112

\(^{298}\) Ibid, p. 112

\(^{299}\) Ibid, p. 113
The existent is “autonomous” with respect to being; it designates not a participation in being, but happiness. The existent par excellence is man.\textsuperscript{300}

These formulations take us beyond what is contained in \textit{On Escape} to Levinas’s more mature philosophy of enjoyment. Nonetheless I think that without consideration of the origins of this notion in that of pleasure contained in this early work, these formulations remain at best obscure. Moreover, as I see it, it is precisely with regard to the question of human \textit{motivation (enjoyment versus Sorge)} that the depth of the disagreement between Levinas and Heidegger can be measured. It is with regard to the problematic of motivation which draws Levinas to accuse Heidegger of a kind of Social Darwinism, a claim for which he finds agreement in Theodor Adorno.\textsuperscript{301} The Heideggerian \textit{Sorge} is read as a drive to continuation of existence.

\textbf{Heidegger, Care and Mineness}

Initially the argument seems to run like this: Because Dasein in Heidegger is understood in the first instance as always already having an understanding of being and is also concerned about being, it follows that Dasein is primarily concerned about its own being. Heidegger writes: ‘That Being which is an issue for this entity in its very Being, is in each case mine.’\textsuperscript{302} ‘Mine’ or ‘mineness’ (\textit{Jemeinigkeit}) becomes a central concept and seems to indicate that Dasein’s activity is fundamentally self-directed. \textit{Mineness (Jemeinigkeit)} is also a relation of Dasein to itself more fundamental than its expression as a self or \textit{I}. The problem here appears to revolve around the word ‘issue.’ On the one hand we might take this to be claiming that Dasein’s being is a \textit{question} for itself, that it confronts its own being as an enigma, in a way that no other being can. Dasein is essentially self-interpreting, its essence is constituted by what it takes itself to be. This characteristic of Dasein is expressed by the claim that ‘Dasein’s ‘Essence’ is grounded in its existence.’\textsuperscript{303} It is beyond doubt that this is central to what Heidegger’s notion of ‘Dasein’ is about. Yet on the other hand we might understand it as claiming that \textit{Dasein} is fundamentally \textit{concerned for} its own being. More strongly, that ultimately \textit{Dasein} is \textit{only} concerned for its own being (and those associated with it), that \textit{Dasein’s} fundamental drive is self-preservation and self-aggrandisement. The tension between these two readings reverberates throughout \textit{Being and Time}. Yet I think it reasonable to suppose that because of Heidegger’s insistence on the primacy of practical comportment over theoretical thought in \textit{Being and Time} the latter reading is at least as natural as the former. Moreover it is not at all clear that the two are seriously incompatible. Levinas insists on a reading which emphasises the latter. In a late interview (1984) he says:

\begin{quote}
In \textit{The Letter on Humanism}, Heidegger defines \textit{Dasein} in almost Darwinian fashion as “a being that is concerned for its own being.” In paragraph nine of \textit{Being and Time}, he defines the main characteristic of \textit{Dasein} as that of \textit{mineness (Jemeinigkeit)} – the way in which being becomes mine, imposes or imprints itself
\end{quote}

\begin{enumerate}
\item Ibid, p. 119
\item See Adorno (2007), esp. pp. 118-119
\item Heidegger (1985a), p. 67
\item Ibid, p. 152 The idea that our existence precedes our essence is of course the basis of Existentialism.
\end{enumerate}
on me. *Jemeinigkeit*, as the possession of my being as mine, precedes the articulation of the *I*. Dasein is only ‘*I*’ (*Ich*) because it is already *Jemeinigkeit*. I become *I* only because I possess my own being as primary.\(^{304}\)

We might conclude from this that as Levinas understands Heidegger, Dasein’s fundamental motivation is self-directed concern, and that the instrumental circuits of *for-the-sake-of-which* that characterise the *ready-to-hand* use of equipment in Dasein’s world terminate at care for its own being. In his lecture courses published under the title *History of the Concept of Time* Heidegger seems to encourage this reading.

‘Its own being is an issue for Dasein’: This first presupposes that in this Dasein there is something like a *being out for something*. Dasein is out for its own being; it is out for its very being in order ‘to be’ its being. As such a *being-about care is this being out for the very being which this very being-out is*.\(^{305}\)

I have claimed that this reading of Heidegger is directly related to the motivational account in Levinas in terms of needs. Heidegger would certainly hotly contest a reading in these terms. Are we to conclude that Heidegger is not the best judge of the implications of his own philosophical position? It would seem that Levinas believes so.

The central point is how we are to understand care (*Sorge*). Heidegger specifies that care (*Sorge*) is the very structure of *Dasein* and, as we have seen, he defines it in this manner:

[T]he being of *Dasein* means out-ahead-of-itself-Being-already-in-(the-world) as being-alongside (entities encountered within-the-world). This being fills out the signification of the term “*care*” (*Sorge*).\(^{306}\)

There is no mention here of care as purely self-directed, it specifies that care is essentially Dasein’s manner of being in the world. But what is crucial from our point of view is the reference to the ‘out-ahead-of-itself.’ We insisted that this ‘out-ahead-of-itself’ did not constitute an escape from the self but a fated return to self. If this is so then it is specifically a self-relation and Heidegger seems to concede this. He writes:

Yet the primary item in care is the ‘ahead-of-itself’, and this means that in every case Dasein exists for the sake of itself. ‘As long as it is’, right to the end, it comports itself towards its potentiality-for-Being. Even when it still exists but has nothing more ‘before it’ and has ‘settled [abgeschlossen] its account’, its *Being* is still determined by the ‘ahead-of-itself’. Hopelessness, for instance, does not tear


\(^{305}\) Heidegger (1985b), p. 294

\(^{306}\) Heidegger (1985a), p. 237
Dasein away from its possibilities, but is only one of its own modes of Being towards these possibilities.\textsuperscript{307}

It is this notion of existing for the sake of itself that Levinas is contesting with his conceptions of need as the need for escape, and enjoyment as beyond Being. It is true that he will come to drop the notion of escape and greatly complicate the nature of the motivation that lies at the heart of the self. But he will never abandon the idea that there are human motivations that are more than self-interested. This will ultimately be realised in the notion of ‘the-one-for-the-other’ in Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence,\textsuperscript{308} but this itself, I will argue, stems from the felt need for escape the burden of existence as I have tried to articulate it. As late as 1981 Levinas could say: ‘For me the famous Heideggerian “Care” took the form of the cumbersomeness of existence.’\textsuperscript{309} Pleasure itself is not in its essence self-directed, however paradoxical such a claim may initially seem.

**Pleasure as a False Promise**

Pleasure therefore is seen in On Escape as responding to need by allowing the self a way of escape from itself. Pleasure is not a means of escape; it is the very escape itself. However it is a false escape and does not really fulfil the role that it appears to fit: ‘Pleasure conforms to the demands of need but is incapable of equalling them.’\textsuperscript{310} By its very nature pleasure cannot really break with the self, as it develops it seems to promise to move more and more towards a final ecstasy but, as Levinas puts it: ‘these promises are never kept.’\textsuperscript{311} Not because we are often unable to obtain enough pleasure, or because pleasure seeking leads to a dissolute life and thus to illness or degeneration. It is of the very nature of pleasure, through its own ‘internal unfolding [devenir interne]’\textsuperscript{312} that it disappoints:

Pleasure is a process; it is the process of departing from being [processus de sortie de l’être]. Its affective nature is not only the expression or the sign of this getting-out; it is the getting out itself. Pleasure is affectivity, precisely because it does not take the forms of being, but rather attempts to break these up. Yet it is a deceptive escape.\textsuperscript{313}

Pleasure does not achieve escape but leaves us with an all the more pronounced sense of our adhesion to our-selves. I will say something presently about what, phenomenologically, this ‘pronounced sense’ is. It is important to remark that this is not a condemnation of pleasure but an attempt to properly locate it in the economy of life.

\textsuperscript{307}Heidegger (1985a), p. 279
\textsuperscript{308}See Chapter 8
\textsuperscript{309}Levinas (1982), p. 52
\textsuperscript{310}Levinas (2003), p. 63
\textsuperscript{311}Ibid, p. 62
\textsuperscript{312}Ibid, p. 63
\textsuperscript{313}Levinas (2003), p. 62
It is worth comparing this view of pleasure with more straightforwardly hedonistic accounts. Important differences become apparent which are central to the whole of Levinas’s project. The hedonistic theory of human motivation sees us as essentially seeking pleasure and tries to account for all of our behaviour on the basis of this urge. The most striking modern example is the Freudian psychoanalytic theory, at least in its early topography,314 that which precedes ‘Beyond the Pleasure Principle.’ 315 Levinas is not, it should be clear, denying that the pursuit of pleasure is an apparently fundamental motivation in human life. Hedonism is much more in evidence in Levinas’s philosophy than it is in the philosophies of say Heidegger or Husserl. As we have seen he places enjoyment (jouissance) at the ground floor of our interaction with the world. But he is not satisfied to merely register this ‘drive’ for pleasure as a fact or principle without further explanation. He seeks out the ontological significance of pleasure itself. He finds this in the need for escape, which is conceived as more fundamental than the urge for pleasure. Pleasure itself is seen as one important manifestation of this more primordial urge. He reaches this idea of a need for escape through a phenomenology of need itself. Need itself is understood as the ontological ground-floor. As such this analysis shoves the basis of human motivation back to an urge to escape the intolerable situation of the brute fact of our existing. Pleasure is the affectivity attendant upon a temporary escape.

Here then we have a picture that sets out to seriously contest the fundamentality of the egotistic urge for pleasure and self-aggrandisement. It is not that I seek for myself; rather what I seek is an escape from myself. Pleasure is therefore not primarily conceived as a self-directed pursuit, but as directed towards escape from the self. An error arises when I believe that this can be achieved by virtue of the pleasure I derive from simply satisfying my needs. The possibility of this error appears to be fundamental and is a constant temptation for theoretical accounts, especially those theoretical accounts that cannot distinguish between existence and the existent, or do not begin their analysis at the level of ontology. We will see further that in his later writings, particularly Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence and beyond, Levinas did not consider even ontology to be adequate to the task of articulating what will grow into an Other-oriented motivation.316

The fundamental urge to escape, which characterises this early writing, will be transformed in Totality and Infinity into the urge for transcendence or the ‘Desire for the Invisible.’317 In fact this notion opens that work.318 But we can see within the need for escape the embryonic notion of a motivation fundamental to the self which is not self-directed, and thus opens the possibility of being Other directed. Our task in the next chapter is to draw out the notion of Desire in contrast to

314 For an account of the two topographies of mental functioning within the Freudian corpus— the first being in terms of Consciousness and the System Unconscious and the second in terms of the Ego, Super-ego and Id— see Ricoeur (1977)
315 Sigmund Freud ‘Beyond the Pleasure Principle’ in Freud (1991), pp. 269-338
316 See especially Chapter 8
317 Levinas (1969), p. 33 and see Chapter 4
318 After the Preface there is Section I entitled ‘The Same and the Other’, which opens with ‘1. Desire for the Invisible.’ P. 33
need and show that the former is more fundamental than the latter. The conception of need as a 
need to escape gives us the first conceptual tools to specify this relation, for we are presented 
with needs as capable of satisfaction as derivative from need as infinitely restless. I have 
attempted to specify this distinction by calling the former needs ‘ontic’ and the latter ‘ontological.’ 
But I have been careful to specify that this distinction is only in a nascent form in On Escape and 
thus that it is not yet clearly demarcated. It is nevertheless of interest to pursue this treatise a 
little further into the other related conceptual areas that Levinas explores, because these will 
prove relevant to our account.

Shame
The failure of pleasure to affect an escape from the self is underlined in the experience of shame. 
It is shame which amounts to the more pronounced sense of our adhesion to our-selves I indicated 
earlier. In a colourful turn of phrase Levinas concludes his remarks on shame like this:

Thus modesty penetrates need, which has already appeared to us as the very 
malaise of being and, at bottom, as the fundamental category of existence. And 
modesty does not leave need once the latter is satisfied. The being who has 
gorged himself falls back into the agonising disappointment of his shameful 
intimacy, for he finds himself anew after the vanity of his pleasure.

This may give the impression that Levinas is insisting that pleasure (particularly sexual pleasure, if 
we read between the lines) is followed by a sense of shame. Though he is certainly exploiting the 
fact that shame and sexuality are closely intertwined he is not simply asserting that this is so, but 
explaining why it is so. He insists that shame is not exclusive to moral phenomena. It does not only 
occur when we feel we have acted badly, but when we feel exposed:

Shame arise each time we are unable to make others forget our 
basic nudity. It is related to everything we would like to hide and that we cannot 
bury or cover up.

It is for this reason that the body is an object of shame, even though it is of itself—or should be—
free of guilt. A fact that the American philosopher Stanley Cavell has also noted in another 
context:

319 The French here creates a kind of pun by means of its gendered nouns. It reads: ‘Prudish modesty [elle] 
does not leave need [il, le] once the latter is satisfied.’ Which can be read as: ‘She does not leave him when 
he is satisfied.’ See Levinas (2003) note 7, p. 115. Thus we have a kind of bawdy pun which reads that she 
(modesty, the woman) does not simply go home or cease to be a presence—he can’t simply roll over and go 
to sleep—once he (need, the man) has had his way.
320 Levinas (2003), p. 65
321 Ibid, p. 64
Under shame, what must be covered up is not your deed, but yourself. It is a more primitive emotion than guilt, as inescapable as the possession of the body, the first object of shame.322

This is very close to Levinas’s understanding of shame. He points out that it is not merely in our relation to others that shame arises but also in relation to ourselves. That, for example, nakedness is shameful is clear, for we are exposed to the gaze of others, but also to that of ourselves. As he puts it: ‘It is this that one seeks to hide from others, but also from oneself. This aspect of shame is often ignored.’323 We can of course hide from others, but it is much harder to hide from oneself. The question of course arises: what are we trying to hide?

Modesty hides the nakedness of the body, but it is not nakedness in the sense of lacking clothes that is here in question. This can be seen by considering:

[T]he naked body of the boxer. The nakedness of the music hall dancer, who exhibits herself—to whatever effect desired by the impresario—is not necessarily the mark of a shameless being, for her body appears to her with the exteriority to self that serves as a form of cover. Being naked is not a question of wearing clothes.324

Thus it is only when the body is conceived in its intimacy that shame arises. Such intimacy is to be understood in terms of the body having an inalienable bond to us. The body, insofar as it is intimately bound to our self, is shameful. It is this self as self-binding that is the true object of shame, for as soon as we are able to alienate our body325 from our self, our sense of shame about it dissipates. In this sense shame arises as the affectivity of our sense of being bound. Thus shame is connected to need, as we have so far understood it, it reveals the self’s inability to escape from itself. This indeed specifies the body, but it is the body conceived in terms of intimacy and not in terms of an instrument or covering, and intimacy is conceived in terms of binding. Shame therefore arises on the basis of the fact that we are bound to ourselves. When Levinas wrote On Escape he conceived shame to be possible when we are alone. But later he locates shame as shame before the Other as face. We will see how these apparently contradictory views can be reconciled when we come to understand ethical subjectivity.326 What needs stressing here as preparatory for such understanding is that shame is the emphatic sense of our inability to be free of ourselves.

What we try to hide— and a great deal of our culture is an attempt at this— is our own essential bodily being and with it those functions of the body that bring the most shame. Our bodily being

323 Levinas (2003), p. 64
324 Ibid, p. 65
325 Or for that matter anything we feel bound to us, for there seems to be no limits to what we might be ashamed of.
326 Chapter 8
— not as the *lived body*, the *I can* which is favoured by Merleau-Ponty, but as what Levinas calls our ‘ultimate intimacy’[^327] — cannot truly or ultimately be escaped. Shame is not therefore an emotion that is culturally grounded, but is tied to the very possession of a body. Or perhaps it might be better to say, the body’s possession of us.

An amusing illustration of shame at one’s very presence is given by Levinas in the example of a scene from the Chaplin film *City Lights*.[^328] Chaplin’s famous tramp has inadvertently swallowed a whistle and simultaneously caught the hiccups (which by themselves are sufficient for shame). Each hiccup is now amplified into a loud whistle, interrupting an entertainer’s song, signalling a frustrated and angry taxi driver and calling neighbourhood dogs. The scene culminates with Charlie re-entering a party accompanied by the unwelcome attention of several dogs. It:

> [T]riggers the scandal of the brute presence of his being; it works like a recording device, and betrays the discrete manifestation of a presence that Charlie’s legendary tramp costume barely dissimulates.  

[^329]

Charlie is not naked in the sense that he still wears his baggy costume; his nakedness is an ontological nakedness. His brute presence is the presence of his bodily-being that is *not* part of his *I can*.[^330] Indeed the whistle is not even really part of Charlie, yet it functions as an amplifier for the hiccups that beset him (in fact it is the only noise on this otherwise ‘silent’ film).

The bindingness of shame can also be illustrated by considering our memory of our shameful acts. We have all undoubtedly done or said something we *are* ashamed of. When we recall the act, the faux pas, the lie we told or other sin, we still to some extent feel its sting. We *cringe* at the thought of it as if we might *pull away* from it but strangely it *adheres* to us. Years pass and the sting remains, which might appear strange since reason certainly tells us that we are not the *same* person we were then, we were young and foolish and so on (we might even blush at a photo of ourselves as a naked baby). As Levinas puts it:

> Yet shame’s whole intensity, everything it contains that stings us, consists precisely in our inability not to identify with this being who is already foreign to us and whose motives for acting we no longer comprehend.  

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[^327]: Levinas (2003), p. 64  
[^328]: This is one of the only two references to film - both Chaplin films - which I am aware of in Levinas, the other being a reference to *The Goldrush* in ‘The Ego and the Totality’ in Levinas (1998d), pp. 25-46  
[^329]: Levinas (2003), p. 65  
[^330]: I should add that this exact illustration of shame is used by Slavoj Žižek in Žižek (2006). He says there: ‘Does this scene not stage shame at its purest?’ p. 72. It seems, however, that Žižek has not read *On Escape*, though he seems otherwise quite familiar with Levinas’s work, for he does not credit this observation to Levinas, even though *On Escape* was written over seventy years earlier.  
[^331]: Levinas (2003), p. 63
The binding character of shame becomes very important to Levinas’s more mature thinking. Indeed later, in *Totality and Infinity*, where shame is presented as our response to the Face of the Other it is claimed that shame is in a certain sense actually constitutive of us.\(^{332}\) It is this aspect of shame as constitutive of subjectivity which will occupy us in later chapters.

It is important, from our point of view, to follow a trajectory that leads by means of philosophical (largely phenomenological) reflection from these early formulations up to Levinas’s mature work. I intend to show how need and Desire are intimately tied, and reflect the conceptual considerations at work in *On Escape*, and how the tie between need and Desire is itself ultimately comprehensible only by tracing the various considerations Levinas gives to the nature of sensibility and the body. Before I move on to consider how the conceptual distinction between need and Desire is specified, first in *Existence and Existents* and *Time and the Other*, and then in *Totality and Infinity*, I want to consider another area of *On Escape* which is important to this topic, I want to consider Levinas’s short meditation on nausea.\(^{333}\)

**Nausea**

The feeling of nausea can be attributed to many different causes, overeating, hunger, and over-indulgence in drink; sea-sickness, dizziness, love-sickness, poisoning or even guilt or shame. The types of object that might make us nauseous are equally numerous, but share certain interesting characteristics: blood, filth, excrement, vomit, internal organs, waste and other forms of exposure of the ‘dirtier’ side of life. Nausea is an extremely claustrophobic feeling, as Levinas says it; ‘encloses us on all sides.’\(^{334}\) Yet this being enclosed cannot be mistaken for the confrontation with an external obstacle, rather we feel suffocated by our-selves: ‘We are revolted from the inside; our depths smother beneath ourselves; our innards “heave” [nous avons “mal au coeur”].’\(^{335}\) From this feeling vomiting will bring deliverance, at least experience has taught us that this is the case. Yet when we consider nausea ‘in the instant in which it is lived’\(^{336}\) we feel that it is not within our powers to overcome it, yet nor can we forget it or put it from our mind, in this sense it obsesses us. We cannot, for example deal with it in the way we deal with external objects. It is not that it is a particularly recalcitrant object of our concern, rather it is a state which holds us and it holds us to our self. As it is lived, nausea is ‘this revolting presence of ourselves to ourselves’ which

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\(^{332}\) I think it would be important to draw a disjunction between shame and guilt — though I’m not sure that Levinas is very consistent in this — shame does not, in and of itself, result in the requirement of responsibility, only in the desire to hide. Whereas, it seems to me, guilt *does* move towards responsibility. I cannot develop this thought here.

\(^{333}\) Sartre’s novel *Nausea* appeared in December 1938, whereas *On Escape* dates from 1935. It is perhaps interesting to wonder whether Sartre read *On Escape* or whether his considerations arose independently. These are not of course the only possibilities; influence may have come about more indirectly. We simply don’t know. See Sartre (1965)

\(^{334}\) Levinas (2003), p. 66

\(^{335}\) Ibid

\(^{336}\) Ibid
appears insurmountable.\footnote{Ibid}\textsuperscript{337} The things that we can do in order to get ourselves out of the state of nausea are themselves nauseating, but they are not initiatives of escape with regard to the nauseating state. They are more like the things we do to get rid of a headache (which can also cause nausea) than breaking out of a trap or overcoming an obstacle. We administer the ‘cure’ and wait. This is due to the fact that in one sense we cannot really assert a duality between us and the nausea. Yet in another sense we \textit{feel} a duality, we wish to flee from this state:

There is in nausea a refusal to remain there, an effort to get out. Yet this effort is always already characterised as desperate: in any case, it is so for any attempt to act or to think. And this despair, this fact of being riveted, constitutes all the anxiety of nausea. In nausea—which amounts to an impossibility to be what one is—we are at the same time riveted to ourselves, enclosed in a tight circle that smothers.\footnote{Ibid}\textsuperscript{338}

Nausea therefore constitutes an acute awareness of the paradoxical structure of need. It is the ‘impossibility to be what one is’ while at the same time being the awareness of ‘being riveted to’ oneself. Levinas will insist that \textit{‘this is the very experience of pure being’}.\footnote{Ibid, p. 67}\textsuperscript{339} It reveals the revolting nakedness of being and this revoltingness is a function of its need. It is connected with shame because this too reveals a kind of bindingness to ourselves. The quality Levinas conceived as unique in nausea is the purity of this experience, our relationship with nausea is unmediated:

For what constitutes the relationship between nausea and us is nausea itself. Thereby, nausea posits itself not only as something absolute, but as the very act of self-positing: it is the affirmation itself of being. It refers only to itself, is closed to all the rest, without windows onto other things. Nausea carries its centre of attraction within itself. And the ground of this position consists in impotence before its own reality, which nevertheless constitutes that reality itself. Therefore one might say, nausea reveals to us the presence of being in all its impotence, which constitutes this presence as such. It is the impotence of pure being, in all its nakedness.\footnote{Ibid, p. 68}\textsuperscript{340}

Our powerlessness to escape is revealed in nausea, but the feeling of nausea is the feeling of this very powerlessness. Thus what is \textit{revealed} in our relationship with nausea is nausea itself which is therefore this very manner of revealing. Put another way, nausea identifies us with our body which at the same time revolts us \textit{by virtue of this very identification}.

Now that I have introduced the theme of nausea an observation as to a striking difference between anxiety and nausea as \textit{Stimmungen} makes itself evident. Anxiety cannot be conceived as a cognitive or intellectualist mental state, yet it still remains a quite \textit{spiritual} affair. Although there

\begin{thebibliography}{99}
\bibitem{337} Ibid
\bibitem{338} Ibid
\bibitem{339} Ibid, p. 67
\bibitem{340} Ibid, p. 68
\end{thebibliography}
is no thing that I am directed at when I am anxious, but rather I am anxious about I-know-not-what (Heidegger will say about nothing or the nothing), still my anxiety faces outwards, even if the world recedes. It retains a kind of intentionality, whereas nausea is very much a matter of the body and turns inwards. In fact it is understood as the very inability to leave the self. More generally nausea makes us very aware of our body; in fact it is, like pain, an inability to forget the body. Anxiety, although it obsesses, does not necessarily obtrude the body onto our attention. As an experience of pure being nausea will give way in the later writings (starting with Existence and Existents) to the notion of horror, which constitutes our sense of the there is (il y a). The notion of being as the il y a and the accompanying idea of our possible participation in it has not as yet been developed, though we have touched upon them in our introduction. Thus nausea is in a sense the precursor to the notion of horror and it would be useful to compare the two. Just as the ontological need we have tried to explicate is the precursor to metaphysical Desire we might see nausea as the precursor of the horror at the il y a. In Existence and Existents Levinas has this to say about nausea:

“Nausea,” as a feeling for existence, is not yet a depersonalisation; but horror turns the subjectivity of the subject, his particularity qua entity, inside out. It is a participation in the there is, in the there is that has “no exits.” It is, if we may say so, the impossibility of death, the universality of existence even in its annihilation.

Though nausea reveals us as unable to escape from ourselves, even by means of the temporary salvation of pleasure, and in this sense constitutes a lack of exit, horror constitutes an awareness of the very loss of the self, or its depersonalisation. Before we consider the notion of the il y a in detail we need to explore the movement towards the more mature distinction between need and Desire in order to see how these connect up with an understanding of subjectivity.

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341 See Chapter 5
342 Levinas (1978), p. 56
4. The Distinction between Need and Desire

The Emergence of Desire in Levinas’s Earlier Texts

The Quest for Transcendence

The major development between *On Escape* and *Totality and Infinity* in relation to the concept of need is the separating out of need from Desire. This can be seen to take place mainly in *Existence and Existent*, where it still remains in a nascent form and also in *Time and the Other*, where it is not mentioned explicitly, but is clearly at work. In short, needs are now understood as being susceptible to satisfaction, and thus as the motivational state that is connected to enjoyment (*Jouissance*), whereas Desire is seen as the insatiable hunger that characterises the longing for transcendence. It is my contention that this is in fact a division within the original notion of need as need to escape — albeit in a more developed form. On the one hand this ‘need for escape’ grows into the concept ‘Desire,’ whereas ‘need’ is a kind of subsection of this more originary Desire, wherein Desire is temporarily appeased by our sojourn in the world. This is not always obvious from the way that needs are articulated in relation to enjoyment in *Totality and Infinity*, indeed what is emphasised is the distinction between need and Desire.

Following this development through *Existence and Existent* and *Time and the Other* gives the impression, not that Levinas was looking for a way of grounding or giving a sense to ethics, but that he was pursuing the problem of escape, expounded in *On Escape*, in order to find a concrete instantiation of Otherness, and thus of the possibility of transcendence. Ultimately he found such a possibility in the face of the Other to whom we maintain an ethical relation. But this is not in evidence, for example, in *Time and the Other* where Otherness is understood in terms of the feminine. The claim that the trajectory of Levinas’s thought is directed towards a quest for transcendence rather than ethics is stated in a footnote to ‘God and Philosophy.’ He writes: ‘It is the meaning of the beyond, of transcendence, and not ethics, that our study is pursuing. It finds it in the meaning of ethics.’ We have seen however that these two, transcendence and ethics, are also seen as equivalent for Levinas. He in no sense subordinates the sense of ethics to the sense of transcendence, even if historically the quest for transcendence came first. It is nevertheless a useful heuristic device to conceive of one as more originary than the other and this quote gives us some warrant for doing so. We might therefore conceive of the development of Levinas’s philosophy in this way: Beginning with *On Escape* he conceives of the fundamental driving force of human motivation in terms of need, which is understood as a need to escape, as we have seen in

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343 Levinas (1978)
344 Levinas (1987a)
Chapter 3. *On Escape* is developed against the background of a Heideggerian conception of the central philosophical problem of fundamental ontology. But Levinas tries to subvert this project by placing emphasis on bodily need which somehow pre-dates our being-in-the-world in Heidegger’s sense. The human body has a meaning and matters in a way which is more than its role in a network of meaningful worldly relations, and this is in terms of human need. We will see that needs are themselves the upshot of a more fundamental craving for transcendence which Levinas calls Desire.

**Existence and Existents**

The first time that the distinction between need and Desire is broached by Levinas’s work is in *Existence and Existents*. In chapter II entitled ‘The World’ the first section is called ‘Intentions.’ Levinas discusses what he calls ‘terrestrial nourishments,’\(^{346}\) this specifies the enjoyment that we have of the world which I have described at length in chapter 2. The paradigm is food, which he insists is ‘typical of life in the world,’\(^{347}\) and he continues:

> What characterizes this relationship is a complete correspondence between desire and its satisfaction. Desire knows perfectly well what it wants. And food makes possible the full realisation of its intention. At some moment everything is consummated.\(^{348}\)

Two points need clarifying here: first the word ‘desire’ is used where in *Totality and Infinity* the word ‘need’ would be more appropriate because Desire is precisely that which is not open to satisfaction and thus is never truly consummated. It is *need* which ‘knows perfectly well what it wants,’ Desire is characterised precisely by not knowing: ‘it implies relations with what is not given, of which there is no idea.’\(^{349}\) This raises the second point: when we discussed *need*, as it is thematized in *On Escape*, in chapter 3, we noted that in an important sense satisfaction was inadequate to the restlessness of need. We specified that: ‘What gives the human condition all its importance is precisely this inadequacy of satisfaction to need.’\(^{350}\) Now it would seem that Levinas is holding precisely the opposite position, need is that which is susceptible to satisfaction. Are we to assume that he has changed his mind and that he has developed an entirely new concept of ‘need’ and replaced the old one with ‘Desire?’ It is my contention that this is not the case at all. Rather, Levinas has separated out the area of life wherein we take a partial sojourn in the world, which he specifies in terms of enjoyment — and which is characterised in terms of the *fit* of need to satisfaction — and the transcendence which enters into this world from outside and above,\(^{351}\) toward which Desire drives us. Thus the analysis of need in *On Escape* remains relevant to a correct understanding of the more developed concept of ‘ Desire’ and the subsidiary concept of

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\(^{346}\) Levinas (1978), p. 30

\(^{347}\) Ibid, p. 34

\(^{348}\) Ibid, pp. 34-35

\(^{349}\) Levinas (1969), p. 34

\(^{350}\) Levinas (2003), pp. 59-60

\(^{351}\) ‘The very dimension of height is opened up by metaphysical desire.’ Levinas (2003), pp. 34-35
‘need.’ This agrees with a common practice of Levinas’s which consists of introducing a philosophical concept or thought in an early text and later passing over it again and developing it in more detail and depth. This gives the impression of a kind of spiralling motion in which the thought is revisited in each turn, expanded upon and enriched.

The distinction between need and Desire is first drawn like this in *Existence and Existents*:

Compare eating to loving, which occurs beyond economic activity and the world. For what characterizes love is an essential and insatiable hunger. To shake hands with a friend is to express one friendship with him, but it is also to convey that friendship is something inexpressible, and indeed as something unfulfilled, a permanent desire. *The very positivity of love lies in its negativity*. The burning bush that feeds the flames is not consumed.  

Thus if we associate the concept of need with eating then we ought to connect the concept of Desire with loving. In this way loving is understood as outside of economic activity, where need is to be located. The point is not dealt with in any more detail in *Existence and Existents*. Rather Levinas spends time on developing the notion of the world as that in which we are at home, in contrast to Heidegger’s idea that we are fallen into it. His emphasis is therefore on the satisfaction of needs.

In dealing with the question of intentions, and again criticising Heidegger’s prioritising of care, Levinas insists upon the immediacy of ‘desires’. Thus we read:

> The care for existing, this extension into ontology, is absent from intention. In desiring I am not concerned with being but am absorbed with the desirable, with the object that will completely slake my desire. I am terribly sincere. No ulterior reference, indicating a relationship of the desirable with the adventure of existence, with bare existence, takes form behind the desirable qua desirable. Of course we do not live in order to eat, but it is not really true that we eat in order to live; we eat because we are hungry. Desire has no further intentions behind it, which would be like thoughts; it is a good will; all the rest belongs to the level of biology. The desirable is a terminus, an end.

Simply by virtue of the fact of being satisfiable would render what is here termed ‘desire’ under the category of ‘need,’ in *Totality and Infinity*. It is here that need as contentment in the world is first understood in terms of the joy or enjoyment that such satisfaction affords. This joy or contentment is a function of the fittingness of the world for our needs, the very *availability* of the world constitutes our joy in the world.

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352 Levinas (1978), p. 35
353 The word ‘desire’ is used where, in *Totality and Infinity*, the word ‘need’ would be more appropriate.
354 Levinas (1978), p. 28
The satisfaction of needs therefore take place in the very pleasures of eating, drinking or taking a stroll in the fresh air. So we can understand needs in everyday terms. On the other hand ‘Desire’, as Levinas comes to characterize it, is a somewhat less everyday concept. This fact is indicated by virtue of often referring to it as ‘Metaphysical Desire.’ Yet it is not entirely divorced from the everyday if we accept that love is an everyday occurrence and we associate Desire with love. Of course love is an everyday occurrence in the sense that happens every day, but it is also outside of everyday events in the sense that it is extraordinary or special. Levinas wants to emphasize both aspects.

If eating is the paradigm figuration of enjoyment, the possibility of such enjoyment, according to Levinas, is achieved on the basis of a separation of the ego from an anonymous way of existing. *Existence and Existents* argues that the existent emerges from anonymous existence and this is described in terms of what Levinas there calls *hypostasis*. This constitutes an account of the existent emerging from the anonymous vigil of the il y a by virtue of taking on the burden of existence and the existent is said to exercise a certain mastery over existence. It is this mastery which constitutes the freedom achieved in the enjoyment we can have of the elements. This movement away from the anonymous, I would argue, is a movement initiated by the urge for transcendence, by Desire. So Desire is at work in everyday needs. But this mastery remains a kind of enchainment. Indeed it *is because it is mastery that it is enchainment*. Need constitutes this very ambiguity; it is a free dependency. We enjoy our world but are never free of its solicitations. The complacency that is possible in such a world is the arresting of the very movement, the movement toward transcendence, which brought about its possibility.

**Time and the Other**

The subject matter of *Time and the Other* can be characterised as the solitude of the subject and the possible ways of escape from this solitude. The specification of this solitude is analogous to the way the existent is riveted to the self as to its own weight explained in *On Escape*. The problem of this solitude is to be understood in terms of the fact that we can share everything except our existence; it is therefore in terms of our existence that solitude prevails. As we have seen in chapter 2 for Levinas, contrary to Heidegger, subjectivity is in the first instance alone. It is understood as the ego which emerges in the very enjoyment of the elements. In *Time and the Other* the first mode in which the possibility of an escape from this solitude is examined is in terms of the world of things we enjoy, which is named ‘Salvation Through the World—Nourishments.’

This relation to the world is that of enjoyment and is thus essentially the relation of the satisfaction of (worldly) needs. We can therefore assume that there is another layer of subjectivity beneath the emergence of the enjoying ego. It is argued that this is a failed attempt to escape from solitude, and thus as inadequate to the need for such an escape (this need will later be

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355 Ibid, pp. 61-100
356 We will explain this notion in detail in Chapter 5.
357 See Chapter 3
358 Levinas (1987a), p. 62
Desire), this is so for all the reasons I have given in chapter 2. The world, and our enjoyment of it, remains very much within the circle of sameness. This is also true for those intentions that make up our representations of the world, which we argued were — in this sense at least — continuous with enjoyment. The other two areas wherein the possibility of escape are examined are death and Eros.

It may seem odd to specify death as a possible candidate for transcendence and escape from solitude, and thus that we might Desire death. This should be seen in the light of the fact that Heidegger has insisted that it is death which affirms our solitude; no one can die in my place. For Heidegger, Being-toward-death therefore individuates Dasein by virtue of the fact that it dispels the illusions of the they (das Man), and forces me to anxiously face up to the fact that my own Being is mine to choose. It is thus the ultimate possibility in the light of which all other possibilities are rendered mine (or possible). It is ‘one’s ownmost and uttermost potentiality-for-Being.’\(^359\) This is so because: ‘Death is the possibility of the absolute impossibility of Dasein.’\(^360\) But for Levinas we are not primarily located in the world which solicits us toward certain possibilities, understood as on the one hand, everyday possibilities within which we can acquiesce and, on the other, our ownmost (eigenst) possibilities which we can resolutely take in hand. Rather we are beings which are fundamentally needy, and this need is essentially a need for escape from a certain burdensomeness of the self. (Ultimately we will see that this need for escape is a need for escape from Being itself). Given this, death may indeed give the impression of accommodating such a need. More exactly this need might now be thought in terms of metaphysical Desire which remains a need for escape. We will need to return to the question of death\(^361\) and the question of Eros\(^362\) later.

Need and Satisfaction in Levinas’s Mature Philosophy
Since we have understood enjoyment in chapter 2 largely in terms of the pleasures of eating, we will understand need in terms of hunger. What is characteristic of hunger, in the sense it has when applied to need in Totality and Infinity, and in contrast to the way need is understood in On Escape, is the pre-established possibility of satisfaction. ‘This is the love of life, a pre-established harmony with what is yet to come to us.’\(^363\) Hunger implies food. This stands in complete contrast to the way that need was understood in On Escape. But the contrast here is between need seen as: ‘a kind of dead weight in the depth of our being, whose satisfaction does not manage to rid us of it’\(^364\) and need seen in relation to our enjoyment of the elements that make up our world. In other words, though need is susceptible to satisfaction in the world we enjoy, it is ultimately inadequate to the Desire that lies behind it. The articulation of this tension therefore requires the conceptual distinction between need and Desire, but the distinction is more subtle than a

\(^{359}\) Heidegger (1985a), p. 307
\(^{360}\) Ibid, p. 294
\(^{361}\) Chapter 5
\(^{362}\) Chapter 6
\(^{363}\) Levinas (1969), p. 145
\(^{364}\) Levinas (2003), p. 60
straightforward opposition. Enjoyment of everyday life ‘already contains a forgetfulness of self.’\textsuperscript{365} It thus involves a kind of partial escape akin to the way we have understood pleasure. But it is not what Levinas is after with his notion of transcendence, which amounts to an absence of return to the self. We might say it is insufficient to achieve the right level of escape velocity. As we know this transcendence is ultimately cashed out in terms of ethics. It is for this reason that, although he opposes earthly enjoyments to the Other directed movement of ethics, Levinas nevertheless allows for a necessary connection. Despite enjoyment ultimately leading back to the self in a kind of complacent contentment, the movement is one of a departure from self as a way of escape and it is via this movement that the self is \textit{separated}.

So need should not be seen entirely in terms of a lack; only in a world of want and poverty, wherein deprivation is the rule does hunger appear to be an absolute negativity. To understand need in terms of such utter privation would be to insist upon a phenomenology of need which understands it only against the background of a disordered and highly underprivileged society. In such conditions—which should hardly be denied, since they apply to a large part of the world’s population—it is not that the sufferers would like to be rid of need once and for all, need knows what it wants, \textit{hunger does not simply desire the cessation of hunger, it desires food}. To understand need only in terms of such deprivation is therefore to forget that: ‘The human being thrives on his needs; he is happy for his needs.’\textsuperscript{366}

If, in separating need from Desire, Levinas thereby construed need in terms of a pure and simple lack, he would have abandoned some of the insights of \textit{On Escape} which we have emphasised in chapter 3. Specifically he would have abandoned the view that the pleasure that is attendant on the satisfaction of needs is to be understood in terms of escape, and that this is the \textit{fundamental meaning} of need. It is central to this thesis that he does not abandon this insight, and that he does not construe need as pure and simple lack, though many commentators have been tempted by this view. Indeed the example of eating might well encourage this way of seeing things, since hunger is appeased by the filling of an empty stomach. John Wild, who writes the introduction to the English translation of \textit{Totality and Infinity} seems to endorse this view: ‘need...seeks to fill a negation or lack in the subject.’\textsuperscript{367} Even Adriaan Peperzak, whose work on Levinas is otherwise admirably clear and precise, sometimes seems to slip. He writes: ‘“Need” is the name for all human orientations toward something that is lacking or makes an achievement incomplete.’\textsuperscript{368}

There is some truth in these formulations, but they are apt to be misleading if we conclude that ‘need’ can be understood purely in terms of lack and incomplete achievement. It must be admitted however that this view is often encouraged by some of Levinas’s own formulations. With reference to the partial otherness of the earth and its nourishments he writes: ‘I can “feed” on these realities and to a very great extent satisfy myself, as though I had simply been lacking

\textsuperscript{365} Levinas (1987a), pp. 63-64
\textsuperscript{366} Levinas (1969), p. 114
\textsuperscript{367} ibid, p. 19
\textsuperscript{368} Peperzak (1993), p. 133
them.\textsuperscript{369} Here I would emphasise the ‘to a very great extent’ and the ‘as though’ in this careful formulation. Other formulations make it clear that he does not construe need simply as a lack.

Levinas’s targets, when he opposes the notion of need as a lack are the philosophies of Plato and Kant. He writes: ‘Need cannot be interpreted as a simple lack, despite the psychology of need given by Plato, nor as pure passivity, despite Kantian ethics.’\textsuperscript{370} With regard to Plato this psychology is explicated in this manner:

\begin{quote}
In denouncing as illusory the pleasures that accompany the satisfaction of needs Plato has fixed the negative notion of need: it would be a less, a lack that satisfaction would make good. The essence of need would be visible in the need to scratch oneself in scabies, in sickness.\textsuperscript{371}
\end{quote}

Plato’s example here is taken to illustrate that the pleasure derived from scratching when one has scabies (or pruritus)\textsuperscript{372} is a product of dealing with an itch which we would have been better off without ever having at all. Pleasure is here conceived as the outcome of the need to itch, but the irritation of an itch is itself seen as something negative, the outcome of something quite horrible, scabies or pruritus. We can see how the example works to specify need as a pure negativity by locating need in an atmosphere of ailment, and the scratching as a temporary relief from symptoms, thus implying that need is analogous to an ailment. But Levinas remarks: ‘To conceive of need as a simple privation is to apprehend it in the midst of a disorganised society which leaves it neither time nor consciousness.’\textsuperscript{373} He contests the idea that need is a pure negativity by insisting that it has the positive function of allowing us escape from the weight of our own being:

\begin{quote}
So in the very instant of the transcendence of need, placing the subject in front of nourishments, in front of the world as nourishments, this transcendence offers the subject a liberation from itself. The world offers the subject participation in existing in the form of enjoyment, and consequently permits it to exist at a distance from itself.\textsuperscript{374}
\end{quote}

Need is constituted by the very distance that is opened up between the free being and the world. ‘The distance intercalated between man and the world on which he depends constitutes the essence of need.’\textsuperscript{375} But this distance is a liberation from the submersion in the world of

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{369} Levinas (1969), p. 33
\item \textsuperscript{370} ibid, p. 114
\item \textsuperscript{371} ibid, p 116 The rather odd mention the pleasure of scratching one’s scabies comes from Plato’s Philebus 46a. Plato (1982)
\item \textsuperscript{372} See Plato (1982) 46a
\item \textsuperscript{373} Levinas (1969), p. 116
\item \textsuperscript{374} Levinas (1987a), p. 67
\item \textsuperscript{375} Levinas (1969), p. 116
\end{itemize}
‘anonymous menaces’376 which constitute the world of ‘the instinctive being.’377 Such is the emergence of ‘a veritable subject’378 which is therefore both free and needy: free from the ‘immediate and incessant contact’379 with the natural world and thus from itself as anonymous participation in the il y a,380 but still dependent upon this (now) external world for its nourishment.

This distance can be converted into time, and subordinate a world to the liberated but needy being. There is here an ambiguity of which the body is the very articulation.381

This language of simultaneous freedom and dependency is articulated in terms of the agreeableness of the things that nourish enjoyment. Freedom in this sense is not conceived in the gratuitous act of will, but is embodied and vulnerable. It is born in the sensuous enjoyment which accompanies the satisfaction of needs: ‘Living from...is the dependency that turns into sovereignty, into happiness—essentially egoist.’382 Thus enjoyment, as the self-sensing of a sentient being, at home in a world it is separated from, is the very sense of our freedom as beings with (bodily) needs. This characterisation of need in terms of the body does not mean that need is a physiological category.

That man could be happy for his needs indicates that in human need the physiological plane is transcended, that as soon as there is need we are outside the categories of being—even though in formal logic the structure of happiness—independence through dependence, or I, or human creature—cannot show through without contradiction.383

‘Outside the categories of being.’ I have already indicated what this means, that affectivity, rather than being a state or mode of being, is a break up of such conditions, an escape beyond being.

Indeed even Plato’s example of the pleasure of scratching an itch—curious though it is—can enter into the richness of life’s sensorial joys. I am reminded of the scene in the Walt Disney cartoon Jungle Book384 when Baloo the bear is singing Bare Necessities.385 At a certain point in what is a

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376 ibid
377 ibid
378 ibid
379 ibid
380 ibid
382 ibid, p. 114
383 ibid, p. 115
384 The Jungle Book Walt Disney Productions, Directed by Wolfgang Reitherman 1967
385 It should be pointed out that the title Bare Necessities is ironic (apart from the word ‘bare’ being a homonym of ‘bear’) in that its exuberant celebration of the simple joys of eating and scratching
joyous celebration of life—designed to make you ‘forget about your troubles and your strife’—
after explaining how the world is, in a sense, made for him, and how somewhere some bees are
buzzing in the trees making honey just for him, the hedonistic bear requests the ‘man–cub’
Mowgli to scratch his left shoulder. Baloo, clearly enjoying the experience, continues his scratching
against a tree and describes the effect as ‘delicious’. This implies that the pleasure of the
scratching—which Plato certainly admits—is not always the product of a respite from pain but can
be a surplus of happiness. Baloo is much more of a Levinasian than a Platonist. He is not fleeing
need but pursuing happiness: ‘which is worth more than ataraxy. Pure existing is ataraxy;
happiness is accomplishment.’\textsuperscript{386} It is better than a state where one has conquered need
altogether, a state of being tranquilized or ‘castrated.’\textsuperscript{387}

I have already clarified how the notion of need in Levinas’s philosophy is not a purely passive state
as he claims it is in Kantian ethics. Need, as it is understood in \textit{On Escape}, is an active striving to
escape an uncomfortable situation. But when it is divorced from the perpetual restlessness that
comes to characterises Desire, its activity remains within a world which constitutes a circuit of
satisfactions, of finalities ‘sufficient unto the day.’ In its separation from Desire, need certainly
takes on the characteristic of a lack, but as I have tried to emphasise it is not purely and simply a
lack, but a lack in a being who knows how to fill the lack and knows the surplus of enjoyment such
fulfilling implies. ‘Need, a happy dependence, is capable of satisfaction, like a void, which gets
filled.’\textsuperscript{388}

\textbf{Desire}

I have argued that rather than being a mere counter-movement to need, Desire is a continuation
of its movement beyond being. But needs—characterised in their fulfilment as enjoyment —
remain insufficiently transcendent for escape because enjoyment pertains strictly to the realm of
the ego or the same. Desire, on the other hand, is a continuation of the movement of need \textit{which
shifts the centre of gravity away from the self and locates it in the Other.}

Levinas characterises Desire as desire for the invisible. To understand this we first need to
remember his account of representation and cognition. Representation and cognition is a
continuation of the world of enjoyment, it is a way of possessing the world. Its medium is light in
which the things of the world are separated from me and at the same time illuminated. Levinas
writes: ‘This relationship with an object can be characterised by enjoyment \textit{[jouissance]}. All
enjoyment is a way of being, but also sensation—that is, light and knowledge.’\textsuperscript{389} In enjoying the
world we sense it, but this sensing also moves into cognition. Cognition is a movement away from
submersion yet back toward the world in a new way. This is a kind of proto-transcendence

demonstrates Levinas’s thesis that ‘The bare fact of life is never bare.’ Levinas (1969), p. 112 Here, it seems,
not even the bare facts of a bear’s life.

\textsuperscript{386} Levinas (1969), p. 113
\textsuperscript{387} Ibid, p. 115
\textsuperscript{388} Ibid, p. 115
\textsuperscript{389} Levinas (1987a), p. 63
because its movement is inspired, through various intermediaries, by the urge to escape. It is for this reason that Levinas thinks of it as a kind of proto-ethics.

The subject separates from itself. Light is the prerequisite for such a possibility. In this sense our everyday life is already a way of being free from the initial materiality through which a subject is accomplished [s’accomplit]. It already contains a forgetfulness of self. The morality of “earthly nourishments” is the first morality, the first abnegation. It is not the last, but one must pass through it.\footnote{Ibid, p. 64}

The world is open to our apprehension and comprehension, which are forms of \textit{prehension} or grasping. It is ultimately at my command because I am at home in the world: ‘In a sense everything is in the site, in the last analysis everything is at my disposal, even the stars, if I reckon them, calculate the intermediaries or the means.’\footnote{Levinas (1969), p. 37} The medium in which the world is given to thought is called by Levinas ‘light,’ as we have seen. Thought is a kind of luminosity and clarity it separates us from the object of thought, and thus spares us from the submersion of contact, while simultaneously giving it to us in clarity:

\begin{quote}
The interval of space given by light is instantaneously absorbed by light. Light is that through which something is other than myself, but already as if it came from me. The illuminated object is something one encounters, but from the very fact that it is illuminated one encounters it as if it came from us.\footnote{Levinas (1987a), p. 64}
\end{quote}

Intelligibility is thus understood as \textit{seeing} in the broadest sense of the term. We have to some extent noted this in chapter 2 where we contrasted representational thinking to enjoyment. But we did not there emphasise the metaphors of light and vision which permeate Levinas’s thinking on representation. This point can be underlined by indicating a footnote in \textit{Time and the Other} challenging Alphonse de Waelhens’ view on Husserl:

\begin{quote}
De Waelhens reckons that the reason that prompted Husserl to shift from descriptive intuition to transcendental analysis resulted from an identification of intelligibility and construction—pure vision not being intelligibility. I think, to the contrary, that the Husserlian notion of vision already implies intelligibility. To see is already to render the encountered object one’s own, as drawn from one’s own ground. In this sense, “transcendental constitution” is but a way of seeing in full clarity. It is a completion of vision.\footnote{Ibid, footnote}
\end{quote}

In other words it is not that the world is transcendentially constituted in thought \textit{before} we see it as our world, rather it is \textit{given in vision} as our world, and this is so because intelligibility runs all the way down to our encounter with the object in sight. It is not that the object is \textit{not} constituted
by thought, but rather that the moment of vision is already an activity of the subject: ‘representation involves no passivity.’\textsuperscript{394} In representational thought the subject does not leave the circle of the same or encounter any true Otherness. Thought remains an imperialist force (‘imperialism of the same’)\textsuperscript{395} and this very movement of assimilation of all otherness to myself in thought, by possession and consumption, ‘is the way of the same.’\textsuperscript{396}

Intelligibility, characterized by clarity, is a total adequation of the thinker with what is thought, in the precise sense of a mastery exercised by the thinker upon what is thought in which the object’s resistance as an exterior being vanishes. This mastery is total and as though creative; it is accomplished as a giving of meaning: the object of representation is reducible to noemata.\textsuperscript{397}

Levinas uses the term ‘Desire’ to characterize the movement toward the Other, and specifies it as a ‘Desire for the Invisible.’\textsuperscript{398} If the encounter with the Other were a form of representation then the Other would be assimilated to the same, it would nullify his or her Otherness by reducing it to my thought of the Other. He uses the term ‘Desire’ to specify the movement toward the kind of beyond of thought that the Other is, by virtue of his or her sheer exorbitance to thought. It is not something visible that is the object of Desire. Not because it is hidden from, but commensurate with the world of light, rather it is beyond or otherwise than this world. It is in this sense also that Desire is Desire for transcendence.\textsuperscript{399}

Needs are a pull towards the self of the objects that are available for its satisfaction motivated by the self; the self wants them (even if this ‘want’ should not always be read as a lack). It is the self’s satisfaction that is sought in fulfilling needs. Therefore needs issue from, and thus are initiated by, the subject. Of course needs are not voluntary, but they nevertheless originate and terminate within the self. It is because of this orientation towards the ego that I used the metaphor of gravitational pull, and thus the idea of a centre of gravity. It follows that an important characterization of Desire, and how it specifically contrasts with need, is precisely in the fact that it originates from outside of the self, and is thus a pull away from the self.

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{394} Levinas (1969), p. 125
\item \textsuperscript{395} ibid, p. 39 & 87
\item \textsuperscript{396} ibid, p. 38
\item \textsuperscript{397} ibid, pp. 123-124
\item \textsuperscript{398} This formulation is the title of the first part of the first chapter of section 1 of \textit{Totality and Infinity}.
\item \textsuperscript{399} This quest for transcendence can be understood as a reaction to what Levinas sees as the disappointing and baleful influences of modern philosophy. Specifically the philosophies of finitude: Heidegger’s \textit{Being and Time} and existentialism, those influenced by psychoanalysis and/or Marxism, and positivism. Each of these in their own way dismisses the yearning for transcendence (Desire) as an illusory wish, and this constitutes their anti-Platonism. On the other hand Levinas wanted to avoid the other, reactionary, extreme of embracing a kind of mysticism. For him mysticism is yet another manifestation of the notion of participation which we have touched upon. In other words mysticism involves neglecting our separated material existence in the world. It seems that Levinas believed that Heidegger’s later philosophy indulged in such a mysticism of Being and thus that his earlier philosophy contains this as a possibility.
\end{itemize}
The inordinateness [démesure] measured by Desire is the face. Thus we again meet with the distinction between Desire and need: desire is an aspiration that the Desirable animates; it originates from its “object”; it is revelation—whereas need is a void of the soul; it proceeds from the subject.400

The Formal Features of Desire
Before the contenders for the concrete instantiation of Desire (or the Desirable) are examined in detail, it will be useful to present the formal requirements that any such candidate must fulfil. Indeed these have been implicit in what has gone before, but making them explicit will help avoid confusion. This will also help us understand why Levinas uses just the types of situation that he does to exemplify Desire: i.e. the Erotic and the Ethical. We will see that Levinas initially locates transcendence in the erotic relation between the sexes but later appears to abandon this in favour of ethics, which he even opposes to Eros. Indeed Stella Sandford has complained that this is a move ‘for which Levinas himself gives no explanation.’401 I agree that he gives no such explanation, but I believe that if we take our lead from the notions of need and Desire we will be able to see that this is a perfectly logical shift, even if it is in some ways regrettable that he does not explain this development.

1) The notion of Desire proper402 is introduced in the very first section of Totality and Infinity, under the title ‘Desire for the Invisible.’403 There Levinas understands Desire as going out towards the absolutely strange or, as Levinas says; ‘other in an eminent sense.’404 It is the urge towards the totally foreign or Other. ‘The metaphysical desire tends towards something else entirely, towards the absolutely other.’405 In this sense it should not be confused with the usual conception of a need, which is seen as an urge towards the return to completeness.406 If this latter conception of Desire was upheld then all of our yearnings would seem to amount to desires to return to a previous harmony or state, something like

400 Levinas (1969), p. 62
401 Sandford (2001) p. 3
402 I say ‘proper’ because I have argued that the idea has being operative, if only implicitly, since 1935 when Levinas wrote On Escape.
403 Levinas (1969), p. 33
404 Ibid, p. 33
405 Ibid, p. 33
406 I have dealt with this understanding of ‘need’ and shown how Levinas opposes it in chapter 3 on On Escape
either as a desire to return to the womb as in Otto Rank’s theory of birth trauma,\(^{407}\) or nostalgia for death, as in Freud’s theory of the death drive (\textit{Todestrieb}).\(^{408}\)

As commonly interpreted need would be at the basis of desire; desire would characterise a being indigent and incomplete or fallen from a past grandeur. It would coincide with the consciousness of what has been lost; it would be essentially a nostalgia, a longing for return. But thus it would not even suspect what the veritably other is.\(^{409}\)

Desire should not be so conceived, it is not a desire for return but ‘for a land not of our birth.’\(^{410}\) It is a going forth to the unknown and thus, to this extent at least, corresponds to the way we have interpreted ‘need’ in \textit{On Escape}. Desire is an attempt to get out without \textit{knowing} where we are going. Levinas compares this distinction to the difference between Odysseus ‘whose adventure in the world was but a return to his native island,’\(^{411}\) and Abraham and Moses who leave the land of their fathers never to return.

2) Unlike need, Desire is not capable of being satisfied: ‘The burning bush that feeds the flames is not consumed.’\(^{412}\) But it is not that the object that would satisfy Desire is beyond its limited reach, it is not a need for something it cannot acquire: ‘Insatiable Desire—not because it corresponds to an infinite hunger, but because it is not an appeal for food.’\(^{413}\) It does not desire its satisfaction, it is ‘not only unsatisfied \textit{in fact}, but outside of every perspective of satisfaction or unsatisfaction.’\(^{414}\) On the contrary the Desirable is said to \textit{increase} Desire: ‘The desirable does not satisfy my Desire, it hollows me, nourishes me somehow with new hungers.’\(^{415}\) Thus the question of the satisfaction of Desire can only arise by \textit{mistake}, if we \textit{confuse} Desire with need. The reasons why Desire is not satiable are threefold. a) Desire is not a privation, in no sense should it be conceived in terms of lack. Desire is an outward movement, and the origins of the concept can be traced back to the notion of \textit{ever-restless need} that we have dealt with at length earlier. If we think of Desire in these terms then we can say that it does not seek satisfaction but escape. It is therefore essentially a motivational state that does not proceed from a lack within the

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\(^{407}\) See Rank (2010) Actually Rank restricts this to the male sex drive. Nevertheless since Levinas first locus of Desire is the Erotic I consider the comparison relevant.

\(^{408}\) See Sigmund Freud’s ‘Beyond the Pleasure Principle’ in Freud (1991), pp. 275-338. Freud explicitly relates this theory to the pessimistic philosophy of Schopenhauer. Here the death drive is opposed to the sexual drive, which is the life instinct.

\(^{409}\) Levinas (1969), p. 33

\(^{410}\) Ibid, pp. 33-34

\(^{411}\) Levinas (2006b), p. 26

\(^{412}\) Levinas (1978), p. 35

\(^{413}\) Levinas (1969), p. 63

\(^{414}\) Ibid, p. 179

\(^{415}\) Levinas (2006b), p. 30
self, yet it is essentially tied to what it is to be a human being. ‘Desire, an aspiration that does not proceed from a lack—metaphysics—is the desire of a person.’416 b) Desire does not proceed from me but has its origin outside of me, as we have already noted. According to Levinas it has its origins in the other person or in God. (The problematic coincidence of these two will be touched upon later). Needs arise in the subject, they are hungers or thirsts. But Desire is initiated by the Desirable. In this sense it opposes the exercise of my freedom as the spontaneous activity of satisfying my needs. It invades me and, as it were, drags me out of myself. I am unable to master it and take it on as part of my thinking or enjoying. Levinas will say that I am unable to ‘assume it.’ It is in this sense that he will insist on the passivity of Desire. c) Desire specifies a reversal of the direction of the concern for needs, instead of my needs being central the needs of the Other are given priority. Rather than a living from..., Desire is a living for the Other, a despite-myself rather than a for-myself. We can summarise with the help of a quote from Humanism and the Other:

The Other who incites this ethical movement of consciousness, who deregulates the good conscience of the coincidence of the Same with self, includes a surplus that is inadequate to intentionality. This is Desire, burning with a fire that is not need extinguished by saturation, thinking beyond what one thinks. Because of this unassimilable surplus, because of this beyond, we call this relation that attaches the Ego to Other: the idea of Infinity.
The idea of Infinity is Desire.417

3) We have seen how Desire is distinguished from need and how the former is in no way reducible to the latter. But we have also insisted upon an intimate connection between them. Thus it might be argued that Desire depends upon need, since it is only by virtue of having needs that I am able to understand that the Other has needs, and thus Desire their wellbeing. Levinas seems to say as much when he insists that: ‘No human or interhuman relationship can be enacted outside of economy.’418 But in the final analysis this is not how things are. He writes: ‘Indeed the time presupposed by need is provided me by Desire; human need already rests on Desire.’419

This completes our list of the formal features of Desire. What remains is to weave the concept into the concrete phenomenological investigations that Levinas undertakes. But in order to reach a stage where this can come into view, we need to examine another central concept in Levinas’s later work—one that we have already touched upon—the concept of the il y a.

417 Levinas (2006b), p. 33
418 Levinas (1969), p. 172
419 Ibid, p. 117
5. The Il y a

Heidegger and the Nothing

In ‘What is Metaphysics?’ Heidegger confronts the question of the nothing. He notes that science deals with all beings, that it allows nothing outside of its field, and thus that what is left over after all beings are held under the penetrating light of science is precisely nothing. He therefore asks the apparently dubious question: ‘How is it with the nothing?’ The natural response to this kind of questioning— and the one to which A.J. Ayer resorted in Language, Truth and Logic— is to claim that Heidegger is subject to a misunderstanding. The word ‘nothing’ is not a name which designates something rather mysterious and thus beyond the reach of the sciences, but is a word that functions (usually) to indicate the absence of anything at all. To misunderstand this is to miss at least one of the points of Lichtenberg’s humorous syllogism: ‘A leg of mutton is better than nothing, Nothing is better than Heaven, Therefore a leg of mutton is better than Heaven.’ But Heidegger is fully aware of this objection, he writes:

In our asking we posit the nothing in advance as something that “is” such and such; we posit it as a being. But that is exactly what it is distinguished from. Interrogating the nothing—asking what and how it, the nothing, is—turns what is interrogated into its opposite. The question deprives itself of its own object.

What Heidegger is here admitting is that if we seek an understanding of the nothing through logical or cognitive means we will see that the nothing is a function of negation as such. Logic has as its background the premise that only what in some sense is is thinkable, and the nothing in no sense is, indeed it is precisely this which defines ‘nothing.’ To ask in this manner thereby renders the question empty. Heidegger does not therefore understand his question as raising the problem of the status of ‘nothing’ as understood via the intellect or logic. This is a self-defeating project. Once again the natural response is one of dismissal, to renounce logic and cognition is here to renounce thinking and thus to embrace irrationalism. It is not clear however that this is the case because here Heidegger appeals to phenomenology. His phenomenology, as we have seen, is a phenomenological ontology and concentrates on existence rather than thought. What he wishes to do is encounter a genuine ‘experience’ of nothingness within existence itself and not in some theoretical understanding of this existence. Though the question of the nothing is indeed beyond reason and logic as it has hitherto being understood, it is not beyond ontology, not beyond being.

Where are we to find in our lives the experience of the nothing that Heidegger seeks? In a sense we have already had an answer to this: ‘This can and does occur, although rarely enough and only

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420 Martin Heidegger ‘What is Metaphysics?’ in Heidegger (1978), pp. 92-112
421 Ibid, p. 98 and 104
422 Ayer (1980) p. 59
423 Lichenberg (1990), p. 45
424 Martin Heidegger ‘What is Metaphysics?’ in Heidegger (1978), p. 98
for a moment, in the fundamental mood of anxiety." It is through the mood (\textit{Stimmung}) of anxiety that the nothing is encountered in its purity. Moreover it is only because the nothing can be encountered at all that it is possible to negate in the intellectual or cognitive sense. The traditional and positivist accounts get things entirely the wrong way round according to Heidegger. It is not because we have the logical function of negation, and are thus capable of thinking things under the sign of the negative, that we have the word ‘nothing’ and thus some understanding of its use. Rather we are capable of such negation on the level of the intellect because at a more primordial lived level of our being-in-the-world we encounter the nothing and this via the mood of anxiety. Indeed we encounter negation or negativity, what Heidegger calls ‘nihilation,’ in our dealings with entities in a much more pronounced manner than we do when we use it as a logical operator:

No matter how much or in how many ways negation, expressed or implied, permeates all thought, it is by no means the sole authoritative witness for the revelation of the nothing belonging essentially to Dasein. For negation cannot claim to be either the sole or the leading nihilative behaviour in which Dasein remains shaken in the nihilation of the nothing. Unyielding antagonism and stinging rebuke have a more abysmal source than the measured negation of thought. Galling failure and merciless prohibition require some deeper answer. Bitter privation is more burdensome. These possibilities of nihilative behaviour—forces in which Dasein bears its thrownness without mastering it—are not types of mere negation. That does not prevent them, however, from speaking out in the “no” and in negation.

Such manners of encountering negativity are not pure experiences of the nothing, but demonstrate its availability in our everyday encounters in a way that is more pressing and closer to our Being than the exercise of negation in thought. The pure experience of the nothing is given in the anxiety in which there ‘occurs a shrinking back before...’ which amounts to a kind of ‘bewildered calm.’ The nothing is essentially repelling and as such it makes for an uneasy calm. Nonetheless it is because the nothing is somehow given to us that Dasein is able to open up to the possibility of questioning, of philosophy and thus to the possibility of \textit{Be-ing} in Heidegger’s transitive sense of the term. ‘In the clear night of the nothing of anxiety the original openness of beings as such arises: that they are beings—and not nothing.’

Ontology, understood as the philosophical enquiry into the difference that it makes that there are beings rather than nothing—which is one way in which we understood it in chapter 1 —, is opened as a possibility by the very fact that the nothing is to some extent given. But this fact of the nothing being given is also the very opening of the possibility of Da-sein because: ‘Da-sein

\begin{footnotes}
\item[425] Ibid, p. 102
\item[426] Ibid, pp. 107-108
\item[427] Ibid, p. 105
\item[428] Ibid
\end{footnotes}
means: being held out into the nothing. The two are thereby codetermined by the nothing. In other words it is due to its having this relation to the nothing that Dasein is essentially ontological. Or, contrariwise, it is because ontology — the sense of the difference it makes that there are beings rather than nothing — is opened by the nothing that Dasein can be the Being that it is, because, as we know, 'Dasein is ontically distinctive in that it is ontological.'

We here encounter a clear demonstration of the overwhelming power of ontologism, the notion that ontology is first philosophy. A power that Levinas perceived clearly enough, bemoaned and ultimately challenged with the notion of an otherwise than or beyond of Being. And he recognised it very early in his career. As far back as On Escape he wrote: ‘Ontologism in its broadest meaning remained the fundamental dogma of all thought.’

There is (il y a) no Nothing
Do we really encounter the nothing in its purity? Is the emptiness or lack of beings that anxiety seems to make obtrude into our lives really an encounter with the nothing?

Levinas opens his section of Existence and Existents entitled ‘Existence Without Existents’ with an invitation: ‘Let us imagine all beings, things and persons, reverting to nothingness.’ It is difficult to know what we are being asked to imagine here or whether we are in fact able to imagine this. It seems however that what is being requested is something like an epoché or phenomenological reduction. This would thereby be the ultimate phenomenological-ontological epoché, revealing the nothing within the brackets. The problem, however, is that the reduction appears all but redundant. ‘The nothing is what we are seeking,’ as Heidegger would put it, but we have already understood this nothing in terms of ‘all beings reverting to nothingness.’ Beyond all beings, again, as Heidegger would put it, is nothing. We should recall at this point however that we have already seen that Levinas insists upon the possibility of existence without existents which he also finds indications of in Heidegger’s notion of thrownness. As he puts it:

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.

Thus the idea that the absence of all beings (existents) amounts to nothing, which functions as a premise in Heidegger’s ‘What is Metaphysics?’, is contested by Levinas, and this by virtue of

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429 Ibid
430 Heidegger (1985a), p. 32
431 See Chapter 3
432 Levinas (2003), p. 71
433 Levinas (1978), p. 51
434 Martin Heidegger ‘What is Metaphysics’ in Heidegger (1978), p. 100
435 Ibid, p. 97
436 See Chap 3 of this thesis and Levinas (1987a), p. 45
437 Levinas (1987a), p. 45
resources that he finds in Heidegger’s work. Once again we find ourselves in the throes of thrownness.

This is why Levinas can say of the ‘nothingness’ which remains, after what I have characterised as an *epoché*, that: ‘Something would happen, if only night and the silence of nothingness.’\(^{438}\) What is left therefore when we think away all beings is the “something is happening”\(^{439}\) characteristic of an indeterminate and impersonal event. What remains in existence after all existents have being extinguished is certainly, for Levinas, a situation without determinate qualities, but we can say something about it: 1) It is a happening or event and not a thing. 2) It is indeterminate and 3) It is impersonal. Levinas calls it the *il y a*, usually translated as the *there is*. He also refers to it, by analogy, as ‘the night:’

> When the forms of things are dissolved in the night, the darkness of the night, which is neither an object nor the quality of an object, invades like presence. In the night, where we are riveted to it, we are not dealing with anything. But this nothing is not that of pure nothingness. There is no longer *this* or *that*; there is not “something.” But this universal absence is in its turn a presence, an absolutely unavoidable presence.\(^{440}\)

This sheer fact of Being is beyond normal experience:

> We would say that the night is the very experience of the *there is*, if the term experience were not inapplicable to a situation which involves the total exclusion of light.\(^{441}\)

It is also beyond, or at any rate beneath, any activity which we might initiate:

> The disappearance of all things and of the I leaves what cannot disappear, the sheer fact of being in which one participates, whether one wants to or not, without having taken the initiative, anonymously.\(^{442}\)

The *il y a* remains a buzzing background to all our experiences and actions, it lies there mute and indeterminate like a monstrous black shadow. This atrocious presence/absence haunts Levinas’s works and appears, as if in apparition, at various crucial junctures, only to return again in the end to haunt the very Otherness that is at the heart of his philosophy. He identifies this strange background with Being itself. By means of the thought of the *il y a* he has therefore both answered Heidegger’s question as to the meaning of Being and at the same time shown that the question is, in a sense, philosophically misguided. In giving an account of what Being is — this non-existent

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\(^{438}\) Levinas (1978), p. 52  
\(^{439}\) Ibid  
\(^{440}\) Ibid  
\(^{441}\) Ibid  
\(^{442}\) Ibid, p. 53
existence — he has at the same time shown it to be precisely the meaningless background against which existents appear, and, as we will see, this ‘against’ takes on the active sense of opposition and conflict. But this very meaningfulness in its turn arises anew as a meaning, only to defeat all our attempts at grasping it. Indeed we might understand the very movement of the il y a in terms of this infinite slipping away from meaning:

But if it were necessary to compare the notion of the there is with a great theme of classical philosophy, I would think of Heraclitus. Not to the myth of the river in which one cannot bathe twice, but to Cratylus’ version of the river in which one cannot bathe even once; where the very fixity of unity, the form of every existent, cannot be constituted; the river wherein the last element of fixity, in relation to which becoming is understood, disappears. 443

Though Levinas opposes the il y a to the Heideggerian nothing he also accepts that it is in a sense to be found in the latter’s work: ‘The Heideggerian nothingness still has a sort of activity and being: “nothingness nothings.” It does not keep still. It affirms itself in this production of nothingness.’ 444 A point also made by Georges Bataille in a review of Existence and Existents when he writes: ‘But is not Heidegger’s nothing finally being?’ 445 Indeed it begins to seem that we are engaged in a dizzying but pointless meditation on an elusive and apparently spurious distinction between contentless ideas. This is a quite typical response to the question of Being. We will see, however, that despite their apparent similarity on this point Levinas has a very different emphasis and understanding of the consequences of this idea. Moreover though it may initially seem of no real significance to life, the fact that the il y a obtrudes itself in crucial areas of our existence to the point of obsession shows that it is more than a piece of philosophical sophistry. Indeed the il y a ‘invades’ and we are ‘riveted to it.’

These are not neutral descriptions. Or more precisely — since often enough Levinas will identify it with a kind of neuter — our attitude toward it is not, and should not be, neutral. More emphatically still Levinas will insist that it is evil and that our response to it is one of horror. What provokes this horror is contained in the ‘return to presence in negation.’ 447 He draws upon Shakespearean tragedy, among other literary sources, to illustrate his point: the return of Banquo’s ghost in Macbeth, the horror that Hamlet feels at the prospect of the “to dye, to sleepe, perchance to Dreame.” 448 Indeed he goes so far as to call it ‘the impossibility of death, the

443 Levinas (1987a), p. 48
444 The phrase is taken from Heidegger’s ‘What is Metaphysics?’
445 Levinas (1987a), p. 49
446 Georges Bataille ‘From Existentialism to the Primacy of Economy,’ in Robbins (1999), p. 166
447 Levinas (1978), p. 57
448 Ibid. Levinas draws on many literary sources in order to illustrate the il y a, for the simple reason that it is such that it inevitably escapes conceptual articulation. Mainly he draws on Shakespeare, a great favourite of his. But he also draws on Racine and intimates such writers as Poe. The other major source of literary attestation to the il y a is his lifelong friend Maurice Blanchot, who considered it one of Levinas’s most
universality of existence even in its annihilation.\textsuperscript{449} But beyond these literary evocations Levinas also supplies his own almost poetic renderings of the \textit{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.\textsuperscript{450}

He is also keen to differentiate his position from similar but distinct philosophical ideas, and to avoid misunderstanding. The \textit{il y a} is not for example ‘the indeterminate ground spoken of in philosophy textbooks, where perception carves out things.’ This is so because: ‘This indeterminate ground is already a being [\textit{un être}] — an entity [\textit{un étant}] — a something.’\textsuperscript{451} Whereas the existing to which the \textit{il y a} refers ‘cannot be expressed by a substantive but is verbal.’\textsuperscript{452} The \textit{il y a} is without form, it is pure formlessness itself, or pure matter: ‘matter is the very fact of the \textit{there is}.

\textsuperscript{453} This is clearly not matter as traditional materialism conceived of it. In a remark that is clearly directed at Sartre\textsuperscript{454} he also insists that: ‘This existing is not an in-itself [\textit{en-soi}], which is already peace; it is precisely the absence of all self, a without-self [sans-soi].’\textsuperscript{455} Moreover, in returning to the theme of the impossibility of death, the “no exits” characteristic of the \textit{il y a}’s infinite return, he insists that ‘One is no longer master of anything—that is, one is in the absurd.’\textsuperscript{456} He continues, undoubtedly responding to Albert Camus,\textsuperscript{457} that ‘Suicide appears as the final recourse against the absurd.’\textsuperscript{458} Unfortunately even this desperate mode of escape is not available in the night of the \textit{il y a}, a fact recognised, according to Levinas, by Hamlet who ‘understands that the “not to be” is perhaps impossible.’\textsuperscript{459} This impossibility to die or to kill is also recognised by Macbeth, as the above example has indicated. Thus the return of the phantom, the night of the living dead, the undead and the monster brought back from beyond the grave, all gain their horrific profile from the faceless \textit{il y a} of which they are a concrete image. Thus Levinas can say:

\begin{quotation}
fascinating propositions. I would also add my own favourite, Samuel Beckett, specifically his play \textit{Endgame} which seems to me to illustrate the ‘no exit’ with great brilliance. To my knowledge Levinas does not mention Beckett and as far as I know knew nothing of his work, which is a great shame.
\end{quotation}
We are opposing, then, the horror of the night, “the silence and horror of the shades,” to Heideggerian anxiety, the fear of being to the fear of nothingness. While anxiety, in Heidegger, brings about “being toward death,” grasped and somehow understood, the horror of the night “with no exits” which “does not answer” is an irremissible existence. “Tomorrow alas! one will still have to live” — a tomorrow contained in the infinity of today. There is horror in immortality, perpetuity of the drama of existence, necessity of forever taking on the burden.460

In short the il y a is the bad infinity (schlechte Unendlichkeit)461 though he will rarely use this term to avoid any Hegelian associations.

But what of negation? Is it not the case that in denying the nothing Levinas is thereby opposing Heidegger’s claim that the nihilation in our lived experience is the roots of our intellectual capacity for negation? In a sense Levinas is certainly denying Heidegger’s claim, but he is not thereby locating our capacity for negation in the fact of logical thought, rather he sees it as a power of consciousness but does not conceive consciousness, in the first instance, in terms of intellection. Beginning by recalling Henri Bergson’s critique of the notion of nothingness in Creative Evolution, Levinas remarks that when:

Bergson shows that the concept of nothingness is equivalent to the idea of being crossed out, he seems to catch sight of a situation analogous to that which led us to the notion of the there is.463

Bergson understands negation to have a positive meaning since he sees it as always the replacement of one thought or felt item by another, and thus never really the annihilation of all such items. As Bergson sums the matter up:

[T]he representation of the void is always a representation which is full and which resolves itself on analysis into two positive elements: the idea, distinct or confused, of a substitution, and the feeling, experienced or imagined, of a desire or regret.464

However Bergson does not quite reach the notion of the il y a as Levinas conceives it, for the process of negation in Bergson always ends up with a ‘something’ which exists, a something which in its turn might be negated. Whereas the notion of the il y a is not the idea of a something but of existence which remains after all ‘somethings’ have being annihilated.

460 Levinas (1978), p. 58
461 See Hegel (1976), Chap 2, part C ‘Infinity’
462 Bergson (2010), pp. 158-171
463 Levinas (1978), pp. 58-59
464 Bergson (2010), p. 163
There is not a “something” that remains. There is an atmosphere of presence, which can, to be sure, appear later as a content, but originally is the impersonal, nonsubstantive event of night and the there is.\textsuperscript{465}

Heidegger’s notion of nothingness is therefore opposed to Bergson’s critique on two fronts: on the one hand it conceives of the nothing as a possibility for thought, whereas Bergson rejects this idea as illusory. But on the other it conceives of the nothing in terms of our being-in-the-world and locates it in relation to anxiety and the face of death. Negation and the nothing are therefore given, for Heidegger, in terms of an engaged concern about our own Being, and not in a contemplative consideration of the possibility of imagining absolute negation. Levinas rejects the first claim with his notion of the il y a; there is no nothing, and this has the effect of modifying in important ways the second claim. He holds to the way of dealing with the problem that centralises our engaged being, but rejects, as we have already seen, Heidegger’s way of construing our way of being-in-the-world. But crucially his notion of the il y a represents a thinking that describes a situation that is prior to our being-in-the-world in Heidegger’s sense. Thus the il y a represents an absolute outside of thought and existents. Nevertheless within the world negation is clearly a possibility and we no longer have recourse to the notion of nothing to explain this, nor are we in a position to straightaway evoke the logical capacity of thought without a further sense of its integration into our lives. Levinas finds this capacity for negation in our capacity to suspend consciousness in sleep. In a remark directed at Heidegger he writes:

Nothingness is still envisaged as the end and limit of being, as an ocean which beats up against it on all sides. But we must ask if “nothingness,” unthinkable as a limit or negation of being, is not possible as interval and interruption; we must ask whether consciousness, with its aptitude for sleep, for suspension, for epoché, is not the locus of this nothingness-interval.\textsuperscript{466}

**Insomnia**

Since the nothingness-interval is conceived in terms of consciousness’s capacity for sleep or suspension Levinas compares the fact of the il y a to the experience of insomnia. Indeed it would appear that the seeds of this notion were sewn at a very early age for him. In an interview with Philippe Nemo, Levinas is asked about the subject matter of his book *Existence and Existents* and the philosopher replies that it is about the il ya, he goes on to explain this ‘phenomenon’: ‘My reflection on this subject starts with childhood memories. One sleeps alone, the adults continue life; the child feels the silence of his bedroom as “rumbling.”’\textsuperscript{467} The child’s world, his or her bedroom, becomes detached from the world of the adults which carries on outside the room. This outside can no longer be integrated into his or her world and thus takes on an uncanny form, as if one were separated from life by the darkness of the room. Unable to sleep the child hears the silence of the room, of the world, as a kind of rumbling: ‘something resembling what one hears

\textsuperscript{465} Levinas (1978), p. 59
\textsuperscript{466} Ibid, p. 60
\textsuperscript{467} Levinas (1982), p. 48
when one puts an empty shell close to one’s ear, as if the emptiness were full, as if the silence were a noise. Wakefulness disengaged from life, which is somehow beyond the darkness of my world, turns the very emptiness into a fullness. One waits in a kind of rapt horror for sleep to come, but this is beyond one’s control.

The wakefulness of insomnia is therefore, according to Levinas, meaningless, as a vigil it watches for nothing. The night drags on in its endless emptiness such that it seems that the present is not different from the past or moving toward a future. Or put another way the present does not portend a change in the future or renew anything from the past. It is ‘constituted by the consciousness that it will never finish.’ We are frozen in suspension: ‘one is riveted there.’ It might be objected that the insomniac waits for sleep. This is true, but this wakefulness itself forms no part of the awaiting-sleep, it does not point towards it, as for example, tiredness might be said to do, and this wait is by definition vain. Insomnia, of itself, is a pointless vigil. Moreover — and this is crucial to its being an ‘experience’ of the il y a — the I itself is lost in the insomniac vigil. As Levinas puts it:

Wakefulness is anonymous. It is not that there is my vigilance in the night; in insomnia it is the night itself that watches. It watches. In this anonymous nightwatch where I am completely exposed to being, all the thoughts which occupy my insomnia are suspended on nothing. They have no support. I am, one might say, the object rather than the subject of anonymous thought.

Thus, as Levinas understands it, existence, the il y a, is construed in terms of a wakefulness or vigilance. This is precisely what we might not expect, especially since we have identified the il y a with matter, which is usually specifically what is contrasted with anything that might bear traces of consciousness. Levinas explains:

It can also seem paradoxical to characterise the there is by vigilance, as if the pure event of existing were endowed with a consciousness. But it is necessary to ask if vigilance defines consciousness, or if consciousness is not indeed rather the possibility of tearing itself away from vigilance, if the proper meaning of consciousness does not consist in being a vigilance backed against a possibility of sleep, if the feat of the ego is not the power to leave the situation of impersonal vigilance.

Consciousness, in the first instance, is not contrasted with unconsciousness, or inert matter; but with this anonymous wakefulness or vigilance.

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468 Ibid
469 Levinas (1987a), p. 48
470 Ibid
471 Levinas (1978), p. 63
472 Levinas (1978), p. 51
We are, thus, introducing into the impersonal event of the there is not the notion of consciousness, but of wakefulness, in which consciousness participates, affirming itself as a consciousness because it only participates in it.\footnote{473 Levinas (1978), p. 62}

Consciousness participates in the il y a but is distinguished from it negatively, because it only participates. That is to say, it is \textit{affirmed} as consciousness precisely by virtue of its participation, but wakefulness is \textit{more} than consciousness, \textit{more awake}. Taking something away from this wakefulness is the very event, and advent, of consciousness.

Consciousness is a part of wakefulness, which means that it has already torn into it. It contains a shelter from that being with which, depersonalised, we make contact in insomnia, that being which is not to be lost or duped or forgotten, which is, if we may hazard the expression, completely sobered up.\footnote{474 Ibid, p. 63}

Wakefulness is complete sobriety, it is, we might want to say, the unblinking eye. As such consciousness becomes consciousness by virtue of its capacity to lapse, to forget or to blink. The problem of consciousness, as it is understood here, is not therefore expressed in terms of its miraculous derivation from non-conscious matter, nor is it the insertion of a unique spiritual substance in an essentially extended materiality, nor as the epiphenomenal froth emerging from the physiology of the brain. Consciousness is here understood negatively, as \textit{privation}. But even as, and despite of, its privation it still ‘participates’ in the anonymous wakefulness of existence.

Consciousness therefore, in the first instance, is simply consciousness as self-sensing, the very ego that we described in the process of separation when dealing with enjoyment in chapter 2. It is not primarily intentional; and thus directed on the world as its finality. Levinas does not inscribe consciousness as emerging from the objective world which forms its object and which it straightaway reflects. Subjectivity, qua consciousness, is hollowed out by virtue of its recourse to an escape from the perpetual vigilance which itself, qua insomnia, has no object. Hence inwardness is without necessary reference to a structured world, but emerges from the pre-worldly background of the il y a. Thus ‘Consciousness appears to stand out against the there is by its ability to forget and interrupt it, by its ability to sleep.’\footnote{475 Ibid, p. 64} The essence of consciousness \textit{refers} to unconsciousness, not by virtue of that to which it \textit{contrasts} — qua consciousness it contrasts with the wakeful vigilance of insomnia — rather consciousness \textit{calls} for unconsciousness by virtue of its very identity: ‘in its very élan consciousness becomes fatigued and interrupts itself, has recourse against itself.’\footnote{476 Ibid, p. 64} Consciousness is never fully awake, a less than full sobriety. It is a kind of blinking light, or, rather — since light itself is the very medium of consciousness for Levinas — light itself is a mixture of pure luminosity and shade. The opening of the eye onto a pure light would not
illuminate but blind, such a light would be, as Levinas writes in another context: ‘a pain of what dazzles and burns.’

In a way consciousness consists as much in a backwards stroke or lapse as it does in clarity: ‘It consists in a fainting away at the very focal point of its luminousness. This characterizes the way light is produced, as scintillation.’ Thus consciousness is already weighed down by itself, already constitutes in its very heart a lapse of attention. As Levinas puts it: ‘Mental reservations already murmur in the very activity of thought, as in a wink, made up of looking and not looking.’

Amidst the anonymous buzzing of existence consciousness emerges by virtue of its capacity to sleep. To sleep, of course, is to cease from, or rather suspend, thought and activity (except perchance to dream) and to remain still; in one place. The notion of a place, for Levinas, is not incidental to the possibility of sleeping but an essential component. He writes: ‘But an abstract being, hovering in the air, lacks an essential condition for this suspending: a place. The summoning of sleep occurs in the act of lying down.’ Spatiality itself finds its inception at this very site. Location then, inaugurated in the lying down to sleep, is a place which, as Levinas writes: ‘is not an indifferent “somewhere,” but a base, a condition.’ As such place is not understood in contrast to nomadic wandering, rather in wandering we always take our place with us; the hotel room bed, the hammock suspended between two trees or the stony ground and rock for pillow. They are all somewhere to lay our head, a dwelling. It is therefore, for Levinas, by virtue of sleep that the I brings about its position in emerging from the non-position, the ‘swarming of points,’ which constitutes the il y a.

This emergence of the existent from anonymous existence is called by Levinas ‘hypostasis’, which is the overall theme of Existence and Existents. We can see therefore that in his considerations of the il y a Levinas gives an account of the emergence of the self that is in conformity with the account given of enjoyment in Totality and Infinity, yet somehow supplements it from the other side. The account of enjoyment did not, for example, thematize sleep, but nonetheless insisted upon the necessity of understanding position starting from our corporeal bodily being. In introducing sleep into the picture we can begin to understand the necessity for a dwelling; somewhere to lay one’s head. So we might say that this account of the emergence of

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477 Emmanuel Levinas ‘From Consciousness to Wakefulness’ in Levinas (1998b), p. 31
478 Levinas (1978), p. 65
479 Ibid, p. 65
480 Ibid, p. 66
481 Ibid, p. 67
482 I will say more about this notion presently.
483 Levinas (1978), p. 53
484 The French title of Existence and Existence is De l’existence à l’existant which would have perhaps being better rendered as From Existence to Existents, since Alphonso Lingis’s translation does not really do justice to the movement of hypostasis from the verbal sense of Being as the il y a to the substantitive being of the existent (self).
485 We will see that such a being requires a dwelling in order to truly inaugurate place.
consciousness for the impersonal vigilance of the *il y a*, this hypostasis, has somehow worked in the opposite direction to the account given in *Totality and Infinity* and the account I gave in chapter 2. In chapter 2 the *il y a* was not mentioned and it only gets a brief mention in *Totality and Infinity*. We started from enjoyment, which contrasted with Heidegger’s understanding of being-in-the-world, and moved outwards to what the ego enjoys; the elements. Hypostasis starts from anonymous existence and describes how the existent emerges. We need therefore to see in what way the accounts mesh together.

The Haunting of the Elements

Enjoyment is the enjoyment of the elements. What is characteristic of the elements is their indeterminacy. But this indeterminacy is not the same as the indeterminacy of the *il y a*. The *il y a* is a ‘plenitude of the void’ without qualities, whereas the elements are ‘pure qualities without support.’ Things or objects constitute a relatively stable determinacy; they are qualities with support, substances. But even things contain the possibility of returning to indeterminacy as Descartes famous example of the piece of wax is meant to demonstrate.

But the identity of things remains unstable and does not close off the return to the element. A thing exists in the midst of its wastes. When the kindling wood becomes smoke and ashes the identity of my table disappears. The wastes become indiscernible; the smoke drifts off everywhere.

Nonetheless the stability of things distinguishes them from the element which is not contained. The enjoyment of the element is therefore touched by a certain insecurity. Because the quality enjoyed is not a quality of *something* this means that the quality is somehow lost in the nowhere, or rather it comes incessantly as if from nowhere. Thus it is not possible to get behind the element and contain it. Our moments of enjoyment are short lived and after they have passed we are once again exposed to the uncertainties and insecurities of the element, we are not assured of our pleasures; they are not held down, gathered or stored. We live as it were ‘from hand to mouth’ and don’t know where our next meal is coming from. The selfish ego has a ‘barefoot’ life, fringed with insecurity and haunting uncertainty. This insecurity is sensed in terms of the dimenson of the future. What escapes us in the ‘overflowing of the instant that escapes the gentle mastery of enjoyment’ is the dimension of the element which tails off into nothingness. But the fact that it overflows the instant haunts the moment of enjoyment itself with a spectral sense of the possibility of enjoyment running out or tailing off into nothing. The future is given beyond the *carpe diem* characteristic of enjoyment by virtue of the indeterminate nature of that very element that is enjoyed, and it is given as insecurity.

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486 Levinas (1987a), p. 46
488 See Descartes (1998) particularly the ‘Second Meditation.’
489 Descartes (1998), pp. 27-30
490 Levinas (1969), pp. 139-140
491 Ibid, pp. 140-141
Enjoyment does not refer to an infinity beyond what nourishes it, but to be the virtual vanishing of what presents itself, to the instability of happiness. Nourishment comes as a happy chance. This ambivalence of nourishment, which on the one hand offers itself and contents, but which already withdraws, losing itself in the nowhere, is to be distinguished from the presence of the infinite in the finite and from the structure of the thing.\textsuperscript{492}

The breaking of the instant of enjoyment, the always-ever-now of submersion in the moment of joy, is not achieved by something coming from the outside to puncture the self-containment of egoic life. Nor is it the case that our being-in-the-world is always already temporally ecstatic due to the nature of our Dasein as pressing into the future, as Heidegger would have it. We have seen that enjoyment pre-dates our being-in-the-world in Heidegger’s sense. Rather it is what is contained in the object of enjoyment itself, the element, which presages the future:

To be affected by a side [face] of being while its whole depth remains undetermined and comes upon me from nowhere is to be bent toward the insecurity of the morrow. The future of the element as insecurity is lived concretely as the mythical divinity of the element. Faceless gods, impersonal gods to whom one does not speak, mark the nothingness that bounds the egoism of enjoyment in the midst of the familiarity with the element.\textsuperscript{493}

The other side of enjoyment, which stirs within it like its spectral counterpart, elusive to the grasp but right here, is the source of those pagan gods and totems described by ethnologists. This is the uncanny side of the familiar world we enjoy and it is given in the very medium of that enjoyment. What is concealed is the night-time world as counterpart to the bright day of enjoyment, and it is given in its very concealment as the insecurity of the future. This future is not the representation or the thought of the future, but something more vague and threatening. It is a kind of sense of the future emerging from the very insecurity of the now, that the now can pass. Even so this night tails off from the ‘qualities without support’ that constitutes the element, to the pure ‘without support.’

We have described this nocturnal dimension of the future under the title there is. The element extends into the there is. Enjoyment, as interiorization, runs up against the very strangeness of the earth. But it has the recourse of labour and possession.\textsuperscript{494}

Escape From Being
The il y a haunts separation as a threat. It is therefore clear that the movement of separation is a movement away from the il y a, an attempt at escape from Being, as we have already specified. Or

\begin{footnotesize}
\textsuperscript{492} Ibid, p. 141
\textsuperscript{493} Ibid, p. 142
\textsuperscript{494} Ibid
\end{footnotesize}
put another way; separation is possible only as an interruption of the \textit{il y a}. What is important from our point of view about the notion of the \textit{il y a} is the fact that Being is now understood in terms of an impersonal existence. Being is no longer revealed to us in its purity by nausea, but by horror. For we have noted in chapter 3 that nausea as a sense of existence ‘is not yet a depersonalization’ whereas ‘horror turns the subjectivity of the subject, his particularity qua entity, inside out’.

The sense of horror at the \textit{il y a} is nausea on stilts. We wish to get out of ourselves, to escape our facticity, but this facticity is now understood in terms of our participation in anonymous existence itself. We began by seeing this need to escape in terms of our thrownness in Heidegger’s sense of the term. But now we are confronted with the fact that the \textit{il y a} from which the ego emerges pre-dates any world in Heidegger’s sense. Enjoyment pre-dates the possibility of a world:

Enjoyment is without security. But this future does not take on the character of a \textit{Geworfenheit}, for insecurity menaces an enjoyment already happy in the element, rendered sensitive to disquietude only by this happiness.

We therefore no longer have recourse to thrownness (\textit{Geworfenheit}) to explain the existence which precedes existents and into which they are thrown. Existents are not thrown into existence but emerge from it by virtue of hypostasis which is specified in terms of the separation of the ego in enjoyment. What then provokes this movement of escape if it is no longer the fact of being thrown? Certainly it is the sense of horror at the \textit{il y a}, but this emerges in enjoyment and therefore cannot account for the emergence of the enjoying ego itself. We will need to await further developments before we can respond to this question in any detail. Nevertheless enjoyment is an escape from Being at a more fundamental level than the sense we have of the \textit{il y a} as haunting the enjoyment we can have of the element. It is an escape from the weight of our own Being, our bodies as a weight for themselves, and as such an escape from Being as such, in which this weight participates as if being dragged back. Or rather it is an attempt at such an escape. The significance of all of these descriptions of pleasure, hypostasis and enjoyment can be ultimately understood as descriptions of our movement away from Being, or contrariwise, toward transcendence.

The subject matter of \textit{Time and the Other} is the question of the solitude of existence and the possibility of escaping this solitude. This is how Levinas describes the issue. It is a challenge to the idea that being-with (\textit{Mitsein}) in Heidegger’s sense, overcomes such solitude and thus constitutes an encounter with the Other:

What is formulated here is the putting into question of the \textit{with}, as a possibility of escaping solitude. Does “existing with” represent a veritable sharing of existence? How is this sharing realised? Or again (for the word “sharing” would signify that

\begin{itemize}
\item \textbf{495} Levinas (1978), p. 56 also see Chapter 3
\item \textbf{496} Levinas (1969), p. 142
\item \textbf{497} See Levinas (1982), p. 58
\end{itemize}
existence is of the order of having): Is there a participation in being which makes us escape from solitude?\textsuperscript{498}

The point here is that since existence is not something one \textit{has} but something one \textit{is} it is not clear that we might share it: we can share everything except our existence and this is why, and the sense in which, we are separate. But my point is not to drive home the fact that separation in terms of our existence is absolute, but to emphasise why this point is made at such length. Levinas explains the matter with perfect clarity:

One must indeed understand nonetheless that solitude is not in itself the primary theme of these reflections. It is only one of the marks of being. It is not a matter of escaping from solitude, but rather of escaping \textit{from being}.\textsuperscript{499}

\textbf{Dwelling}

The threat presented by the indeterminacy of the element is overcome in labour and possession. But these in their turn depend, according to Levinas, on dwelling. A dwelling is more than a building or an implement for inhabitation by a subject; it is the very advent of place. We might interpret the home as an implement or tool: ‘The home would serve for habitation as the hammer for driving in nails or the pen for writing.’\textsuperscript{500} This is not so much wrong as missing a crucial point. The home or dwelling certainly serves to protect from the weather and gather around one the gear needed for domestic tasks. On the other hand this ‘crucial point’ is not captured by insisting that one enjoys one’s home in the way one enjoys the element. For this is also true, as we have seen, of tools in general: we can enjoy the hammer or pen, they can become ends and not merely means. What is specific about the dwelling for Levinas is the fact that it is our point of ‘commencement’:

The privileged role of the home does not consist in being an end of human activity but in being its condition, and in this sense its commencement. The recollection necessary for nature to be able to be represented and worked over, for it to first take form as a world, is accomplished as the home.\textsuperscript{501}

In order for us to represent the world to ourselves, or work on nature to our own ends, something like ‘recollection’ is required and this is made possible by the fact of dwelling. ‘Recollection,’ in the present sense, does not designate remembering, but a more pronounced sense of the self to itself. This is made possible by a removal from immediate contact with an environment, the creation of a more marked gap between the \textit{I} and its world.

Recollection, in the current sense of the term, designates a suspension of the immediate reactions the world solicits in view of a greater attention to oneself,

\textsuperscript{498} Levinas (1982), p. 58
\textsuperscript{499} Ibid, p. 59
\textsuperscript{500} Levinas (1969), p. 152
\textsuperscript{501} Ibid
one’s possibilities, and the situation. It is already a movement of attention freed from immediate enjoyment, for no longer deriving its freedom from the agreeableness of the elements.\textsuperscript{502}

This kind of mediation is achieved by the concrete event of dwelling in a home, an event which is not the becoming conscious of the event, but the \textit{living} of it. The analysis of enjoyment has shown that the subject is not primarily related to the world as a subject being presented with objects in intentional acts, it is submerged in the world. To dwell is to create a kind of enclave within the world wherein the uneasiness created by the ‘strangeness of the earth’ is suspended. The element no longer immediately solicits our needs, and the indeterminate format which haunts the element no longer invades and unnerves the happiness of the ego:

The home does not implant the separated being in a ground to leave it in vegetable communication with the elements. It is set back from the anonymity of the earth, the air, the light, the forest, the road, the sea, the river. It has a “street front,” but also a secrecy. With the dwelling the separated being breaks with natural existence, steeped in a medium where its enjoyment, without security, on edge, was being inverted into care.\textsuperscript{503}

The dwelling makes possible recollection, in the present sense of the word, by virtue of the fact that it is a \textit{new} way of \textit{being} and not simply a new relation to the elements or a reconfiguration of old ways of being. This means that it is via the dwelling that the world shows up \textit{as a world}: ‘With the dwelling the latent birth of the world is produced.’\textsuperscript{504} ‘Latent’ because for the world to become a world — in the present sense, the sense of a work-world \textit{à la} Heidegger — it must be worked over by labour. The dwelling is the \textit{condition}, in the sense of \textit{necessary condition}, of labour.

For the dwelling to make such recollection possible it is necessary that it be such that it is concretely related to the element, otherwise it would become alienated from the world: ‘The I would thereby lose the confirmation which as life from...and enjoyment of... it receives in the element which nourishes it, without receiving this confirmation from elsewhere.’\textsuperscript{505} It suspends the immediacy of enjoyment by virtue of a kind of thinking which both distances itself from the earth while at the same time being implanted in it. This apparently contradictory requirement is supplied by the ambiguity that the body evinces. The body merges with the world which it at the same time separates itself from:

To present inhabitation as a becoming conscious of a certain conjunction of human bodies and buildings is to leave aside, is to forget the outpouring of consciousness in things, which does not consist in a representation of things by consciousness, but in a specific intentionality of concretization. We can formulate

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{502} Ibid, p. 154
\item \textsuperscript{503} Ibid, p. 156
\item \textsuperscript{504} Ibid, p. 157
\item \textsuperscript{505} Ibid, p. 154
\end{itemize}
it in this way: the consciousness of a world is already consciousness through that world. Something of the world seen is an organ or essential; means of vision: the head, the eye, the eyeglasses, the light, the lamp, the books, the school.

The world is seen from the point of view of dwelling, or rather; through our dwelling in it: ‘Concretely speaking the dwelling is not situated in the objective world, but the objective world is situated by relation to dwelling.’507 Our world makes sense to us starting from our home and all spatial relations are in the first instance calculated on the basis of the home as locus. Moreover it is by virtue of the home that the world becomes domesticated. But it is not that a building called a dwelling miraculously transforms the enjoying ego into a recollecting inhabitant. Rather it is because the enjoying being begins to exist as a recollecting being — due to the uneasiness provoked by the indeterminacy of the element — that its existence takes on the form of dwelling. ‘Because the I exists recollected it takes refuge in the home.’508 It is only because the I is already on the point of being recollected, in the present sense, that it turns the occupancy of a building, cave or tent into a dwelling or home. This is why the birds nest, the mouse hole or the beaver’s lodge is not a dwelling in the present sense:

Interiority concretely accomplished by the home, the passage to act — the energy — of recollection in the dwelling, opens up new possibilities which the possibility of recollection did not contain analytically, but which, being essential to its energy, are manifested only when it unfolds.509

These new possibilities are labour and representation which, as Levinas says, ‘complete the structure of separation.’510 We have not yet seen however what it is about the home that marks it off from other elements of the world which are characterized by the fact that they are a part of it through which we view it. The window of the home is special: through it I view a largely anonymous world from the point of view of an essential intimacy, and it is from this central point of intimacy that is radiated a softening light which transforms a cold world into a familiar street, a home-town, a native-country. . . . What is the source of this intimacy?

Habitation and the Feminine

One of the most controversial aspects of Levinas’s philosophy to receive critical attention in recent times is his use of the concept of the ‘feminine.’511 The feminine512 first appears in Totality and

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506 Ibid, p. 153
507 Ibid, p. 153
508 Ibid, p. 154
509 Ibid
510 Ibid
511 For a comprehensive discussion of the issues surrounding this controversy see: Chanter (2001). For a thorough and persuasive critical evaluation of the issue see Sandford (2000).
512 For a discussion of the issues that the concept of the feminine raises, particularly due to feminist criticism, see Appendix. I have restricted my discussion of this issue to an appendix due to considerations of
Infinity in the discussion of the dwelling. That portion of the world which first becomes
domesticated and intimate, which we call the home, does not become so on the basis of habitual
familiarity. Rather such familiarity and habituation arise from the fact of intimacy:

The familiarity of the world does not only result from habits acquired in this world,
which take from it its roughness and measure the adaptation of the living being to
a world it enjoys and from which it nourishes itself; familiarity and intimacy are
produced as a gentleness that spreads over the face of things. This gentleness is
not only a conformity of nature with the needs of the separated being, which from
the first enjoys them and constitutes itself as separate, as I, in that enjoyment, but
is a gentleness coming from an affection [amitié] for that I. The intimacy which
familiarity already presupposes is an intimacy with someone. The interiority of
recollection is a solitude in a world already human. Recollection refers to a
welcome.513

Thus the possibility of dwelling already presupposes the fact of a welcome and this is possible only
by the fact of someone having an affection for the I. Dwelling is only possible where something like
love is already present in the form of an affectionate intimacy. This intimacy, this someone who
welcomes, cannot simply amount to the demanding presence of the Other which characterizes the
face,514 since then rather than being welcomed the I would be put into question. Therefore this
someone must be, as Levinas puts it: ‘revealed, simultaneously with this presence, in its
withdrawal and in its absence.”515 Thus the other who welcomes me must, at the very point of
being present before me, become absent:

This simultaneity is not an abstract construction of dialectics, but the very essence
of discretion. And the other whose presence is discreetly an absence, with which is
accomplished the primary hospitable welcome which describes the field of
intimacy, is the Woman. The woman is the condition for recollection, the
interiority of the Home, and inhabitation.516

Dwelling is understood as requiring love. The one who is to recollect in the dwelling is the one who
requires love. We have associated love with Desire and enjoyment with need. It follows that in
order for the separated being to enter into dwelling, recollect and thus complete the structure of
separation he517 must somehow encounter Desire. Thus dwelling itself is born out of the selfless

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513 Levinas (1969), pp. 154 -155
514 See Introduction and particularly Chapter 6.
515 Levinas (1969), p. 155
516 Ibid, p. 155
517 Is this ‘he’ a metaphor? It seems that only a ‘he’ fits here and this is the essence of the problem. We need
here to note Derrida’s extraordinary remark from his essay on Levinas ‘At This Very Moment in This Work
Here I Am:’ ‘“Let us observe in passing that Totality and Infinity pushes the respect for dissymmetry to the
love that characterizes Desire and this is termed ‘welcome.’ Once again we are witness to the priority of Desire in Levinas’s work. Here it is love wholly received rather than love given and thus, for Levinas, not the ethical. This is not because of the asymmetry which characterizes this relation; the ethical relation is likewise asymmetrical. I owe the Other more than I deserve myself. But ethics is essentially my giving, and not my receiving. Nevertheless Desire, in the form of love, would seem to be situated here. But Levinas does not attribute to the feminine alterity who welcomes me in the home the ethical status that he confers upon the face. Indeed he could hardly do so, since the ethical relation depends upon the absolute separation of the self, which is only achieved by means of the dwelling:

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 (which would thereby turn into the idolatry that brews in all contemplation). The “vision” of the face to 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 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.518

The fact of separation, of economic independence, is the precondition for the possibility of welcome. The possibility of opening my home to the Other is precisely Desire. It is therefore in Desire that I go beyond mere dwelling and open the possibility of welcome. Recollection in a dwelling is therefore the completion of separation and it requires for its possibility the discreet presence of the feminine alterity. True transcendence is accomplished in the face to face, which is discourse and language; I speak to the Other. But my relation to the feminine alterity is not one of discourse. Or rather it is ‘a language without teaching, a silent language, an understanding without words, an expression in secret.’519 Levinas associates it with the I-Thou of Martin Buber’s philosophy. It is in terms of the thou (tu) of familiarity that the feminine is addressed. Whereas it is the respectful and distant you (vous) which reveals the face itself ‘in a dimension of height,’520 this is the ethical dimension.

Perhaps the best way to get a hold of what Levinas is saying here is to understand this welcoming and discrete presence in the home to refer in large part to Woman as a post-natal maternal

518 Levinas (1969), p. 172
519 Ibid, p. 155
520 Ibid

point where it seems to us impossible, essentially impossible, that it could have been written by a woman. The philosophical subject of it is man [vir].”) In Bernasconi and Critchley (1991) p. 40 I cannot pursue this matter here, but it is troubling in the extreme and seems to create fissures in the work which require careful examination.
We are discreetly always already familiar with our mothers (or other maternal carers), and thus her presence is registered as a background absence, prior to our encountering her as the full presence of Otherness. Yet it is also the case that the mother retains all the possibilities of placing my spontaneous ego into question. But the maternal necessity for curbing my ego does not appear to be the throwing into question characteristic of the face, but the nurturing of the possibility of my openness to faces. Indeed this is central to her role as mother. But this does not exclude the possibility of respecting my mother, let alone mothers in general, as a demanding Otherness. I shall, therefore, retain this reading of the feminine alterity, but with certain reservations.

The obvious objection to this reading is that Levinas also refers to the feminine alterity in erotic terms, indeed the notion is introduced in precisely this context. But this can be countered by registering different modalities of the feminine and considering the analysis at hand to be the feminine as mother rather than the feminine as lover. Another objection is much harder to counter: The fact is that Levinas never says that this alterity is the maternal, indeed he virtually never even mentions mothers in Totality and Infinity. Since I am largely sympathetic with this reading of the notion of the feminine alterity in the dwelling as making the most sense of what Levinas says I am presented with two options: Either this is what Levinas meant and he did not deign to tell us (for reasons I cannot fathom). Or this is the most accurate reading of the text but Levinas himself was not clear about this area of his thinking. It is the latter option that I feel is the nearest to the truth.

What is achieved by virtue of this welcoming presence in the dwelling is recollection which makes possible labour and possession. These therefore depend upon a more fundamental welcome into the world that predates the purely economic existence of the ego. The implication is that the dwelling or the home cannot be acquired in an act of appropriation, which would amount, in Levinas’s lexicon, to the conquering ego or the same as being the foundation of that which founds civilization. On the contrary, the possibility of living, in the sense of living in, or being-at-home, presupposes the feminine welcome and thus is not opened up unless it is offered as a gift. This resistance to appropriation is thus coincident with the hospitable welcome. Thus dwelling is both closed off by the feminine (we cannot enter by force) and opened up by the feminine welcome (whereby force subsides and recollection begins). Labour and possession are therefore new possibilities of being-in-the-world. Do they free us of the il y a?

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521 This idea is proposed and brilliantly defended in Dudiak (2001) see pp. 130-140
522 See Levinas (1987a), pp. 84-90 We will return to this reading in the next section.
523 There is one, perhaps significant, exception to this on p. 278, but it does not connect maternity to dwelling. On the other hand, as we will see, Otherwise than Being makes extensive use of the notion of (pre-natal) maternity.
524 For further discussion of Levinas’s notion of the feminine see Appendix 2
Labour and Possession

In Heidegger Being (Sein) is always the Being (Sein) of some being (Seiendes). ‘Being is always the Being of an entity.’ Or, in more Levinasian terms: existence is always the existence of some existent. Levinas’s notion of the il y a challenges this claim. Also in Heidegger our relation to Being is ontological. Being is comprehended at the level of ready-to-hand coping, even if this is only a ‘vague average understanding.’ Our being-in-the-world is already a comprehension of Being:

Being and Time has argued perhaps but one sole thesis: Being is inseparable from the comprehension of Being (which unfolds as time); Being is already an appeal to subjectivity.

With Levinas things are different. Our relation to Being is a constant renegotiation of our relation, in terms of a contracted acceptance. We are perpetually trying to find elbow room and ultimately hope for escape. This is the significance of each of the figurations of our relation to the faceless il y a, from enjoyment to dwelling. The same can be said of labour and possession. To clarify by means of an analogy: if Heidegger conceives of our relation to Being as a mutually beneficial and respectful service in which we see the worth of our work through Being, then Levinas conceives of it in terms of a grudging task performed for an alien and faceless master. Heidegger sees the craftsman, Levinas the corporate slave.

The purpose of labour is escape from the threatening indeterminacy of the element which arises in the very enjoyment that we have of it. Labour takes hold of stuff and moulds it, hammers it or weaves it. In so doing it converts matter into possessions which can be stored, they are ‘movable goods’ (‘Les choses meubles’).

Labour masters or suspends sine die the indeterminate future of the element. By taking hold of things, by treating being as a furnishing, transportable into the home, it disposes of the unforeseeable future in which being’s ascendency over us was portended; it reserves this future for itself.

It is through labour that a world emerges and a corresponding separated being completes its separation. The positive function of labour is therefore to create a habitable world. In so doing it calms the threat of the il y a. Enjoyment was still threatened by Being even while it aspired to the beyond Being:

In enjoyment the I assumes nothing; from the first it lives from. . . . Possession by enjoyment is one with enjoyment; no activity precedes sensibility. But to possess
by enjoying is also to be possessed and to be delivered to the fathomless depth, the disquieting future of the element. 530

Labour takes hold by means of the hand and matter is controlled by separating it ‘from immediate enjoyment, depositing it in the dwelling, conferring on it the status of a possession.’ 531 Matter becomes ‘raw material’ which is turned into ‘things’ which can be stored. ‘In the primordial grasp matter at the same time announces its anonymity and renounces it.’ 532 By doing so the future is thereby tamed:

A fathomless depth divined by enjoyment in the element yields to labour, which masters the future and stills the anonymous rustling of the there is, the uncontrollable stirring of the elemental, disquieting even within enjoyment itself. 533

The insecurity of the future is thereby conquered and the il y a is held back: ‘The hand both brings the elemental qualities to enjoyment, and takes and keeps them for future enjoyment.’ 534 The hand is therefore no longer of the order of sensibility, but breaks with the bathing in the element and thereby conquers its ominous future; it is ‘mastery,’ 535 ‘it gathers the fruit but holds it far from the lips.’ 536

In this way labour forms the thing which becomes a possession, it can thereby be exchanged and thus ‘be quantified, and consequently already lose its very identity, be reflected in money.’ 537 In this way economic life arises and the separated being becomes an economic being in the broader sense of the term. Freedom is no longer the freedom of the agreeableness of the element, which was already insecurity. Rather freedom is now the economic freedom of property and exchange. It is a world built and sustained by labour which offers us time. ‘To be free is to build a world in which one could be free.’ 538

The fact of property means that the possibility of encountering the Other as face emerges.

But possession itself refers to more profound metaphysical relations. A thing does not resist acquisition; the other possessors — those whom one cannot possess — contest and therefore can sanction possession itself. Thus possession of things issues in discourse. The action that is beyond labour, presupposing the absolute

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530 Ibid, p. 158
531 Ibid, p. 159
532 Ibid
533 Ibid, p. 160
534 Ibid, p. 161
535 Ibid
536 Ibid
537 Ibid, p. 162
538 Ibid, p. 165
resistance of the face of another being, is command and word — or the violence of murder.\(^{539}\)

Labour and possession free us from the threat of the *il y a*, constitute our separation and independences and thus open us to the possibility of the face of the Other. From the start we have held that the movement of transcendence is a movement away from Being which pursues us like our own shadow. If we have had done with the threat of pure Being then why should we need the transcendence of the face? What is the Other to me? The usual reading of Levinas insists that it is exactly the Other that inspires in me the Desire which drives me out of myself (my needs) toward the (needs of) the Other. We have not contested this reading but maintained that we are not only drawn from the outside (exteriority) but driven from the inside (interiority). In this we have insisted that the Desire for the absolutely Other remains a need to escape. I am therefore contesting that labour and possession truly do enough to escape the anonymous rustling of the *il y a*. Levinas is clear: it is only ‘society with the Other’ (the ethical relation) that ‘marks the end of the absurd rumbling of the *there is*.\(^{540}\) Indeed I want to show how it continues to haunt labour itself.

**Effort, Fatigue and Indolence**

Work, in Heidegger, is understood in terms of the manipulation of the ready-to-hand which we might, after Hubert Dreyfus,\(^ {541}\) call ‘transparent coping.’ Specifying work in terms of labour emphasises the physical strenuousness of the task.\(^ {542}\) This aspect of work is not given a great deal of attention in *Totality and Infinity*, but is dealt with at length in *Existence and Existents*. Just as, in order to articulate the other side of enjoyment — the emergence of the *il y a* via the indeterminate format of the element — we needed to turn to *Existence and Existents*, so likewise in order to see this other side of labour we also turn to that text.

The fact that work is not easy, that it is not a game or mere play, is attested to by the possibility of indolence. When I am indolent it is not that I cannot get out of bed, of course I can, but I can’t be bothered, as they say. This implies that getting out of bed is a bother, that it requires effort, even if such effort is usually so customary as to be rendered invisible. Thus in indolence the task of moving the body reveals itself as something of a burden, something heavy to be overcome with effort. This implies that effort is not always the effort to grapple with an external obstacle, but that the self, as material body, presents itself as an obstacle, as weight. Levinas writes ‘Indolence is an impotent and joyless aversion to the burden of existence itself.’\(^ {543}\) In starting out on any enterprise we are not therefore ‘light as the air’ but carry ourselves to some measure. This shows the self to be doubled in some respect, as we specified in chapter 3. ‘It is not just that one is, one is oneself [en s’est].’\(^ {544}\) In *On Escape* we noted that the self is conceived as burdened with itself, and

\(^{539}\) Ibid, p. 162
\(^{540}\) Ibid, p. 261
\(^{541}\) Dreyfus (1991), passim
\(^{542}\) We need not here neglect, as most philosophical concepts of labour do, the labour of child-birth.
\(^{543}\) Levinas (1978), p. 17
\(^{544}\) Ibid, p. 16
this can be understood, given our understanding of the *il y a*, as the existent burdened with its existence. The burdensome nature of existence is here revealed in the indolence that is a refusal to take up existing.

This burden is also manifest in fatigue. In the heaviness of fatigue we are, as it were, weighed down by ourselves. Fatigue holds us back like a weight within ourselves, yet it is not just some specific weight: heavy arms or legs. In fatigue I am weighed down by my self. It is a kind of numbness which cries out for respite, yet, paradoxically, in the extremes of fatigue I remain restless. The fatigued body forms into an opacity which imprisons us. The cruelty of fatigue is that we have not given up on things, yet nevertheless our self forms into a muddiness and weight that drags us away even from the engagements we love. To do anything in a state of fatigue requires effort. Effort is the admission of the involvement of the self in the things it undertakes. But by such involvement the self is revealed in the gravity of its seriousness; this gravity is the self’s weight upon itself, an essential element in our bodily experience. Labour reveals effort in its purity, the pains of labour reveal the body as simultaneously the self and opposed to the self. Yet it does not seem right to say that fatigue and effort are somehow a counterthrust to life. They are as much a part of the healthy life as of the unhealthy. Everybody gets tired or worn out. Levinas will understand the phenomena of indolence, fatigue and effort as the very weight of existence: ‘Here the taking up of existence in the instant becomes directly perceptible.’

If we therefore understand Heidegger’s notion of work in terms of transparent coping, which appears to be only interrupted by the breakage of the tools, then we can see that effort and fatigue introduce a certain opacity into the proceedings. Not on the side of the tools or equipment to be manipulated, but on the side of Dasein who does the manipulating. This opacity is the very fact that labour never reaches out of itself and into a future the way ecstatic Dasein is said to do. Rather, qua labour, it is always held in the present by the weight of existence and this is what effort and fatigue reveal.

What effort struggles against is not explained by stating that it is matter or something external to the self. For this is true of the magician waving a wand and the idle capitalist. But in the case of these latter two there is no getting their hands dirty, they could just as well be elsewhere. They follow the work from a distance. ‘Whereas human labour and effort are a way of following the work being done step by step.’ Levinas contrasts this to a melody. In a piece of music each note *dies* away to allow the other to follow, one does not follow the music by noting the specific elements; it flows. In this sense it has no parts: ‘there are no instants in a melody.’ It is pure duration. This is revealed if we hear a wrong note: ‘a sound that refuses to die.’ Whereas: ‘The duration of effort is made up entirely of stops.’ In other words effort is precisely the

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545 Ibid, p. 25
546 Ibid
547 Ibid
548 Ibid
549 Ibid, p. 22
involvement with the instant. In saying this I am not claiming that effort is somehow an absorption in the moment, in the sense of a forgetfulness of self. On the contrary, effort is precisely the sense of the instant as that which won’t pass; one is somehow glued to it as if in mire, the self is a subjection to a moment that holds it: ‘The pain of effort or fatigue is wholly made up of this being condemned to the present.’\textsuperscript{550} This means that the instant is not simple, but structured. Arguably the idea that the instant is simple is due to understanding time in terms of observation of the passing of events. Noting the lived moment of effort or fatigue shows that time does not slide past quite so smoothly. It is a kind of lag.\textsuperscript{551}

But if the instant is structured we can specify its elements. Since it is revealed in effort this will enable us to reveal the relationship that is characteristic of effort. It is that between existence and the existent. In other words it is another manifestation of our relationship to anonymous existence or the il y a:

To act is to take on a present. This does not amount to repeating that the present is the actual, but it signifies that the present is the apparition, in the anonymous rumbling of existence, which is at grips with this existence, in relationship with it, takes it up. Action is this taking up. Action is then by essence subjection and servitude, but also the first manifestation, or the very constitution, of an existent, a someone that is.\textsuperscript{552}

Effort and fatigue reveal that the il y a does not go away in labour, but plagues it as a weight to the self. The very moment of labour signals servitude. Moreover in possession, which proceeds from labour, there is always the danger that our possessions will come to possess us:

Labour ... is visibly inserted in the things, but the will forthwith absents itself from them, since works take on the anonymity of merchandise, an anonymity into which, as wage-earner, the worker himself may disappear.\textsuperscript{553}

Thus labour is not only subjugation at the point of effort, but the possessions it creates; develop into the possibility of exploitation and alienation because the self is not present in the products of labour. Possession is nevertheless a necessary condition for the possibility of the ethical relation of

\textsuperscript{550} Ibid, p. 24
\textsuperscript{551} I don’t have time or space to enter into the complicated and variegated meditations on the nature of time in Levinas’s philosophy, but let it suffice to say that he, like Heidegger, is involved in the project of deformalizing our understanding of time. By this I mean that he tries to understand the temporal modalities in terms of certain crucial lived experiences. In the present case therefore the temporal mode of the present is being understood in terms of human effort. He is not therefore discussing ‘our sense of time’ but time itself.
\textsuperscript{552} Levinas (1978), p. 23 The only word that Levinas emphasises is ‘someone’ all other emphases are mine.
\textsuperscript{553} Levinas (1969), p. 226
the face to face which is only possible if I have something to give: ‘To recognize the Other is to recognize a hunger. To recognize the Other is to give.’

**Pain and Death**

There is pain in labour. But pain in general also evinces the intrusion of the *il y a*. Here I specifically mean the type of pain of which Levinas says in *Time and the Other* is ‘lightly called physical.’

While in moral pain one can preserve an attitude of dignity and compunction, and consequently already be free; physical suffering in all its degrees entails the impossibility of detaching oneself from the instant of existence.

We cannot distance ourselves from physical pain. We exist in some sense as pain when we are in pain; it is not something we deal with in the way we deal with an external object. Pain rivets us to the *instant*, pain does not point to the *future*. Let me explain this rather odd remark. Philosophically speaking, pain is part of that parcel of phenomena that we refer to as ‘sensible’. This includes such things as seeing a red patch, feeling a rough surface, hearing a noise and so on. With regard to the latter phenomena these are taken up into a perception of our world. Levinas uses the term ‘assumed’ to specify this sense of taking up the sensible. Seeing, hearing and feeling are all qua sensible content, seen *through*. They constitute, very crudely, windows onto our world. These sensible contents form part of our interaction with the world. As such they direct us to objects in our environment and, coupled with desires, promote actions, actions which press into our future.

This is not the case with pain. It is not something we hold as an object in our intentional gaze. Pain does not direct us to the world in this sense, but closes us up in ourselves. Rather than being a window onto the world, to continue this metaphor, pain is in its own special way *opaque*. It locks us up in our self in this specific sense. But this way of being closed up in oneself is very far from being a *refuge*, rather, Levinas insists, it is exposure itself:

In suffering there is an absence of refuge. It is the fact of being directly exposed to being. It is made up of the impossibility of fleeing or retreating. The whole acuity of suffering lies in this impossibility of retreat. It is the fact of being backed up against life and being. In this sense suffering is the impossibility of nothingness.

The only desire felt with regard to pain is the desire to get out of it, to stop it; or, despairing of this, to ease it, in other words; to *put it behind us*. The only satisfactory relation we appear to be able to have with pain refers to its absence; it’s *receding into the past*. It seems therefore that pain is meaningless, it is simply negative. Arguably—and Levinas insists that this is so—it is the very epitome of meaninglessness. For it does not direct us to or tie up with the rest of our life, but

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554 Ibid, p. 75
555 Levinas (1987a), p. 69
556 Ibid
557 Ibid
remains pure disruption. It surpasses ‘the measure of our sensibility and our means of grasping or holding.’ It is:

[A] backwards consciousness, ‘operating’ not as ‘grasp’ but as revulsion. A modality. The categorical ambiguity of quality and modality. The denial, the refusal of meaning, thrusting itself forward as a sensible quality: that is, in the guise of ‘experienced’ content, the way in which, within consciousness, the unbearable is precisely not borne, the manner in which this not-been-borne; which paradoxically is itself a sensation or a datum.

It is that which cannot be borne but which—and we have no way of saying no—must be borne.

So we can find no distance between ourselves and our pain. But this indicates that pain does not expose us to an arbitrary this or that; it backs us up against life and being, it absorbs us. As such it shows us life in its bare absurdity. This absurdity is not the nothingness into which life is precariously suspended, as Heidegger would have it. It is the very ‘impossibility of nothingness;’ it is the fact of Being itself, with no way out. This persistence of being, which is in no sense a specific being, is the il y a.

But this impossibility of nothingness is not the end of the story. He continues:

But in suffering there is, at the same time as this call to an impossible nothingness, the proximity of death. There is not only the feeling and knowledge that suffering can end in death. Pain of itself includes it like a paroxysm, as if there were something about to be produced even more rending than suffering.

Despite the absence of an escape hatch, there remains in pain a kind of vertigo, as if we are tightly held over the abyss that is death: ‘as if it must still get uneasy about something.’ Death, for Levinas, therefore reveals itself in suffering. Not, as it does in Heidegger, in anxiety over nothingness. It is not given as straightforward nothingness, but announced in an experience that is meaningless. Death likewise confounds our capacity for grasping and describing. It contains a dimension more frightening than nothingness that Levinas calls ‘mystery’. This is why we shrink back from it in horror.

The face of death and the face of pain are, for Levinas, horrific, that is why they are the stock in trade of horror films. Our natural tendency is to turn away from them. It is this aspect of death that is emphasised in Levinas’s writings. Heidegger sees death as something in the face of which we should become resolute and heroic. But Levinas knows that death is much messier than this. While Heidegger conceives death as a kind of sudden lights out, Levinas sees it as a slow eating

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558 Emmanuel Levinas ‘Useless Suffering’ in Levinas (2006a), p. 78
559 Ibid
560 Levinas (1987a), p. 69
561 Ibid
away at us from a dimension that we cannot even know or fight, a dimension that recedes into mystery. He says that: ‘death is ungraspable, that it marks the end of the subject’s virility and heroism.’

We can see how pain and death are connected to the *il y a* and how in fleeing them we are fleeing the *il y a*. But death is not the only thing that is marked by this sense of mystery. Levinas also attributes this to the feminine when he considers it in the context of the erotic. The location of the erotic in Levinas’s work is very important because it combines many of the concepts we have so far developed: mystery, the feminine, need and Desire; and, of course, love. It is Eros therefore that I turn to next.

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562 Ibid, p. 72
6. Eros and the Face

Eros in Eros in Existence and Existents and Time and the Other

The Centrality of the Face
Up to now we have depicted Levinas’s philosophy in terms of a search for transcendence. This in turn we have traced to a phenomenology of need which is understood in terms of the need for escape from, in the first instance our facticity, but on mature consideration what we have described under the heading of the il y a. This has led us to articulate on the one hand the notion of Desire as the mature articulation of this need, and on the other those modes of life (dwelling, labour and possession) wherein such escape is attempted. We have seen that these, like enjoyment, are essentially failed attempts. We have indicated from the beginning that Levinas locates true transcendence in the encounter with the infinite which, according to the philosophy of Totality and Infinity, has its concrete instantiation in the face of the Other. But I have spent the majority of our time dealing with modes which are not the face. In other words we have not yet located subjectivity in the social relation specified by Levinas in terms of the face to face.

The encounter with the other person is first focused upon in Levinas in terms of the erotic relation. But it is essential to attend to the notion of the face, since the mature understanding of Eros is developed in contrast to the face, so I will come to this soon. This is not true of the earlier articulation of Eros (in Time and the Other and Existence and Existents). We will see when we reach the mature vision why Levinas rejected Eros as the locus of transcendence, but we need to see why he initially thought of locating it here and thus concerned himself with it at length. It is my contention that this concern is centred on two factors: 1) the non-cognitive and non-assimilable ‘object’ of love and, correlativey, 2) the singularity of the object of love.

Convention and the Other
The values and ideas of decency that prevail in the interaction between individuals in a given community are conventional. Such conventions are exemplified by wearing clothes. Covering our nakedness is not simply a matter of protecting ourselves from the elements, it is also and primarily a way of covering our shame. But the trappings of ‘decency’ extend much further than this.

Those we encounter are clothed beings. Man is a being that has already taken some elementary pains about his appearance. He looked at himself in the mirror and saw himself. He has washed, wiped away the night and the traces of its instinctual permanence from his face; he is clean and abstract. Life in society is decent. The most delicate social relationships are carried out in the forms of propriety; they safeguard the appearances, cover over all ambiguities with a cloak of sincerity and make them mundane. What does not enter into the forms is
banished from the world. Scandal takes cover in the night, in private buildings, in one’s home — places which enjoy a sort of extraterritoriality in the world.\textsuperscript{563}

The encounter with the Other in the face breaks with the world and is, in Levinas’s phrase, ‘a pure hole in the world,’\textsuperscript{564} and Levinas often describes the face in terms of nakedness and nudity\textsuperscript{565} to specify that the face is not subsumable under a concept, and thus that it is not adorned or draped in the world’s fabric of meaning. Accordingly the face is outside of decency and convention. Given these circumstances the overriding conventional crust of the world would appear to have the effect of blocking out access to the Other in their purity. How then are we to show an interpersonal encounter which is exemplary of the relation of the face-to-face?

It might be argued that the encounter with the Other is a transcendental condition for the possibility of morality itself and thus not an empirical fact. It seems correct to say that it is such a condition but not to say that it is not therefore empirical. Moreover in \textit{Time and the Other} Levinas had not yet characterised the face-to-face in terms of ethics, yet it is clearly there,\textsuperscript{566} and thus it is not deduced by transcendental arguments from the existence of ethics. On the other hand it is evidently the exemplary event of the encounter with alterity. With this conviction in mind we can ask again how this encounter takes place. The answer I think is that it has already taken place and is taking place all the time when we encounter other people. But this fact is hidden by the crust of convention that immediately intervenes to numb the shock of the encounter, because: ‘Social life in the world does not have that disturbing character that a being feels before another being, before alterity.’\textsuperscript{567}

Encounters in society thus invariably take place via a \textit{third} item; we meet on a common ground or against a common background. ‘All the concrete relations between human beings get their character of \textit{reality} from a third term.’\textsuperscript{568} This is the manner in which the \textit{shock} of the encounter with the Other as face is moderated. In the most general sense it is the world itself which is shared in words and deeds and thus constitutes this third term.

It is through participation in something in common, in an idea, a common interest, a work, a meal, in “a third man” that contact is made. Persons are not simply in front of one another; they are along with each other around something. A neighbour is an accomplice.\textsuperscript{569}

\textsuperscript{563} Levinas (1978), p. 31
\textsuperscript{564} Levinas (2006b), p. 39
\textsuperscript{566} Levinas (1987a), pp. 78-79
\textsuperscript{567} Levinas (1978), p. 31 we will see how this works when we come to Chapters 7 and 8.
\textsuperscript{568} ibid, p. 32
\textsuperscript{569} ibid, p. 32
The world therefore is prone to hide the Otherness of the Other. So again we might ask how a relation to the other akin to the face-to-face can come into view. Levinas’s answer to this question in *Time and the Other* is in some ways quite startling:

In civilized life there are traces of this relationship with the other that one must investigate in its original form. Does a situation exist where the alterity of the other appears in its purity? Does a situation exist where the other would not have alterity only as the reverse side of its identity, would not comply with the Platonic law of participation where every term contains a sameness and through this sameness contains the Other? Is there not a situation where alterity would be borne in a positive sense, as essence? What is the alterity that does not enter into the opposition of two species of the same genus? I think the absolutely contrary contrary [*le contraire absolument contraire*], whose contrariety is in no way affected by the relationship that can be established between it and its correlative, the contrariety that permits its terms to remain absolutely other, is the feminine. \(^{570}\)

This, in many ways notorious,\(^{571}\) passage is Levinas’s introduction to the notion of the erotic as it is articulated in *Time and the Other*. Erotic otherness for Levinas is the feminine. In the preface written in 1979, thirty two years after the main body of the text, Levinas revisits this point.

The notion of a transcendent alterity—one that opens time—is at first sought starting with an *alterity-content*—that is, starting with femininity. Femininity—and one would have to see in what sense this can be said of masculinity or virility; that is, of the difference between the sexes in general—appeared to me as a difference contrasting strongly with other differences, not merely as a quality different from all others, but as the very quality of difference.\(^{572}\)

The difference between the sexes revealed in the erotic relation specifies an absolute difference, which is not subsumable under a third term. Moreover it is a relation that is, as Levinas will later say: ‘accomplished before being reflected on: the other sex is an alterity borne by a being as an essence and not as the reverse of his identity; but it could not affect an unsexed me.’\(^{573}\) Sexual difference is not given primarily in a cognitive awareness but in the affectivity of erotic desire and such desire could not arise in an unsexed being. This difference therefore is not one which can be understood in terms of different species of a genus: ‘Sex is not some specific difference. It is situated beside the logical division into genera and species.’\(^{574}\) Neither is the difference between

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\(^{570}\) Levinas (1987a), p. 85

\(^{571}\) It has become notorious since Simone de Beauvoir’s use of it in *The Second Sex* to characterise Levinas as exemplary of the unexamined sexist bias characteristic of the history of Western philosophy. See Beauvoir (1981), p. 16 and see Appendix.

\(^{572}\) Levinas (1987a), p. 36

\(^{573}\) Levinas (1969), p. 121

\(^{574}\) Levinas (1987a), p. 85
the sexes a contradiction.\textsuperscript{575} If it were then this would allow for a dialectical understanding in terms of a higher synthesis, distance would be eradicated. Most importantly from the point of view of erotic love the difference should not be understood in terms of two complimentary terms:

\[ \text{[F]or two complimentary terms presuppose a pre-existing whole. To say that sexual duality presupposes a whole is to posit love beforehand as a fusion. The pathos of love, however, consists in an insurmountable duality of beings.}\textsuperscript{576} \]

This idea that the pathos of love is constituted by the very separateness of the lovers is central to Levinas’s thinking about the erotic. The crucial point so far however is that sexual difference constitutes a difference which is not a formal difference which can be united in a higher unity, but is understood as the ‘very quality of difference.’ As such, for Levinas, it disrupts the monism of Being which he believes to be characteristic of Western philosophy, and thereby introduces an irreducible plurality. Centralising sexual difference is therefore an attempt to break with the tradition that Levinas traces back to Parmenides: ‘it is toward a pluralism that does not merge into unity that I should like to make my way and, if this can be dares, break with Parmenides.’\textsuperscript{577}

The reason for this has largely been given in my introduction, but we should recall that the central movement toward plurality is a movement away from Being. If Being is conceived as One then difference, ultimate difference, will be understood in terms of Being and Nothingness which, as Levinas points out, ‘has led to the notion of the “there is.”’ The negation of being occurs at the level of the anonymous existing of being in general.\textsuperscript{578} We are unable to negate Being and for this reason we are driven to escape it. Difference takes the form of transcendence which is a relation to another in which the terms in the relation ‘absolve themselves from the relation, or remain absolute within relationship.’\textsuperscript{579}

\section*{The Feminine}

The central thesis of Levinas’s thinking of the erotic is that in love the lover seeks in the beloved something that goes beyond the confines of anything that can be presented as a phenomenon, yet the lover cannot say what this ‘something’ is. In this sense love, in its aim, is transcendent and resembles Desire. ‘It is a relationship with what always slips away.’\textsuperscript{580} This elusiveness of the ‘object’ of love (essentially the Other) is what generates the very pathos of love, its pleasures and frustrations. ‘The other as other is not here an object that becomes ours or us; to the contrary, it withdraws into its mystery.’\textsuperscript{581} If we ask what this ‘object’ of love is, what this ‘something’ is that the lover seeks, the nature of this ‘mystery,’ then Levinas will answer that it is the feminine. Does

\textsuperscript{575} Ibid
\textsuperscript{576} Ibid, p. 86
\textsuperscript{577} Ibid, p. 42
\textsuperscript{578} Ibid, p. 86 and see also Chapter 5
\textsuperscript{579} Levinas (1969), p. 195. Here Levinas is referring to the relation of language, which is somehow the inverse of the erotic relation, as we will see when we come to deal with Eros in Totality and Infinity in detail.
\textsuperscript{580} Levinas (1987a), p. 86
\textsuperscript{581} Ibid
he mean to say that only females are loved and that it is always males that do the loving? He is not saying this. With regard to the sense of ‘feminine’ in this context we are not referring to empirical members of the female sex. Rather we are referring to a principle of Being. It is essential that I make clear what this means because, as we have noted, his use of the concept of the ‘feminine’ has become one of the most controversial aspects of Levinas’s work, particularly, of course, among feminist critics. 582

Levinas’s use of gendered metaphors, 583 those of masculine and virile, woman and feminine, are based upon traits that are conventionally attributed to them. The male metaphors are used in the context of the public, hostile, selfish, impersonal, cold, assertive, conatus essendi and universal reason or logos. The male is thus identified with Being, which Levinas understands in terms of an impersonal struggle for existence and power. The feminine metaphors, on the other hand, are used in the context of privacy, gentleness, selflessness, intimacy, warmth, discretion, reserve and particularist intuition. It follows that the feminine is, largely, identified with Otherness as a counter-current to Being and thus with the warmth of personal encounter, and thereby the possibility of ethics. Accordingly the warlike ancient Amazon culture, for example, despite the dominance of women, would be as masculine as Roman culture in terms of Levinas’s divide. This dissection is something of a simplification but it will help to guide us through a good deal of what Levinas says. The point is that Levinas is not prescribing to women the role of home-maker or beloved, but using already existing (if somewhat archaic) generalities about the nature of femininity in order to specify the significance of certain areas of our existence. He says, for example:

To light eyes that are blind, to restore to equilibrium, and so overcome an alienation which ultimately results from the very virility of the universal and all-conquering logos that stalks the very shadows that could have sheltered it, should be the ontological function of the feminine, the vocation of the one ‘who does not conquer.’ 584

The question arises as to whether Levinas’s point could have been made without the use of such gendered metaphors.

‘Eros, strong as death’

Eros can be understood as a mode of encountering alterity, something wholly beyond our cognitive and practical control, which cannot be incorporated into the self in the mode of

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582 Due to the length of this thesis, and because it might constitute a distraction, I have decided to place the important feminist objections to Levinas’s use of the ‘feminine,’ and my attempt to deal with them in a separate appendix. The reader should therefore note that they are not being ignored but rather for the purposes of this thesis postponed. The reader should therefore consult the Appendix in order to clarify these matters.

583 We will see that it is a little easy to call them metaphors and that in saying this we are not saying very much.

584 Emmanuel Levinas ‘Judaism and the Feminine’ in Levinas (1997), p. 33
enjoyment, but which nevertheless allows the self to continue to be. This inability to fall under our control shows that Eros is closely related to death in Levinas’s thinking. Hence the quote from the *Song of Songs*, 8:6 ‘Eros, strong as death’, in *Time and the Other*, is not merely ornamental but reflects a philosophical conviction on his part. On the other hand the fact that the self is not shattered by Eros contrasts it to death. Levinas makes the point in this manner: ‘Love is not a possibility, is not due to our initiative, is without reason; it invades and wounds us, and nevertheless the I survives in it.’ To say that love is not a possibility is not to say that it is impossible, but that it does not fit into the Heideggerian circuit of human abilities, which are characterised in terms of possibilities; it is not something we do or that originates in us. Thus it comes from the outside ‘it invades,’ moreover it does violence to us, it ‘wounds.’ But it does not thereby crush the self. Hence as far as the structure of Levinas’s work is concerned it plays a role similar to that of death, as he understands it in contrast to Heidegger. (Both death and Eros are also inscribed in terms of mystery). Since death is described as marking ‘the end of the subject’s virility and heroism,’ not because it is a terminus, but because I am not master over it, that it is a ‘reversal of the subject’s activity into passivity,’ then this could also be said of Eros. Love stops the rapacious, masterly-self dead in its tracks. Instead of waging a war of all against all, the self cares more about another than itself.

**Eros not a Power Relation**

Eros performs the function of arresting the spontaneous ego, not by virtue of the ego’s own intrinsic limitation, but because of what comes from the outside. The type of alterity that Eros reveals therefore has the strength—and perhaps is just as disturbing—as death, but clearly has a positive function. Despite the talk of strength Eros is not a power relation:

> It is only by showing in what way eros differs from possession and power that I can acknowledge a communication in eros. It is neither a struggle, nor a fusion, nor a knowledge.

We can see therefore that Levinas conceives the erotic in terms of a unique relation in social life which reveals Otherness in its purity, just as death is said to do, but which allows the self to continue, or, as Levinas puts it: ‘the subject is still a subject through eros.’ More precisely, as he

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585 Levinas (1987a), p. 76  
586 Ibid, p. 88-89  
587 See Chapter 5 section on ‘Pain and Death.’  
588 Levinas (1987a), p. 72  
589 Ibid  
590 If this is so then it is clear that the reversal of the notion of the feminine into the masculine and virility that Levinas suggests as a conceptual possibility in the preface to *Time and the Other* cannot be made sense of. How can an encounter with virility mark the end of the subject’s virility?  
591 Levinas (1987a), p. 88  
592 Ibid
says of the face-to-face, it ‘at once gives and conceals the Other.’ In *Existence and Existence* and *Time and the Other* (both published in 1947) absolute alterity, and thus transcendence, would therefore seem to be inscribed in terms of Eros and the feminine.

The fact that the Other is always experienced as beyond or out of reach in love is precisely the very content of the affectivity of love. The Other who is sought withdraws, and yet it is not to a somewhere else that she removes herself, rather it is into what Levinas calls *mystery*. We have noted that Levinas also characterises death in terms of mystery, and this is so because it is on the one hand refractory to our powers and on the other that it takes hold of us. This as we have seen is also true of the mystery that characterises the feminine.

Levinas insists that ‘in the most brutal materiality, in the most shameless or most prosaic appearance of the feminine, neither her mystery nor her modesty are abolished.’ What he wants to say is that the feminine is not within the world of the visible. If we recall that for him existence in the world is characterised in terms of light; enjoyment and representation, then in contrast the feminine is understood as ‘a mode of being that consists in slipping away from the light.’ This escape from the light, this beyond the graspable, is exemplified by the mode of sensibility that characterises erotic touching; the caress.

**The Caress**

The caress is a mode of the subject’s being, where the subject who is in contact with another goes beyond that contact. Contact as sensation is part of the world of light. But what is caressed is not touched, properly speaking. It is not the softness or warmth of the hand given in contact that the caress seeks. The seeking of the caress constitutes its essence by the fact that the caress does not know what it seeks. This “not knowing,” this fundamental disorder, is the essential.

Thus we have the exemplification of a mode of sensibility that, while retaining its connection to the sensible world of light; primarily enjoyment, nevertheless reaches beyond a mere encounter with the palpable materiality of things. This beyond is the unknown. But it is not as if the reaching of the caress wishes to uncover the unknown and thus convert it into the known. The essence of the caress is contrary to a bringing to light. It does not culminate in the satiety of a hunger or the satisfaction of the need to know and unearth. It is sustained in its very erotic vibrancy by the fact that what it reaches for is the unreachable.

It is like a game with something slipping away, a game absolutely without project or plan, not with what can become ours or us, but with something other, always

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593 Ibid, p. 79
594 We write ‘she’ since this seems to be most consistent with the idea of the feminine, but Levinas does not always do so in *Totality and Infinity*.
595 Levinas (1987a), p. 86
596 Ibid, p. 87
597 Ibid, p. 89
other, always inaccessible, and always still to come [à venir]. 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.\textsuperscript{598}

Thus the caress does not move towards a goal as if it were governed by a preconceived plan or project, it cannot even be understood in terms of the pre-cognitive projection that characterises Dasein’s self-transcendence in Heidegger’s Being and Time; for such projections still constitute a kind of understanding. The caress does not reach for possibilities. Nevertheless the caress indicates, or signifies, a future. This cannot be the future of Dasein’s projected possibilities or even of its resolute anticipation of its own death. This is a ‘pure future [avenir], without content,’ always future, it does not connect up with the present in an intellectual anticipation, as in Husserl’s notion of protension; nor in a passionate anticipation, as in Heidegger’s understanding of Dasein’s authentic resoluteness. The future the caress anticipates, as we will see later, is the future of fecundity. We should note that the caress here has the structure of what we have characterised as Desire, it does not move towards its own satisfaction but ‘feeds on countless hungers.’ As I understand it, the caress is therefore the manifestation of transcendence within sensibility itself, and the ultimate prototype of all metaphysical transcendence. It is the very disturbance of order, the order of the totality which constantly closes over itself in the world of light, and is thus the very presence/absence of Otherness.

The Importance of the Face

The Face

In Totality and Infinity Levinas moves away from the idea of understanding absolute Otherness in terms of Eros and comes to understand it in terms of the face. His notion of the face combines the ordinary with the extraordinary in a rather fascinating way. In an obvious sense faces are everywhere. Some are familiar and some strange. But we know what they are. In this sense each face is very concrete. Yet for Levinas it is more than this:

The face is not the mere assemblage of a nose, a forehead, eyes, etc.; it is all that, of course, but takes on the meaning of a face through the new dimension it opens up in the perception of a being. Through the face, the being is not only enclosed in its form and offered to the hand, it is also open, establishing itself in depth and, in this opening, presenting itself somehow in a personal way. The face is an irreducible mode in which being can present itself in its identity.\textsuperscript{599}

A dimension of depth is opened up by the face which resists our assimilation by means of enjoyment, labour or cognition. This gives the impression that the face, despite its mundanity, is

\textsuperscript{598} ibid

\textsuperscript{599} Emmanuel Levinas ‘Ethics and Spirit’ in Levinas (1987), p. 8
also the portal into another more elevated dimension: ‘Expression, or the face, overflows images, which are always immanent to my thought, as though they came from me.’\textsuperscript{600} The face is identified with expression and the dimension which the face opens up might be compared to the notion of the noumenal in Kantian philosophy; this too exceeds all perception and knowing. In this way: ‘A veritable “phenomenology” of the noumenon is effected in expression.’\textsuperscript{601} But as Levinas understands it the face does not open us onto some world behind the world:

If the extraordinary experience of Entry and Visitation maintains its significance, it is because the beyond is not a simple background from which the face solicits us, not an “other world” behind the world. The beyond is precisely beyond the “world,” that is, beyond all unveiling.\textsuperscript{602}

The concept of the face therefore gives the impression of the extraordinary at work in the ordinary. This turns the ordinary notion of the face into something that Bernhard Waldenfels goes so far as to call ‘uncanny.’\textsuperscript{603} It is understood as opening us to something beyond the mundane world; order which exceeds this world. Not because it opens us onto the secret metaphysical world hidden behind this one. Rather the beyond is so called because it does not fit into our capacity for knowing or consuming which constitutes our world, it disturbs our world. It exceeds such possibilities; indeed it exceeds all possibilities, if possibilities are understood in terms of our initiative.

It is in terms of the personal order that the face is said to exceed our world. The face characterises the other person qua Other and as such is the epiphany\textsuperscript{604} of that which is beyond my grasp. Because I can never truly know the Other, they do not enter into my cognition, essentially general, but remain singular, in their identity. Or, as Levinas puts it: ‘He is a being (étant) and counts as such.’\textsuperscript{605} We have seen how Levinas insists that knowledge is essentially the grasping of things in terms of their generality: ‘It fits under a concept already, or dissolves into relations.’\textsuperscript{606} Whereas, to encounter a face is precisely not to thus subsume or dissolve the ‘being’ met. In a word the face refers to that about the other person that cannot be grasped in knowing or incorporated in enjoyment, and this is located in the other person’s singularity. It is in this sense that it is out of the world. This is contained in the ‘experience’ of the face.

\textsuperscript{600} Levinas (1969), p. 297
\textsuperscript{601} Emmanuel Levinas ‘Freedom and Command’ in Levinas (1998d), p. 21
\textsuperscript{602} Levinas (2006b), p. 38
\textsuperscript{603} Bernhard Waldenfels ‘Levinas and the Face of the Other’ in Critchley and Bernasconi (2002), p. 65
\textsuperscript{604} ‘Epiphany’ is Levinas’s word for the way the face appears without thereby fitting into the context of the world. He chose the word because of its connection to both manifestation and visitation, but also I suspect because of its religious connotations. I suspect that it is also connected to Kierkegaard and Heidegger’s notion of ‘Augenblick’ or ‘moment of vision.’ The face is also characterised as enigma in contrast to phenomena. I will elaborate on this idea in Chapter 7 when we have discussed the trace.
\textsuperscript{605} Emmanuel Levinas ‘Is Ontology Fundamental?’ in Levinas (1996b), p. 6
\textsuperscript{606} Emmanuel Levinas ‘Philosophy and the Idea of Infinity’ in Levinas (1998d), p. 50
The signification called ‘face’ is not only found in the ‘mere assemblage of a nose, a forehead, eyes, etc.’ But: ‘the whole body—a hand or curve of the shoulder—can express as the face.’ The extraordinary notion of the face as exceeding our world is therefore rooted in a phenomenology of the body. Face is thus that which expresses, but is not to be identified with what we ordinarily mean by ‘face.’ Yet it still retains an important connection to it. The face, in the ordinary sense, is that by which we usually distinguish one person from another; the face is unique to the individual. In this way it defies generality. Of course the fingerprint or DNA code is unique to the individual too. But these are not also the part of the body where expression is most readily found. Moreover these are unique relative to other prints or patterns and thus are given within a context. The face is unique in a way that does not depend on context: ‘the face signifies itself.’ It is undoubtedly these associations that induce Levinas to choose the term ‘face.’ This fact of expressing from itself and not from within a context is what he calls expression Καθ’ αυτό (kath’ auto). But even though it is the face (in the ordinary sense) that is most expressive, the body can clearly also express. Levinas was impressed by Vasily Grossman’s novel Life and Fate: in a particular scene Grossman describes people standing in a line in Stalinist Moscow to see family or friends who are incarcerated or facing deportation. Levinas remarks how Grossman describes ‘these human beings who glue their eyes to the nape of the neck of the person in front of them and read on that nape all the anxiety in the world.’ Thus even the nape of a neck can express as face.

The face that concerns Levinas is always the face of the Other. This might seem rather obvious but I can also look at my own face (in the ordinary sense) in a mirror. But it is not the case that I look at myself in the way that the Other looks at me. The Other’s look constitutes a kind of accusation and yet I have not consented to any contract which I might have broken:

What am I doing in this mess? Where does this shock come from, when I pass by, indifferent, under the gaze of Others? The relation with the Others challenges me, empties me of myself and keeps on emptying me by showing me ever new resources. I did not know I was so rich, but I don’t have the right to keep anything anymore. Is the Desire for Others appetite or generosity?

It is in terms of the look of the Other that Levinas often characterises the face, in this his affinity to Sartre is apparent and acknowledged. In Humanism of the Other we find: ‘Sartre, though
stopping short of a full analysis, makes the striking observation that the Other is a pure hole in the world.\textsuperscript{614} In several places in \textit{Totality and Infinity}, when referring to the face as expression or signification, we find such locutions as: the face expresses ‘as eyes that look at you,’\textsuperscript{615} ‘the presence of humanity in the eyes that look at me,’\textsuperscript{616} ‘The third party looks at me in the eyes of the Other,’\textsuperscript{617} ‘This interdiction...looks at me from the very depths of the eyes I want to extinguish,’\textsuperscript{618} and ‘My arbitrary freedom reads its shame in the eyes that look at me.’\textsuperscript{619} The face is here indicated, not in terms of that which I see, but as that which looks at me. One does not see the looking-at-me-ness of the eyes of the Other, one senses it. Sartre makes the point like this: ‘If I apprehend the look, I cease to perceive the eyes.’\textsuperscript{620} Levinas remarks that ‘The best way of encountering the Other is not even to notice the colour of his eyes!’\textsuperscript{621} This means that I am not to see the Other as just another object in my world, though this is a possibility, but as that outside of my world which looks at me, and Levinas reads this look as an accusation. In other words to notice the face of the other is to notice it as that which locates me differently in my world. Or more precisely; that which locates me in such a way that it no longer appears as exclusively my world. This need not be affected precisely by eyes that look at me, but they remain a significant reference point. Such expressions indicate that for Levinas the face is encountered as that which collapses me into a world which is potentially more than a field for my enjoyment or cognition and thereby shows my ego to be arbitrary in a very specific sense: its spontaneous movement is not given in terms of justification (\textit{de jure}) but merely of fact (\textit{de facto}). The ‘appearance’ of the Other in the face introduces an order which is able to question this fact on the basis of my right to the world. Such an order redefines my ego in terms derived from the sense of shame I feel under the gaze of the Other. The face in its look is therefore very articulate. Sticking with the motif of the eye Levinas says: ‘The eye does not shine; it speaks.’\textsuperscript{622} What it says might be translated as ‘shame on you.’

This shame also leads me to see my finitude by becoming aware of the infinite that is revealed in the face of the Other: this awareness has the same structure as Descartes’ argument from the ‘Third Meditation,’ which insists that the finite cannot give rise to the infinite, and since I have the idea of the infinite it must have been put into me from the outside, thus revealing my own finitude in the light of its excess.\textsuperscript{623} However for Levinas this infinite is not given conceptually, and thus not as an argument, but is \textit{produced} as the ethical demand which governs the relation. It is the sense

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{614} Levinas (2006b), p. 39
\item \textsuperscript{615} Levinas (1969), p. 178
\item \textsuperscript{616} Ibid, p. 208
\item \textsuperscript{617} Ibid, p. 213
\item \textsuperscript{618} Ibid, pp. 232-233
\item \textsuperscript{619} Ibid, p. 252
\item \textsuperscript{620} Sartre (1969), p. 258
\item \textsuperscript{621} Levinas (1982), p. 85
\item \textsuperscript{622} Levinas (1969), p. 66
\item \textsuperscript{623} Descartes (2003), pp. 42-43
\end{itemize}
of shame which produces and reveals this demand. The infinite is not so much unveiled as accomplished in this very relationship:

It is accomplished in shame where freedom at the same time is discovered in the consciousness of shame and is concealed in shame itself. Shame does not have the structure of consciousness and clarity. It is oriented in the inverse direction; its subject is exterior to me. Discourse and Desire, where the Other presents himself as interlocutor, as him over whom I cannot have power [je ne peux pas pouvoir], whom I cannot kill, conditions this shame, where qua I, I am not innocent spontaneity but usurper and murderer.

We have said something about shame in Chapter 3 and we can now see how Levinas centralises it. The ego notices its freedom, at the level of spontaneity, threatened by the shame it discovers in its very sense of shame. But it also finds itself within an order whereby its freedom can take on a meaning beyond the arbitrary fulfilment of its own needs. It is awakened to the exigency of Desire. This specifies the possibility of discourse, which should not be understood primarily in terms of a topic or theme, but rather in terms of the one to whom I speak or who addresses me, or rather to the fact of address. Certainly I can offer a theme to the Other, or indeed treat the Other as a theme (Which appears to be what I am doing here and Levinas is also doing). But already it is said to the Other who, as interlocutor, has quit the theme that encompassed him, and upsurges inevitably behind the said. The fact that the face speaks is the first saying and underlies the possibility of any theme: ‘The face opens the primordial discourse whose first word is obligation, which no “interiority” permits avoiding.’

We have indicated that Levinas found Sartre’s analysis to be inadequate. Sartre certainly noted the fact of our sense of shame within the glance of the Other. But he didn’t interpret this shame in ethical terms. The question Levinas seems to be responding to is; why is it shame precisely that I feel ‘under the gaze of Others’? His answer seems to be quite straightforwardly that it is shame because we are ethically accused. This leads him to a more intricate sense of the significance of

624 The notion of something being ‘accomplished’ is used here in the same way as he often uses the term ‘production’ which he says indicates the simultaneity of both ‘effectuation of being’ and ‘being brought to light.’ (Levinas (1969), p. 26)
625 Levinas (1969), p. 84
626 We will see in Chapter 8 that this fact of thematizing the Other while insisting that she or he cannot be thematized is a central concern in Levinas’s work, a concern which he will address in Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence in terms of the saying (le dire) and the said (le dit) and the unsaying of the said.
628 Ibid, p. 201
629 There is a problem with concluding this on the basis of shame alone. A problem which can be formulated from resources garnered from Levinas’s own works. We have noted in Chapter 3 that in On Escape Levinas’s analysis of shame presents it as not applying exclusively to moral phenomena. Rather it is understood in terms of our sense of our basic nudity and this sense is even possible in isolation from others. In other words it is possible, according to this early work, without the Other. We will see that this tension is overcome with
the face which we will come to presently. But we can already see why Levinas is reluctant to talk about a *phenomenology* of the face, since phenomena are for Levinas *constituted* by us. This is why he says:

> So, too, I wonder if one can speak of a look turned toward the face, for the look is knowledge, perception. I think rather that access to the face is straightaway ethical.\(^{630}\)

The encounter with the face reverses the direction of intentionality: the world is no longer that which is given to me in my spontaneity, but, via the face, my acts of positing get undermined by the fact that I find myself confronted by the alien. The ‘phenomenology’ of the face is given by noting that the very presence of the face of the Other is ‘given’ by virtue of its absence. I fall into the Other’s world and as such have a sense of the Other as outside of my world. This alterity is understood by Levinas to be straightaway ethical.

The face is understood in terms of the paradoxical unity of authority and vulnerability. In Levinas’s terms it is ‘situated in a dimension of height and of abasement—glorious abasement.’\(^{631}\) Spatial metaphors abound in Levinas and here ‘height’ does duty for moral authority while ‘abasement’ specifies the vulnerability characteristic of the face. It is a gaze that ‘can supplicate only because it demands.’\(^{632}\) The vulnerability of the face provokes our sadism:

> The face, for its part, is inviolable; those eyes, which are absolutely without protection, the most naked part of the human body, none the less offer an absolute resistance to possession, an absolute resistance in which the temptation to murder is inscribed: the temptation to absolute negation. The Other is the only being that one can be tempted to kill.\(^{633}\)

The face is therefore a simultaneous temptation to murder and an absolute resistance to murder. Why is it such a temptation? This cannot in my view be explained in Sartrean terms as a response to the fact that the Other is a drain-hole through which my world seeps, while I fall into another’s in which my spontaneous freedom is thwarted and thus stolen from me. In these terms the temptation to murder would be an attempt to bung up this hole, and thus assert my freedom. If we take this line then we are faced with the apparent difficulty that in many places Levinas insists

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\(^{630}\) Levinas (1982), p. 85

\(^{631}\) Levinas (1969), p. 251

\(^{632}\) Ibid, p. 75

\(^{633}\) Emmanuel Levinas ‘Ethics and Spirit,’ in Levinas (1997), p. 8
that ‘The Other is not a being we encounter that menaces us or wants to lay hold of us.’ Indeed the Other is the origin of peace:

The face in which the other—the absolutely other—presents himself does not negate the same, does not do violence to it as do opinion or authority or the thaumaturgic supernatural. It remains commensurate with him who welcomes; it remains terrestrial. This presentation is pre-eminently nonviolence, for instead of offending my freedom it calls it to responsibility and finds it. As nonviolence it nonetheless maintains the plurality of the same and the other. It is peace.

But if the ego is to see the Other as a temptation to murder then such peace should not be construed as inevitable. Indeed to so construe it would, from a practical point of view, be the height of naiveté.

Part of me in my encounter with the Other desires to maintain the self in its spontaneous freedom. There is within this desire the possibility of not seeing the face and thus of ‘avoiding the gaze.’ This possibility is the possibility that ‘one sees the other freedom as a force.’ Or more precisely, of seeing the Other as a freedom which is:

[A] characteristic in which the failure of communication is inscribed in advance.

For with a freedom there can be no other relationship than that of submission or enslavement. In both cases one of the two freedoms is annihilated.

This greatly complicates the naïve account of Levinas which depict him as insisting that the very encounter with the Other results in an ethical conscience. Because the ego is tied to its spontaneity it contains the possibility of seeing the Other as nothing but what its own spontaneous freedom is: ‘a force on the move’ (une force qui va). Thus there are two possible options in the encounter with absolute Otherness, acknowledgment or annihilation. The later requires ‘catching sight of an angle whereby the no inscribed on the face by the very fact that it is.

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634 Levinas (1987a), p. 87
635 I do not at this stage want to complicate my exposition by qualifying this as a ‘pre-originary origin,’ as we should if we took the whole of Levinas into account. Such locutions are much more appropriate to the later, Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence, expression of his philosophy. I therefore wait until some account of this is given before introducing such complications.
636 Levinas (1969), p. 203
638 Ibid
639 Levinas (1987a), p. 87
640 Levinas (1969), p. 171. This phrase appears often in Levinas’s work to characterise Being’s movement. It derives from Victor Hugo’s play Hernani.
a face becomes a hostile or submissive force."\textsuperscript{641} This temptation is therefore inscribed in this absolute resistance as the possibility of misconstruing it as a force.\textsuperscript{642}

It is precisely this no inscribed in the face, on the other hand, which constitutes the absolute resistance to murder. Which is not that of a force greater than mine, indeed it coincides with the very vulnerability of the Other. It is not therefore an ontological resistance and as a matter of fact murder is quite common. The resistance takes place because the Other is not in the world and thus not within the ontological order at all. This beyond the ontological is the concrete instantiation of the infinite:

This infinity, stronger than murder, already resists us in his face, in his face, in the primordial expression, in the first word: “you shall not commit murder.” The infinite paralyses power by its infinite resistance to murder, which, firm and insurmountable, gleams in the face of the Other, in the total nudity of his defenceless eyes, in the nudity of the absolute openness of the Transcendent.

There is here a relation not with a very great resistance, but with something absolutely other: the resistance of what has no resistance—the ethical resistance.\textsuperscript{643}

Such ethical resistance makes murder impossible. This point is of the utmost importance and Levinas felt it necessary to reiterate and underline its importance in a footnote to \textit{Otherwise than Being}:

A purely “ethical” impossibility is expressed in expressions such as “impossible without shirking one’s obligations,” “without fault,” “without sin.” If there were real impossibility, responsibility would be an ontological necessity. But a “purely ethical” impossibility is not a simple relaxation of an ontological impossibility. Being wanting, fault, sin, or as it can be put in a way perhaps more acceptable today, “complex” – that is not only a reality “for kids.”\textsuperscript{644}

This ethical imperative should not therefore be misunderstood as a hypothetical imperative which threatens punishment to those who do not obey, in the way we might discipline our children. But it would be misleading to call it a categorical imperative, since Kant has made this phrase his own and connected it in his work with universality. In Levinas the face in its uniqueness calls \textit{me} to responsibility and it is up to \textit{me} in my uniqueness to respond to this call. Indeed this call is an appeal that \textit{speaks to me} before it says something about something, before there is any cognitive content to the speech. It is pure address. Moreover it is such address which \textit{creates} me as the

\textsuperscript{641} Emmanuel Levinas ‘Freedom and Command’ in Levinas (1998d), p. 19

\textsuperscript{642} How such a misconstrual is possible requires much more explanation than I am able to give here. I will say something about it in the Conclusion.

\textsuperscript{643} Levinas (1969), p. 199

\textsuperscript{644} Levinas (1998a), p. 198 footnote 2
ethical being that I am. For the I to be anything more than a ‘force on the move’ it requires founding by the address of the face.\textsuperscript{645}

It follows that it is not at the level of cognition or thought that the face challenges, but at the level of sensibility and affect. Shame is not merely the thought of shame but an affectivity which penetrates our very body. In other words the face affects us in a way that slips under the net of our conceptual thinking and perceiving. Indeed: ‘If the resistance to murder were not ethical but real we would have a perception of it. We would remain within the idealism of a consciousness of struggle.’\textsuperscript{646} But it is central to the whole of Levinas’s thinking to contest the idea that only what pertains to consciousness has signification or even the first word. The first word is delivered to us before we have time to go out and meet it.

The height of the face, the dignity that pertains to its command, is conjoined with the very humility of the Other. As height the face is not understood in terms of an intimacy but a distance; or more precisely the immediacy of the face should not be read as a kind of closed society of the relation. The asymmetry of the relation maintains the possibility of ethics and is opposed to the I-Thou characteristic of the philosophy of Martin Buber.\textsuperscript{647}

One may, however, ask if the thou-saying [tutoiement] does not place the other in a reciprocal relation, and if this reciprocity is primordial. On the other hand, the I-Thou relation in Buber retains a formal character: it can unite man to things as much as man to man. The I-Thou formalism does not determine any concrete structure. The I-Thou is an event (Geshehen), a shock, a comprehension, but does not enable us to account for (except as an aberration, a fall, or a sickness) a life other than friendship: economy, the search for happiness, the representational relation with things.\textsuperscript{648}

In other words the reciprocal relation of intimacy cannot account for the height of the Other’s command which founds ethics. If I and the Other were alone in the world there would be no reciprocity: ‘If there was only the other facing me, I would say to the very end: I owe him everything.’\textsuperscript{649} This goes so far as to my being responsible ‘for the harm he does me.’\textsuperscript{650} But we are not alone, there are other Others, and I am also responsible for these. If another Other wishes to harm the Other then we are compelled to defend the victim. In this way a notion of justice is born, it consists in ‘referring to the third party,’ \textsuperscript{651}(le tiers). But the third party is always already there in the face that looks at me:

\textsuperscript{645} We will see in Chapter 8 what this amounts to in detail.
\textsuperscript{646} Levinas (1969), p. 199
\textsuperscript{647} See Buber (2002)
\textsuperscript{648} Levinas (1969), pp. 68-69
\textsuperscript{649} Emmanuel Levinas ‘Questions and Answers’ in Levinas (1998b), p. 83
\textsuperscript{650} Ibid
\textsuperscript{651} Levinas (1969), p. 213
Everything that takes place here “between us” concerns everyone, the face that looks at it places itself in the full light of the public order, even if I draw back from it to seek with the interlocutor the complicity of a private relation and a clandestinity.\textsuperscript{652}

It is this fact that prevents me from being absolutely beholden to the Other, for I am an Other to another and thus a third party. The third party is the means of transition from primordial asymmetry to justice, reason and politics. It is not merely that first we have the face and then we have the third: ‘The third party looks at me in the eyes of the Other — language is justice.’\textsuperscript{653}

The argument seems to be this: because I am responsible even for the Other’s very responsibility,\textsuperscript{654} and the Other is responsible for another Other, I too am responsible for this third party. But to be so is to recognise the Other as not only Master but also as one who serves the Other. Thus his command to me is not only to serve but via the third to also command. Despite the fact that the Other is primarily above me, via the presence of the third in the face, we become equals: both masters and servants:

He comes to \textit{join} me. But he joins me to himself for service; he commands me as a Master. This command can concern me only inasmuch as I am master myself; consequently this command commands me to command. The \textit{thou} is posited in front of a \textit{we}. To be \textit{we} is not to “jostle” one another or get together round a common task. The presence of the face, the infinity of the other, is a destituteness, a presence of the third party (that is, of the whole of humanity which looks at us), and a command that commands commanding.\textsuperscript{655}

It is in virtue of this command that commands me to command that there can be laws and society and the \textit{necessary violence} of the state, which is a ‘limitation of charity.’\textsuperscript{656} The face therefore contains more than the call to responsibility it ‘is also sermon, exhortation, the prophetic word.’\textsuperscript{657}

Such themes exceed the limits of this thesis. But it is important to note that the face contains a reference to the third party and thereby to the whole of humanity.

We will see presently that Levinas did not conceive of the relation to the Other in the earlier writings (\textit{Existence and Existents} and \textit{Time and the Other}) in terms of the face. Rather, as I have already remarked, it is in terms of the erotic relation that alterity is there conceived as being encountered.

\textsuperscript{652} ibid, p. 212
\textsuperscript{653} ibid, p. 213
\textsuperscript{654} We need to show how and why this is so. This will be done in Chapter 8 when we deal with ethical subjectivity.
\textsuperscript{655} Levinas (1969), p. 213
\textsuperscript{656} Emmanuel Levinas ‘Philosophy, Justice, and Love’ in Levinas (2006a), p. 90
\textsuperscript{657} Levinas (1969), p. 213
Eros in *Totality and Infinity*

The Ambiguity of Eros

We have noted that when he came to write *Totality and Infinity* Levinas insists that the erotic relation is not the ethical relation characterised in terms of the face-to-face, which there exemplifies transcendence. This is so because the erotic is now conceived as essentially ambiguous between Desire and need. Desire, it will be recalled, goes out towards the Other and thus gets its impetus from *outside* the self. As we have seen this is true of the erotic. However the erotic as Levinas understands it in *Totality and Infinity returns* to the self, and as such reveals its kinship with enjoyment, which is characterised in terms of the satisfaction of needs. In terms of our earlier understanding of Desire as the desire to escape the self, the erotic is yet another failure to do so.

Along with the ambiguity of need and Desire in Eros, we should also note another crucial distinction between Eros and the face as it is presented in the later writing. The face-to-face, along with being a relation that has its source in the Other, is also conceived in *Totality and Infinity* as the initiation of the social relation, via the third party and language, as we have seen. The erotic relation has no such social significance. Or to be more precise it is ‘the very contrary of the social relation. It excludes the third party, it remains intimacy, dual solitude, closed society, the supremely non-public.’

Levinas remarks upon this contrast by emphasising the justice that is characteristic of the face in contrast to the injustice of the selectivity or partiality of love.

Language as the presence of the face does not invite complicity with the preferred being, the self-sufficient ‘I-Thou’ forgetful of the universe; in its frankness it refuses the clandestinity of love, where it loses its frankness and meaning and turns into laughter and cooing. The third party looks at me in the eyes of the Other—language is justice.

‘Clandestinity,’ ‘lack of frankness and meaning,’ ‘laughter and cooing,’ all these elements are evoked in the characterisation of the erotic. These contrast them to the frank, straightforward, meaningfulness of the face which, as a consequence of this, leads to a sociality which essentially calls on and for justice. Yet we should not forget that the face-to-face is fundamentally asymmetrical and thus unjust. The link therefore that brings in the third party, which initiates the universality of the social relation, is language. Eros, therefore, is outside the order of language. Levinas thus articulates his mature vision of the erotic in contrast to the face. This contrast is largely drawn in terms of the opposition in Eros to a social dimension and this in turn in terms of its exclusion of language.

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658 Levinas (1969), p. 265
659 Ibid, p. 213
The metaphysical event of transcendence—the welcome of the Other, hospitality—Desire and language—is not accomplished in love. We shall show how in love transcendence goes both further and less far than language.\(^{660}\)

Once again this emphasises an ambiguity in love, it goes further yet less far than language. Why less far? Levinas begins the section of *Totality and Infinity* entitled ‘The Ambiguity of Love’\(^{661}\) by asking all too briefly about the possible objects of love. It is usual to think that the ‘object’ of love is another person, but this is not exclusively true. Arguably the other person is nevertheless required as a prototype of love’s possibility. The person here enjoys a privilege—the loving intention goes unto the Other, unto the friend, the child, the brother, the beloved, the parents.\(^{662}\)

We should perhaps pause over the word ‘intention’ in this quote because the erotic relation is not properly speaking a type of intentionality for Levinas. Clearly, on the one hand, it is a relational notion, but, on the other, it does not aim at a *meaning* in the strict sense. This ‘privilege’ of the other person specifies the fact that love by its very nature has to do with the Other. This mature vision of the erotic therefore depends upon the face for its sense.

Nevertheless as we have indicated, love does not remain exclusively the love of another person. ‘But a thing, an abstraction, a book can likewise be objects of love.’\(^{663}\) Therefore love shows itself to be also about that which is not transcendent and Other. In this way Levinas considers love to contain the seeds of a possible betrayal of its transcendent ‘intention’ and to fall back onto *this side* of Otherness, thus finding expression in the satisfaction of needs rather than finding its significance in the yearnings of Desire. But this kind of love, if we can still call it love, can also be for another person. In this case the Other is enjoyed as a ‘connatural being, a sister soul.’\(^{664}\) We conceive the beloved as a narcissistic complement to our own being. Aristophanes’ myth in Plato’s *The Symposium*\(^{665}\) is appropriate to this aspect of love only, which, for Levinas ‘presents itself as incest.’\(^{666}\) It is in virtue of this understanding of love in terms of the possibility of the satisfaction of needs, what Levinas calls ‘the most egoist and cruelist (sic) of needs’,\(^{667}\) that, as I understand him, ultimately disqualifies the erotic from being taken as the true model of transcendence.

### The Audacity of Love

On the other hand Levinas insists that love in its primary ‘intention’ goes unto the other in Desire. Even within the relation between lovers who do nothing but satisfy their carnal needs by using the others body, there remains a kind of exceptional energy to the relationship which can hardly be reduced to the enjoyment involved in the consumption of food. The other person, despite being

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\(^{660}\) Ibid, p. 254  
\(^{661}\) Ibid, pp. 254-255  
\(^{662}\) Ibid, p. 254  
\(^{663}\) Ibid, p. 254  
\(^{664}\) Ibid  
\(^{665}\) Plato (1999) 189a-193e  
\(^{666}\) Levinas (1969), p. 254  
\(^{667}\) Ibid
used as a sexual object, remains an Other and this creates ripples of unease in the relationship. Even here love exerts a mysterious influence.

But this *this side* itself, by the depths of the unavowable to which it leads, by the occult influence it exercises over all powers of being, bears witness to an exceptional audacity.\(^\text{668}\)

The magic of love resides in the alterity of the Other that its ‘intension’ is ultimately drawn towards, and this despite the fact that one can cruelly allow the other to go unacknowledged in the relation. Part of this magic finds expression in the idea that love takes on a kind of fatalism. ‘The supreme adventure is also a predestination, a choice of what had not been chosen,’\(^\text{669}\) It remains a power outside of us. Love therefore remains bound to transcendence. To summarise Levinas says: ‘Love remains a relation with the Other that turns into need, and this still presupposes the total, transcendent exteriority of the other, of the beloved.’\(^\text{670}\)

We might still ask, however, in what sense love goes further than language. Language goes to the Other, it is the miracle of communication between the I and the transcendent Other. But love goes beyond the Other, beyond the beloved. This beyond is given, as we have seen in characterising the caress, a temporal description by Levinas it is ‘a future never future enough.’\(^\text{671}\) What constitutes the compelling beauty in the face of the beloved is nothing but the ‘obscure light’\(^\text{672}\) which filters through from this impossible\(^\text{673}\) future. This future refers to a future that is beyond my powers; it is the future of the child that it is possible to engender through Eros, as we will see. This is an element to the characterisation of the caress which have not noted before. The caress indicates fecundity in its very structure.

**The Frailty of the Other**

I have said that the erotic in Levinas’s mature work is articulated in contrast to the face, but that it also depends for its ‘sense’ on the face. An articulation of the concept of the face in the mature works affects a more nuanced conception of the nature of the mystery that is involved in the feminine. In the first place Levinas notes that love is a kind of ‘intentionality’ in the sense that it ‘aims at the Other.’\(^\text{674}\) Yet it remains distinct from the usual modes of intentionality in that it originates or is initiated in the Other, and, as I already indicated, does not aim at a meaning. The Other invades us, and this aiming at the Other is precisely this drawing our attention away from ourselves towards the beloved. Very specifically it aims at the Other in a particular mode; ‘it aims at him in his frailty [faiblesse].’\(^\text{675}\) The face, as we have noted, is characterised in terms of frailty,

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\(^{668}\) Ibid

\(^{669}\) Ibid

\(^{670}\) Ibid

\(^{671}\) Ibid

\(^{672}\) Ibid

\(^{673}\) I have already indicated, but will reiterate presently, in what way it is impossible.

\(^{674}\) Levinas (1969), p. 256

\(^{675}\) Ibid. Note the mysterious use of the masculine pronoun.
but also in terms of height. It is understood in terms of expressiveness—essentially in the vocative—and this is both supplication and command. However frailty should not be understood in terms of the deficiency of a certain quality that I share with the Other. Frailty is precisely what it is to be Other, ‘it qualifies alterity itself.’\(^{676}\) To love someone is therefore to see the infant within them, vulnerable and helpless. It is also simultaneously to experience one’s own existence as a place of shelter and help for them. ‘To love is to fear for another, to come to the assistance of his frailty. In this frailty as in the dawn rises the Loved, who is the Beloved.’\(^{677}\) Thus it is not that we meet another person and then notice their frailty which draws us to offer protection to the Other. Rather the Other emerges from his or her frailty, in the way that Juliet appeared to her Romeo; first as the questionable light that ‘through yonder window breaks,’ and then as the horizon from which it emerges; ‘It is the East,’ and then as the beloved proper; ‘and Juliet is the sun.’\(^{678}\) In this way Juliet is finally revealed as the source of the illumination which captures Romeo’s attention. Frailty therefore qualifies the horizon in which the beloved is situated, ‘as a soft warmth where being dissipates into radiance.’\(^{679}\) The Other is thus not first given in the erotic as a person or ego, the Other is ‘one with her regime of tenderness.’\(^{680}\)

The Ultramateriality of the Carnal

This frailty is not correlative with expression and command as it is with the recognition of the Other in the face. Rather it is paradoxically united with the inexpressive par excellence: ‘And yet this extreme fragility lies also at the limit of an existence “without ceremonies,” “without circumlocutions,” a “non-signifying” and raw density, an exorbitant ultramateriality.’\(^{681}\) This ultramateriality, a bold bodily physicality, is the carnal counterpart to the etherealty of the frail ‘radiance’ exemplary of tenderness. It does not refer to the lifeless density of the flesh of corpses, rocky landscapes or certain cubist paintings; rather it ‘designates the exhibitionist nudity of an exorbitant presence.’\(^{682}\) The body is thrust into presence with all its carnal weight. It is precisely the fact that this weight is coupled with the evanescence of frailty that saves it from becoming the obscene. Here we have the paradoxical unity of chaste discretion and wanton display.

Let us in passing note that this depth in the subterranean dimension of the tender prevents it from being identified with the graceful, which it nevertheless resembles. The simultaneity or the equivocation of this fragility and this weight of non-signifyingness \([\text{non-significance}]\), heavier than the weight of the formless real, we shall term \textit{femininity}.\(^ {683}\)

\(^{676}\) ibid
\(^{677}\) ibid
\(^{678}\) Shakespeare (1996) Act 2, scene 2, 2-6, p. 84
\(^{679}\) Levinas (1969), p. 256
\(^{680}\) ibid
\(^{681}\) ibid
\(^{682}\) ibid
\(^{683}\) ibid, p. 257
Thus we arrive at a more specific definition of the feminine. It is the paradoxical combination of an evanescent frailty and a carnal weight.

In the erotic we have a situation where the ‘exorbitant presence’ of the ‘ultramateriality’ of the erotic body does not fit into the context of the world and thus has no form. It is precisely this fact of escaping every form that designates the essence of erotic nudity, even as it stirs from under clothing. Because it will not be captured in a form, because it perpetually disrobes itself of all significance and adornment, this ‘presence’ constantly slips into mystery. It is essentially hidden while wanton.

It designates the exhibitionist nudity of an exorbitant presence coming as though from further than the frankness of the face, already profaning and wholly profaned, as if it had forced the interdiction of a secret. The essentially hidden throws itself towards the light, without becoming signification. Not nothingness—but what is not yet. This unreality at the threshold of the real does not offer itself as a possible to be grasped; the clandestinity does not describe a gnoseological accident that occurs to a being. “Being not yet” is not a this or a that; clandestinity exhausts the essence of this non-essence.684

This essentially hidden dimension, which manifests itself as an exorbitant ultramateriality, therefore takes on the temporal character of a not yet.

The ambiguity of the erotic is here exemplified by the carnal presence which stands out as a shocking sensuous presence against the uniform familiarity of the world, but which in its very thrusting forward remains essentially mysterious; virginal. This is the import of Levinas’s ‘Phenomenology of Eros.’

**Identity of Feeling**

Despite the tension produced by the very fact of the separation of the lovers there is a kind of sensuous unity precisely in the voluptuosity of bodies entwined. It is, as Levinas emphasises, ‘the common action of the sentient and the sensed.’685 This unity of feeling locked within a duality of being makes for a commonality of feeling. It is this commonality which definitively isolates the lovers.

The non-sociality of voluptuosity is, positively, the community of sentient and sensed: the other is not only a sensed, but in the sensed is affirmed as sentient, as though one same sentiment were substantially common to me and to the other—and not in the way two observers have a common landscape or two thinkers a common idea.686

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684 Ibid, p. 256-257
685 Ibid, p. 265
686 Ibid
It is not that some third or distinct content mediates the lovers by virtue of the fact that they share in it. The commonality is direct and denotes the fact that while they are separate they are one in feeling, there is, as Levinas says, an ‘identity of the feeling.’ But this voluptuosity takes on a kind of impersonal animality and is therefore not, as Sartre would insist, the drama between two freedoms fighting for possession. Possession would destroy the voluptuous because: ‘The separation of the other in the midst of this community of feeling constitutes the acuity of voluptuosity.’ This commonality denotes the fact that love is reciprocal; that one loves precisely in being loved. But this is not a complimentary relation precisely because the sentient/sensed which is the locus of the feeling of voluptuosity is not personal, but takes place in the clandestine element which characterises the erotic body. Yet as we have said it nevertheless depends for its pathos on the face and thus on the absolute separateness of the Other.

Voluptuosity is directed at the Other’s voluptuosity. It is, as Levinas puts it, ‘love of the love of the other.’ In other words I love the love that the other has for me. ‘If to love is to love the love that the Beloved bears me, to love also to love oneself in love, and thus to return to oneself.’ So, as we warned earlier, love, despite its transcendent aspirations, despite its kinship with Desire, returns to the self and satisfies a need: the need to be loved. Nevertheless in the abandonment which we have seen in voluptuosity there is a prefiguring of a sense of ourselves as outside ourselves in another. It is however the selfishness of love characteristic of its very structure which for Levinas debars it from being true transcendence. Still the outcome of love, if that’s the right way to put it; it seems to me, achieves this transcendence. It is through fecundity, as we will see, that I truly learn to care more about the Other than myself, where I get away from myself.

I love fully only if the Other loves me, not because I need the recognition of the Other, but because my voluptuosity delights in his voluptuosity, and because in this unparalleled conjuncture of identification, in this trans-substantiation, the same and the other are not united but precisely—beyond every possible project, beyond every meaningful and intelligent power—engender the child.

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687 Ibid
688 See Sartre (1969), Part 3, Chapter 3
689 Levinas (1969), p. 265
690 Ibid, p. 271
691 Ibid, p. 266
692 Ibid
693 Ibid
Subjectivity in Eros

We have seen that in the erotic relation the self in a sense loses itself in the Other by virtue of a commonality of feeling. Yet this is not a fusion and does not betoken the end of separation. On the contrary, it is precisely the separateness that makes for the whole electricity of the union. Nor is it the case, as we have observed, that this ‘commonality’ is distinct from the union of the two. It is not a communion around a third term in which both participate. It is in the very sensibility of the two that the commonality is realised and yet it is, as we know, in sensibility that the I achieves separation. It is therefore in terms of the erotic that the oneness of our being is challenged in Levinas. Not however in terms of a third in which we each participate, the union is a union of two alone. Nor is it a falling into the commonality of the they (das Man) which strips us of our uniqueness in the way that the il y a is said to do. The union of love shows our existence as multiple, even if it is to ultimately fall back onto the enjoyment characteristic of separation.

We seem to be trying to maintain two contradictory positions here. On the one hand we want to affirm absolute separation and this via sensibility (as enjoyment). But on the other we want to insist upon a certain union of the sensible in the erotic relation. How is this possible? We need to recall how the enjoying ego quickly congeals into the I of power and knowledge. Yet we have from the very beginning held onto a sense of the self that somehow predates these. This is the sense in which the self is a being driven out of the self or a need for escape. Sensibility emerges, I have argued, precisely in this urge. Certainly in the first instance it specifies absolute separation in the enjoyment of the element. But this is possible because the element is precisely able to be incorporated into the self as that from which it lives. The Other is that which cannot be so incorporated and this means that the significance of escape is transfigured. The self is certainly driven out in a kind of enjoyment, but at the same time finds itself vertiginously unable to incorporate the Other. It thereby yearns for what it knows not. The shared sensibility characteristic of the erotic encounter is therefore an unsatisfiable yearning. It is Desire. The caress is thus the central figuration of such an encounter. The caress does not signify. Nor is it acting or forming; it does not shape anything; it moves obsessively and can repeat the same movement without monotony. In it the self is not ecstatically drawn into the Other and thus consumed. The self of the erotic encounter is a self prior to the ego. 694 This is how Levinas puts the matter:

The acuity of the problem lies in the necessity of maintaining the I in the transcendence with which it hitherto seemed incompatible. Is the subject only a subject of knowing and powers? Does it not present itself as a subject in another sense? The relation sought, which qua subject it supports, and which at the same time satisfies these contradictory exigencies, seemed to us to be inscribed in the erotic relation. 695

In other words the self must maintain its identity while at the same time entering into a relation with the Other such that it (the Other) remains wholly Other. Indeed it is perhaps stronger than

694 We will give more sense to this ‘self prior to the ego’ in Chapter 8
this: the self must maintain its identity in such a way as being the point of its own commencement while at the same time having its significance outside itself. This is the strong sense of transcendence that Levinas is after. The importance of the erotic lies is the fact that for him it seems to fulfil these necessities.

Voluptuosity, as the coinciding of the lover and the beloved, is charged by their duality: it is simultaneously fusion and distinction. Voluptuosity transfigures the subject himself, who henceforth owes his identity not to his initiative of power, but to the passivity of the love received. He is passion and trouble, constant initiation into mystery rather than initiative. Levinas thus breaks with the unity or mineness of the self without thereby sacrificing the subject to the violence of a participatory ecstasy. And this by virtue of the fact that he rethinks the subject in terms which do not locate it as the centre of knowing or powers; not the I think and not the I can, not initiative but passivity. The erotic thereby anticipates what we will come to see as ethical subjectivity. Already the identity of the self, opened in enjoyment, is challenged in the erotic relation itself. The centrality of the Heideggerian mineness is challenged by virtue of the fact that the identity of the self, as absolute source and point of initiation, is thrown into question by Eros: ‘The subject of voluptuosity finds himself again as the self (which does not mean the object or the theme) of an other, and not only as the self of himself.’

**Beyond Eros**

**Fecundity**

The mystery of the feminine is given as a promise that eludes fulfilment. That which is promised is what the caress seeks, but it ‘does not know what it seeks.’ The promise is perpetually postponed; it is ‘always still to come [à venir].’ It is this movement of withdrawal which compels the lover. As such it ‘is the anticipation of this pure future,’ a future therefore which is promised as mine but not mine. Levinas conceives Eros as prefiguring the relation that I have, as parent, with my child, the relation of it being my child. This relation is a relationship with the future; a future which is both mine and not mine. It is the child’s future or the possibility of the child in the

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696 Ibid, p. 270
697 This theme will be taken up again and in more detail in Chapter 8
698 Levinas (1969), p. 270
699 Levinas (1987a), p. 89
700 Ibid
701 Ibid
702 Despite the fact that Levinas says ‘the son’ and talks of ‘paternity,’ the relation in question (fecundity) should also be understood, and a fortiori, in terms of the mother/child relation. I can see no reason why this should not be so, which makes his use of sexually specific terms in this context all the more irritating. Such use nonetheless appears to be tied to his overall view and this is where we see his greatest weakness. See Appendix.
future. The relation to the child is not one of ownership, though clearly the parent has some authority over the child.

Both my own and non-mine, a possibility of myself but also a possibility of the other, of the Beloved, my future does not enter into the logical essence of the possible. The relation with such a future, irreducible to the power over possibles, we shall call fecundity.  

The notion of fecundity, even given its biological grounding, takes on important broader implications in Levinas’s work. The having of a child is not a project in Heidegger’s sense of the term. Of course we can treat our children as projects, but this is not the point. The existence of the child does not fit into the ecstatic time that is Dasein’s; it comes into his or her own time. As an existent the child exceeds any form that we may wish to impose upon him or her. This situation is reminiscent of Samuel Beckett’s joke in Endgame where the son Hamm asks Nagg, who appears to be his father (‘accursed progenitor!’) ‘Why did you engender me?’ and Nagg replies ‘I didn’t know.’ ‘Hamm: What? What didn’t you know? Nagg: That it’d be you.’ The son is other than the father, a stranger, but also, according to Levinas, the same.

Possession of the child by the father does not exhaust the meaning of the relationship that is accomplished in paternity, where the father discovers himself not only in the gestures of his son, but in his substance and his unicity. My child is a stranger (Isaiah 49), but a stranger who is not only mine, for he is me.

Here more is being claimed than is initially obvious. The father discovers himself in the son, not merely in the sense that he sees a mirror image of his own gestures (which he may never have seen anyway), but in the sense that he finds himself by finding the son. As an experience of parenthood this is not an unusual claim: that in seeing my son I find that my ‘substance’ is not identical to the ego that wants for itself, but bursts the bounds of my own needs to find it cares more about the needs of another. There may also be another sense to this claim: In considering the nature of the time opened up by fecundity, a discontinuous but infinite time, a time of renewal and new birth, Levinas writes:

This recommencement of the instant, this triumph of the time of fecundity over the becoming of the mortal and aging being, is a pardon, the very work of time.

Clearly the new birth, wherein I am another, does not drag with it the guilt of my life and in this sense is a pardon. My child is innocent, yet he is me.

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703 Levinas (1969), p. 267
704 Beckett (2009), p. 31
705 Levinas (1969), p. 267
706 Once again it should be emphasised that the use of the male parent and male child is here consonant with Levinas’s practice, but will also be true of the daughter, and a fortiori of the mother.
Levinas is claiming that I am my child: ‘I do not have my child; I am my child.’ Yet I do not thereby cease to be me. ‘In this “I am” being is no longer Eleatic unity.’ This claim is significant for its role as transitional to the later work, with its emphasis on ethical subjectivity. Thus transcendence is conceived as the very disruption of the self as transcendental unity of apperception which constitutes the knowing subject and the egoism of enjoyment in which corporeal subjectivity emerges. It is, Levinas tells us, a ‘trans-substantiation.’ I am me and not me in fecundity.

Fecundity encloses a duality of the Identical. It does not denote all that I can grasp—my possibilities; it denotes my future, which is not a future of the same—not a new avatar: not a history and events that can occur to a residue of identity, an identity holding on by a thread, an I that would ensure the continuity of the avatars. And yet it is my adventure still, and consequently my future in a very new sense, despite the discontinuity.

In other words the I of fecundity is not the subjectivity which remains a recursion or simple return to self.

The I as subject and support of powers does not exhaust the “concept” of the I, does not command all the categories in which subjectivity, origin, and identity are produced.

The identity of the self is disrupted in fecundity and ‘he will be other than himself while remaining himself.’ We can see here the prototype of ethical subjectivity, as substitution, in the relation of what Levinas calls paternity, though we will see that there are significant differences, particularly in relation to the temporal dimension in which each is located. Specifically we should note that the temporal dimension opened up by fecundity is an infinite time. Such infinity is not the bad infinity of the continuous where all is one. But an infinity made up of a plurality of discontinuous times, indeed for Levinas here, ‘death and resurrection constitute time.’ And fecundity is the concretion of such time: ‘time adds something new to being, something absolutely new.’ We should note that it goes beyond the bounds of Heidegger’s notion of Dasein’s temporality as having its ultimate horizon in being-toward-death.

We have indicated that fecundity is not restricted to its biological meaning, but specifies a definite ontological structure. Indeed it is fecundity which begins to show serious fissures in Being itself,

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708 Ibid, p. 277
709 Ibid
710 Ibid, p. 269
711 Ibid, p. 268
712 Ibid
713 Ibid, p. 272
714 Ibid, p. 284
715 Ibid, p. 283
since the self is problematized in terms of non-self-identity, which Levinas claims breaks with Eleatic unity.

The fecundity of the I is its very transcendence. The biological origin of this concept nowise neutralizes the paradox of its meaning, and delineates a structure that goes beyond the biologically empirical.\textsuperscript{716}

Fecundity therefore achieves what we have been seeking from the first: the \textit{escape from the self} of transcendence. This was not achieved by the I conceived as the power of actualising possibilities in Heidegger’s sense. Such an I, which pushes toward its own future, ‘falls back on its feet, and, riveted to itself, acknowledges its transcendence to be merely illusory and its freedom to delineate but a fate.’\textsuperscript{717} The transcendence of fecundity on the other hand breaks with this return to self by finding itself as Other, but the I does not thereby become nothing but a moment of an ultimate biological finality.

**Filiality and Fraternity**

The relation of a child to a parent (Levinas will say: of a son to a father)\textsuperscript{718} is understood in terms of ‘both rupture and a recourse at the same time.’\textsuperscript{719} As a new beginning the child represents a rupture and is designated by Levinas as ‘a created freedom.’\textsuperscript{720} To call the child ‘created’ is to distinguish its commencement from that of the effect of a cause. Such commencement specifies the absolute rupture from the parent and thus identifies the separateness of the two. But the child is also dependent on the parents. Just as the father has access to a future that is not his time via the time of the son, so the son has access to a past which he did not live through via the father. The child has \textit{recourse} to this legacy but it does not weigh on him. The weightlessness of this legacy—which the child nonetheless enjoys the ‘advantages’ of—is characteristic of the mode of being of childhood.

The recapture of the past can be produced as a recourse. For by existing an existence which still \textit{subsists} in the father the I echoes the transcendence of the paternal I who \textit{is} his child: the son \textit{is}, without being “on his own account”\textsuperscript{721}; he shifts the charges of his being on the other and thus plays his being. Such a mode of being is produced as childhood, with its essential reference to the protective existence of the parents.

But these relations do not capture the genuine relation in which the child stands to the father. Or, more accurately, they do not specify the way the child is ‘accomplished’ as an I. ‘The I owes its

\textsuperscript{716} Ibid, p. 277
\textsuperscript{717} Ibid, p. 268
\textsuperscript{718} I shall follow Levinas’s practice but note its sexist implication here.
\textsuperscript{719} Levinas (1969), p. 278
\textsuperscript{720} Ibid
\textsuperscript{721} Ibid
unicity as an I to the paternal Eros.\textsuperscript{722} It is in the father’s love for the son that the son becomes the I that he is. Love, as Levinas puts it, ‘aims at the Other.’\textsuperscript{723} This is not simply the claim that it is others that are loved, but more precisely that in true love the Other is loved in his (or her) Otherness and not because of some specific desirable quality that the beloved instantiates. Erotic love always falls short of this, as we have noted. It is nonetheless achieved in paternal love.

The love of the father for the son accomplishes the sole relation possible with the very unicity of another; and in this sense every love must approach paternal love.\textsuperscript{724}

This relation of loving the child in his uniqueness is called by Levinas ‘election.’ The uniqueness of the child is due to the fact that he is unique for his father. The very identity of the child is derived from the love of the father. Thus the love of the father for the son is not added to an ‘already constituted I of the son.’\textsuperscript{725} Rather the fathers love ‘invests’ the unicity of the son in election. He stands out from the others, is unique, by virtue of the fact that he is ‘brought up’\textsuperscript{726} and ‘the strange conjunction of the family is possible.’\textsuperscript{727}

But the unique one is a unique one among other such unique ones. ‘The unique child, as elected one, is accordingly at the same time both unique and non-unique.’\textsuperscript{728} The Others who are also unique therefore take on the relation of brothers among brothers. The son is not only among the other unique ones he is also ‘turned ethically to the face of the other,’\textsuperscript{729} and as such is among equals. As being in the world the child therefore is among others; but not simply among them. As unique among unique ones he or she does not simply be-with (\textit{Mitsein}) others in the world as part of a culture or social milieu (as Heidegger would have it). Rather he or she is presented with the uniqueness of others in a relation that Levinas calls ‘fraternity.’ Others are my brothers (or sisters).

In presenting themselves as unique each Other is presented as face. And as we know the relation to the face is straightaway ethical; I owe everything to the Other. The face to face relation, essentially ethical, is mitigated in its overpowering responsibility by the existence of the other Other; the third (\textit{le tiers}). As I am responsible even for the very responsibility of the Other the \textit{le tiers} makes justice possible. Justice is the comparing of incomparables. This community of justice is manifest concretely, for Levinas, in fraternity. The Otherness of the face nevertheless remains wholly Other. It is in terms of fraternity wherein the absolute demand of the face is mitigated by \textit{le tiers} that the realm of the political and justice are opened up. Politics is therefore inscribed in terms of fraternity: all lads together. Despite its sexist connotations this notion of politics as an

\textsuperscript{722} Ibid
\textsuperscript{723} Ibid, p. 256
\textsuperscript{724} Ibid, p. 279
\textsuperscript{725} Ibid
\textsuperscript{726} Ibid
\textsuperscript{727} Ibid
\textsuperscript{728} Ibid
\textsuperscript{729} Ibid
extension of friendship—which has classical predecessors—is not without its appeal. Fraternity forms one of the terms of the trinity of values of the French Republic, the others being liberty and equality. Most modern liberal, neo-liberal and socialist political theorists tend to emphasise one of the two latter; whereas for Levinas in contrast these only emerge on the basis of the former.

Towards Ethical Subjectivity
This familial drama of filiality and fraternity can be seen as a kind of political concretisation of an ethic of the face, where the family is centralised and the erotic seen as a means to the achievement of the greater and purer love of the father for the son. This is a love without Eros. The father/son relation and the fraternal relation resulting from this are thus conceived as the model for the ethical relation in general. The erotic relation is seen as embodying certain crucial concepts for the articulation of transcendence simply by virtue of its anticipation of this greater love.

For me this area of Levinas’s thinking is both the most troubling and the most fruitful. I see in these configurations the seed of what will later emerge as ethical subjectivity. The disrupting of the identity of the I has paved the way for the concept of substitution which forms the centrepiece of Otherwise than Being. It is also clear that these pages represent Levinas’s sense of what it means to achieve transcendence and thus escape from the self. But these ideas are presented in terms of a traditional familial drama, dominated by male actors. We might be able to take these ideas and their corollaries out of their archaic shells and display them without the troubling patriarchal politics that seems to be unfolding. This can be achieved, I think, by showing how ethical subjectivity is inscribed in the later work in a way that will bring us full circle. This will have the effect of locating the drama of the ethical at the very heart of subjectivity itself and thereby show that the need for escape is not only achieved by ethics or fecundity, but also inaugurated by the encounter with the Other. Ethics thereby goes all the way to substitution.

But in order to reach this point I will need to specify in what way the later thinking depends upon innovations which are required by the very logic of Totality and Infinity. These innovations relate to the nature of the trace and the related notion of the gift.

730 See Appendix
7. Beyond Totality and Infinity

Two Problems with *Totality and Infinity*

The analyses and the view of things offered in *Totality and Infinity* left us with two very glaring problems. In the first place the encounter with absolute Otherness as it occurs in our ‘experience’ of the face of the other person is not given as a vision or cognitive awareness. Indeed it cannot, by its very nature, appear to consciousness in the form of a theme which might be incorporated into the life of the self. For if it were it would not ipso facto be an absolute alterity. The question then arises of how this otherness, characterised by Levinas as formally resembling the infinite of Descartes’ third meditation or the Platonic *epokeina tès ousias*, gets encountered at all. Such a transcendence has indeed been testified to by the history of philosophy, even if such testimony has remained very much on the margin of what is otherwise, in Levinas’s terminology, ontology.

The transcendence of the Good with respect to being *epokeina tès ousias* is a transcendence to the second degree, and we are not obliged to make it immediately reenter into Heideggerian interpretation of being that transcends beings. The One in Plotinus is posited beyond being, and also *epokeina nou* The One of which Plato speaks in the first hypothesis of the Parmenides is foreign to definition and limit, place and time, self-identity and difference with respect to oneself, resemblance and dissemblance, foreign to being and to knowledge—for which all these attributes constitute the categories of knowledge. It is something else than that, other absolutely and not with respect to some relative term....The One is not beyond being because it is buried and hidden; it is buried because it is beyond being, wholly other than being.\(^\text{731}\)

Thus we are to compare absolute alterity to the Good in Plato, and the One of which he speaks in the *Parmenides* but which is given more extensive treatment in Plotinus’s *Enneads*. Given that these are characterised as beyond being, it is clear that they are therefore beyond knowledge which is coextensive with phenomena, manifestation of being or *Ousia*.\(^\text{732}\) The more therefore we insist upon the absolute alterity of the other, the more urgent becomes the question:

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\(^{731}\) Emmanuel Levinas ‘The Trace of the Other’ in Taylor (1986), p. 347

\(^{732}\) It does not matter for the purpose of this remark that I use the term ‘Ousia’ (being) rather than *Parousia* (presence), because we can ignore here the complication of the ontological difference between being (*Sein*) and beings (*seiendes*) which the above quote makes clear has been taken into consideration by Levinas. This is so because in Heidegger the comprehension of being (*Sein*) is presupposed by the comprehension of beings (*seiendes*), even if such comprehension, as it is understood in *Being and Time*, is stripped of any intellectualist implications. Moreover in Heidegger beings (*seiendes*) are not coextensive with *Parousia* (presence). For Levinas the Heideggerian being of beings, the *Sein of seiendes*, is another way of establishing the dominance of totality over infinity, or the neuter over the face of the Other.
In what sense, then, does the absolutely other concern me? Must we with the—from the first unthinkable—contact with transcendence and alterity renounce philosophy? Would transcendence be possible only for a completely blind touch, or for a faith attached to non-signification? Or, on the contrary, if the Platonic hypothesis concerning the One, which is One above being and knowledge, is not the development of a sophism, is there not an experience of it, an experience different from that in which the other is transmuted into the same?733

We have seen how for Levinas the concept of ‘experience’ takes on two opposed meanings. On the one hand it designates that which I can encounter in enjoyment and cognition, and thus assimilate to myself, and on the other it designates that which ‘transports us beyond what constitutes our nature,’734 and is therefore an encounter with what is alien. 735 The encounter with the Other is therefore the experience of the alien. So we must ask how is such an encounter to take place if ‘experience’ in the second sense is not to be thereby rendered into ‘experience’ in the first sense? The answer to this question is in terms of Levinas’s notion of the trace.

The second and closely related problem Totality and Infinity bequeaths to us is; given that we are to articulate the ‘theme’ of the absolutely Other, and yet this Other is ‘foreign to being and to knowledge,’ how are we to find a language in which it is to be said? This problem in large part, no doubt, derives its force from Derrida’s reading of Levinas in ‘Violence and Metaphysics.’736 As is pointed out there, in order for Levinas’s claim to remain within philosophy and not to become a matter of ineffable faith in an unsayable transcendence, it must be determinable in thought. But by Levinas’s own admission—and essentially so—there is no thought without language.

Modern investigations in the philosophy of language have made familiar the idea of an underlying solidarity of thought with speech. Merleau-Ponty, among others, and better than others, showed that disincarnate thought thinking speech before speaking it, thought constituting the world of speech, adding a world of speech to the world antecedently constituted out of significations in an always transcendental operation, was a myth.737

The point being that the language of Totality and Infinity— and arguably all language— is tied to ontology and depends for its meaning on its connection to ‘definition and limit.’ Two central examples can illustrate this point: the notion of ‘infinity’ is already given as the negative of the finite—the in-finite—and not in a positive sense, as Levinas would require in order to articulate the infinite as the absolutely other. Such infinity can only be given sense as the ‘not’ of what is given in the phenomenological experience (in the first sense articulated above) of the face of the

733 Emmanuel Levinas ‘The Trace of the Other’ in Taylor (1986), pp. 347-348
735 See Introduction
737 Levinas (1969), pp. 205-206
other—stubbornly finite\textsuperscript{738}— as a beyond of the phenomenon (called by Levinas ‘enigma’). The language of infinity therefore belongs to the philosophy of finitude or ontology. As Derrida puts it:

If one thinks, as Levinas does, that positive Infinity tolerates, or even requires, infinite alterity, then one must renounce language, and first of all the words \textit{infinite} and \textit{other}.\textsuperscript{739}

The other example is the notion of ‘exteriority’ which is clearly dependent for its sense on the notion of spatiality. \textit{Totality and infinity} is subtitled ‘An Essay on Exteriority’ so the concept is as central as the infinite. But Levinas certainly does not use the term in a spatial sense, but uses it metaphorically to specify the ‘outside’ of the totality. Yet in doing so it already depends upon a language of spatiality which it stretches to breaking point (we should note that spatial metaphors abound in \textit{Totality and Infinity}). The question then is; can we truly think the absolutely Other as infinity and exteriority without disconnecting these terms from the very well-springs from which they derive their meaning? Given, that is, what we have already admitted: that there is no thought without language. Derrida boggles at the thought:

That it is necessary to state infinity’s excess over totality \textit{in} the language of the Same; that it is necessary to think \textit{true} exteriority as \textit{non-exteriority}, that is, still by means of the Inside-Outside structure and by spatial metaphor; and that it is necessary still to inhabit the metaphor in ruins, to dress oneself in tradition’s shreds and the devil’s patches—all this means, perhaps, that there is no philosophical logos which must not first let itself be expatriated into the structure Inside-Outside.\textsuperscript{740}

Whatever we make of this it is clear that there is indeed a problem about how we are to articulate in language that which is the very source of language; the face of the absolutely infinite Other, for it is clear, as Derrida again notes, that: ‘Language, therefore, cannot make its own possibility a totality and \textit{include} within itself its own origin or its own end.’\textsuperscript{741}

The question then is a question of language, indeed \textit{the} question of language itself. Levinas readily admits that the language of \textit{Totality and Infinity} is still too ontological, so the question of the possibility of an alternative language—an ethical language—arises. This question is addressed in the papers ‘Meaning and Sense’, ‘Language and Proximity’ and above all his second major work \textit{Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence}, indeed this work can be seen as a working out of the implications of the problem of language within the framework of Levinas’s ethical metaphysics. There, as Levinas puts it; ‘The ontological language which \textit{Totality and Infinity} still uses in order to

\textsuperscript{738} This does not beg the question. For Levinas the face is also given as a phenomenon and as such, but only \textit{as such}, is reducible to its plastic forms.


\textsuperscript{740} Ibid, p. 140

\textsuperscript{741} Ibid, p. 118
exclude the purely psychological significance of the proposed analyses is henceforth avoided.\textsuperscript{742} We will see in Chapter 8 how such avoidance is attempted.

In this section I will articulate the notion of the trace. The texts central to an understanding of the trace are: ‘The Trace of the Other’ and ‘Enigma and Phenomenon.’ Another important work is the book \textit{Humanism of the Other}, particularly its first section ‘Meaning and Sense.’ Our explication will proceed by a reading of these texts.

\textbf{The Trace}

A friend of mine was very fond of telling a story—probably apocryphal—about the surrealist artist René Magritte. Apparently one evening while welcoming guests at the door to a formal dinner he had organised, the artist, out of the blue and very quickly, kicked one of the gentlemen guests up the backside, and then continued with the formalities as if nothing had happened. In other words he pretended that nothing had happened by attempting to erase any \textit{trace} of what took place. One can imagine the look of bemusement on the face of the gentleman in question (an oddly amusing image): did that really happen? It \textit{can’t} have happened, \textit{it doesn’t make sense}. The evening could have passed, the gentleman confided in no one—they might think him a little odd—and in the end he would forget the whole thing. And yet...

If the artist were to never do such a thing again, if his conduct in the future were to become conformity itself, if when the subject of the kick were tentatively raised he looked puzzled and if finally the victim’s life were to continue without any further aberrations of this kind, then the latter might start to believe that what had taken place hadn’t really taken place; a product of the imagination, a moment of madness or delirium. The event would then probably be forgotten, dropped from his life like a moment of a dream, erased forever. Reality would intervene in its intimidating coherence and totality to smother the ‘event’ under its irrecusable fabric. But would it be thoroughly erased? I would say that the event, the kick, would \textit{haunt} the guest. He would carry it with him somewhere deep in his psyche and it would emerge as a memory of an event that apparently did not take place, something like a screen memory. He could never revisit the site of the crime, because he would find no trace of the happening. I see him blinking and stiffly shaking his head in dismissal, as one does when a crazy idea strikes one. But I don’t think the event would ever entirely go away.

The point of this rather surreal story is to illustrate the effects of a disturbance of order when that which disturbs withdraws, or simply passes. Such a disturbance of order, the order of totality as Levinas calls it, which withdraws from the totality \textit{before it arrives}, he designates the \textit{trace}. It certainly takes on a surreal aspect. The trace is a kind of hyperbolic form of our comic interruption; it is the manner in which that which has never been present interrupts the order of the world.\textsuperscript{743}

\textsuperscript{742} Emmanuel Levinas ‘Signature’ in Levinas (1997), p. 295

\textsuperscript{743} We will revisit this strange idea of a diachronic past and show its relation to sensibility in Chapter 8
The one who left traces while erasing his traces didn’t want to say or do anything by the traces he leaves. He irreparably disturbed order. Because he passed absolutely. Being, as leaving a trace, is passing, leaving, absolving oneself.\textsuperscript{744}

The trace is therefore not a manner of signifying which would have behind it an intention to signify. On the contrary the trace, or rather the ‘trace in the strict sense,’\textsuperscript{745} is the remains left by one who wished to erase all traces of his passing. Just as our surrealist’s kick was meant for nothing, or was not meant (one will say ‘for a laugh,’ as young people say their idle pranks are for, but no one laughs). Nevertheless our example is lacking, or rather is too full, as all examples must be, because given the example we can fit it back into a world or a text or a context: we can see it as a piece of a surrealist protest at the hypocrisy of the order of civilised life. But the trace is not to be fitted into order. It disrupts ab-solutely.\textsuperscript{746} It nevertheless remains no coincidence that Levinas uses as his epigraph for \textit{Enigma and Phenomenon}, a text devoted to the articulation of the notion of the trace, a quote from Eugene Ionesco’s play \textit{The Bald Soprano}: ‘In short, we still do not know if, when someone rings the doorbell, there is someone there or not...’\textsuperscript{747}

Ionesco was one of the foremost play writers in what was known as the \textit{Theatre of the Absurd}. This movement is understood to be depicting the plight of humanity in a Godless and therefore meaningless world,\textsuperscript{748} essentially the existentialist view. But Levinas is in fact inverting this idea: it is not the world that is meaningless and absurd. ‘It is not something irrational or absurd that disturbance disturbs.’\textsuperscript{749} The world is shot through with meaning in the sense that it is rationally ordered. Just as Magritte’s dinner party was rationally ordered; even if this ordering is cold and faceless. Indeed it is precisely by virtue of its indomitable order that the world, as Levinas understands it, is cold and faceless. A little like Kafka’s\textsuperscript{750} world where everything is ordered according to an impersonal logic which crushes the individual making him a cog in the machine or a helpless cry; indeed I read Kafka’s work as largely an attempt to articulate such a cry (Kafka is also often associated with the school of the Absurd). It is rather the face as an entrance into the world unsettling its order, which constitutes the disruptive element. Yet on the other hand, and despite our introductory example, the disruption of order by the face should not be construed as an entrance of the absurd, which would leave the face as bereft of orientation or directing force.

\textsuperscript{744} Levinas (2006b), p. 42
\textsuperscript{745} Emmanuel Levinas ‘The Trace of the Other’ in Taylor (1986), p. 357
\textsuperscript{746} Levinas developed the technique of hyphenating certain important terms in his later works in order to emphasise their etymological structure and thereby to draw out archaic or suppressed meanings. The word ‘ab-solute’ is a significant example of this. The ‘ab’ implying ‘away from’ and the ‘solute’ ‘to absolve’: Latin absolūtus (“unconditional”), perfect passive participle of absolvō (“loosen, free; complete”). And thus it is connected to ‘absolve:’ from Latin absolvere, present active infinitive of absolvō (“set free, absolve”), from ab + solvō (“loose”).
\textsuperscript{747} Emmanuel Levinas ‘Enigma and Phenomenon’ in Levinas (1996b), p. 66
\textsuperscript{748} For a forceful articulation of the notion of the Absurd in this sense see Camus (1975)
\textsuperscript{749} Emmanuel Levinas ‘Enigma and Phenomenon,’ in Levinas (1996b), p. 71
\textsuperscript{750} See Kafka (1994) and (1986)
Rather it is the clash of two incompatible orders: ‘The disturbance that is not the surprise of the absurd is possible only as the entry into a given order of another order which does not accommodate itself to the first.’ The face enters from a different order and its visitation disturbs the order of the world. This situation is not a matter for despair, rather it is precisely by virtue of the fact that the face does not and cannot enter into the order of the world that there is ethics in the world. It’s as if this is the very wellspring from which is issued the human order, an order such that there are values and ethics.

Levinas imagines an ordinary scenario: ‘Someone unknown to me rang my doorbell and interrupted my work. I dissipated a few of his illusions.’ But later he introduces a different possibility: ‘someone rang, and there is no one at the door: did anyone ring?’ Such stories do in fact ring a bell. There was something in the look she gave me, but no: it was nothing, I imagined it. What was that movement by the window? It was nothing after all, just the wind:

A lover makes an advance, but the provocative or seductive gesture has, if one likes, not interrupted the decency of the conversation and attitudes; it withdraws as lightly as it had slipped in. A God was revealed on a mountain or in a burning bush, or was attested to in scriptures. And what if it were a storm! And what if scriptures came to us from dreamers! Dismiss the illusory from our minds! The insinuation itself invites us to do so.

The signification of the trace is such that it does not force a meaning upon us; rather it disturbs order only to withdraw. We have all experienced moments like those that Levinas describes and generally we have done what he says we do; dismissed them from our minds. We might call them moments of inspiration, and this would accord with Levinas’s use of this term in Otherwise than Being. Such inspiration, according to Levinas, comes from the outside, from the absolutely Other. Eventually, as we will see, Levinas will identify this source as God. But it should be emphasised that it is not a clear and distinct idea that comes to mind. The trace insinuates itself only to withdraw, or rather; it is the very passage of this withdrawal. A God of this sort does not reveal himself to a knowing or as a theme.

He is the node of an intrigue separate from the adventure of being which occurs in phenomena and in immanence, a new modality which is expressed by that “if one likes” and that “perhaps,” which one must not reduce to the possibility, reality and necessity of formal logic, to which scepticism itself refers.

Thus the nature of this disturbance does not force itself upon us but enters our lives in a way that excludes our saying ‘it is’ or ‘is not,’ the ‘is’ gets no purchase in such an intrigue. Rather it...

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751 Emmanuel Levinas ‘Enigma and Phenomenon’ in Levinas (1996b), p. 71
752 Ibid, p. 68
753 Ibid, p. 70
754 Ibid
755 Ibid, p. 71
insinuates itself in such a subtle way that: ‘It remains only for him, who would like to take it up.’\textsuperscript{756} In other words its mode is not the mode of knowledge; Levinas will call this a ‘divine comedy.’\textsuperscript{757} Indeed he will ultimately identify it with ethics, and its necessity—since it certainly places demands upon us—rather than being that of what he calls formal logic, will be an ethical necessity. Levinas explains this distinction and defends its seriousness in a footnote to \textit{Otherwise than Being}.

A purely “ethical” impossibility is expressed in expressions such as “impossible without shirking one’s obligations,” “without fault,” “without sin.” If there were real impossibility, responsibility would be an ontological necessity. But a “purely ethical” impossibility is not a simple relaxation of an ontological impossibility. Being wanting, fault, sin, or as it can be put in ways perhaps more acceptable today, “complex” – that is not only a reality “for kids.”\textsuperscript{758}

Thus there is a kind of necessity to this ‘visitation’ or ‘opening,’ it calls to order or to an awakening to our duties and this vigilance is not of the order of the world but of an ethical order. It is not confidently announced in a phenomenon or a being, but enters discretely in the mode of humility, soliciting rather than ordering. It therefore has about it an essential ambiguity: at once humility and command. ‘Obviously such an opening can only be an ambiguity.’\textsuperscript{759} This is the ambiguity which pertains to the face as we have seen.

Roslyn Diprose has evoked Levinas’s notion of the Other as ‘getting under my skin’ in her account of how original thought emerges; thought which is essentially critical of existing ideas. Particularly, for her, feminist thought.\textsuperscript{760} And there is a good deal of textual evidence that such a reading is faithful to a part of Levinas’s intention. More explicitly Levinas is attempting to account for how ethics enters the world, how, as we saw above, we are in an ethical relation of responsibility and therefore responsiveness toward the Other. Thought can become comfortable with itself, moving as it were in a circle which is never broken by the outside. As we have seen it is not only the case that we have our thoughts, \textit{we also enjoy our thoughts}; they fill our life with joys or sorrows. It is therefore not surprising that we can grow comfortable with our thoughts and not challenge them too much. After all, from where might such a challenge emerge? Critical thought, and therefore radical thought, for Levinas, arise from a situation wherein we are placed simultaneously before a demand and a supplication. It is the unique particularity of the singular other that places us in this situation simply by facing us. How does the face of the other do this? The answer is in terms of the trace. Levinas will tell us that the trace proceeds from an immemorial past and is the trace of an

\textsuperscript{756} Ibid, p. 70
\textsuperscript{757} Emmanuel Levinas ‘God and Philosophy,’ in Levinas (1998d), p. 166
\textsuperscript{758} Levinas (1998a), p. 198
\textsuperscript{759} Emmanuel Levinas ‘A Man-God?’ in Levinas (2006a), p. 48
\textsuperscript{760} Diprose (2002), Part II, section 7 ‘Thinking Through Radical Generosity with Levinas,’ pp. 125-145
illeity (a He-ness) which he associates with the word ‘God.’ All this requires a good deal of unpacking. But following on from our surreal episode: It’s as if God had kicked us up the backside (in the sense that it is often said that one needs such a kick) in an immemorial past and the face is a trace, the faint reminder, of this kick.

The Gift

Levinas begins his paper ‘The Trace of the Other’ by considering the nature of the I. The I is considered to be ‘identity in the strong sense; it is the origin of the very phenomenon of identity.’ But the I is not a simple tautology; A=A, rather it is understood in terms of a dynamic self-relation. Somewhat similar to Kierkegaard and Heidegger’s view the self is understood as a concern for itself it ‘is an “A anxious for A,” or an “A enjoying A,” always an “A bent over A.”’

Even so the world in which it finds itself is one that caters for its needs, as we have already seen at length. It is in terms of the satisfaction of these needs that the I is initially understood: ‘The tautology of ipseity is an egoism.’ This egoism is not disturbed or counteracted by the adventure of knowledge. Knowledge gathers beings into a coherent picture of the world by means of memory and anticipation which is a gathering of things into the present by means of the minds synthesising activity. As we will see it is precisely this understanding of being in terms of the present and therefore presence, especially in his paper ‘Enigma and Phenomenon,’ which Levinas will challenge with his notion of the trace.

The temporal modality of the present points us towards a future as possibility; as in Heidegger’s notion of anticipatory resoluteness. Therefore even Heidegger’s notion of the Being of beings, which Levinas characterises as ‘difference in itself,’ does not constitute a radical enough alterity to constitute a serious challenge to the ego’s sovereignty. Once again Levinas reiterates the fact that in Heidegger our relation to being is still inscribed in terms of comprehension. Despite the fact that the history of metaphysics is nothing but the process of the forgetting of Being according to Heidegger, Being is still in a certain sense graspable and grasped.

But the poets and philosophers force, for a moment, its inexpressible essence. For it is still in terms of light and obscurity, disclosure and veiling, truth and non-truth—that is, in the priority of the future—that the being of beings is approached.

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761 I will ignore the sexist overtones of this ‘He’ of the trace, but not because I do not think they are important. Rather I think that to deal with this problem requires more space than I can afford. See Appendix.
762 A severe reprimand, especially one to motivate someone into doing something (idiomatic)
763 Emmanuel Levinas ‘The Trace of the Other,’ in Taylor (1986), p. 345
764 Ibid
765 See Chapter 2
766 Emmanuel Levinas ‘The Trace of the Other,’ in Taylor (1986), p. 345
767 Ibid, p. 246
768 Ibid
Thus at the level of comprehension the possibility of an encounter with radical alterity is ruled out. This is taken as equivalent to the maintenance of the sovereignty of the ego. Philosophy as ontology, as Levinas conceives it, is thereby complicit in this suppression of genuine alterity since, with the exception of certain marginal gestures specified above (and we will add to the list later), it continues to be a discourse on comprehension. Such a discourse leans towards idealism, which constitutes a crucial target of Levinas’s attack. Idealism, in its very general form, consists in conceiving reality in terms of the constitution of the spiritual. In so doing thought closes itself in and armours itself against alterity, testifying to the sense of ‘allergy’ at the thought of an Other that remains Other.

Every experience, however passive it be, however welcoming, is at once converted into a “constitution of being” which it receives, as though the given were drawn from oneself, as though the meaning it brings were ascribed to it by me. Being bears in itself the possibility of idealism.

Being, even in its excess over beings, is still understood in Heidegger in terms of comprehension, which in its turn calls for idealism. Now, this may indeed be a rather dubious reading of Heidegger, particularly if we take account of the later Heidegger, after the so-called turning or ‘Kehre.’ There it is clear that there is in Heidegger an excess to Being as comprehended and indeed that he can be read as closer to Levinas than the latter is willing to admit. What is clear however is that this excess in Heidegger cannot be construed as an ethical excess as Levinas wishes to understand it. Nevertheless I cannot go into this in any detail here, and the point still stands that Levinas argues that what is within comprehension is not thereby wholly Other and thus, as he says, ‘bears in itself the possibility of idealism.’ In other words nothing is given raw and prior to constitution by the ego, not even the poets inexpressible ‘vision’ of the essence of Being, which they miraculously manage to express in their poems. This then is the reiteration of a notion of experience which is the first we have characterised above. Once again there arises the difficulty over how Levinas is to articulate that which he is a pains to insist cannot be understood in terms of light and comprehension when at the same time the phenomenological is understood as coextensive with light and comprehension.

At this point Levinas then reminds us that philosophy has been able to express a strong notion of alterity despite the fact that: ‘From its infancy philosophy has been struck with horror of the other that remains other.’ As we have already seen he cites Plato’s epekeina tês oussias and Plotinus’s One. Later he increases the list of such gestures of transcendence in the history of philosophy.

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769 Ibid. The word ‘allergy’ is also one that Levinas has chosen carefully: from Gk. allos “other, different, strange” + ergon “activity”
770 Ibid
771 At this level Levinas joins those philosophers in the analytic tradition who have criticised what has come to be known as the ‘myth of the given.’ In the United States the major advocate of this line is Sellars (1997) wherein the term is coined. In Britain one should here mention Austin (1962).
772 Emmanuel Levinas ‘The Trace of the Other’ in Taylor (1986), p. 346
It is the beyond being in Plato; the entrance through the door of the agent intellect in Aristotle; the idea of God in us, going beyond our capacity as finite beings; the exaltation of theoretical reason in practical reason in Kant; the search for recognition by the Other in Hegel himself; the renewal of durée in Bergson; the sobering up of lucid reason in Heidegger...\textsuperscript{773}

All this after he has just concluded an argument that such a notion belongs to a ‘certain articulation of Husserl’s thought.’\textsuperscript{774} What is perhaps even more surprising is that he also cites Nietzsche as a precursor in this: ‘The Nietzschean man above all was such a moment.’\textsuperscript{775} Thus we can conclude, if Levinas is indeed correct in this characterisation, that a sense of absolute alterity perpetually raises its head in philosophy, despite philosophers’ efforts to repress it. Thus we have at least prototypes of the kind of thing Levinas is after. But these notions require, in order that they be made convincing, some sense in which they are manifest in experience. This demonstrates Levinas’s continued commitment to a kind of phenomenology, even if the structures he is after constitute an interruption of phenomenology.

If, consequently, the trace does not belong to phenomenology, to comprehension of appearance and dissimulation, it could at least be approached by another path, by situating that significance from the phenomenology it interrupts.\textsuperscript{776}

Thus the ‘method’ consists in following a certain phenomenological investigation until this phenomenology is interrupted. Such an interruption comes about by following a specific concrete instance in human existence such that it can only be explicated if phenomenology is exceeded in some crucial respect. It is thus necessary therefore to specify a concrete instance wherein such a thing as a movement of transcendence is achieved. What this requires is the possibility in the human drama of an ‘experience’ which does not amount to integration into the life of the subject. A non-egoistic movement of the subject, an abandoning of the self in which nevertheless the self is not erased; as it would be in the kind of sacred intoxication that Levinas has called ‘participation.’\textsuperscript{777} ‘Can there be something as strange as an experience of the absolutely exterior, as contradictory in terms as a heteronomous experience?’\textsuperscript{778} It will come as no surprise that such an experience is the experience of the ethical, here given a very specific explication.

The heteronomous experience we seek would be an attitude that cannot be converted into a category, and whose movement unto the other is not

\textsuperscript{773} Emmanuel Levinas ‘Philosophy and Awakening’ in Levinas (2006a), p. 76. It is clear that the ‘idea of God in us’ refers to Descartes third Meditation.
\textsuperscript{774} Ibid
\textsuperscript{775} Levinas (1998a), p. 8
\textsuperscript{776} Levinas (2006b), p. 41
\textsuperscript{777} See Emmanuel Levinas ‘Lévy-Bruhl and Contemporary Philosophy’ in Levinas (2006a), pp. 34-45 and many other places in his writings. See also Introduction.
\textsuperscript{778} Emmanuel Levinas ‘The Trace of the Other’ in Taylor (1986), p.348
recovered in identification, does not return to its point of departure. Is it not furnished us by what we call quite simply goodness, and works, without which goodness is but a dream without transcendence, a pure wish (blosser Wunsch), as Kant put it?\textsuperscript{779}

Thus the heteronomous experience we are after is specified in terms of the goodness of works. Such works are a doing for others without regard for oneself, a giving or donating of one’s time and effort for the sake of others. Levinas specifies such work—what we might in more familiar English call ‘service’—by the use of the term ‘liturgy’ (a translation of the Greek term \textit{leitourgia} or \textit{λειτουργία}) which is

\begin{quote}

a Greek term which in its primary meaning indicates the exercise of an office that is not only completely gratuitous, but that requires, on the part of him who exercises it, a putting out of funds at a loss.\textsuperscript{781}
\end{quote}

If there is no such thing, and we will see how this can be challenged, then Levinas has not specified the type of experience that he has promised, but he is betting on the fact that there is. However that may be, such goodness will require certain definite formal conditions in order to satisfy his notion of a heteronomous experience. ‘\textit{A work conceived radically is a movement of the same unto the other which never returns to the same.}\textsuperscript{782}’ It should however be added that such a movement cannot be equated with the simple gratuitous act, the act of pure expenditure, as Bataille\textsuperscript{783} would put it. With clear allusion to the latter Levinas writes:

\begin{quote}

On the other hand, a work differs from the game or pure expenditure. It is not realised in pure loss, and it is not enough for it to affirm the same in its identity circumvented with nothingness. A work is neither the pure acquiring of merits nor a pure nihilism. Beneath the apparent gratuity of his action, both he who chases after merits and the nihilist agent forthwith takes himself as the goal.\textsuperscript{784}
\end{quote}

The formal conditions therefore are quite strict and have as a consequence triggered controversy,\textsuperscript{785} for they develop the logic of the \textit{gift} indicated in \textit{Totality and Infinity} as that which is instrumental in the emergence of dwelling allowing me to escape from the faceless depths of the \textit{il y a}.\textsuperscript{786} \textit{Giving} in \textit{Totality and Infinity} is located as the concrete response to the face of the Other, a radical generosity which is the outcome of my spontaneous freedom being thrown into question by the face. (It is also, as we have noted, the possibility of the opening of the dwelling by

\textsuperscript{779} Ibid
\textsuperscript{780} It is no doubt in this sense of ‘service’ that the whole idea of a religious service arises.
\textsuperscript{781} Emmanuel Levinas ‘The Trace of the Other’ in Taylor (1986), p. 350
\textsuperscript{782} Ibid, p. 348, Levinas’s emphasis
\textsuperscript{783} See Georges Bataille ‘The Notion of Expenditure’ in Taylor (1986)
\textsuperscript{784} Emmanuel Levinas ‘The Trace of the other’ in Taylor (1986), p. 389
\textsuperscript{785} See Derrida (1992) and Schrift (1997)
\textsuperscript{786} Levinas (1969), pp. 168-74
I no longer feel I have the right to my possessions. It is not only my right to be that is questioned by the face of the other but also my possessions. Levinas insists that this is necessarily the case if I am to differentiate my-selves from the faceless elemental: ‘I must know how to give what I possess.’ The notion of the work parallels this notion of the gift in that it too represents a radical generosity, though here it does not specify possessions but the helping hand; which indeed can clearly amount to the donation of money, possessions, blood or a kidney. But can this be conceived as a gift? Certainly in the ordinary sense to give generously is to bestow a gift. But Jacques Derrida has argued that the notion of the gift constitutes an aporia in the sense that the conditions of its possibility are also the conditions of its impossibility.

These conditions of possibility of the gift (that some “one” gives some “thing” to some “one other”) designate simultaneously the conditions of the impossibility of the gift. And already we could translate this into other terms: these conditions of possibility define or produce the annulment, the annihilation, the destruction of the gift.

What are these conditions? If we focus on the quote we should be struck by the fact that the conditions that Derrida is emphasising are the conditions that the players in the drama—“one”, “one other” and the “thing” given—are inscribed in terms of substantives; as identities. Questioning the identity of the agents in the ethical relation is central to Levinas’s later work, as we will see. Thus this does not indicate a divergence between Levinas and Derrida but, I will try to argue, an area of convergence. Nevertheless such questioning alone does not yet tell us why such identities render the gift impossible.

The point is that the conditions of the gift are specified in terms of a certain pre-conception of what it is to give; not in the sense that this pre-conception is prejudice; rather such pre-conceptions are implicit in our understanding of terms. They are, to borrow a metaphor from Wittgenstein, the rules for the correct application of the terms in question. The grasping of such rules, if this is the right way of putting it, Derrida— in a clear allusion to Heidegger—refers to as ‘semantic precomprehension.’ In the case of the ‘gift’ as Derrida understands it—this is why he spends so much time on it—these rules when applied result in the annulment of the possibility of a gift. This would seem to deny precisely what Levinas is relying on; the possibility of the gift. But I think it is the case rather that this strange conceptual knot takes us to the heart of Levinas’s thinking.

The problem with the gift emerges because in order for it to be a true gift it must be the case that it involves no reciprocity. Indeed the gift stands out in contrast to the reciprocity of economic exchange, which is characterised by the quid pro quo of prudential rationality. As Derrida sees it:

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787 See Chapter 5 ‘Habitation and the Feminine’
788 Levinas (1969), p. 171
790 Ibid
If the other gives me back or owes me or has to give me back what I give him or her, there will not have been gift, whether this restitution is immediate or whether it is programmed by a complex calculation of a long-term deferral or differance. Levinas treats the Odysseus (or Ulysses) myth as the epitome of prudential rationality which is always nostalgia and homecoming, the reaffirmation of the status quo and as such the circle of return. Such return is also characteristic of the movement of goods in an economic system, of ‘the circulation of women and of merchandise in a society.’ Thus in characterising the work or liturgy in terms of a gratuitous gift he advances as a point of contrast another, specifically Old Testament, story.

To the myth of Ulysses returning to Ithaca, we wish to oppose the story of Abraham who leaves his fatherland forever for an unknown land, and forbids his servant to even bring back his son to the point of departure.

This motif recurs frequently in Levinas’s work and is used to differentiate the totalising rationality which he believes characterises the dominant mode of philosophical discourse from his own ethical metaphysics. Thus it is not merely that the gift or liturgy is one mode of the ethical among others. ‘Liturgy, as an absolutely patient action, does not take place as a cult alongside of works and ethics. It is ethics itself.’ The stakes therefore are pretty high: We are trying to identify the possibility of ethics itself by virtue of this thinking of the gift and the liturgy and we are experiencing the difficulty that we cannot ascertain with certainty that such exists by means of concrete examples. Yet it is on the basis of phenomenology—understood as the search for the concrete—that we have decided to proceed. Derrida’s criticism takes as central, as we will see, an understanding of what it is to give that involves ‘some one’ intends to give something to someone other. While this ‘intends-to-give’ is understood as ‘to want, to desire, to intend.’ But if the ‘someone’ desires to give then the giving is already repaid in the giving itself and thus annuls the giving as a gift. This problematic is

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791 Ibid, This is difference with an ‘a.’

792 Emmanuel Levinas ‘Language and Proximity,’ in Emmanuel Levinas (1998d), p. 109 This apparently odd use of ‘women’ is an allusion to the work of Claude Lévi-Strauss who in The Elementary Structures of Kinship describes the use of women as property as characteristic of patriarchal societies. See Lévi-Strauss (1970)

793 Emmanuel Levinas ‘The Trace of the Other’ in Taylor (1986), p. 348

794 We should perhaps also note the connection here between Levinas’s work and Adorno and Horkheimer’s Dialectic of Enlightenment: Adorno and Horkheimer (1979) which characterises the Odyssey as the myth of Enlightenment (Aufklärung). Enlightenment in its turn is itself treated as an extension of myth and a means for the acquisition of power. Indeed Odysseus is there seen as homo economicus (see also Hent de Vries Minimal Theologies: Critique of Secular Reason in Adorno and Levinas, p. 197). See especially Adorno and Horkheimer (1979), pp. 43-81. This connection goes strangely undeveloped in the only comparative study I know of Levinas and Adorno, the otherwise admirable work De Vries (2005)

795 Emmanuel Levinas ‘The Trace of the Other’ in Taylor (1986), p. 348

796 Derrida (1992), p. 11

797 Ibid
not entirely new; Kant had already noted a kind of impossibility in recognising a single good action with certainty, even by looking within ourselves (and perhaps especially not by looking in this direction),\textsuperscript{798} and Kant too centralised intentions in acts of goodness.

Given that there can be no reciprocity if the gift is to really be a gift then it must be such that it be given without recognition that it is a gift and that the one receiving the gift return only a radical ingratitude. Otherwise we re-enter the circle of exchange against which the gift is defined, even if only symbolically. Derrida explains:

For there to be a gift, \textit{it is necessary [il faut]} that the donee not give back, amortize, reimburse, acquit himself, enter into a contract, and that he never have contracted a debt. (This “it is necessary” is already the mark of a duty, a debt owed, of the duty-not-to \textit{[le devoir de ne pas]}: The donee owes it to \textit{himself} even not to give back, he \textit{ought not owe [il a le devoir de ne pas devoir]} and the donor \textit{ought not count on restitution}.) Is is (sic) thus necessary, at the limit, that he not \textit{recognize} the gift as gift. If he recognises it as gift, if the gift \textit{appears to him as such}, if the present is present to him \textit{as present}, this simple recognition suffices to annul the gift. Why? Because it gives back, in the place, let us say, of the thing itself, a symbolic equivalent...The symbolic opens and constitutes the order of exchange and of debt, the law or the order of circulation in which the gift gets annulled.\textsuperscript{799}

A tightening of the knot is here effected by driving home the logic of the conditions governing the nature of the gift. If we noted in the earlier specifications of the conditions that Derrida emphasised the substantiality of the elements in the situation of giving, then now we will note that he emphasises the \textit{very phenomenal}\textsuperscript{800} of the conditions of giving as annulling the gift, even if this phenomenality issues in a symbolic circle of reciprocity. He goes on to exclude the possibility of the unconscious as agent in giving and receiving since this retains the notion of a memory, indeed the unconscious is constituted by virtue of the inscription of memory traces. Memory\textsuperscript{801} itself is excluded as this entails the symbolic function; it ‘must not be kept in memory, retained as symbol of a sacrifice, as symbolic in general. For the symbol immediately engages one in restitution.’\textsuperscript{802} In other words ultimately the gift is excluded from \textit{presence}. The present (gift) is never present (given). I am not trying to be clever by this remark but indicating certain linguistic affinities to which Derrida draws our attention and which can easily be overlooked; the remark is not meant as explanatory but as evocative.

\textsuperscript{798} Kant (1981), p. 19 
\textsuperscript{799} Derrida (1992), p. 13 
\textsuperscript{800} Where earlier we had scare quotes to emphasise the substantives now we have italics to emphasise the phenomenal. Derrida also includes modal and normative terms in italics. I take this to be to indicate that these too belong to phenomenology in a way that the gift cannot. 
\textsuperscript{801} We will see in Chapter 8 how Levinas locates the source of sacrifice or giving in the \textit{immemorial}. 
\textsuperscript{802} Derrida (1992), p. 23
The gift then, and thus the work or liturgy in Levinas’s sense, defies phenomenological grasp by virtue of its paradoxical logic. It is, in Derrida’s terms, locked in a double bind. But more importantly this double bind renders the gift incapable of entering the phenomenological order. This confirms Levinas’s point: placing the liturgy as an interruption of the phenomenological order. Thus if Derrida can be read as insisting on the impossibility of the gift and thus of the liturgy, which is precisely what Levinas’s account heavily relies upon, he can also be read as supporting Levinas’s later point, articulated in detail in Otherwise than Being, that goodness—understood here in terms of the gift, work or liturgy—does not exist within the phenomenological or ontological order but constitutes an interruption of such order.

For Levinas, as we have seen, the phenomenological is coextensive with light. Light can itself be identified with the world wherein needs are satisfied by the taking in of things from which we derive enjoyment and thought. The liturgy or gift therefore does not belong to the world of light and does not as a consequence proceed from need. Need is always ‘nostalgia, homesickness’ the movement characteristic of the economic and of Odysseus. The movement of the liturgy is, on the contrary, the movement of Abraham, a going out without return. This is what we have described under the term ‘Desire.’ We should recall that we have understood Desire in terms of the need to escape, which is inaugurated by the alterity that lies at the heart of the self, this is the pulse of this whole thesis. Therefore it is in the gift, work or liturgy that the movement of escape from the self (as circle of the same) is achieved. ‘Desire is revealed to be goodness.’ Goodness is the movement out of the self which has been promised from the start. Thus the aporia of the gift is avoided by understanding the ‘intention’ behind the act in terms of Desire rather than need. Desire is not able to be recuperated and is not a mode of the voluntary. Indeed, if I am right, the movement characteristic of Desire is like being driven out of one’s sanctuary, an itch that cannot be scratched or ‘it is like an inversion of the conatus of esse, a having been offered without holding back, a not finding any protection in any consistency or identity of a state.’ We will return to this language, which is characteristic of Otherwise than Being in Chapter 8, when we have seen the trace in more detail.

Levinas’s explication of the liturgy does not take the arduous path taken by Derrida in explicating the gift. But I think that there is indeed accord on the nature of the problem in each account. What the former insists upon is in the first place that the work goes out to the Other without return, like Abraham rather than Odysseus, and in the second place that it ‘requires an ingratitude of the other.’ These two elements combined, and driven to their logical conclusion, go to make up the aporia that Derrida drives home. But thirdly Levinas insists that what is central to the work is the idea that the agent act in such a way that he or she does not enter into the same time as the recipient; that he or she not rely on being around when the work come to fruition.

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803 Emmanuel Levinas ‘The Trace of the Other’ in Taylor (1986), p. 350
804 We have not yet shown this but will do so in Chapter 8
805 Emmanuel Levinas ‘The trace of the Other’ in Taylor (1986), p. 351
806 Levinas (1998a), p. 75
807 Emmanuel Levinas ‘The Trace of the Other’ in Taylor (1986), p. 349
The work, confronting its departure and its end, would be absorbed again in calculations of deficits and compensations, in accountable operations. It would be subordinated to thought. The one-way action is possible only in patience, which, pushed to its limit, means for the agent to renounce being the contemporary of its outcome, to act without entering the promised land.\(^{808}\)

Much of this is also a critique of Heidegger’s notion of action in *Being and Time* in terms of a *for-the sake-of-which*, which ultimately terminates in the *care* that *Dasein* has for its own being. This is perhaps a contestable reading of Heidegger but it is certainly Levinas’s. It is however reasonably uncontroversial that in *Being and Time* Heidegger understands *Dasein* as *being-in-the-world*, and this primarily in terms of the manipulation of equipment. Levinas will claim that what completes the circuit of the referential totality that constitutes *Dasein*’s world is a return to self. Thus he writes in *Time and the Other*:

> Since Heidegger we are in the habit of considering the world as an ensemble of tools. Existing in the world is acting, but acting 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.\(^{809}\)

By introducing a form of action, the gift, work or liturgy, which does not have *being-in-the-world* or *Dasein* for its objective, as it extends beyond the care for one’s own self (and we have seen just how radically this is construed) Levinas is thereby contesting Heidegger’s notion of temporality in terms of ecstatic *Dasein*’s finitude, and thus in terms of possibilities to be grasped and death as the possibility of impossibility which we have already explored. The concept of *patience* as it is developed here is precisely such a contestation and it takes on this specific hyperbolic meaning in Levinas’s later texts.

We have seen also how Heidegger’s notion of ecstatic time is also contested in terms of fecundity.\(^{810}\) We can now see how these two notions — the gift and of fecundity — come together. For the structure of fecundity is characterised as precisely the ‘goodness of goodness.’\(^{811}\) Permit me to quote at length:

> Transcendence is time and goes unto the Other. But the other is not a term: he does not stop the movement of Desire. The other that Desire desires is again Desire; transcendence transcends towards him who transcends—this is the true adventure of paternity, of the transubstantiation which permits going beyond the simple renewal of the possible in the inevitable senescence of the subject. Transcendence, the for the Other, the goodness correlative of the face, founds a more profound relation: the goodness of goodness. Fecundity engendering

\(^{808}\) Ibid

\(^{809}\) Levinas (1987a), p. 62

\(^{810}\) See Chapter 6

\(^{811}\) Levinas (1969), p. 269
fecundity accomplishes goodness: above and beyond the sacrifice that imposes a gift, the gift of the power of giving, the conception of the child. Here the Desire which in the first pages of this work we contrasted with need, the Desire that is not a lack, the Desire that is the independence of the separated being and its transcendence, is accomplished—not in being satisfied and in thus acknowledging that it was need, but in transcending itself, in engendering Desire.\footnote{Ibid, p. 269}

The transcendence which goes unto the Other by virtue of the gift is itself time. The opening of time is achieved precisely by the possibility of a time that is not simply my time. This is given in the opening unto the time of the Other by virtue of a radical generosity that does not in acting strive towards being the contemporary of the outcome of the action. Indeed we might well question whether this is still conceivable as action at all. The extra-ordinariness of such an ‘action’ is captured in the extraordinary, yet every day, occurrence of fecundity. Fecundity, as anyone who has had children will know, combines the extraordinary with the ordinary in an almost uncanny fashion. The most ordinary fact in the world, the birth of a child, is of course the most extraordinary event in anyone’s life. It is this situation that is specified in Totality and Infinity as characterising the fulfilment of the movement of the gift in its most radical form. It is ‘the gift of the power of giving,’ the opening up of a world in which youth emerges, or the world as young again. Death is not therefore the last word in the philosophical horizon which phenomenology opens up, as ontology would have it. Rather a beyond of Being takes us to rebirth by virtue of a renouncing of the egoism which Levinas claims is characteristic of our being-in-the-world. The child’s time is not my time but I ‘care’ about it through him or her as much as, perhaps even more than, I care about my own life.

It is here also that the very notion of the substantive self-identical self is first questioned in Levinas’s texts. The child is understood in terms of a ‘transubstantiation,’ which takes us beyond the circuit of possibility and thus of the economic existence characteristic of the world. The time of the child transcends the horizons of my world, yet my ‘substance’ is carried over into that new time. This questioning of the identity of the self is central to Otherwise than Being as we will see in Chapter 8. There also we will come closer to understanding what is meant in this context by my ‘substance,’ given that we are here contesting the identity of the self.

Thus we can see that this radical generosity is not only a quality of generous actions but is characteristic of the movement of fecundity and therefore, as Levinas sees things, the rebirth that constitutes the adventure of bringing children into the world. But fecundity is not restricted to biological birth as we have seen. However before we can understand such fecundity in its true significance we need to be clear as to what brings about this radical generosity. We have seen that it is the encounter with the face of the Other that throws into question my rights to my possessions and so makes giving possible. We have also seen that such giving is possible only because of Desire. Yet we have left unspecified just how the face signifies this radical questioning. We know now that it is in terms of the enigmatic trace that the face signifies. What is the trace?
The Enigma of the Trace

The face as Levinas conceives it does not enter into the order of the world but disturbs that order. It is not therefore manifest as a phenomenon. Nor is it hidden and thus able to be inferred on the basis of such appearances; ‘outside every revelation and dissimulation, a third way excluded by these contradictories.’ This third way is the way of the trace which cannot enter order but, as I have said, disturbs it. Levinas calls this way the face has of ‘appearing’ while absent ‘enigma.’

This way the Other has of seeking my recognition while preserving his incognito, disdaining recourse to the wink-of-the-eye of understanding or complicity, this way of manifesting himself without manifesting himself, we call enigma – going back to the etymology of this Greek term, and contrasting it with the indiscreet and victorious appearing of a phenomenon.

Order is characterised by Levinas in terms of ontology which is reflected in rational speech, specified later as the said (le Dit). Speech draws being into presence, which specifies on the one hand manifestation and on the other a privileged temporal modality. Speech here stipulates the language of phenomenology and ontology and is not to that extent bias towards the spoken rather than the written word. Language, as the language of ontology— whether speech or writing—is the language of manifestation. We have seen however that there are in the history of philosophy marginal moments which indicate thoughts of the beyond being. If the liturgy acts outside the order of ontology and it is provoked into such gratuity by the presence of the face, then the face signifies in a way which indicates a breach of order, a space wherein the goodness of the work can find elbow room.

Everything depends on the possibility of vibrating with a meaning that is not synchronised with the speech that captures it and cannot be fitted into its order; everything depends on the possibility of a signification that would signify in an irreducible disturbance. If a formal description of such a disturbance could be attempted, it would have us speak of a time, a plot, and norms that are not reducible to an understanding of being, which is allegedly the alpha and omega of philosophy.

We have indicated just how surreal such a ‘vibrating’ can appear when contrasted with the order that we take for granted. But we need to be very careful about how we cash out this surrealism, since it does not amount to the gratuity of pure play for example, as we have already noted. The

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813 Emmanuel Levinas ‘The Trace of the Other’ in Taylor (1986), p. 155
814 Emmanuel Levinas ‘Enigma and Phenomenon’ in Levinas (1996b), p. 70. In Greek, ainigma means an obscure or equivocal word, a riddle. The ‘wink-of-the-eye’ is, to my mind, a clear allusion to Heidegger’s—and before him Kierkegaard’s— notion of the ‘moment of vision’ (Augenblick) which literally means ‘in the blink of an eye.’
815 We will clarify this term in Chapter 8
816 Emmanuel Levinas ‘Enigma and Phenomenon’ in Levinas (1996b), pp. 67-68
The signification of the face is gravity itself: ‘it is a disturbance imprinting itself (we are tempted to say engraving itself) with an unexceptional gravity.’\textsuperscript{817} The weight of this ‘engraving’ of the face is the very materiality of reality itself. In other words I contend that, for Levinas, materiality is an outcome of the trace itself and saves the world from dissolving into relations which ultimately would issue in the truth of idealism. Does not Levinas say as much when he writes: ‘But then is not the trace the weight of being itself outside of its acts and its language, weighing not through its presence, which fits it into the world, but by its very irreversibility, its ab-soluteness?’\textsuperscript{818}? The trace disturbs order but also makes it possible. If there were no trace the world would be nothing more than the order of relations without any relata, but then the order would dissipate too. I will go into detail on this presently.

When a thief wishes to perpetrate the perfect crime he erases his fingerprints and removes all marks of his presence. In so doing he leaves traces of such erasing, the handkerchief that he uses to rub the doorknobs smudges the dust that lays dormant over the rest of the house. The smudge is a trace of the passage of one who tries to erase all sign of his being there, or at least all sign that it is he that has being there. The smudge indicates that someone has passed but it does not indicate anyone in particular as the fingerprint would. Such is the trace: ‘it signifies outside of all intension of making a sign and outside of any project that would sight it.’\textsuperscript{819} Of course the smudge enters into the order of the world, becomes a sign; it is clearly the work of a man adept at removing his fingerprints; a professional job, as they say. But the trace strictly speaking does not so enter; ‘the authentic trace disturbs the world’s order.’\textsuperscript{820} Thus the trace and the sign stand opposed, but not as two distinct ways of being, rather as two distinct orders. This is a difficult notion to follow. Suppose I sign a cheque. As a signature it stands in a definite relation to other signatures of mine. Their identity consists in being written by my hand—that is to say their identity as signatures of mine— and not in their being similar. Clearly a forger could make a mark closer to mine than my next (indeed being too close a good detective will spot the deception: ‘nobody can sign exactly the same each time’). But the mark on paper, the scrawling of my name by me, remains a trace of my passing: I had no intension to elide the ‘e’ and hoop the ‘d.’ Also I indented the page below, if our detective were to carefully and lightly scribble over this with a pencil my mark would be revealed; they would know who had been here. The mark or trace thus considered does not have as its criterion of identity my intension to sign, it is not identical to anything, it is simply its material presence; it appears to be nothing but its mute facticity. (I will return to this notion of facticity and its relation to Heidegger). Thus the trace, qua trace, does not enter into order; but without traces there could be no order, no signatures for example. This relation between the sign and the trace is similar to the relation between the saying (le dire) and the said (le dit). In this way we can see how Levinas is evoking the trace as a means of showing how the face can signify a ‘beyond,’ that which is beyond the order of the world, without this beyond

\textsuperscript{817} Emmanuel Levinas ‘The Trace of the Other’ in Taylor (1986), p. 359
\textsuperscript{818} Ibid, p. 357
\textsuperscript{819} Levinas (2006b), p. 41
\textsuperscript{820} Ibid
denoting another world hidden behind phenomena. It does not therefore represent an order of *things-in-themselves* behind the order of phenomena in the Kantian sense; it is not to reintroduce ‘worlds-behind-the-world.’

Central to Levinas’s notion of the trace as it signifies in the face is its temporal anomalousness: ‘A trace is the insertion of space in time, the point at which the world inclines toward a past and a time.’ It points towards a past that has never being present, older than phenomena. ‘The face is the trace of the absolutely completed, absolutely past Absent, retired into what Paul Valéry calls “old olden days, never olden enough.”’ The trace is given as a necessary component in signification and at the same time that which absolves itself from the relations of signification; which is the world. All signification depends for its possibility on prior traces; every word, for example, depends upon other words for its sense and each word stands in the trace. But if this is so then the trace always precedes the sign. Even the first sign is preceded by a trace that allows for its engraving. Thus the trace as ‘emptiness and desolation’ is prior to all meaning as presence or phenomenon. It belongs, as Levinas puts it, to an ‘immemorial past.’

Part of the thrust of this meditation on the trace is that meaning depends on memory—this is true of re-presentation for example, which for Levinas characterises intentional thought—because it requires for its possibility the retention of traces of the past. So this must also be true of the first meaning; which amounts to the fact that what precedes memory is the trace. This structure of a past that was never present is not only characteristic of what the trace signifies but of its manner of signification, as we will see. Given all this we can see therefore that the first words were never spoken, or rather that they were always already spoken. The first words for Levinas, as we know, are the words issuing from the face of the other and commanding: ‘You shall not kill.’

This temptation to murder and this impossibility of murder constitute the very vision of the face. To see a face is already to hear ‘You shall not kill’, and to hear ‘You shall not kill’ is to hear ‘Social justice’. And everything I can hear [entendre] coming from God or going to God, Who is invisible, must have come to me via the one, unique voice.

Levinas also insists that the first word is ‘God,’ and thus that these are equivalent ‘sayings.’ Within this immemorial past what comes to pass is the emergence of a debt for simply *Being* and this debt can never be acquitted. This is the origin of the ethical and, as we will see, Levinas

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821 Emmanuel Levinas ‘Jean Lacroix: Philosophy and Religion’ in Emmanuel Levinas (1996c), p. 81. This phrase is a translation of Nietzsche’s notion of ‘Hinterweltern,’ usually, and perhaps unhelpfully, translated as ‘back-worlds.’

822 Emmanuel Levinas ‘The Trace of the Other’ in Taylor (1986), p. 358

823 Levinas (2006b), p. 40

824 Emmanuel Levinas ‘Enigma and Phenomenon’ in Levinas (1996b), p. 69

825 Emmanuel Levinas ‘Ethics as First Philosophy,’ in Levinas (1989a), p. 84 and many other places.

826 Emmanuel Levinas ‘Ethics and Spirit’ in Levinas (1997), pp. 8-9

identifies this intrigue with God. I am accused in a _pre-originarity_ time, a time that is described by Levinas as _an-archic_, because it predates all origin, principle or _arche_. Prior to being I am already accused, and it is this accusation which he will identify with the _for-the-other_ which is proper to the psyche. It’s as if this accusation by an _an-archic_ alterity breathed into the self its very selfhood. This selfhood is understood as an unpayable debt to the Other which _identifies_ me as the accused. Levinas calls this being called to account for our very being ‘election.’ Such election is the only criteria of the identity of the self that Levinas is willing to countenance. It is our inability to slip away or transfer our duties; it is the source of the primordial shame that we feel when faced with the Other in their helplessness or need. As such it is the ultimate situation and it is given as a trace.\(^{828}\)

**The Difference between Levinas and Derrida’s Notion of the Trace**

We know that the notion of the trace is also central to Derrida’s philosophy. Derrida also, when commenting on its place in Levinas’s philosophy, ascribes to it a temporal meaning, he refers to it in terms of: ‘A past that has never been present:’ and continues, ‘this formula is the one that Emmanuel Levinas uses, although certainly in a nonpsychoanalytic way, to qualify the trace and enigma of absolute alterity: the Other.’\(^{829}\) Now though I suspect that Levinas would endorse this formula it is not how he in fact formulates the notion of the trace. What he says is: ‘A trace is a presence of that which properly speaking has never been there, of what is always past.’\(^{830}\) The trace is a _presence_ of sorts, despite the fact of its enigmatic status as ‘never been there.’ I rather suspect that the two philosophers are grinding somewhat different axes even if what they wish to chop with them remains very similar. It is clear that Derrida is concerned to question the metaphysics of presence, whereas in Levinas’s formulation I hear in the phrase ‘never been there’ an echo of Heidegger’s notion of _Da-sein_ (being-there) and thus as a challenge to the primordiality of _Da-sein_. In this way the notion of the trace is intended as a confrontation with Heidegger’s notion of _being-in-the-world_ rather than a questioning of presence as such. Such a confrontation is far from Derrida’s intentions; especially when he wrote ‘Différence’ wherein he counts Heidegger as an ally in his attempt to go beyond the metaphysics of presence. I will return to my contention that the trace in Levinas is intended to confront Heidegger in detail later. But as a preliminary, and to distinguish Levinas’s notion of the trace from Derrida’s, we need to be clear that Levinas does not conceive the trace in its materiality as a _bare facticity_ (it is not, we will see, our _thrownness_ that is being thematized here) preceding the order of meaning in the world, but inscribes it clearly in the _personal order_. The trace is the presence of a compelling absence and this absence, as the manner in which the face signifies, is _ethical_ in nature. The trace for Levinas is the trace of the _Other_, and not, as it would seem to be for Derrida, a textual trace. It predates our being-in-the-world and governs its character in a way that Heidegger would have rejected.

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\(^{828}\) More of this in Chapter 8  
\(^{829}\) Jacques Derrida ‘Différence’ in Derrida (1982), p. 21  
\(^{830}\) Emmanuel Levinas ‘The Trace of the Other’ in Taylor (1986), p. 358
For similar reasons we ought not to conceive of the trace in terms of cause and effect; and precisely because it is of a personal and transcendental order. Whereas cause and effect are most certainly involved in the order of the world; nothing is more ordered than the relation of cause to effect. Indeed Kant seemed to think that as far as phenomena were concerned the relation of cause and effect was implicated in the very notion of a temporal order (at least in so far as outer sense is concerned); the temporal itself being a necessary condition for the phenomenal. The trace on the other hand is the trace of an absolutely absent bygone past, a past that has never been present which is not of the order of ‘things,’ which:

In themselves do not leave a trace but produce effects, that is to say, remain in the world. One stone scratched another. The scratch can of course be taken as a trace: in reality, without the man who held the stone, the scratch is nothing but an effect. It is no more a trace than the brush fire is the trace of thunder. Cause and effect, even when separated by time, belong to the same world. All that is in things is exposed, even their unknown; the traces that mark them are part of the plenitude of presence, their history has no past. The trace as trace does not only lead to the past it is the very pass to the past more distant than all past and all future that still range themselves in my time, towards the past of the other where eternity as designed, absolute past that reunites all times.\textsuperscript{831}

The trace therefore is not only a way this past reaches us but the very passage—‘the very pass’—of this irrecoverable past, as we indicated by pointing out that this way of being past is part of the structure of the trace. When faced with the face one does not read the trace in order to decipher its message or its clue, one does not thematize the trace but submits to it. The trace comes as a command in the face of the Other; it calls to order. In this way the psyche is awoken to its responsibility towards the Other. But this is not so by virtue of being subjected to a cause issuing from a bygone time; the command is always already of the personal order.

The trace, according to Levinas, here awakens the psyche to the idea of a third person. Thus the trace does not compel out of some impersonal order but out of the order of a He. \textquote{The personal order to which a face obliges us is beyond being. Beyond being is a third person, which is not definable by the oneself, by ipseity.}\textsuperscript{832} This third person, as we have already remarked, Levinas refers to as illeity. The beyond where the trace comes from, the beyond of an immemorial past, a time which does not connect up with the present and is therefore irreducibly diachronic, is the beyond of illeity (He-ness).

This time is retreat of the Other and, consequently, in no way degradation of duration, which is intact in memory. The superiority does not lie in presence in the world but in an irreversible transcendence. It is not the modulation of the Being of being. As He and third person, it is somehow outside the distinction between

\textsuperscript{831} Levinas (2006b), p. 43
\textsuperscript{832} Emmanuel Levinas ‘The Trace of the Other’ in Taylor (1986), p. 356
Being and beings. Only a being transcending the world—an ab-solute being—can leave a trace.\footnote{Levinas (2006b), pp. 42-43}

After insisting that the trace brings to mind a personal order, the order of illeity, Levinas then proceeds to connect this personal order to the specificity of revealed religion.

The revealed God of our Judaeo-Christian spirituality maintains all the infinity of his absence, which is in the personal order itself. He shows himself only by his trace, as is said in Exodus 33. To go towards Him is not to follow this trace which is not a sign; it is to go toward the others who stand in the trace of illeity.\footnote{Emmanuel Levinas ‘The Trace of the Other’ in Taylor (1986), p. 359}

The movement follows this path: from the face as transcendence we move to the notion of its absolute absence. We then need to know how it is encountered, how it ‘signifies.’ The answer is in terms of the trace. This in its turn involves us in a cluster of terms: the Other as the Absent One, which is referred to the order of the He or illeity, and this is then identified with the God of Judaeo–Christian spirituality, Who shows Himself precisely through this trace. Here God is a God of ethics and we are able to approach him only through Others, and by virtue of the helping hand; that is, the gift. The trace therefore is a central notion in Levinas’s thought. ‘But the trace is not just one more word: it is the proximity of God in the countenance of my fellow man.’\footnote{Emmanuel Levinas ‘A Man-God?’ in Levinas (2006a), p. 50}

We will now turn to what kind of subjects we must be if the trace is to affect us in the way that Levinas insists that it does. We will see how ethical subjectivity constitutes an openness which allows for the trace to enter without passing through the synthesising work of consciousness.
8. Ethical Subjectivity

Introduction

The word ‘essence,’ as it appears in the title of Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence, is thought by Levinas to require some preliminary explanation:

It is necessary to emphasise at the beginning of this book something that will often be repeated within it, and which is necessary if its language, and its very title, are to be understood: the term essence here expresses being different from beings, the German Sein distinguished from Seiendes, the Latin esse distinguished from the Scholastic ens. We have not ventured to write essance as would be required by the history of the language, where the suffix -ance, deriving from -antia or -entia, gave birth to abstract nouns of action.836

Thus the very title of the book is a clear allusion to Heidegger, not as a uniquely original philosopher, who by virtue of this fact deserves emphatic remarking upon, rather it is because Levinas perceives in Heidegger’s notion of Being the culmination of a whole tradition of philosophy which lays emphasis on the movement or activity of essence and the importance of the comprehension of this essence.

Essence is understood by Levinas in terms of on the one hand an all pervasive presence coming to fill any gap which might appear to emerge in its midst (like the il y a which is another name for Being), and on the other a persistence in being which is its very activity of essancing. Exclusivity and persistence, the sovereignty of being is absolute: ‘The essence thus works as an invincible persistence in essence, filling up every interval of nothingness which would interrupt its exercise. Esse is interesse; essence is interest.’837 With a pounding logic essence invades, with an indifference to our lives and thus our deaths — which mean nothing in its perspective, the totality of beings. Every negation, as we have already noted838, is only relative, only another positive. The positivity of essence is captured by the term conatus.839 The active striving of all beings to be is the very movement of essence, its very interesse, or interest. This is the logos of Being. The Hobbesian war of all against all:

Being’s interest takes dramatic form in egoisms struggling with one another, each against all, in the multiplicity of allergic egoisms which are at war with one another

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836 Levinas (1998a), p. xlvi The term ‘otherwise than being’ is a translation of Plato’s epekeina tēs ousias which characterises ‘the good’ in Plato Republic. See Plato (1987) 509 b9, p. 248
837 Ibid, p. 4
838 See Chapter 5
839 Levinas derives the word ‘conatus’ from Spinoza (though it is central to other thinkers in the Western tradition) where it features as the ‘conatus essendi.’ Spinoza understands the conatus in the sense that ‘each thing, as far as it lies in itself, strives to persevere in its being’ Spinoza (1979) part 3, prop. 6, p. 91
and are thus together. War is the deed or the drama of the essence’s interest. No entity can await its hour.  

Given this picture it seems that peace and ethics can only come about by compromise and calculation: utilitarianism rules ethics and enlightened self-interest is the law of politics. But Levinas will ask if this is truly sufficient to account for the goodness, charity and sacrifice which are present in the world (even the little that there is). This is the point of the quotation from Pascal that follows the dedication at the front of *Otherwise than Being*:

...They have used concupiscence as best as they could for the general good; but it is nothing but a pretence and a false image of charity; for at bottom it is simply a form of Hatred. Pascal *Pensées*, 404

Given this notion of Being and essence, is it not necessary to specify an exception to the logos which he identifies with *polemos*? Is there not an otherwise than being? A disinterestedness (dis-inter-essence, *dés-intéressement*)? These are the general points of reference within which this book operates. The exception to essence, that which is beyond Being, is found in the heart of subjectivity itself. Subjectivity is therefore not an ontological category for Levinas, but an ethical category; ethics itself ‘being’ beyond being.

The saying (le Dire) and the said (le Dit)

The clumsiness of the last sentence of the previous paragraph is indicative of another problem that a conception of an otherwise than being encounters. The fact that I found it necessary to put the word ‘being’ in scare quotes to indicate its inappropriateness is symptomatic of the fact that the language of philosophy is the language of ontology. And this is what Levinas claims. The

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840 Levinas (1998a), p. 4
841 Many of these themes are a repetition in another format of those we have noted in the introduction. But it is necessary here to reiterate them in order to orientate ourselves in the new idiom in which they are expressed.
842 Levinas (1998a), opening pages
843 Already in *Totality and Infinity* the truth of Being was inscribed in terms of *polemos* or war. See Levinas (1969) Preface.
844 Adriaan Theodoor Peperzak has suggested that it might be better to treat such exceptions not in terms of an otherwise than Being, but rather as seeing Levinas’s polemic against ontology as showing the limitations of previous ontologies and thus as being a partial view of what is. Peperzak (1999), pp. 83-84. I have a good deal of sympathy with this view, properly developed, as it would have the effect of diminishing the odd and paradoxical nature of much of what Levinas seems to be saying. However it is not Levinas’s way of putting things and he finds some justification for this in the works of Plato and Plotinus. The notion of an otherwise than being is certainly strange to the point of madness, and Levinas does not shy away from noting this proximity to pathology (see Levinas (1998a), p. 191 n. 3). I suppose the terminology is designed to emphasise the radicality of Levinas’s departure from the tradition.
845 The terminology is Levinas’s and is modelled on the terms ‘essence’ and thus, like this term, should be read as a verb, in an active sense.
language which describes beings, their Being or essence, Levinas will call ‘the said’ (le Dit). All ways of expressing Being, scientific or poetic, are understood in terms of the said. All language is ultimately the said because it congeals into being and is comprehended in terms of what is.\(^{846}\)

But there is also the situation of language in which one person addresses another. This is as universal to language as the said. Each time I say ‘hello’ or ‘help’ or pat a friend on the back I am approaching another. It is not the message contained in these words or gesture, there is no message; it is the fact that they are addressed to another person, that they accomplish my proximity\(^{847}\) to you, which gives them significance. This aspect of language Levinas calls ‘the saying’ (le Dire). But there is no said without saying even if the saying inevitably congeals into a said. This torsion is thematized in terms of the saying (le Dire) being prior to the said (le Dit), it being a ‘foreword’ (avant-propos). But since the said (le Dit) inevitably incorporates all language into its all-encompassing totality, the saying (le Dire) is not thereby understood as an origin or cause but as ‘pre-original’ or ‘an-archical’ (an-arche). The significance of this saying is central to the intrigue that we are attempting to articulate, the intrigue that is called subjectivity and is comprehensible (if that’s the right word) only as the proximity to another:

Saying is not a game. Antecedent to the verbal sign it conjugates, to the linguistic systems and the semantic glimmerings, a foreword preceding languages, it is the proximity of one to the other, the commitment of an approach, the one for the other, the very signifyingness of signification… The original or pre-original saying, what is put forth in the foreword, weaves an intrigue of responsibility.\(^{848}\)

But can a book express by mean of its inevitable said the very saying which is characteristic of proximity? If in the form of a written thesis, a philosophical tract, Levinas wishes to convey the very saying of a said is this not done ‘at the price of a betrayal’\(^{849}\)? This indeed is how things are. But such a movement is not unprecedented in philosophy. There are other ways of saying which inevitably betray the point of what it is saying by virtue of being said. Scepticism seems to be such a way:

To conceive the otherwise than being requires, perhaps, as much audacity as scepticism shows, when it does not hesitate to affirm the impossibility of statement while venturing to realize this impossibility by the very statement of this impossibility. If, after the innumerable “irrefutable” refutations which logical thought sets against it, scepticism has the gall to return (and it always returns as philosophy’s illegitimate child), it is because in the contradiction which logic sees

\(^{846}\) ‘The said’ (le Dit) in Levinas is reminiscent of Wittgenstein’s notion of language as picturing facts in the Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus, but I suspect that the said is somewhat more inclusive. See Wittgenstein (1961)

\(^{847}\) We will be examining the important notion of ‘proximity’ in the body of the text.

\(^{848}\) Levinas (1998a), pp. 5-6

\(^{849}\) Ibid, p. 6
in it the “at the same time” of the contradictories is missing, because a secret
diachrony commands this ambiguous or enigmatic way of speaking, and because
in general signification signifies beyond synchrony, beyond essence.850

The claim which scepticism makes that we don’t really know anything is a claim to know at least
this. Just as Socrates’s claim that all that he knew was that he knew nothing also seems to claim
what it ‘at the same time’ denies. What Levinas seems to be suggesting is that the movement of
the saying (le Dire) of it is not ‘at the same time’ as the content said (le Dit) but somehow belongs
to another temporal order. Its time is out of joint. This temporal breach in the very act of saying
scepticism, which is how it is able to return anew after every logical refutation, Levinas names
‘diachrony.’ He distinguishes it from the temporal gathering together into a totality which
characterises the synchronous time of the said. I’m not able here to go into too much detail on the
difficult question of Levinas’s theory of time, but we need to note this distinction here if we are to
understand what follows. Apparently paradoxical figurations of time (‘diachrony’, ‘pre-origininary
past’, ‘immemorial time’, ‘deep formerly’, ‘irrecuperable past’ and so on) abound in Levinas’s later
work. They are there, among other things, to indicate the radicality of the exception to the logos
of essence — which is gathered into a synchronous present in the said (le Dit) — that subjectivity
constitutes.

The Connection to Need

Our reading of Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence will concentrate mainly on Chapter IV
titled ‘Substitution.’ This is anyway, according to Levinas, the centre piece of the work and that
around which it is built.851 More specifically ‘substitution’ constitutes the central concept of ethical
subjectivity as I understand it, and it is this that this chapter will address. In agreement with Simon
Critchley I believe that ethical subjectivity is a condition for the possibility of ‘Levinas’s account of
ethics understood as the relation to the other irreducible to comprehension and therefore to
ontology.’852 In other words it is in terms of a certain conception of the subject that Levinas
conceives of the possibility of the relation to alterity exemplified by the face to face. Where my
account diverges from Critchley’s is in insisting that this conception of subjectivity has been in part
implicitly operative since On Escape, and can only be correctly understood when this very early
work is taken into account. Particularly it requires us to bear in mind the distinct concept of ‘need’
that is explicated there. Thus for example when Critchley writes that:

The Levinasian subject is a traumatised self, a subject that is constituted through a
self-relation that is experienced as a lack, where the self is experienced as the
inassumable source of what is lacking from the ego — a subject of melancholia,
then.853

850 Ibid, p. 7
851 Levinas (1998a), p. xlvi
852 Simon Critchley ‘The Original Trauma’ in Critchley (1999), p. 184
853 Ibid, p. 195 (emphases mine)
I find that though I am certainly in agreement that the subject stands in a self-relation of something like a need,\textsuperscript{854} I do not agree that Levinas construes this need in terms of a lack. Indeed, as in 	extit{On Escape}, I find that this need at the heart of the self is best understood in terms of a claustrophobic over-fullness and a consequent urge to escape. We will return to this.

\textit{On Escape} Does however lack a crucial element which is present in the later work; and this is the insistence that the self is always already invaded by alterity in the very heart of its (non)-Being. It is this condition of the subject being pre-originally constituted by Otherness that 	extit{Otherwise than Being} attempts to describe.

But this description of subjectivity is also a description of the body, as we will see, and Levinas is clear as to how the body should be understood:

The body is neither an obstacle opposed to the soul, nor a tomb that imprisons it, but that by which the self is susceptibility itself. Incarnation is an extreme passivity; to be exposed to sickness, suffering death, is to be exposed to compassion, and, as a self, to the gift that costs. The oneself is on this side of the zero of inertia and nothingness, in deficit of being, in itself and not in being, without a place to lay its head, in the no-grounds, and thus without condition. As such it will be shown to be the bearer of the world, bearing it, suffering it, blocking rest and lacking a fatherland. It is the correlate of a persecution, a substitution for the other.\textsuperscript{855}

This seems pretty far from the notion of the body in terms of sensible enjoyment and we will need to say how they are related. This chapter, however, will be an unpacking of this notion and a defence of the idea that the seeds of this idea lie in the very early Levinas.

The Deconstruction of the Subject

Heidegger’s 	extit{Being and Time} has contested the notion of the subject as inner and hidden, looking out on an alien world; what has come to be known as the Cartesian picture. Heidegger’s understanding of Dasein locates our way of Being in terms of always already being embedded in a world. It thus contests the notion of the subject as \textit{ego cogito}, but also as the Kantian \textit{I think} which must accompany all my representations. This latter is a notion of the subject as self-transparent and absolute point of commencement. Heidegger insisted that if we ‘posit an “I” or a subject as that which is proximally given’\textsuperscript{856} then we are not engaging in the prior more important question of the Being of the entity in question:

\textit{Ontologically}, every idea of a ‘subject’—unless refined by a previous ontological determination of its basic character—still posits the \textit{subjectum} (\textit{ύποκείμενον})

\textsuperscript{854} We will see that this need should really be understood in terms of Desire.
\textsuperscript{855} Levinas (1998a), p. 195, note 12
\textsuperscript{856} Heidegger (1985a), p. 72
along with it, no matter how vigorous one’s ontical protestations against the ‘soul substance’ or the ‘reification of consciousness’.\textsuperscript{857}

In other words one need not buy into the notion of the subject as a psychical substance in Descartes sense in order to be burdened with a notion of the subject which is pre-ontological. The \textit{subjectum} (\textit{ὑποκέιμενον}) is Aristotle’s word for the substratum or base on which other things are predicated but which is not in its turn predicated on anything else.\textsuperscript{858} Thus Heidegger is claiming that to posit the subject prior to an ontological examination of our way of Being is to posit a point of absolute commencement. It might be argued however that Heidegger resurrects something of this subjectivity with his notion of authenticity. An authentic (\textit{eigentlich}) self, on one reading, extracts itself from the alienation of \textit{the they (das Man)} and comes back to its ownmost (\textit{eigenst}) Being.\textsuperscript{859} Indeed this kind of reading underpins some of Levinas’s central criticisms of Heidegger. The ultimate point of concern for Dasein’s concernful dealing is read in terms of its return to \textit{mineness (Jemeinigkeit)}. Accordingly if \textit{Being and Time} does not posit the I as \textit{subjectum} it nevertheless returns Dasein to itself in terms of its ownmost Being. Subjectivity remains mine and is thus understood as a return to the self.

The later Heidegger can be seen to take this critique of the subject even further. Here the human being is conceived in terms of that through which Being manifests itself to itself, which is why we have said that the movement of Being is tied to the comprehension of Being. Being is already ontology. The notion of subjectivity, and its ultimate incarnation as transcendental subjectivity in Husserl, is conceived by Heidegger a symptomatic of a certain way of taking Being which has dominated the West (at least) since Plato. A way that he stigmatises as ‘metaphysics’ and characterises as a ‘forgetting’ of the question of Being.\textsuperscript{860} What is characteristic of the modern manifestation of metaphysics is the fact that it centralises man as the subject: ‘the essence of humanity transforms itself in that man becomes the subject.’\textsuperscript{861} In this way it redefines the notion of the ‘subject’ since, despite the conception of the subject as \textit{subjectum}, the idea has ‘in the first instance, no special relationship to man, and none at all to I.’\textsuperscript{862}

For Heidegger, in order to reawaken the question of Being it is necessary to submit the previous history of ontology — a history which has been dominated by the interpretation of Being in terms of the \textit{subjectum} i.e. metaphysics — to a destruction (\textit{Destruktion})\textsuperscript{863} or dismantling (\textit{Abbau}). The

\textsuperscript{857} Ibid
\textsuperscript{858} See Aristotle (1998), 1028b 33-9
\textsuperscript{859} See Chapter 1 of the present work
\textsuperscript{860} See Simon Critchley and Peter Dews ‘Prolegomena to Any Post-Deconstructive Subjectivity’ in Critchley and Dews (1996), pp. 13-45
\textsuperscript{861} Martin Heidegger ‘The Age of the World Picture’ in Heidegger (2002) p. 66
\textsuperscript{862} Ibid
\textsuperscript{863} This is the origin of Derrida’s famous term ‘deconstruction.’ Of such \textit{destruction} Heidegger writes: ‘it has nothing to do with a vicious relativizing of ontological standpoints. But this destruction is just as far from having the negative sense of shaking off the ontological tradition. We must, on the contrary, stake out the positive possibilities of that tradition, and this means keeping it within its limits; and these in turn are given
modern notion of the subject as; on the one hand the seat of representations, and thus the locus of rational understanding, and; on the other, the point of absolute commencement in the sense of free-action (these two are combined in the notion of rational agency), this understanding reveals itself to be a product of the wrong turning attributed by Heidegger to the history of metaphysics: A wrong turning which is responsible for the technological nihilism which is characteristic of what Heidegger sees as the crisis of the Western world. Indeed with a painful irony Heidegger even blamed the holocaust on this wrong turning.864

Levinas also recognised that much of what had become the sciences of man had also found the notion of subjectivity to be at best dubious: ‘The “inward forum” is no longer a world. The inward world is contested by Heidegger, as by the sciences of man.’865 This attests to a sense that the notion of the subject as traditionally conceived as falling out of favour.

Levinas is cautious of the possibility of these strains of thought taking on the appearance of the evident:

The end of humanism, of metaphysics, the death of man, the death of God (or death to God!) – these are apocalyptic ideas or slogans of intellectual high society. Like all the manifestations of Parisian taste (or Parisian disgust), these topics impose themselves with the tyranny of the last word, but become available to anyone and cheapened.866

Yet despite the disdainful tone of this remark he is not rejecting the movement which lies behind the manifestation of these topics. This new orientation in thinking, this ‘mutation of the light of the world’867 is not something that can be reversed but comes about for good reason.

The crisis of humanism in our times undoubtedly originates in an experience of human inefficacy accentuated by the very abundance of our means of action and the scope of our ambitions. In a world where things are in place, where eyes, hands and feet can find them, where science extends the topography of perception and praxis even if it transfigures their space; in the places that lodge the cities and fields that humans inhabit, ranking themselves by varied groupings among the beings; in all this reality “in place,” the misconstruction [contre-sens] of

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864 I cannot elaborate on or defend this reading of the later Heidegger here. For more see Young (2002) and Safranski (2002)
865 Emmanuel Levinas ‘No Identity’ in Levinas (1998d), p. 144
866 Ibid, p. 141
867 Ibid, p. 142
vast failed undertakings — where politics and technology result in the negation of the projects they guide — teaches the inconsistency of man, mere plaything of his works. The unburied dead of wars and death camps accredit the idea of a death with no future, making tragi-comic the care for one’s self and illusory the pretentions of the rational animal to a privileged place in the cosmos, capable of dominating and integrating the totality of being in a consciousness of self.\footnote{Levinas (2006b), p. 45}

The enlightenment project which promoted the idea of a rational philosophy and politics seems to have been mocked by the emergence of Auschwitz and the Gulag.\footnote{But it is not as if these phenomena are only a part of a distant past. Only yesterday, as it were, we had the Rwandan Genocide, the ethnic cleansing of the Yugoslav Wars and countless other atrocities perpetrated in the name of democracy and freedom. Not to mention the economic meltdown which has left Western capitalism wondering what hit it.} If we are to identify the subject with the self as rational representation of the world and centre of rational activity, then the fact that its representations take on a local perspective shot through with prejudice and hate, and the fact that the products of its activity become alienated from their source and take on a life of their own, throws suspicion on the idea of a humanism based upon such a subject. This suspicion reaches the point of morally justified scepticism when we see that the products of such activity are often the instruments of human torture and the ideological reflection of the world often their mode of justification. It is for this reason that Levinas quotes Maurice Blanchot with approval: ‘To speak nobly of the human in man, to conceive the humanity in man, is to quickly come to a discourse that is untenable and undeniably more repugnant than all the nihilist vulgarities.’\footnote{Emmanuel Levinas ‘No Identity,’ in Levinas (1998d), pp. 141-142, quoted from La Nouvelle Revue Française, n. 179, 820-21 (1967)}

Yet despite this Levinas does not rule out all talk of subjectivity, nor indeed of humanism. More precisely he believes that: ‘Humanism has to be denounced only because it is not sufficiently human.’\footnote{Levinas (1998a), p. 128} We will try to show in what way he conceived of subjectivity as ethical and how this connects to our earlier explication of his notion of escape.

From Openness to Exposure
In specifying ethical subjectivity Levinas distinguishes it from subjectivity understood in terms of self-consciousness. We have already seen how he conceives of subjectivity in terms of sensibility when articulating his notion of the ego in terms of enjoyment or living from... Ethical subjectivity is likewise conceived in terms of sensibility. But he peels off yet other layers of subjectivity to reach the sensible in its very rawness. And this rawness is not an enjoying ego but the oneself exposed to every kind of pain and outrage.

\footnote{See Chapter 2}
We have seen that subjectivity is brought under attack by the sciences of man which denies that there is any inside, and by Heidegger who latterly conceives of Dasein as nothing but the opening or clearing of Being. But what does this ‘outside’ or ‘openness’ signify? In Humanism of the Other Levinas specifies three possible readings of the idea:

1. There is the possibility that such openness specifies the fact that any being can effect another being and is such that they each form part of a manifold of experience: ‘it can signify the opening of all objects to all others, in the unity of the universe governed by the third analogy of experience in Critique of Pure Reason.’ That is to say it can specify the general interaction of all beings. Or as Kant puts it: ‘All substances, in so far as they can be perceived to coexist in space, are in thoroughgoing reciprocity.’

2. This opening can designate the intentionality of consciousness, which Heidegger has understood as an ‘ecstasy in being.’ Such intentionality would be read as ‘animating consciousness that, by the original opening of the essence of being (Sein), is called to play a role in this drama of opening.’ In this way the drama of Being would also contain the vision of this drama and the intentionality of consciousness would be understood as founded on the truth of the openness of Being itself. It would be nothing but a modality of such openness, or clearing. Levinas associates this way of seeing things with naturalism: ‘Didn’t naturalism foresee this mode of foundation by positing consciousness as avatar of nature?’ Indeed as nothing but ‘epiphenomenon’ of nature. Yet this still remains a mode of understanding, even if it is not founded on an intellectualist understanding. As such it is not the type of sensibility to which Levinas wishes to resort: ‘If all openness involves understanding, the image in sensible intuition has already lost the immediacy of the sensible.’

3. But there is a third sense of openness. This sense is the exposure of the skin to the elements and thus to pain; a nudity and vulnerability. In this sense:

Opening is the stripping of the skin exposed to wound and outrage. Opening is the vulnerability of a skin offered in wound and outrage beyond all that can show itself, beyond all that of essence of being can expose itself to understanding and celebration. In sensibility “is uncovered,” is exposed a nude more naked than the naked of skin that, form and beauty, inspires the plastic arts; nakedness of skin

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873 Levinas (2006b)
874 Ibid, p. 62
875 Kant (1985), p. 233
876 Levinas (2006b), p. 62
877 Ibid
878 Ibid
879 Ibid
880 Levinas (1998a), p. 62
offered to contact, to the caress that always, even ambiguously in voluptuousness,
is suffering for the suffering of the other.\textsuperscript{881}

It is this third notion of openness which constitutes the heart of ethical subjectivity as Levinas conceives it.\textsuperscript{882} Thus ethical subjectivity is not an attempt to resurrect some notion of the subject as inner and hidden, or as the self-legislating rationality of self-consciousness, but is a pushing to its logical conclusion the notion of openness.

But the subject is ordinarily conceived as the subject of \emph{experience}, and not a raw openness. This is the second notion which centralises intentional consciousness. Here, even if we deny the substantiality of the self, consciousness, as \emph{consciousness of...} or intentionality, remains a central motif of most notions of subjectivity. It is conceived in terms of the drawing together in a manifold of the diverse moments of experience. But this drawing together is characterised by Levinas in terms of an ideality. Such an ideality is language-like in its constituting faculty and thus it is called by Levinas ‘a said.’\textsuperscript{883} ‘Even an empirical individual being is broached across the ideality of logos.’\textsuperscript{884} We have encountered this theme before.\textsuperscript{885} We have also noted that the notion of ‘experience’ central to this idea of subjectivity is a notion which really only begins and ends with the self:

The detour of ideality leads to coinciding with oneself, that is, to certainty, which remains the guide and guarantee of the whole spiritual adventure of being. But this is why this adventure is no adventure. It is never dangerous; it is self-possession, sovereignty, \textit{ἀρχή} (arche). Anything unknown that can occur to it is in advance disclosed, open, manifest, is cast in the mould of the known, and cannot be a complete surprise.

For the philosophical tradition of the West, all spirituality lies in consciousness, thematic exposition of being, knowing.\textsuperscript{886}

Once again this is a familiar theme: philosophy has predominantly been ontology and ontology calls for an epistemology as its natural complement in subjectivity. For all ways of Being are ways of comprehending Being, even if such ways are not in the first instance theoretical. The articulation of this situation is given through Husserl, where the thematic of constituting consciousness reaches its culmination. For Levinas all thought and intentionality which is directed onto the world takes the form of a kerygmatic\textsuperscript{887} \textit{claim}. Thought is precisely language-like and the central figuration of thinking is judgement. ‘Every phenomenon is a discourse or a fragment of

\textsuperscript{881}Ibid, p. 63
\textsuperscript{882}He also accepts the other two forms of openness, but as derivative of this third.
\textsuperscript{883}Levinas (1998a), p. 99
\textsuperscript{884}Ibid
\textsuperscript{885}See the Introduction
\textsuperscript{886}Levinas (1998a), p. 99
\textsuperscript{887}‘Kerygma’ is Levinas’s word for the original proclaiming or naming of entities as \textit{this} or \textit{that}. 
discourse.\footnote{Emmanuel Levinas ‘Language and Proximity,’ in Levinas (1998d), p. 112} Intuition therefore, in the Husserlian sense of the term, cannot be identified with the immediately given, if this is construed as that which falls into thought from the outside, without thought identifying it as…. In other words the given is a given only because it is understood as given. We cannot reasonably go beyond or behind that which is taken as given in Husserl, for then that in turn would have to be so taken. All thought or experience is an identification of the identity of entities across the chaotic.

Levinas also specifies a deeper level of conscious awareness, prior to the conceptualisation of phenomena, wherein the very notion of consciousness emerges. Thought, at this fundamental level, emerges from the very divergence of the feeling and the felt. This is the origin of what Levinas calls ‘awakening.’ Such divergence is the very possibility of thought being distinguished from that which is thought about and thus the very possibility of it having time to recuperate itself, this divergence opens time itself. The gap between the feeling and the felt means that consciousness is a \textit{being-out-of-phase-with-itself}, which is time itself. The possibility of placing a gap between the feeling and the thing felt — be it only a temporal gap or an instant — is for Levinas the very opening of the possibility of time.\footnote{Emmanuel Levinas ‘Language and Proximity’ in Levinas (1998d), p. 115} Consciousness is recall or \textit{anamnesis}, because it is allowed a delay wherein memory can re-call the felt, hold it in a retention and anticipate in a protention. This level is the level of ‘passive synthesis,’ without a subject. Yet it has time.

**Proximity to the Other**

Let us return here to the question of the relation to the other person, since it is this that is centralised in Levinas’s thought and this, as we will see, which exemplifies the third notion of openness. Is the relationship with the interlocutor itself a knowing? Does the interlocutor form part of my panorama of thought? Is he or she, therefore, comprehended through a universality which subsumes him or her under a description? Communicating with another is not the same as comprehending (grasping) another, it is more like approaching him or her. Even if I raise the Other as a theme in our conversation he or she still rises up behind the conversation as the one I address. Or, as Levinas is willing to say: ‘Whatever be the message transmitted by speech, the speaking is contact.’\footnote{Once again I cannot enter into the difficult question of Levinas’s philosophy of time here. But it requires some indication as the idea of proximity as immemorial is consequent on his thinking in this area. We will encounter just how this figures in Levinas’s account as we proceed. But there will be no systematic treatment of Levinas’s rich thinking on time.} This contact should be understood in terms of proximity and the analysis of proximity will bring us to the heart of ethical subjectivity. Because the Other stands in his or her singularity they cannot be thought. Or to put it another way; if we are to truly recognise another’s singularity it cannot be via thought. Otherwise we have lost the immediacy of contact. This contact is the original language, an ethical language. It forms at the point where thematization and representation break down. It is contact with an unrepresentable singularity.
This is the original language, the foundation of the other one. The precise point at which this mutation of the intentional into the ethical occurs, and occurs continually, at which the approach breaks through consciousness, is the human skin and face. Contact is tenderness and responsibility. 

Thus we should be aware that the immediacy of the contact with the Other in communication is a form of sensibility which differs qualitatively from the sensibility which we specified under the heading of enjoyment or living from... Or more precisely it contains enjoyment yet resists it. It therefore: ‘has to be described in terms of enjoyment and wounding, which are, we will see, the terms of proximity.’ The Other resists and remains on the outside. It is this mode of sensible contact that Levinas refers to as ‘proximity.’ The manner by which the language breaks through from the Other to me is precisely the (act of) saying (le dire) prior to any (content) said (le dit). The saying is the very encounter with the Other in language, irrespective of the conceptual content of this language.

**Proximity and Enjoyment**

But how is the sensibility of enjoyment, which we have spent some time on, related to the sensibility of proximity? In the first place it seems almost reversed, so that the sensibility here described is more akin to that of pain:

> It is the living human corporeality, as a possibility of pain, a sensibility which of itself is the susceptibility to being hurt, a self uncovered, exposed and suffering in its skin. In its skin it is stuck in its skin, not having its skin to itself, a vulnerability.

The self, given in this way, given over to the Other as a rawness we are unable to cover up, is a self that is for-the-other. This giving over to the Other prior to any choice for giving is precisely the pre-original donation which constitutes responsibility for the Other, as we will see. But in order to give, in order to truly give, it must be the case that what I have I want to keep. It must be ‘the gift that costs.’ So the self is such that it is capable of a contentment which will be disturbed in the very depths of sensibility as exposure. Such a contentment is enjoyment. It is again figured in terms of eating: ‘The emptiness of hunger is emptier than all curiosity, cannot be compensated for with mere hearsay of what it demands.’ The sated body is the very figuration of contentment. We have already articulated at some length the significance of this for Levinas. But he now notes that the possibility of such satisfaction is implicit in the very nature of the sense of the suffering that exposure entails: ‘Without egoism, complacent in itself, suffering would not have any sense.’

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891 Ibid, p. 116
892 Levinas (1998a), p. 63
893 Ibid, p. 51
894 Ibid, p. 195
895 Ibid, p. 72
896 Ibid, p. 73
Now it takes on a significance such that the handing over of what is mine, the giving to the Other, requires that I sacrifice. But such sacrifice requires that I give what it costs me to give: ‘But giving has meaning only as a tearing from oneself despite oneself, and not only without me.’ Dramatically, Levinas refers to this movement as ‘snatching the bread from one’s mouth.’ The sacrifice therefore is hard and cruel and costs. The complacency of happiness is consequently struck, from the outside, in the very heart of sensibility itself. It’s as if Levinas has bored even deeper into the heart of the sensible and found there the ultimate signification, the ethical signification of the ‘one-for-the-other.’ But we have not thereby denied the fundamental nature of sensibility as enjoyment. On the contrary, it is deployed as a necessary condition for the giving at the centre of this proximity to have the ethical significance that Levinas insist upon. We find that it is only incarnate beings that are capable of ethics, indeed their incarnation is an ethical incarnation: ‘Only a subject that eats can be for the other, or can signify. Signification, the-one-for-the-other, has meaning only among beings of flesh and blood.’

We have understood enjoyment in terms of the satisfaction of needs. Needs in their turn we have argued are a subset of Desire which is the driving force for transcendence. The language has changed in Otherwise than Being, but we will insist that the overall structure remains pretty much the same. We note here that the significance of enjoyment is specified in terms of the very sensibility which gives it its possibility. But the language of sensibility has taken on a darker tone:

> The immediacy of the sensible is the immediacy of enjoyment and its frustration. It is a gift painfully torn up, and in the tearing up, immediately spoiling this very enjoyment.

Let us here recall how pleasure was understood in On Escape: We noted that need was understood as the need to escape. What we insisted this amounted to was the need to escape from the self: ‘Thus, escape is the need to get out of oneself, that is, to break the most radical and unalterably binding of chains, the fact that the I [moi] is oneself [soi-même].’ Pleasure is the very sense of this escape, albeit a false sense. The self then in its very heart as a needy self is a need to escape the self. We noted there that this need is construed as due to the fact that we are thrown into existence in Heidegger’s sense of the term. But we have shown that this cannot be Levinas’s ultimate position. Indeed we know that the ego understood in terms of enjoyment is somehow prior to any ‘world’ in Heidegger’s sense. We also know that the ethical subjectivity we are now articulating is intimately connected to the ego as the possibility of enjoyment. I am

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897 See Emmanuel Levinas ‘Useless Suffering’ in Levinas (2006a), pp. 78-88
898 Levinas (1998a), p. 74
899 Ibid
900 Ibid
901 Ibid
902 Levinas (2003), p. 55
903 See Chapter 3
904 See Chapter 5, the section entitles ‘Escape From Being’
arguing that the need to escape found at the heart of the self is inaugurated by the presence of the Other in the self, calling it into question. To quote Levinas: ‘One comes not into the world but into question.’ I will try to show in detail what such subjectivity is for Levinas and how it is understood as put into question by the very ‘presence’ of Otherness.

**Obsession**

The relationship of proximity is specified in terms of a sensibility which does not move into conceptualisation or imaginative figuration. The reason for this is that the relationship is ‘a relationship with a singularity without the mediation of any principle, any ideality.’ The sensibility characteristic of this encounter somehow slips under the net of even the most basic level of thematization. Here there is not even the capturing of the sensible in the temporal organisation of retention and protention. Thus the ‘contact’ is such that there is no distance between the feeling and the felt. The feeling comes on without my having time to greet it. In this sense it is prior to any possible present:

> Incommensurable with the present, unassemblable in it, it is always “already in the past” behind what the present delays, over and beyond the “now” which this exteriority disturbs or obsesses. This way of passing, disturbing the present without allowing itself to be invested by the ἀρχή (arche) of consciousness, striating with its furrows the clarity of the ostensible, is what we have called a trace.

It is in this sense that the contact of the sensible is an obsession. We can’t ignore it but nor can we hold it before us as we might an idea or an image, it takes us over in an important sense and we cannot gain control over it. We are incapable of having done with it or being indifferent to it, it is a ‘non-indifference.’ It is: ‘the difference between the same and the other in the non-indifference of obsession exercised by the other over the same.’ It incessantly comes on without our being able to take it up or ‘assume’ it, as Levinas says. In this sense it resembles pain. It is ‘an ego unable to conceive what is “touching” it.’ This relationship is one that according to Levinas has a concrete instantiation:

> What concretely corresponds to this description is my relationship with my neighbour, a signifyingness which is different from the much-discussed “meaning-

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905 Emmanuel Levinas ‘God and Philosophy’ in Levinas (1989a), p. 81
906 Levinas (1998a), p. 100
907 Ibid and see chapter 7 for a discussion of the trace.
908 Levinas (1998a), p. 166
909 Ibid, p. 85
910 See Chapter 5 ‘Pain and Death’
endowment,” since signification is the very relationship with the other, the-one-for-the-other.912

This signifyingness, characterised as the one-for-the-other, is for Levinas the signification of the saying (le Dire) which precedes and underpins all meaningfulness which finds itself in the said (le Dit). He here distinguishes it from the ‘meaning-endowment’ or ‘Sinngebung,’ characteristic of Husserlian phenomenology, by virtue of the fact that such meaning-endowment is an intentional act of an ego which locates the intentional object in a temporally coherent field of consciousness. The sense of the-one-for-the-other, on the other hand, has absolutely no trace of activity in it and thus is anarchical in the double sense that it defies such order and that it is not (an-) an ἀρχή (arche) or principle; and is in this sense that it is pre-originary. But it is not thereby disorder because: ‘Disorder is but another order.’913 Levinas evokes Bergson as authority on this and continues: ‘Anarchy troubles being over and beyond these alternatives.’914

The signification of the-one-for-the-other specifies the fact that one is always already beholden to the neighbour before any initiative that arises in the ego. We are invaded and wounded by the proximity of the Other and thereby driven out of all contentment or rest in ourselves. We experience ourselves as the discomfort of need:

[It is already an assignation, an extremely urgent assignation – an obligation, anachronously prior to any commitment. This being affected which can in no way be invested by spontaneity: the subject is affected without the source of the affection becoming a theme of representation. We have called this relationship irreducible to consciousness obsession.915

This relationship therefore takes on the form of pathology: ‘a disequilibrium, a delirium.’916 I am obsessed by the neighbour because he or she affects me right at the very heart of what I am; indeed this affecting is the very heart of what I am. Such affecting falls outside of the order of the rational, or even the alternatives of the orderly or disorderly. For Levinas this ethical movement, this obsession is the privileged form of madness, a madness which defines us as human, the very essence of subjectivity: ‘The soul is the other in me. The psyche, the-one-for-the-other, can be a possession and a psychosis; the soul is already a seed of folly.’917

Trauma

We can here see in what sense this proximity is traumatic. It leaves a wound in the soul which will not stop bleeding at a point where the ego is unable to bring it within its command. But before we
move any deeper into the strange idiom of ‘ethical language’ I think it would be useful to give some kind of account of where sensibility stands.

We have spent some time on explicating sensibility in terms of enjoyment. The central figuration of enjoyment was eating. It was in terms of such consumption that the ego was seen as avoiding the solipsistic traps of idealism. The sensible reaches beyond the phenomenological intentional object of thought by reaching right out to reality in bodily affectivity. We sink our teeth into the real: ‘The signification proper to gustative sensation consists somehow in “breaking through” the knowledge gathered, to as it were penetrate into the inwardness of things.’918 Hence the sensible is differentiated from the intentional by virtue of its predominantly bodily being and its capacity to reach outside the self and relocate us in animal faith in the materiality of the real. This is achieved by satisfying our needs in enjoyment:

Matter carries on, “does its job” of being matter, “materializes” in the satisfaction, which fills the emptiness before putting itself into a form and presenting itself to the knowing of this materiality and the possession of it in the form of goods. Tasting is first satisfaction. Matter “materialises” in satisfaction, which, over and beyond any intentional relationship of cognition or possession, of “taking in one’s hands,” means “biting into . . . .” It is irreducible to a taking into one’s hands, for it is already an absorption of a “within” including the ambiguity of two inwardnesses: that of a recipient of special forms, and that of an ego assimilating the other in its identity, and coiling in over itself.919

Enjoyment thereby is contact with the real in our very assimilation of it prior to our collecting of it into an intentional conscious content. Levinas extends this relation to all sensibility:

We have chosen the example of a gustative sensation because this schema of consumption is found in all forms of sensibility; to feel the world is always a way of being nourished by it.920

Thus the sensible is characterised in terms of touching and touching in terms of the contact involved in assimilation. But we have also seen how the sensible is understood under the theme of Eros, where the caress is taken as paradigmatic. The caress is understood in terms of contact, but as ‘contact with another’ which ‘goes beyond that contact.’921 What is characteristic of the caress is that it is contact with that which cannot be assimilated. Indeed the whole pathos of the caress is to be understood in terms of this ambiguity between contact with and distance from the Other. This constitutes the essence of the yearnings and frustrations characteristic of caresses:

918 Emmanuel Levinas ‘Language and Proximity’ in Levinas (1998d), p. 117
919 Levinas (1987a), p. 73
921 Levinas (1987a), p. 89
It is like a game with something slipping away, a game absolutely without project or plan, not with what can become ours or us, but with something other, always other, always inaccessible, and always still to come (à venir).\textsuperscript{922} 

The caress is such that it cannot assimilate the Other but leaves it in its Otherness and yet still it is contact. It attempts to get hold of ‘what ceaselessly escapes’\textsuperscript{923} its grasp. If the caress is assimilated to the sensible, and the sensible to hunger, then the ‘caress would be fed by its own hunger.’\textsuperscript{924} The caress therefore is not fed by what is given it to eat but by the very distance that its ‘object’ places between it and satisfaction. There is here room for confusion and this is exemplified in ‘the ridiculous and tragic simulation of devouring in kissing and love-bites.’\textsuperscript{925} This constitutes ‘the ambiguity of a kiss.’\textsuperscript{926} But we are not here being given two distinct forms of sensibility but two aspects of sensibility. For we should note that for Levinas:

In every vision contact is announced: sight and hearing caress the visible and the audible. Contact is not an openness upon being, but an exposure to being. In this caress proximity signifies as proximity, and not as the experience of proximity.\textsuperscript{927}

Thus the nature of the caress is apparent in all sensibility such that the reality of the real is not only defined in terms of its possible assimilation into the materiality of the body, but is also characterised in terms of its simultaneous resistance to such assimilation. The otherness of the Other is revealed in its resistance to assimilation and what it does to us by virtue of our contact with it as such resistance. This means that the contact with the other person somehow predates our contact with the amenable elements. The evocation of our pre-natal relation to our mother would appear appropriate here, since our first element is the body of a ‘proximate’ Other. It is by virtue of such inassimibility that the Other reverses the direction of the ego’s spontaneous conatus:

In a caress, what is there is sought as though it were not there, as though the skin were the trace of its own withdrawal, a languor still seeking, like an absence which, however, could not be more there. The caress is not coinciding proper to contact, a denuding never naked enough. The neighbour does not satisfy the approach....Proximity, immediacy, is to enjoy and to suffer by the other. But I can enjoy and suffer by the other only because I am-for-the-other, am signification, because the contact with skin is still a proximity of a face, a responsibility, an

\textsuperscript{922} Ibid
\textsuperscript{923} Levinas (1969), p. 257
\textsuperscript{924} Ibid
\textsuperscript{925} Levinas (1978), p. 35
\textsuperscript{926} Levinas (1998a), p. 75
\textsuperscript{927} Ibid, p. 80
obsession with the other, being-one-for-the-other, which is the very birth of 

signification beyond being.928

Contact in this sense is the very birth of signification or meaning and this meaning is an ethical meaning, which is not able to be captured in thoughts or images: ‘The one-for-the-other is not a lack of intuition, but the surplus of responsibility.’929 We are struck with shame at our need which, rather than negating this need, transforms it into Desire. Desire is the restlessness attendant upon this sensible contact which Levinas calls ‘proximity.’ The problem of other minds as traditionally conceived really does not arise for Levinas; we are beholden to Others before we encounter a world, and this responsibility to and for the other is born in contact. It is also the first meaning and thus the birth of a meaningful world and the initiation of the possibility of language and thought: ‘In the approach of a face the flesh becomes word, the caress a saying.’930

Sensibility is therefore construed as the site of responsibility for the Other; the sensible ‘breaks through’ prior to our being able to go out and meet it in consciousness. It hollows me out by precisely showing me the absence of what is given. It is too much. Here I become, by virtue of this very invasion of the Other into my sensibility, the signification that Levinas calls ‘the-one-for-the-other,’ which is the first signification, the saying (le Dire) which underpins the said (le Dit). This sense of the Other as invading me in my very entrails and yet remaining recalcitrantly alien, is a trauma. It is as if I cannot leave this scene of trauma and yet am forcibly expelled by trying to fix it as a site. It is this which drives me out of myself:

Proximity is not a state, a repose, but, a restlessness, null site, outside of the place of rest. It overwhelms the calm of the non-ubiquity of a being which becomes a rest in a site. No site then, is ever sufficiently a proximity, like an embrace. Never close enough, proximity does not congeal into a structure, save when represented in the demand for justice as reversible, and reverts into a simple relation. Proximity, as the “closer and closer,” becomes the subject.931

I have argued that this restlessness should be identified with the need to escape which lies at the heart of what Levinas names ‘Desire.’ Thus it is the very crowdedness of the interiority of the self, its over-fullness with the Other that inaugurates the movement out of the self which is the movement of transcendence. The need at the heart of the self, contrary to what Simon Critchley has claimed,932 should not be read in terms of a lack, but as a sense of being constricted in our own skin: ‘The oneself takes refuge or is exiled in its own fullness, to the point of explosion or fission.’933

928 Ibid, p. 90
929 Ibid, p. 100
930 Ibid, p. 94
931 Ibid, p. 82
933 Levinas (1998a), p. 104
This traumatic scene is the point at which the whole of *Otherwise than Being* turns, we need to elaborate its nature a little more.

Given this rather convoluted understanding of sensibility we can see that the notion of trauma is not here understood as the result of some violent wounding of a previously content subject, but prior to all contentment the trauma of being driven out by the very tightness of being in a skin. There is an anxiety at the heart of subjectivity which is attendant on our very incarnation, always already troubled by the Other. But it is not an anxiety over death as it was in Heidegger; the vulnerability of the flesh is not its vulnerability to death, but to the Other forcing me to take on their cares. It is not an anxiety over death but over the very fullness of being:

\[ \text{Anxiety as being-for-death is also the hope to reach the deep of non-being. The possibility of deliverance (and the temptation to suicide) arises in death anxiety: like nothingness, death is an openness into which, along with a being, the anxiety over its definition is engulfed. But, on the other hand, anxiety as the tightness of the “going forth into fullness,” is the recurrence of the oneself, but without evasion, without shirking, that is, a responsibility stronger than death — which Plato in the *Phaedo*, affirms in his own way, in condemning suicide (62b).}\]

Thus to some extent the Heideggerian concept of anxiety is retained but transformed in the face of a rethinking of subjectivity.

Thus we are called upon by the Other. This being called upon is manifest in the shame which we feel even in the very trauma which the Other brings about. We are shamed while not having done anything wrong; shamed in our very passivity. It is this shame and this accusation which constitutes the identity of the oneself. I am me as chosen. As such I am a return to myself in such a way that I cannot escape myself because I am the accused man: the eyes of the Other are upon me. Such a perpetual return of a self to itself (already considered in *On Escape*) Levinas now calls ‘recurrence.’

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 threads of consciousness which should have welcomed it in the present, the passivity of being persecuted.\footnote{ibid, p. 195}

We will see later how this recurrence is broken in substitution and therefore how substitution constitutes Levinas’s mature notion of how we are to escape.\footnote{ibid, p. 111}
Accusation, Persecution and the Condition of Being a Hostage

As persecuted by the Other subjectivity is driven out of itself by an accusation which wounds and thus allows for no rest. It is the very proximity of the Other that constitutes this ‘restlessness and insomnia’.

But then it would seem that we have sacrificed the very possibility of the identity of the self to a kind of constant disturbance or restlessness. The self would in fact be ‘identity gnawing away at itself.’ Paradoxically it is this very restlessness that constitutes the identity of the self:

Recurrence becomes identity by breaking up the limits of identity, breaking up the principle of being in me, the intolerable rest is itself characteristic of definition. The self is on the hither side of rest; it is the impossibility to come back from all things and concern oneself only with oneself. It is to hold on to oneself while gnawing away at oneself.

The self is therefore itself under persecution by the Other and thus held hostage by the Other. It is this very fact of being always already beholden to the Other before any initiative which constitutes the identity of the psyche. But this identity, as a break up of identity, is not considered by Levinas to be a defective identity. On the contrary, it is only in the light of a philosophical tradition which favours totality over infinity, which favours self-sameness over Otherness, that such a paradoxical identity should appear deficient. In a way this point is crucial to my thesis. We can certainly see this situation in terms of subjectivity in need and thus in terms of the restlessness characteristic of need. But this self-relation of need should not in my view, as I have intimated, be understood as a lack, as Simon Critchley has understood it. Rather we should read the idea of this need in terms of a need to escape due to an overflow rather than a deficiency, just the type of discomfort of need that we characterised in our chapter on On Escape. Levinas explains:

But viewed out of the obsession of passivity, of itself anarchical, there is brought out, behind the equality of consciousness, an inequality. This inequality does not signify an inadequation of the apparent being with the profound or sublime being, nor a return to an original innocence (such as the inequality of the ego in Nabert, who is perhaps faithful to a tradition in which non-coincidence is only privation). It

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936 Ibid, p. 64 The concept of ‘insomnia’ has already featured when we discussed the il y a, and we can now see that it issues not only from Being but the Otherwise than Being. Levinas has noted that there is the possibility of confusing this Otherness of the Other — what we named I the last chapter ‘illeity’ — with the il y a. In ‘God and Philosophy’ he writes of the alterity prior to the alterity of the neighbour (i.e. illeity) that it is ‘transcendent to the point of absence, to the point of a possible confusion with the stirring of the there is.’ Levinas (1998d), p. 166. I can’t pursue this line here.
937 Ibid, p. 114
938 Ibid, p. 114
939 See quote above in the section entitled ‘The Connection to Need’ and Simon Critchley’s ‘The Original Traumatism’ in Critchley (1999), p. 195
940 See Chapter 3
signifies an inequality in the oneself due to substitution, an effort to escape concepts without any future but attempted anew the next day.\(^{941}\)

Levinas’s reference to a tradition for which non-coincidence is only privation is a reference to a tradition which his work, I have argued, is designed to contest. The effort to escape characteristic of the oneself is not a need in terms of lack but the kind of need which Levinas characterises as Desire, and which arises as an insatiable Desire for the Other.\(^ {942}\) The movement toward the Other, which coincides with the very subjectivity of the traumatised subject, is inscribed in terms of substitution.

The paradox is therefore that the identity of the subject is understood in terms of the subject in substitution for the Other. It is an identity in ‘the accusative form’, as Levinas puts it ‘which is a modification of no nominative form.’\(^ {943}\) The subject as the one accused. The grammatical distinction that he specifies is to indicate that while under accusation it is not that I am there before the accusation, but rather that I am constituted by virtue of this very accusation. The identity of the self is of a self under accusation from the Other.

Accordingly the self, in its very identity, must contain the Other as accuser. My oneself is dependent on the Other for its very identity. But this identity, as we noted, is thereby a restlessness and discomfort. Crowded out by the Other the self is responsible before it is free. This may seem to be a matter of force therefore, where freedom is subordinated to a power. But Levinas insists that this is not so:

To be without choice can seem to be violence only to an abusive or hasty and imprudent reflection, for it precedes the freedom non-freedom couple, but thereby sets up a vocation that goes beyond the limited and egoist fate of him who is only for-himself, and washes his hands of the faults and misfortunes that do not begin in his own freedom or in his present. It is the setting up of a being that is not for itself, but is for all, is both being and disinterestedness. The for itself signifies self-consciousness; the for all, responsibility for the other, support of the universe. Responsibility for the other, this way of answering without a prior commitment, is human fraternity itself, and it is prior to freedom.\(^ {944}\)

This fraternity prior to commitment is ‘the condition of being a hostage’ and it is because of it that ‘there can be in the world pity, compassion, pardon and proximity – even the little that there is, even the simple “after you sir.”\(^ {945}\)

\(^{941}\) Levinas (1998a), p. 115  
\(^{942}\) See Chapter 4  
\(^{943}\) Levinas (1998a), p. 124  
\(^{944}\) Ibid, p. 116  
\(^{945}\) Ibid, p. 117
Substitution
Ich bin du, wenn
ich ich bin.

[I am you, when
I am I.]

Paul Célan

Given this notion of responsibility prior to freedom we can see how this uses of terms like ‘accusation,’ ‘persecution’ and ‘hostage’ is not the usual ordinary language use. It is here that we see how Levinas is resorting to what he calls ‘ethical language.’ Clearly it is not the language we usually associate with ethics, but has the function of attempting to articulate that which is not possible in the language of Being, or what we have named the said (le Dit). The way it functions is to give the impression of referring to an ontological situation but then undermining this interpretation by precluding one of the necessary conditions (or perhaps after Wittgenstein we should say ‘criteria’) for the language to be so understood. Thus the idea of being taken as hostage, for example, seems to presuppose a prior freedom. But this is not the way Levinas uses the term because the condition of being a hostage for him, as we have seen, is prior to the conceptual pair freedom and non-freedom. So neither is it the contrary of what is said: it is not an non-freedom either, rather it is undermined at the point of being said. It is an unsaying:

This reduction is then an incessant unsaying of the said, a reduction to the saying always betrayed by the said, whose words are defined by non-defined words; it is a movement going from said to unsaid in which the meaning shows itself, eclipses and shows itself.

So that language is used as said in order to convey the saying, that which is really ‘ineffable, at the price of a betrayal which philosophy is called upon to reduce.’

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946 Ibid, p. 99
947 Ibid, p. 193
948 In evoking Wittgenstein’s notion of ‘criteria’ we are at the same time postulating another affinity with scepticism. Stanley Cavell has argued convincingly that the condition of scepticism arises in virtue of our using language outside of the language-games wherein the criteria for ordinary use get a grip. See Cavell (1979) Thus in undermining these criteria Levinas is likewise using terms in an otherwise than ordinary (we might say extraordinary) way. I cannot pursue this line here.
For a comparison of Levinas’s ethical language with Wittgenstein’s use of nonsense in the early Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus philosophy see the excellent paper Overgaard (2007)
949 This is not meant as an exhaustive or even adequate reading of the notion of ‘ethical language’ but is meant to focus upon one of its features. I cannot defend this reading here.
950 Levinas (1998a), p. 181
951 Ibid, p. 162
Given this brief characterisation of ethical language we will see that the concept of ‘substitution’ is likewise part of ethical language, and as such suffers the same unsaying and betrayal. When Levinas says for example:

The overemphasis of openness is responsibility for the other to the point of substitution, where the for-the-other proper to disclosure, to monstration to the other, turns into the for-the-other proper to responsibility. This is the thesis of the present work.952

Then we should be clear that the type of substitution that he has in mind is not the actual (ontological) substitution of me for another person. This can be seen from the fact that substitution is constitutive of the identity of the oneself:

Substitution is signification. Not a reference from one term to another, as it appears thematized in the said, but substitution as the very subjectivity of the subject, interruption of the irreversible identity of the essence. It occurs in the taking charge of, which is incumbent on me without any escape possible. Here the unicity of the ego first acquires meaning – where it is no longer a question of the ego, but of me. The subject which is not an ego, but which I am, cannot be generalised, is not a subject in general; we have moved from the ego to me who am me and no one else.953

The uniqueness of the I is characterised in terms of its substitution for the Other, this is its very subjectivity and what makes it unique and thus not just another one. But we have seen that grasping or conceptualisation requires a generality and that uniqueness is inevitably missed in such conceptualisation.954 Thus the description of the subjectivity of the subject in terms of substitution pre-dates the possibility of conceptualisation of the subject. The subject does not fall into an ontology coextensive with a possible knowing but is ‘interruption’ of such ‘essence.’ It is an identity which pre-dates any possible identification. It is the very non-being, or otherwise than being, of our non-condition of being a hostage. What does this mean concretely?

The notion of substitution is perhaps the most difficult to grasp of all of Levinas’s conceptual innovations. Indeed Robert Bernasconi has suggested, in an appropriately entitled article ‘What is the question to which “substitution” is the answer?’ that the question may well be: ‘what is the most obscure philosophical concept of the twentieth century?’955 Be that as it may we need to get

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952 Ibid, p. 119 The idea of overemphasis or hyperbole is also central to the notion of ethical language. Phrases such as: ‘It is the fission of self, or the self as fissibility, a passivity more passive still than the passivity of matter’ (Levinas (1998a), p. 180) abound in Otherwise than Being. The point is again an attempt to remove all temptation to ascribe an ontological meaning to the phrases.
953 Ibid, pp. 13-14 emphasis mine
954 See Introduction section on ‘Philosophy’s Recourse to Neuters’
955 Robert Bernasconi ‘What is the question to which “substitution” is the answer?’ in Critchley and Bernasconi (2002), p. 238
at least some grip on the notion of substitution since we believe that the question that it answers is: ‘how do we escape the self?’

More specifically the concept of substitution answers the question: how is ethics possible in Levinas’s peculiar sense of the term, as the interruption of the spontaneous ego by the Other? Or, to put it in other terms, how is sacrifice or giving possible? His answer is that if the self is not already a hostage to the Other all the way to the point of substitution for the Other, then there could be no truly gratuitous act of sacrifice which he believes is central to ethics. Prior to the self crystalizing into an enjoying ego it is always already substituted for the Other. But again we should emphasise that this is not an ontological event, the self is not in its identity then put in the place of the Other. Rather the identity of the self is determined by such substitution.

We have seen that in Totality and Infinity the categories of same and Other have been, by and large, traditional. Identity was not really thrown into question until we reached the point of eroticism and more specifically the relation of father to son. Then we saw that Levinas was willing to say that the I was another: ‘I do not have my child; I am my child.’ This gives us a kind of concrete lever with which to lift the heavy lid of his notion of substitution. We know how a parent feels responsible for the acts of the child even though they did not have their origin in his or her initiative. The kind of responsibility characteristic of substitution is exemplified by this relation, but magnified. My concern reaches beyond my ego and my responsibility reaches beyond that which originates in my ego. The mysterious nature of the claim that I am my child is therefore clarified with the notion of substitution. Once again we will note that this is not making a specifically ontological claim; indeed Levinas indicates as much when he writes: ‘In this “I am” being is no longer Eleatic unity.’ If in Totality and Infinity this ‘I is another’ is seen as breaking up the unity of Being, then in Otherwise than Being, as the title suggests, it is seen as going beyond being. Where it goes is toward the Other in a movement of sacrifice:

For me, the notion of substitution is tied to the notion of responsibility. To substitute oneself does not amount to putting oneself in the place of another man in order to feel what he feels; it does not involve becoming the other nor, if he be destitute and desperate, the courage of such a trail. Rather, substitution entails bringing comfort by associating ourselves with the essential weakness and finitude of the other; it is to bear his weight while sacrificing one’s interestedness and complacency-in-being, which then turn into responsibility for the other.

It is precisely in this way therefore that the self manages to escape itself. It is central to the nature of the self as a unique chosen one that its need to escape itself only finds culmination in self-sacrifice. All the different figurations we have encountered of quasi-transcendence: enjoyment,
labour, dwelling and Eros are outcomes of this same drive. It lies at the heart of what it is to be truly human, it saves us from ourselves by, paradoxically, allowing us to forget ourselves.

Substitution frees the subject from ennui, that is, from enchainment to itself, where the ego suffocates in itself due to the tautological way of identity, and ceaselessly seeks after the distraction of games and sleep in a movement that never wears out.\textsuperscript{959}

**Summary**

The obscurity and difficulty of Levinas’s later work, and the concept of substitution, makes it challenging to assess with any certainty. At least the fact of his obscurity and difficulty is beyond dispute. Another thing that is clear is that the work takes on a much darker tone than the earlier Totality and Infinity work. In the latter we were given a picture of an already constituted contented ego challenged in its complacent spontaneity by the face of the Other. Now we are given to understand what subjectivity must be like in order for real ethical sacrifice to be possible. The self is here painted as a raw susceptibility invaded by the Other in a violent and traumatic way. The Other does not simply challenge my happy possession of the world but persecutes me to the point of outrage, a malicious persecution I am unable to defend against. This passivity in the face of such persecution, as it were, turns me inside out: not as a consciousness of persecution but an obsession of a body exposed to a touch that is painful. It’s as if Levinas wants to push our capacity to be touched by others to the point where we can’t refuse this touch, and further:

This passivity deserves the epithet of complete or absolute only if the persecuted one is liable to answer for persecutor. The face of the neighbour in its persecuting hatred can by this very malice obsess as something pitiful.\textsuperscript{960}

We should not overlook how shocking this claim is coming from a man whose work is ‘dominated by the presentiment and the memory of the Nazi horror.’\textsuperscript{961} It is in effect limitless guilt, expressed in violent terms which are no longer simply terms of pathos, but of veritable pathology. Indeed this has led Paul Ricoeur to venture the term ‘verbal terrorism.’\textsuperscript{962}

Substitution has given us to think identity differently, where the I is another. We have encountered this thought before in relation to paternity where I am in some sense identified with my child. We can plausibly read this in terms of a sense of responsibility for what our child does, accompanied with a caring for a time which is not my time. In short, this is a concrete instance of putting the Other first. We are now invited to think this relation to alterity hyperbolically; this

\textsuperscript{959} Levinas (1998a), p. 124

\textsuperscript{960} Ibid, p. 111

\textsuperscript{961} Emmanuel Levinas ‘Signature’ in Levinas (1997), p. 291

\textsuperscript{962} Paul Ricoeur ‘Otherwise: A Reading of Emmanuel Levinas’s Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence’ in Trezise (2004), p. 93
relation is a relation to one who touches me in such close proximity that he/she is under my skin: ‘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’. Rather than paternity being the central figure for my ethical relation to another, now it is best understood in terms of the maternal body: ‘Here the psyche is the maternal body’. Maternity becomes the model or the fundamental relation in which I stand to another, any Other: ‘Maternity, which is bearing par excellence, bears even the responsibility for the persecuting of the persecutor’. It is not simply a question of giving one’s time and money to the Other but giving one’s very substance. In this way I am always already responsible for the Other right up to the point of being responsible for his or her responsibility. In this way I am substituted for the Other.

I have argued that this concept of ‘substitution’ answers to a question, or a quest, laid out very early in Levinas’s work. It is through such substitution that the self is able ‘to break that most radical and unalterably binding of chains, the fact that the I [moi] is oneself [soi-même]’. This is achieved by subverting the very cornerstone of ontology: What he called in *On Escape* ‘Ontologism in its broadest meaning’ which ‘remained the fundamental dogma of all thought’. This dogma is summarised thus:

[O]ne could think and feel only what is supposed to exist. A principle more imperious than that of non-contradiction, since here nothingness itself — to the degree that thinking encounters it — gets clothed with existence, and so we must without restriction state, against Parmenides, that non-being is.

My argument is that this is a movement of thought which begins with a rethinking of what it is to need, given this rethinking Levinas finds at the heart of the self a motivating source which lies behind the drive to survival or the quest for pleasure, and this is the need for transcendence. This is the Desire which we have spoken of and which is the heir to the need to escape both the self and the ontology which prioritises identity over difference. It has led him to rethink subjectivity in terms of an exposure which is the very inauguration of this need: it is driven by the very weight of its responsibility. Whether substitution is an adequate, or even comprehensible, answer to this question is beyond the scope of this thesis. Certainly it is conceived by Levinas as a condition

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963 Levinas (1998a), p. 115
964 Ibid, p. 67
965 Ibid, p. 75
966 In practice this extreme responsibility which is central to subjectivity is mitigated by the fact that there is the third party (le tiers) and thus there are other Others. This is the advent of the ‘comparison between incomparables’ (Levinas (1998a) p.16) and therefore of justice. But a further explication of this is beyond the scope of the present thesis. I have touched upon the problem in Chapter 6 and will revisit it in the Conclusion.
967 Levinas (2003), p. 55
968 Ibid, p. 71
969 Ibid
which takes us out of the categories which are valid for Being. Nearly forty years earlier in *On Escape* Levinas had already written:

> It is a matter of getting out of being by a new path, at the risk of overturning certain notions that to common sense and the wisdom of the nations seemed the most evident.970

970 Ibid, p. 73
Conclusion

The central point of this work has been to argue that Levinas articulates an entirely new way of understanding human motivation which derives from a reading of Heidegger yet remains very different from anything the latter developed. This motivation can be contrasted with self-interest, which Levinas argues still remains the motivating force in Heidegger: ‘Dasein is out for its own being; it is out for its very being in order ‘to be’ its being.’\textsuperscript{971} We might question this reading of Heidegger, but it remains clear that the force which animates the human in Levinas is very different from that in Heidegger. If for Heidegger it is care for our own Being then in Levinas it is the \textit{quest for transcendence}, understood in a particular way. From this conception of motivation he develops a novel notion of subjectivity as ethical.

I have located the origin of this understanding of motivation in the very early piece by Levinas \textit{On Escape}. But before digging to this origin I have taken up Levinas’s notion of enjoyment (\textit{Jouissance}) in \textit{Totality and Infinity}. This gives the initial impression that Levinas favours a hedonistic account of motivation, and though he certainly recognises the importance of the pleasure in our lives, I argue that his project at this stage has more to do with seeking out the ontological foundations of pleasure.

The description of enjoyment has proceeded by way of a contrast to Heidegger’s notion of being-in-the-world. Enjoyment, living from... or happiness is understood as a more fundamental way of being than Heidegger’s way of understanding \textit{Dasein’s} comportment towards entities as ready-to-hand. This more fundamental way of being-in-the-world is already a transcendence, already beyond being: ‘The reality of life is already on the level of happiness, and in this sense beyond ontology.’\textsuperscript{972} ‘To be I is to exist in such a way as to be already beyond being, in happiness.’\textsuperscript{973} As such it cannot be understood in terms of \textit{existentials} in Heidegger’s sense. It is this process of enjoyment wherein the ego is first understood to crystallise out in its separateness from the element. We are fundamentally separated beings.

Enjoyment emerges in the satisfaction of needs. Therefore this way of understanding things is to grasp the human primarily in terms of \textit{need} rather than the \textit{possibilities} of action. This in its turn calls for a re-examination of \textit{need} and a questioning of the usual understanding in terms of lack. This we have done via \textit{On Escape}. There \textit{need} was understood as the need for escape, an impetus to get away from the self’s enchainment to the weight of its bodily being. We understood this enchainment in terms of Heidegger’s notion of thrownness or \textit{Geworfenheit} manifest concretely in the suffering of disquiet or sense of malaise in needs themselves. Pleasure is understood as an exaltation attendant upon the satisfaction of need which signified a temporary release from our

\textsuperscript{971} Heidegger (1985b), p. 294
\textsuperscript{972} Levinas (1969), p. 112
\textsuperscript{973} Ibid, p. 120
enchainment. Pleasure is the feeling of getting out of oneself and is in this sense a kind of proto-transcendence. But it turned out to be a false release and revealed itself as nothing more than a temporary loosening of the chains.

The movement of escape is therefore a quest for transcendence, and Levinas derives this from a phenomenology of needs themselves. But at this early stage his analysis does not reach a satisfactory notion of what would concretely satisfy such a quest. Pleasure remains a false promise. The fact of remaining thus chained after pleasure has passed is registered in this work in terms of shame. Shame is the recognition that I am chained to myself, that I cannot hide from myself. This is expressed in the fact of being ashamed of our nakedness, and so shame is also primarily connected to the body. So even at this early stage the body is already conceptualised in terms of passive exposure, but also, as we have seen, as exposure while being enchained to ourselves. The culmination of this claustrophobic sense of being riveted to the self is given in this early work in the phenomenology of nausea. Nausea reveals a sense of ourselves as closed in on ourselves and unable to get out. It is, according to On Escape: ‘the very experience of pure being.’

If this is as far as things go then the human, understood in terms of the quest for transcendence, is, as Sartre put it, ‘a useless passion.’

But this is not Levinas’s last word on the matter. We know that Levinas will ultimately locate transcendence in the ethical relation in which I stand to the Other exemplified concretely in my relation to the face. But to reach this point he will take us through many human forms of life wherein transcendence is sought but ultimately not found, but which we have maintained are explicable in terms of this quest. We have traced these forms through enjoyment, dwelling, representations and Eros. We have been guided in this reading by two conceptual innovations in Levinas’s writings which take place after On Escape. First of all where in On Escape the motive force which drove us out of ourselves was the threat which amounted to the nausea of being trapped in one’s own self, when he came to write Existence and Existence there appeared the horror at the more ominous threat of being sucked into the il y a characteristic of insomnia. Secondly a conceptual split takes place within the concept of need as it is formulated in On Escape and this develops into the important contrast between need and (metaphysical) Desire.

We are, I think, justified in seeing the horror at the il y a as a radicalisation of nausea. We might say that the il y a is Geworfenheit on stilts, where we are wholly unable to take the initiative, where there are “no exits.” The il y a is a source of the depersonalisation of the subject and is identified with the numinous or the sacred. In relation to the il y a the separated being loses its

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974 Ibid, p. 67
975 Sartre (1969), p. 615
976 Levinas (2003), p.67
separateness and is drawn into what Levinas calls, after the anthropologist Lucien Levy-Bruhl, ‘participation’.977

The distinction between need and Desire constitutes a leading thread in Levinas’s philosophy. Desire is given as the motivation for escape and thus transcendence. Needs are those elements of our wants that admit of satisfaction. But as we have argued Desire is the more fundamental human urge. The distinction is drawn first in Existence and Existents978 where it is illustrated in terms of the difference between eating and loving.979 There love is described as ‘an essential and insatiable hunger.’980 Whereas eating, as the fulfilment of need and thus enjoyment, is ‘sincerity’981 and: ‘This structure, where an object concords fully with a desire,982 is characteristic of the whole of our being-in-the-world.’983

Sensibility is identified with enjoyment and not with the neutral given of cognitive awareness, this is the primary signification of sensibility, which as we have tried to show at length is affective. The importance of construing sensibility in terms of enjoyment remains throughout Levinas’s work, despite the change of emphasis we have specified in the later work: ‘Enjoyment is an ineluctable moment of sensibility.’984 But sensibility is also connected to knowledge via perception. This does not constitute a radical break with enjoyment because knowledge also fits into this circuit of the world where there is a perfect fit between the knower and the known. Sensibility is, as it were, anaesthetized in knowing: ‘But also, no doubt, repressed or suspended.’985 So knowing, as representational thinking, does not really draw us out of the circle of sameness of the ego’s economy. It is, as far as alterity is concerned, continuous with the subject’s enjoyment of the world. Although we have also said how the direction of constitution is reversed: ‘it is always the same (the self) that determines the other (the world).’986 This is the essence of transcendental idealist constitution. As Levinas makes the point:

My effort consists in showing that knowledge is in reality an immanence, and that there is no rupture of the isolation of being in knowledge; and on the other hand,

978 Though as we have noted the terminological distinction is not yet clearly drawn, nevertheless the contrast is plain enough.
979 Levinas (1978), p. 35
980 Ibid
981 Ibid, p. 37
982 Here the new terminology which clearly distinguishes ‘need’ from ‘Desire’ is not yet developed, even though the distinction itself is clearly in evidence.
983 Levinas (1978), p. 36
984 Levinas (1998a), p. 72
985 Ibid, p. 64
that in the communication of knowledge one is found beside the Other, not confronted with him, not in the rectitude of the in-front-of-him.\textsuperscript{987}

We noted that enjoyment was troubled by the very element it enjoys. It is shaken by the uncertainties that attend the elemental nature which underpins it, which we saw as revealing the element’s connection to the \textit{il y a}. This uncertainty was mitigated by the exertions of labour. But labour brought with it the pain of effort and thus we are introduced to the possibility of suffering.

Suffering is thematized by Levinas centrally in terms of physical pain, it is understood as the invasion of non-sense, we are pressed right up against being, and thus again brought into proximity with the \textit{il y a}. Pain is therefore understood in terms of the ‘no exit’ which characterises the \textit{il y a}. Its lack of sense is explicated by virtue of the fact that while it clearly constitutes a sensible content (it is thus affective) it is not assumable, not incorporable into the life of the subject. The phenomenology of pain is incorporated into \textit{Otherwise than Being} since, despite the fact that in pain we are, as it were, wrapped up in ourselves, it also indicates that we are vulnerable up to the point of pure passive exposure. Pain indicates an alterity, one that is not incorporable into the life of the subject and thus resists assimilation. Yet one to which we are exposed by virtue of being incarnated. What is the nature of the alterity that pain indicates? Levinas insists that this alterity is the alterity of death. It is precisely in suffering, and the ‘no exit’ which this indicates, that death is revealed in all its horror. Contrary to Heidegger therefore death is not conceived as our ultimate possibility which is incorporated into our lives, in the mode of being-toward-death, in order to give shape and meaning to our existence. Rather, death is seen as being on the outside of our lives and conceived in terms of mystery. The alterity of death comes from a dimension that we can know nothing about and comes as if it is out to get us. All death therefore takes on the significance of murder. We therefore cannot enter into relation with death. It follows that for Levinas the fear of death is not in reality anxiety over nothingness as it is in Heidegger, rather it is fear over a kind of attack from a dimension that is intractable to light:

Thus the fear for my being which is my relation with death is not the fear of nothingness, but the fear of violence—and thus it extends into fear of the Other, of the absolutely unforeseeable.\textsuperscript{988}

To coin a phrase if in Heidegger death is the possibility of impossibility then in Levinas it is the impossibility of possibility.\textsuperscript{989}

If Levinas describes death in terms of mystery then this is also true of what he calls the feminine. The feminine in \textit{Time and the Other} is conceived as the very model of an absolute alterity. We have examined some of the more troubling aspects of this, but this has not led me to feel that the whole topic is without merit. The Otherness of the feminine is conceived from the position of the heterosexual male who regards the feminine not from the neutral point of view but from the

\textsuperscript{987} Levinas (1982), p. 57
\textsuperscript{988} Levinas (1969), p. 235
\textsuperscript{989} See Levinas (1987a), footnote on p. 70
sexed point of view. The erotic Other (here given in terms of the feminine) is revealed in an erotic desire and not in a knowing. In this way the erotic ‘gaze’ cannot come from a neutral third party point of view. We move from the feminine as mysterious alterity to the erotic desire which this alterity arouses. But from here we move rather quickly to the notion of love. Love is then conceived as the ultimate relation, a relation that achieves the escape we had awaited from the first. Yet it does not crush as death does:

There where all possibles are impossible, where one can no longer be able, the subject is still a subject through eros. Love is not a possibility, is not due to our initiative, is without reason; it invades and wounds us, and nevertheless the I survives it.\textsuperscript{990}

We can see therefore why Levinas finds in love precisely what he is looking for. There is escape from self, a losing of oneself in the Other, and a relationship with a mysterious alterity beyond knowing, which takes away my I can, but which is not therefore to be considered undesirable. Even if in a sense I lose myself in love, I am not therefore crushed but remain a self.

Levinas will come to reject the erotic relation as constituting the true encounter with alterity and I have understood this to be the case for two reasons. In the first place love is construed as interlacing both need and Desire. But since, according to Levinas, to love is to love the fact that I am loved, it returns to the self and is thus disqualified as a true relation to absolute Otherness (it is more like Odysseus than Abraham). Therefore need wins out over Desire. In the second place the society of the lovers becomes a closed society. It is important for Levinas to derive universal justice and rationality from his primary alterity relation (via the third person), otherwise what he insists must be understood as a fundamental human situation will turn out to be a marginal ‘phenomenon.’ The solitary circle of the beloved couple belies this possibility of issuing in the universality of human communication. All this is made clear in the more thorough treatment of the erotic in \textit{Totality and Infinity}. I have tried to trace this out and have located the problematic nature of Levinas’s treatment of the feminine in the Appendix.

What this thesis has found of the most value in the erotic relation is Levinas’s phenomenology of the caress as the typically erotic form of sensibility. The caress is a form of touch, but it is not reducible to palpation or the openness of the feeling on the felt. It is not an intentionality which has an object for its directedness. Rather the caress seeks it knows not what. What it seeks cannot be got hold of. Not because it fails in its ‘intention,’ but because it is of the essence of the caress to reach beyond what can be reached. What it manages to get hold of is the very receding of the Other under its touch: ‘The caress is a mode of the subject’s being, where the subject who is in contact with another goes beyond this contact.’\textsuperscript{991} It is this beyond which indicates the very Otherness of the Other. Here is a form of sensibility which constitutes contact with alterity. It forms the basis of an empiricism which does not depend upon the given as present but precisely

\textsuperscript{990} Levinas (1987a), pp. 88-89

\textsuperscript{991} Ibid, p. 89
on its ‘presence’ as being an irrecoverable absence: ‘always inaccessible, and always still to come [à venir].’ We have seen that this ‘to come’ indicates a certain fecundity which is derived from the erotic relation and which is specified by Levinas in terms of the having of the child.

The notion of fecundity, even given its biological grounding, takes on important broader implications in Levinas’s work. We have indicated that one of these implications is in terms of a new birth. Moreover the having of a child is not a project in Heidegger’s sense of the term. Of course we can treat our children as projects, but this is not the point. The existence of the child does not fit into the ecstatic time that is Dasein’s, it comes into his or her own time. As an existent the child exceeds any form that we may wish to impose upon him or her. Thus fecundity is conceived as the very disruption of the unified subject and thus the egoism of enjoyment in which corporeal subjectivity emerges. It is, Levinas tells us, a ‘trans-substantiation:’ I am me and not me in fecundity. In other words the I of fecundity is not the subjectivity which remains a simple return to self. ‘The fecundity of the I is its very transcendence.’ In Otherwise than Being, as we have seen, ethical subjectivity goes all the way to substitution for the Other and yet this substitution is not an alienation of the self but an awakening to its most primordial nature as responsibility for the Other. Thus we can see the prototype of ethical subjectivity in the relation of what Levinas calls paternity. Yet even given this formulation Levinas says of the son that ‘his I qua filial commences not in enjoyment but in election. He is unique for himself because he is unique for his father.’ The son’s very identity depends upon the love that the father bears him. It is precisely the concept of election that Levinas uses in Otherwise than Being to specify the self as awakened in ethical subjectivity. We are subjects, uniquely elected, by virtue of being subjected to the Other (responsibility is our inability to slip away). We have seen how the election of the son specifies both his uniqueness and his being unique among other unique ones. This issues in what Levinas calls ‘Fraternity’, which he conceives as the basis of political cooperation.

My thesis has argued that this area of Levinas’s thought is both the most troubling and the most fecund. We have seen how it is here that the prototypical concepts which go to make up the idea of ethical subjectivity get an airing for the first time. What strikes me as troubling is the way Levinas has specified the ethical in terms of the traditional family which thereby incorporates a profoundly patriarchal view of the way ethics is concretely produced. The family is given as a structure dominated by a father who is endowed with authority over his son because he (the father) actually creates the son’s very identity. Not by virtue of biological genesis, but by virtue of his very specific love for the son:

And because the son owes his unicity to the paternal election he can be brought up, be commanded, and can obey, and the strange conjuncture of the family is

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992 Ibid
993 Levinas (1969), p. 269
994 Ibid
995 Ibid, p. 279
possible. Creation contradicts the freedom of the creature only when it is confused with causality.\footnote{Ibid, p. 279}

This has the effect of making us forget about the discrete presence of the feminine in the dwelling (this very discretion demands that we forget) and indeed we have certainly ruled out, or perhaps allowed as an afterthought, the possibility of a daughter. Would she too be one of the elect? Indeed it would be somewhat unfair to say that the mother gets no mention at all in the articulation of this ‘strange conjuncture:’

Such a mode of existence is produced as childhood, with its essential reference to the protective existence of the parents. The notion of maternity must be introduced here to account for this recourse.\footnote{Ibid, p. 278}

It is indeed introduced only to be dropped again. But it takes a central place in the later Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence in terms of the maternal body.

The sections of Totality and Infinity entitled ‘Beyond the Face,’ wherein the concepts of Eros, fecundity and fraternity are articulated, contain some of the most interesting in Levinas’s corpus and are incorporated into his later account of ethical subjectivity wherein they lose their patriarchal character. What this reveals, I think, is that the family is one possible structure that emerges in our being-in-the-world and which concretely instances ethical relations: albeit relations which are in perpetual danger of ossifying into ontological, and thus non-ethical, structures. We can therefore lift Levinas’s conceptualisation of the erotic, of fecundity and the parental relation out of this situation and see how he has worked them into the very nature of the subject itself. This does not have the effect of making subjectivity into a microcosm of the patriarchal family, but rather to disrupt notions of identity of the self.

We noted that Totality and Infinity left us with two very glaring problems: If the Other is wholly other how can he or she mean anything to me? And given that the Other is not amenable to ontological language how can it be said, as it is in Levinas’s works for example? More centrally to my account we found troubling Levinas’s account of the familial and fraternal in the last sections of Totality and Infinity. I have argued that nevertheless these sections furnish us with the conceptual resources needed to specify ethical subjectivity. The answer to the first question was given in terms of the trace. We have seen that the trace is the manner in which the face signifies, in Levinas it is an ethical trace which indicates an excess beyond what would count as meaningful in phenomenology and ontology.

If the language of Totality and Infinity is given as a kind of progressive developmental quasi-phenomenological structure, then we can read Otherwise than Being and Beyond Essence rather as a text which centres around a single scene or intrigue. Indeed it circles round this ‘primal scene’ with a language that sounds more and more obsessive. This scene is the point of awakening of
ethical subjectivity and it is inaugurated by the Other as always already having taken hold of me. We have said that *Otherwise than Being* is an attempt to articulate this intrigue of the awakening of ethical subjectivity and we have noted how the illeity at the centre of this ‘scene’ is possibly confused with the *il y a*. The encounter with the Other as it is there described is now rendered in terms of proximity. Proximity should not be confused with contiguity in space, indeed Levinas has insisted that spatial relations are possible only starting with proximity. We have argued that proximity is best understood—and is usually explicated in terms of—touching, and touching itself in terms of the *caress*. This gives credence to our claim that the erotic and related matters form the conceptual ground on which the later work is implanted. (Indeed this assignment to the Other is called by Levinas love without Eros). Proximity, like the caress, indicates both approach and the receding of that which is approached. The other absents him or her-self at the point of greatest contact, like the lovers embrace\(^998\) which is never close enough. This is the true centre of sensibility wherein, though it is necessary to begin with enjoyment—as we have done—we find a more primordial mode of sensibility which accounts for the latter. Proximity is my contact with the Other and this contact is made via the trace which assigns me to the other right up to the point of substitution.

The necessity of such a substitution is given because I am *traumatised* by the presence of the Other and held *hostage* by the very assignment to a post I in no way said yes to. This assignment took place before the possibility of any yeses and noes. It took place in the immemorial past. This proximity to the Other is indeed a *bodily* proximity, it is produced in sensibility at its most passive, wherein it does not move on to assume that which affects it (as it does in knowing and enjoying) but is subjected to it. Subjectivity is this very subjection. It is the strange paradox of a bodily spirituality, for it is not merely that proximity is enacted in the body; proximity is the very psyche of our corporeality. This of course is flat contrary to the whole tradition of Western philosophy: ‘For the philosophical tradition of the West, all spirituality lies in consciousness, thematic exposition of being, knowing.’\(^999\) Indeed the sensibility of proximity is also *language* as the first word, the saying (*le Dire*) prior to any said (*le Dit*); the ‘you shall not kill’ or ‘God’ which emanates from the face of the other. This language does not congeal into concepts but breaks through from the Other to the very core of subjectivity (*‘Language is a battering ram,’*)\(^1000\) where it cannot be taken up but presents itself as an extreme urgency, an obsession.

With regard to the language in which *Otherwise than Being* is in fact written sensibility, as it is there described, appears to be more akin to the descriptions of pain than those of pleasure and enjoyment. We have seen how pain is articulated by Levinas in terms of the onset of non-sense, the very counter-thrust to meaning. Thus the language strains at the edges of madness and many of the figurations reflect the language of pathology: ‘The soul is the other in me. The psyche, the one-for-the-other, can be a possession and a psychosis; the soul is already a seed of folly.’\(^1001\) The

\(^{998}\) Levinas (1998a) p. 82  
\(^{999}\) Ibid, p. 99  
\(^{1000}\) Emmanuel Levinas ‘*Language and Proximity*’ in Levinas (1998d), p. 125  
\(^{1001}\) Levinas (1998a), p. 191
one-for-the-other is here rendered as the basic configuration of meaning, the ultimate residue when all specific meaningfulness is distilled out. It is also the figuration of ethical subjectivity which is the psyche as given over entirely to and for the Other. As assigned to the Other, as obsessed by him or her, I have nowhere to go. I am backed up against myself. I am hounded out of every hiding place, can find no refuge in myself. Nor can I take on this obsession any more than I can take on pain. ‘It is unassumable like persecution.’ It is clear therefore that this primal intrigue took place precisely before any possible removal of oneself from one’s post, before any enjoyment or possible escape, and is the very scene that inaugurated this Desire for escape. It took place in an immemorial past prior to the ego as enjoying. This scene is the creation of ethical subjectivity which is an expiation, an outpouring, or giving to the Other, which defines the subject at its most primordial level. ‘It is always to empty oneself anew of oneself, to absolve oneself, like in a haemophiliac’s haemorrhage.’ As obsessed by the Other the body as a pure passivity, ‘more passive still than the passivity of things,’ vulnerability to pain and outrage, is this subjectivity. It is given to the Other in the very exposedness of its skin. It carries the Other under its skin, in its entrails, it is the maternal self. It is as if persecuted by the Other. Persecuted! Then why shame? Why do I find myself to be a comrade with this persecutor? ‘It is as though persecution by another were at bottom of solidarity with another. How can such a passion take place and have its time in consciousness?’ Indeed it cannot and does not; it slips under the net of consciousness’s work of constitution. Therefore this pre-originary scene does not fit into the language of phenomenological and ontological disclosure, wherein it becomes a theme, is synthesised and synchronised. It is irreducibly diachronic.

The language of Otherwise than Being is itself therefore problematic since what it describes cannot fit into a description that falls under the terms of the said (le Dit) and as such can only betray the saying (le Dire), which we have understood as proximity itself. There is within this work a modulation of the said and the unsaying of the said that makes for its curious style. Such a modulation, as we have noted and Levinas explains at length, mirrors the modulation of scepticisms claim to know that we cannot know. Scepticism when stated refutes itself, yet no matter how often it is refuted this legitimate child of philosophy perpetually emerges again to disrupt philosophy’s claim to sufficiency.

The primal intrigue is now given as subjectivity always already responsible for the Other by virtue of an immemorial intrigue. Ethical subjectivity is uneasiness, an inability to rest or stay within the self: an expiation. This is the subject’s very materiality, its incarnation. It is driven out of all identity and thus unable to harden into an ego. This is so because in its very heart it is always already invaded by alterity, already the eyes of illeity look at it. It is guilty before having sinned and thus there is indeed guilt before any act but not before any Other has accused. This is subjectivity at its most primordial and from this all else follows.

1002 Ibid, p. 87
1003 Ibid, p. 92
1004 Ibid, p. 110
1005 Ibid, p. 102
We can feed this back in to our primary way of reading Levinas. We construed the need to escape—and the discomfort attendant on this need—and thus for transcendence, in terms of Heidegger’s notion of Geworfenheit. We can now see that prior to being thrown into the world we are accused by the Other and ethically assigned thereby: ‘One comes not into the world but into question.’ Thus we might reread all of the categories that we have let emerge on this reading.

We can take one central conceptual intrigue as our example, death. For Heidegger my relationship to death individuates me and isolates me by pulling me out of the inauthentic vortex of the they (das Man). My authentic relationship to death is always a relationship with my own death. The death of Others cannot concern me at the same depth or with the same urgency as my own death. Though this does not mean I am left indifferent to the death of Others. Rather it means only that the Other’s death does not signify to ‘the survivor, more than funerary behaviour and emotions, and memories.’ But Levinas has introduced us to the idea of a being-for-the-other that is prior to our being-for-self. Thus the fact of the no escape of death that we have discussed above amounts to the fact that my responsibilities for the Other do not end with my death. Not even the grave absolves us: ‘The tomb is not a refuge; it is not pardon. The debt remains.’ This primordiality of ‘dying for…’ the Other, that is of being more afraid of murder than of dying (and the death of the Other is always in a sense murder), is concretised in the phenomenon of sacrifice. Specifying this in terms of concrete familial relation it can be asked: what mother or father would not sacrifice her or himself for their child? If it is the case that there are in fact many who would not, then this only shows how immoral the world is. Examples of the latter have the power to outrage us; why should we be outraged if the primary motive of beings is their urge for persistence in being (conatus essendi)? Is it because we know that the power of love should be stronger than the fear of death? Levinas wants to insist that sacrifice is the primordial human condition, prior to the struggle for existence.

All the “transfers of feeling” by which the theorists of primordial war explain the birth of generosity would not succeed in being fixed in the ego if the ego were not, with all its being (or all its non-being), a hostage. It is not certain that at the beginning there was war. Before war there were alters.

This leaves me with a crucial question: If the self-sacrifice of ethics somehow precedes the self-assertion of war, then why is there in practice so much of the latter and so regrettably little of the former? Levinas certainly recognises this fact, but leaves the answer to this question vague and thus unconvincing. What would be required in my view is either a political philosophy with the conceptual resources to explain this alienation, or a philosophical psychology which could account

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1006 Emmanuel Levinas ‘Ethics as First Philosophy’ in Levinas (1989a), p. 81
1007 Emmanuel Levinas ‘Dying For...’ in Levinas (2006a), p. 186
1008 Levinas (1998b), p. 200 fn 29
for it in terms of bad faith or self-deception. Whatever these might look like is the subject for another study.
Appendix Levinas and the Feminine

Simone de Beauvoir’s Criticism

The question of the notion of the feminine in Levinas’s work has been controversial ever since Simone de Beauvoir held it up for scrutiny in *The Second Sex*. Despite the fact that Beauvoir was the first to raise the interesting and controversial problem of the notion of the feminine in Levinas’s work there is a sense in which this criticism misses the mark. Levinas writes: ‘Neither does this mystery of the feminine—the feminine: essentially other—refer to any romantic notions of the mysterious, unknown, or misunderstood woman.’ Levinas’s linking of the feminine to mystery is a function of his characterisation—of the feminine as ‘essentially other.’ Of course it is precisely this that is the target of Beauvoir’s characteristically feminist objection:

And she is simply what man decrees; thus she is called ‘the sex’, by which is meant that she appears essentially to the male as a sexual being. For him she is sex—absolute sex, no less. She is defined and differentiated with reference to man and not he with reference to her; she is the incidental, the inessential as opposed to the essential. He is the Subject, he is the Absolute—she is the Other.

It is at this point that Beauvoir opens the footnote which begins: ‘E. Lévinas expresses this idea most explicitly in his essay *Temps et l’Autre*.’ Then begins a long quote from *Time and the Other*. Central to this quote is the remark that:

I think that the feminine represents the contrary in its absolute sense, this contrariness being in no wise affected by any relation between it and its correlative and thus remaining absolutely other.

Richard A. Cohen translates the same remark like this:

I think the absolutely contrary contrary [le contraire absolument contraire], whose contrariety is in no way affected by the relationship that can be established between it and its correlative, the contrariety that permits its terms to remain absolutely other, is the feminine.

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1010 Beauvoir (1981), p. 16
1011 Ibid
1012 Though we will see that it is not entirely misguided
1013 Levinas (1987a), p. 86
1014 Beauvoir (1981), p. 16
1015 Ibid
1017 Levinas (1987a), p. 85. Cohen also opens a footnote registering de Beauvoir’s criticism and responding that she has tended to oversimplify the issue.
The central point of this remark is that the feminine is properly understood not in its relation to the masculine but from itself. It is difficult to see what else could be meant by the claim that it is such that its ‘contrariety is in no way affected by the relationship that can be established between it and its correlative,’ and that this relationship ‘permits its terms to remain absolutely other.’ Not only is the feminine in Levinas not differentiated with reference to man, she is not even affected in her alterity by any relationship that can be established between her and her correlate, which I take to be the masculine. Levinas insists upon this point and it is essential to his understanding of absolute alterity—the genuinely Other—that this be the case. Femininity is a positive essence which in no way derives its content from its masculine counterpart. What is curious however—and justifies Beauvoir’s concern—is that this positive essence is alterity itself. Otherness makes up the whole essence of the feminine, at least in *Time and the Other*.

It is also essential to Otherness that it be understood as occupying a greater height than the Same (the masculine). The Other in Levinas’s philosophy represents the most crucial and important content. To this extent, and very interestingly, Beauvoir, it seems to me, fails to register the radicality inherent in Levinas’s use of concepts and thus his departure from the western (masculine) tradition of philosophical logos. Given this, the accusation that the feminine is ‘inessential’ or ‘incidental’ completely misses the mark. If anything could be called the ‘Absolute’ in Levinas’s philosophy it is the Other, and here the Other is the feminine. We will need to examine what this means.

By mounting this defence of Levinas against Beauvoir’s criticism I am not wishing to imply that there are no traces of sexism to be found in Levinas’s work, far from it. Indeed it is precisely here that Levinas strikes me as being at his most conventional. The fact is that the three specific areas wherein the concept of the feminine is deployed remain precisely those areas most characteristic of women’s oppression: the realm of the home, the theme of the erotic and the role of child bearer. Nevertheless these areas are not given the subordinate role in the scheme of things by Levinas which they have traditionally being accorded. We will see that even if Levinas is as guilty as Nietzsche and Kierkegaard1018 (and perhaps nearly every other traditional male philosopher) of assigning typically, and historically determined, feminine roles to Woman, then he also to some extent inverts the value that is traditionally assigned to these roles. This fact, however, does little to overcome the accusation of sexism, since placing the feminine virtues of home, family and fertility on a pedestal is a typical male way of leaving women precisely in these roles.

**Women in the Home**

I will approach Levinas’s notion of the feminine in the order I have dealt with it in the body of the text. It first emerges in relation to the dwelling where the feminine is evoked as the possibility of the opening up of the intimacy of the dwelling by virtue of a discrete presence of a loving Other who welcomes. This welcoming discrete presence is the feminine. This has the effect of giving the impression that the feminine should be understood in terms of a domestic setting, thus locating women firmly in the home. But it is not in my view that Levinas is prescribing a homely role to

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1018 For an argument that he is so guilty see Sonia Sikka ‘The Delightful Other: Portraits of the Feminine in Kierkegaard, Nietzsche and Levinas’ in Chanter (2001), pp. 96-118
women, while the man kills the prey or organises society. I have understood this welcoming and discrete presence in the home to refer in large part to Woman as a post-natal maternal element. Thus we can see that Levinas’s (metaphorical) use of terms like ‘Woman’ and ‘the feminine’ draw their sense from conventional connotations and are descriptive in these terms, not prescriptive. This is also true of masculine metaphors such as those used to characterise our relation to death as marking ‘the end of the subject’s virility and heroism.’[^1019] If the specific subject referred to were female then it would mark the end of her virility and heroism.

We can give more concrete content to the rather abstract characterisation of the feminine if we turn to Levinas’s article ‘Judaism and the Feminine.’[^1020] There we find praise for the great and ‘charming feminine figures of the Old Testament.’[^1021] Of these figures he claims that they ‘all play an active role in the attainment of biblical purpose.’[^1022] And he contrasts this state of affairs to the Orient where: ‘at the heart of masculine civilization, woman finds herself completely subordinate to masculine whims or reduced to charming or lightening the harsh life of men.’[^1023] Thus we can see that, while undoubtedly preserving something characteristically feminine about woman, Levinas is not in favour of reducing such femininity to a subordinate place to man, or to the role of a charming lightening of the seriousness of his life. Even if this is what appears to be meant by the claim that woman is ‘a delightful lapse in being, and the source of gentleness in itself.’[^1024]

This is also true of his reading of the roles and attributes of the great feminine figures of the bible. The importance of these women, he insists, cannot be exaggerated:

> But the world in which these events unfolded would not have been structured as it was — and as it is and always will be — without the secret presence, on the edge of invisibility, of these mothers, wives and daughters; without their silent footsteps in the depths and opacity of reality, drawing the very dimensions of interiority and making the world precisely habitable.[^1025]

Once again we are brought to this theme of the feminine opening up the dimension of interiority (exemplified precisely by the home) and therefore making a cold hard world habitable. The contrast here therefore is between on the one hand Woman as mere supplement or appendage to man’s existence (this is Levinas’s characterisation of the Orient)[^1026] wherein man would already be capable of life on such rugged terrain, and on the other hand Woman as essential to the very habitability of the world.

Thus for Levinas it is not merely that the feminine is a kind of charming lapse in the rough life of man, but rather that it constitutes a ‘lapse in being.’[^1027] In this sense the feminine does not play a

[^1019]: Levinas (1987a), p. 72
[^1020]: Emmanuel Levinas ‘Judaism and the Feminine’ in Levinas (1987), pp.30-38
[^1021]: Ibid, p. 31
[^1022]: Ibid
[^1023]: Ibid
[^1024]: Levinas (1969), p. 155
[^1025]: Emmanuel Levinas ‘Judaism and the Feminine’ in Levinas (1987), p. 31
[^1026]: How dubious we might find such a characterization is here I think beside the point.
subordinate role to the masculine in any straightforward sense. The feminine here is neither merely describing a specific sex (which would locate it as a biological category) nor does it denote a specific gender (which would locate it in a cultural milieu) rather, as Levinas puts it: ‘the feminine figures among the categories of Being.’ Thus the feminine for Levinas constitutes an ontological category. What does this mean?

The ego or self is identified by Levinas with the drive to conquest or the will to power. Essentially *conatus essendi* the self, as the Being par excellence, is a drive to remain in its Being or to enlarge and enhance its Being. This is concretely achieved primarily in enjoyment, which is the sensible taking in of the elements. Then, because of the insecurity characteristic of the elements, the self has recourse to labour. But labour itself requires the inwardness and recollection achieved by virtue of habitation. What is woman’s role in this? This question is introduced by Levinas by recourse to the meeting of Rabbi Yossi with the prophet Elijah. The Rabbi asks ‘what can be meant by the verse from Genesis on ‘the woman lending aid to Adam.’ Levinas cites the prophet Elijah:

Man brings home corn—does he chew corn? He brings flax—can he clothe himself in flax? The woman is the light of his eyes. She puts him back on his feet.

This may well give the impression that woman is here conceived as the mere helpmeet of man and thus occupying an unimportant and subordinate role, but this is a reading that Levinas resists. For surely, he protests; ‘A slave would be good enough for such a task.’

In the first place the corn and flax drawn from nature by the labour of the hand of man, for Levinas, testifies to the fact that he has to an extent broken from the immersion in the elements characteristic of the life of spontaneous enjoyment. That is to say labour betokens a break from instinctive life. It is precisely this fact of labour that marks ‘what one can accurately call the life of spirit.’ But even if this is truly a break with the immediate immersion in nature and the founding of spiritual life, it cannot be truly called human. The unchewed corn and the unworked flax constitute not so much food and clothing as impersonal commodities. The birth here of a kind of economic rationality, cold and loveless, does not uncover a habitable world: though it is obviously true that without such labour habitation would not be possible. Levinas clearly considers such labour to be a continuation of a virile and conquering *logos* which he habitually associates with *Being* itself. As a consequence of this, though man goes beyond not only nature, but also the...
nature in himself: ‘an insurmountable rawness remains in the products of our conquering civilization.’

The world in which reason becomes more and more self-conscious is not habitable. It is hard and cold, like those supply depots where merchandise which cannot satisfy is piled up: it can neither clothe those who are naked nor feed those who are hungry; it is impersonal, like factory hangers and industrial cities where manufactured things remain abstract, true with the truth of calculations and brought into the anonymous circuit of the economy that proceeds according to knowledgeable plans that cannot prevent, though they can prepare, disasters. This is the spirit in all its masculine essence.

The world of masculine spirit, the spirit of labour and conquest, remains a cold and impersonal world. The personal sphere of habitation and dwelling (essentially the home) therefore requires an element over and above labour, this element Levinas designates ‘the feminine.’ It is precisely by virtue of this discrete presence of an Otherness, which constitutes a counterthrust to the conquering logos, that a habitable world is formed. A masculine self, conceived in purely economic terms, is broken in its rapacious drive by the possibility of coming to himself, of ‘recollection’ as we have dealt with it above, within a dwelling, but the dimension of the dwelling, which is ontologically distinct from mere the occupation of a building, is achieved by virtue of the presence in being of the feminine. In a way then, since Levinas habitually identifies being with the conquering logos, or the conatus essendi, the feminine is an ontological element that runs counter to the ontological. With regard to the masculine spirit, Levinas might say of the feminine what he says of death; ‘that it marks the end of the subject’s virility and heroism.’ This is so far from being a bad thing that, for Levinas, it constitutes an essential prerequisite to ethical life. It is in this sense that in the early writings he is prone to characterise the feminine in terms of absolute Otherness. The role then of making the dwelling habitable, to which Levinas assigns the feminine, should not be misunderstood as that of making the beds and dusting the furniture. Making habitable means, quite literally, making habitation in the world possible at all.

Jacques Derrida has insisted that there are two possible readings of this feminine alterity in Levinas’s thought. On the one hand we can see it, as he admits that he once did, as ‘the traditional and androcentric attribution of certain characteristics to woman (private interiority, apolitical domesticity, intimacy of a sociality that Levinas refers to as “society without language,” etc.).’ Yet on the other hand, while accepting this criticism of Levinas’s manner of expressing himself:

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1034 Ibid
1035 And the labour from which they derive their value also undoubtedly remains abstract. It is precisely in terms of abstract labour that Marx understands the exchange value of commodities in capitalist societies. This is also the basis of our alienation from the products of our labour.
1036 Emmanuel Levinas ‘Judaism and the Feminine’ in Levinas (1987), p. 32
1037 See Chapter 5 ‘Dwelling’
1038 Levinas (1987a), p. 72
The other approach to this description would no longer raise concerns about classical androcentricism. It might even, on the contrary, make of this text a sort of feminist manifesto. For this text defines the welcome par excellence, the welcome or welcoming of absolute, absolutely original, or even pre-originary hospitality, nothing less than the pre-ethical origin of ethics, on the basis of femininity. That gesture reaches a depth of essential or meta-empirical radicality that takes sexual difference into account in an ethics emancipated from ontology.\textsuperscript{1040}

It is this second approach that is most compatible with my own reading, though it has to be admitted that the first reading is certainly available. Nonetheless we do not need to choose between some barely suppressed premise about the domestic role of women and a radical feminist manifesto. Neither reading on its own does sufficient justice to the complexities of the text. Moreover neither reading goes very far toward explaining why Levinas has recourse to this troubling notion precisely here.

Ethics is only enacted when separation is complete, at least on a specific reading of \textit{Totality and Infinity}, yet the feminine alterity is required in order to complete it, which implies that this welcome is not yet ethical. Why should this be? On the other hand it is not clear whether recollection is required for dwelling or dwelling required for recollection. Derrida has also registered the confusion that this area is prone to. He writes:

\begin{quote}
One might then say that the welcome to come is what makes possible the recollection of the at home with oneself, even though the relations of conditionality appear impossible to straighten out. They defy chronology as much as logic.\textsuperscript{1041}
\end{quote}

Chronology does not really present a problem here since a reading of Levinas that took him to be explicating things in terms of a temporal unfolding would barely make sense. Levinas is giving an account which displays \textit{moments} of our being from egoistic life to ethical transcendence in terms of constitutional layering, wherein no layer is entirely superseded by the next. We never, for example, leave behind the relation of enjoyment to the elemental; it is only surpassed in the sense of being subordinated to other ways of comporting ourselves. This means that the defying of logic \textit{does} present a problem, for we are trying to read the text in terms of certain forms of conditionality. Yet we are finding it increasingly difficult to pin down what conditions what. We need to be separate before we can encounter Otherness yet we seem to need Otherness in order to separate. We need to recollect in order to dwell, but we need to dwell in order to recollect. The first point is allegedly answered by specifying that the Otherness in the dwelling is the feminine alterity and not the face, but what does this mean? The second point is left to stand. This complicated and paradoxical formulation is, I believe, an anticipation of the notion of the \textit{trace}.

\textsuperscript{1040} Ibid, p. 44
\textsuperscript{1041} Ibid, p. 28
Thus we can argue that though Levinas’s text seems to brim with paradox, the trace as the pre-originary encounter with the Other does all the work of straightening things out. Levinas’s troubling notion of the feminine in this area can largely be left behind and seen as an unfortunate lapse into a way of speaking which is still too ontological. I think however that Otherwise than Being and Beyond Essence is an attempt to supersede such language, as my thesis has argued. Thus if Levinas can be accused of sexist stereotypes in this area, then I suspect that they are dropped in the mature work. A case could be made for the idea that in his early and middle writings he was still burdened with what we have called ontological language, and this tended to draw him toward idealised figurations like the feminine in order to specify the opening of the ethical relation. If this language has been surpassed in the later work, then so too are these residual idealised notions. This does not let Levinas’s work of the hook, but it does make a move in trying to show that these ideological stereotypical idealisations do not vitiate the work as a whole.

I am not therefore claiming that the metaphor of the feminine can function without any reference to real flesh and blood women. As Stella Sandford makes the point:

> The descriptive and/or ideological content of the notion of the feminine cannot simply be dismissed as unrepresentative of empirical women because how we understand what it is to be an empirical woman is influenced — to some extent, that is, constituted — by this (and other) notions of the feminine.

The point is that Levinas employs a conventional notion of the feminine (I have admitted as much above) and as such this notion is already shot through with ideological biases. But if we argue that these ideological biases are a product of Levinas’s inability to operate outside of a language which embodies these biases, and that the later ethical language endeavours to do precisely this, then we might feel that the project gains its philosophical or metaphysical justification precisely in the way it articulates ethical subjectivity. Whether he has succeeded in this task is another matter and beyond the scope of this appendix. So when Sandford makes the point that:

> One might ask, for example, what place unquestioned ideological assumptions have in a philosophical text, and what the uncovering of those assumptions means, philosophically, for that text. If it should turn out that the assumptions are on the other hand, not unquestioned but consciously and purposively employed, one might ask what the employment of such assumptions tells us about the philosophical project under discussion, and what cultural or political consequences it might entail.

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1042 See Chapters 7 and 8
1043 Of course there is in the mature work the centralisation of the maternal body, but I will try and say something about this soon.
1044 Sandford (2000), p. 49
1045 Ibid
We can respond by saying that they are there because the language in which they are formulated remains still too ontological, and thus shot through with such assumptions, and as such incapable of expressing ethics without betrayal (as indeed the later ethical language is, but here it is self-conscious and subject to an unsaying). This hardly closes the matter but it moves the discussion away from the question of Levinas’s apparently expressed views to the question of expression itself.

The Feminine and the Erotic

We have noted similar problems in Levinas’s treatment of the erotic. Here again Levinas understands the feminine in her traditional role as mystery. Levinas tries to obviate this objection: ‘Neither does the mystery of the feminine—the feminine: essentially other—refer to any romantic notions of the mysterious, unknown or misunderstood woman.’ On the other hand in his need to articulate ‘the exceptional position of the feminine in the economy of being’ he does not shy away from certain literature and views that might well be seen in precisely this light:

I willingly refer to the great themes of Goethe or Dante, to Beatrice and the *ewig Weibliches* (eternal feminine), to the cult of the Woman in chivalry and in modern society (which is certainly not explained solely by the necessity of lending a strong arm to the weaker sex)—if, more precisely, I think of the admirably bold pages of Léon Bloy in his *Letters to his Fiancée*, I do not want to ignore the legitimate claims of the feminism that presupposes all the acquired attainments of civilization.

Most feminist understandings of these themes do not locate them as ontological structures but as ideological reflections of male dominated social structures. There is no denying the presence of these stereotypes.

Moreover when he characterises the erotic body in terms of on the one hand frailty and on the other Ultra-materiality, we are witnessing a formulation of the feminine that can be read as a combination of virginal purity and wanton whore, and it seems to culminate in an understanding of the mystery of woman which places her outside of the world of language and meaning in which justice is located. Indeed the feminine, as the beloved, is associated with the anonymous materiality of the *il y a*:

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1046 *Time and the Other*, p. 86
1047 Ibid
1048 Ibid. Of particular interest in relation to feminist criticism is Levinas’s evocation of the now little known author Léon Bloy’s work *Letters to his Fiancée*, since Bloy’s book allows for a particularly sordid reading of Levinas’s view, a point that has been picked up on by Stella Sandford. See Sandford (2000), pp. 52-54
1049 See Chapter 6
Alongside the night of the anonymous rustling of the there is extends the night of the hidden, the clandestine, the mysterious, land of the virgin, simultaneously uncovered by Eros and refusing Eros—another way of saying profanation.\textsuperscript{1050}

We may well find this characterisation of the feminine in terms of simultaneous virgin and whore, coupled with the notion of her mysterious secrecy, to be a familiar male dominated stereotype. Indeed it is hard to resist this impression.\textsuperscript{1051}

This impression is not improved when we realise that the erotic relation is characterised in exclusively heterosexual terms, even to the point of understanding it ultimately in terms of the goal of childbirth, which is one of the concrete instantiations of transcendence:

In fecundity I transcend the world of light—not to dissolve into the anonymity of the there is, but in order to go further than light, to go elsewhere. To stand in the light, to see—to grasp before grasping—is not yet “to be infinitely”; it is to return to oneself older, that is, encumbered with oneself. To be infinitely means to be produced in the mode of an I that is always at the origin, but that meets with no trammels to a renewal of its substance, not even from its very identity. Youth as a philosophical concept is defined thus.\textsuperscript{1052}

The problem here, of course, is that the erotic relation gains its ultimate sense from the reproductive relation (fecundity). Feminine alterity is thereby conceived in terms of a passage (by virtue of her role as mother) or indication (by virtue of her role as beloved) of a future that is only achieved in fecundity. Levinas’s habitual use of the male as subject (father), and ultimate outcome (the son), of Eros tends to confirms the suspicion that it is dominated by a masculine ideological bias. We have seen that matters are not improved by his treatment of filiality and fraternity.

I believe these criticisms to be essentially correct and my response will be that same as it was in the last section. I think that these kinds of ideologies vitiate these areas of Totality and Infinity as an accurate expression of ethical Otherness. But I am not convinced that the project as a whole is thereby undermined. If my reading of Levinas is correct then he does not fully work out a sense of the motivating force of Desire and the nature of ethical subjectivity until we reach Otherwise than Being, nor does he until then find the correct mode of expression for these insights.

**Maternity**

If what I have said is correct then I am left with something of a problem by Levinas’s use of the figure of the maternal body to characterise ethics in Otherwise than Being and Beyond Essence. If, as I claim, he has left behind the very language in which such stereotypes are ingrained and thus

\textsuperscript{1050} Levinas (1969), pp. 258-259  
\textsuperscript{1051} For a clear and persuasive argument that Levinas’s metaphysics is vitiated by the use of such an ideological stereotype see Sandford (2000)  
\textsuperscript{1052} Levinas (1969), p. 268
has no further use for them, why does he use the idealised figure of the maternal body in order to specify ethical subjectivity?

The figure of maternity functions in Levinas’s later works in order to specify the structure of ethical subjectivity. We can specify these structural elements as: the idea of ethics as bodily exposure to the Other, as responsibility for the Other right up to the point of substitution, a responsibility which ‘does not imply anything voluntary’\(^{1053}\) and as feeding the Other with the ‘bread out of one’s own mouth.’\(^{1054}\) We can see how the figure of the pre-natal maternal body therefore is a natural choice for Levinas. What should be clear about this is that the figure is not restricted to the female subject, but specifies a form of subjectivity which is prior to the emergence of the ego as the enjoying subject and subject of knowledge and ability (usually identified with the masculine element). If however we insist upon understanding the maternal body as another figure of the feminine, then it seems to function as a curative for the notion of the feminine simply as means for the possibility of ultimately masculine ethical subjects, which is how it can be understood in *Totality and Infinity*. If this is our major objection to his notion of the feminine then we would appear to have met this objection.

However Stella Sandford has argued that with the appearance of the third (*le tiers*) in *Otherwise than Being*, maternity becomes as subordinate as Eros did in *Totality and Infinity*.\(^{1055}\) This is so because it ‘runs the same risk of the exclusion of the third party.’\(^{1056}\) In other words it instantiates the danger of prioritising the intimacy of the closed society of the two over justice for everyone. If this is correct then Levinas has reproduced, in different terminology, the same problems which we have admitted beset the work up to *Totality and Infinity*. A serious and thorough engagement with this issue would require more space than I can afford, so I will just indicate in what way an answer might be orientated given my own reading of Levinas’s work.

I have understood maternity as a figure illustrative of the condition of human subjectivity as vulnerability always already exposed to the Other up to the point of substitution. It is a figuration of the ultimate sense of the-one-for-the-other.\(^{1057}\) The proximity which characterises this intrigue is given in the trace which is such that there is within it always a reference to an illeity beyond the mere encounter between two people. It is this illeity which ultimately moves us to shame in the face of the Other.\(^{1058}\) Thus in order to understand in what way the proximity characteristic of maternity is always already a reference to the third (*le tiers*), and thus always already more than the intimacy of two, we need to grasp that there is no mere proximity without reference to the

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\(^{1053}\) Levinas (1998a), p.55
\(^{1054}\) Ibid
\(^{1055}\) See Chapter 6
\(^{1057}\) See Chapter 8
\(^{1058}\) See Chapter 7
third (*le tiers*). Sandford is fully aware of this but nonetheless insists that the text displays tensions which are not quite so easily resolved. I think this is the case, but a fuller consideration of these tensions is beyond my scope. Nonetheless we should note that illeity is a characteristically masculine term; it refers to a He-ness and not a She-ness, and thus the accusation of sexism will not be so easily disposed of.

Whether there are resolutions to these problems within Levinas’s texts, or whether they require development along different lines is a question I am unable to pursue. What we can say is that my central concern has been mapping out a certain fundamental human ethical motivation which is characteristic of subjectivity itself. The problem of the third (*le tiers*), and thus of justice and the political order, has not been my topic. I have however wondered if a political philosophy inspired by Levinas’s work would not require a theory of alienation to explain actual political formations. We might also ask if such a theory would permit us to see Levinas’s own political views in the light of such alienation.

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1060 See Conclusion
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