

Totality, the Other, the Infinite: The Relation between Ethics and Religion in the Thought of Emmanuel Levinas

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TOTALITY, THE OTHER, THE INFINITE: THE RELATION
BETWEEN ETHICS AND RELIGION IN THE THOUGHT OF
EMMANUEL LEVINAS

a dissertation

by
THOMAS HIDYA TJAYA

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DISSERTATION ABSTRACT

Title: TOTALITY, THE OTHER, THE INFINITE:
THE RELATION BETWEEN ETHICS AND RELIGION
IN THE THOUGHT OF EMMANUEL LEVINAS

By Thomas Hidya Tjaya

Director: Prof. Richard Kearney

The present study seeks to address the general question of the relation between Levinas's ethics and his account of religion. The specific questions pursued here include the following: Is his ethics secular or religious, and in what sense is it so, either way? Does his ethics depend on religion? How does Levinas himself understand 'religion'? This thesis will show that any interpretation of Levinas's ethics cannot be separated from its religious dimension, namely, the openness to exteriority as Desire for the Infinite. Religion, despite all consolations it may bring, cannot dispense with this ethical demand.

Chapter One analyzes Levinas's account of ethics as the outward movement towards the Other and the putting into question of the *I* by the Other. The face of the Other challenges the self-preoccupation and the *conatus essendi* of the *I*, including its tendency to incorporate everything into itself. Through its appeal and demand, the face calls the *I* to responsibility. The shift from self-preoccupation to responsibility for the Other constitutes the asymmetrical relation between the *I* and the Other. The chapter will

end with the discussion of justice that involves the third party, given the fact that we live in a world that consists of a multiplicity of beings.

Chapter Two explores the subjectivity of the human subject that makes possible the responsibility it carries for the Other. It will show that instead of a conscious and thinking subject that often characterizes the modern conception of human subjectivity, Levinas offers us a sensible and feeling subject. Sensibility allows the human subject to feel the appeal of the face of the Other and to respond to its demand. The analysis of the relation between the subject's exposure to the Other and temporality brings out the religious dimension of such human subjectivity that is manifested in the election by the Good to the responsibility for the Other.

Chapter Three discusses the metaphysical desire for the Infinite that the very Infinite within the subject produces. It begins with the Levinasian distinction between Desire and Need, which is based on their cause of movement towards their object as well as on their potential fulfillment.. The chapter then analyzes the Cartesian idea of the Infinite and Levinas's appropriation of it in order to show both the limitation of the intending consciousness and the infinity of the Infinite. After the discussion of the relation between the Infinite, God, and the Good, it brings us to a deeper analysis of the Desire for the Infinite that never reaches satisfaction, but instead gets diverted to the neighbor. The responsibility for the Other is thus never the result of the free choice of the subject, but rather of the order of the Infinite.

Chapter Four brings us to a more evident link between ethics and religion in Levinas's thought, namely, to the discussion of the face of the Other as a trace of the

Infinite. Navigating between presence and absence, the notion of a trace brings out not only the unique signification of the face, but also a new conception of God as Illeity that always escapes representation. As a trace of the Infinite, the face is no longer a phenomenon, but rather an enigma. The chapter ends with the discussion of the structure of ethical language through the distinction between the *Saying* and the *Said* that roughly shows the relation between the subject's exposure to the Other and the effort to thematize the encounter.

Chapter Five discusses the major elements that bring together ethics and religion in Levinas's thought. It begins with the analysis of his general concept of religion, which emphasizes, among other things, the relation between God and the human being without totalization and sociality. Then it brings forth the religious character of Levinas's ethics that was discussed in the previous chapters. Following this analysis is the discussion of the ethical character of religion that is centered on the responsibility for the Other. Religion becomes meaningful only if it fully commits itself to the horizontal and sensible dimension of human existence.

ABBREVIATIONS OF WORKS BY LEVINAS

The following abbreviations accompanied by page numbers are used in this study in reference to Levinas's works. When a page reference is followed by slash and a second reference, the first refers to the French edition and the second to the English translation. In these cases, translations are taken from the English edition, sometimes slightly modified for consistency or clarity.

- AE* *Autrement qu'être ou au-delà de l'essence*. Livre de Poche. The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1978.
- AaT* *Alterity and Transcendence*, trans. Michael B. Smith. New York: Columbia University Press, 1999.
- AeT* *Altérité et Transcendance*, préface de Peirre Hayat. Fata Morgana, 1995.
- BI* "Beyond Intentionality," *Philosophy in France Today*, ed. Alan Montefiore. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983, pp. 100-115.
- BPW* *Basic Philosophical Writings*, eds. Adriaan T. Peperzak, Simon Critchley, and Robert Bernasconi. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1996.
- CPP* *Collected Philosophical Papers*, trans. Alphonso Lingis. Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1998.
- DC* "The Trace of the Other," *Deconstruction in Context: Literature and Philosophy*, ed. Mark C. Taylor. Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1986.
- DE* *De l'évasion*, introduit et annoté par Jacques Rolland. Fata Morgana, 1982.
- DEH* *Discovering Existence with Husserl*, trans. Richard A. Cohen and Michael B. Smith. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2000.
- DF* *Difficult Freedom: Essays On Judaism*, trans. Seán Hand. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990.
- DL* *Difficile Liberté: Essais sur le judaïsme*, troisième édition revue et corrigée. Éditions Albin Michel, 1976
- DMT* *Dieu, la mort et le temps*. Paris: Éditions Grasset & Fasquelle, 1993.

- DVI De Dieu qui vient à l'idée*, seconde édition revue et augmentée, troisième tirage. Paris: Librairie Philosophique J. Vrin, 1998.
- EDE En découvrant l'existence avec Husserl et Heidegger*, troisième édition corrigée. Paris: Librairie Philosophique J. Vrin, 2001.
- EES Existence and Existents*, trans. Alphonso Lingis. Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 2001.
- EET De l'existence à l'existant*, seconde édition augmentée, huitième tirage. Paris: Librairie Philosophique J. Vrin, 2004.
- EFP Éthique comme philosophie première*, préfacé et annoté par Jacques Rolland. Paris : Éditions Payot & Rivages, 1998.
- EaI Ethics and Infinity : Conversations with Philippe Nemo*, trans. Richard A. Cohen. Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1982.
- EeI Éthique et Infini : Dialogues avec Philippe Nemo*. Le Livre de Poche, Librairie Arthème Fayard et Radio-France, 1982.
- ENP Entre Nous: Essais sur le penser-à-l'autre*. Éditions Grasset & Fasquelle, 1991.
- ENT Entre Nous: Thinking-of-the-Other*, trans. Michael B. Smith and Barbara Harshav. New York: Columbia University Press, 1998.
- GCM Of God Who Comes to Mind*, trans. Bettina Bergo. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998.
- GDT God, Death and Time*, trans. Bettina Bergo. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000.
- HAH Humanisme de L'Autre Homme*. Fata Morgana, 1972.
- HO Humanism of the Other*, trans. Nidra Poller, intro. Richard A. Cohen. Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2006.
- HS Hors Sujet*. Fata Morgana, 1987.
- IH Les Imprévus de l'histoire*. Fata Morgana, 1994.
- IRB Is It Righteous To Be?: Interviews with Emmanuel Levinas*, ed. Jill Robbins. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001.

- ITN* *In the Time of the Nations*, trans. Michael B. Smith. London: The Athlone Press, 1994.
- LC* *Liberté et commandement*. Fata Morgana. 1994.
- LR* *The Levinas Reader*, ed. Seán Hand. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing Ltd., 1989.
- NTR* *Nine Talmudic Readings*, trans. Intro. Annette Aronowicz. Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1990.
- OB* *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*, trans. Alphonso Lingis. Pittsburgh : Duquesne University Press, 1998.
- OE* *On Escape*, intro. Jacques Rolland, trans. Bettina Bergo. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003.
- OS* *Outside the Subject*, trans. Michael B. Smith. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993.
- PN* *Proper Names*, trans. Michael B. Smith. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996.
- QLT* *Quatre lectures talmudiques*. Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 2005.
- SS* *Du Sacré au Saint : Cinq Nouvelles Lectures Talmudiques*. Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 1977.
- Tal* *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, trans. Alphonso Lingis. Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969.
- TeI* *Totalité et Infini. Essai sur l'extériorité*. Livre de Poche. The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1971.
- TIHP* *The Theory of Intuition in Husserl's Phenomenology*, second edition. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1998.
- TIPH* *Théorie de l'Intuition dans la Phénoménologie de Husserl*. Paris: Librarie Philosophie J. Vrin, 2001.
- TA* *Le temps et l'autre*. Quadrige/PUF, 2004.
- TO* *Time and The Other [and Additional Essays]*, trans. Richard A. Cohen. Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1987.

UH *Unforeseen History*, trans. Nidra Poller, introduction by Richard A. Cohen.
Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2004.

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INTRODUCTION

A calling into question of the same – which cannot occur within the egoist spontaneity of the same – is brought about by the other. We name this calling into question of my spontaneity by the presence of the Other ethics.

Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*

It is in this ethical perspective that God must be thought, and not in the ontological perspective of our being-there or of some supreme being and creator correlative to the world, as traditional metaphysics often held... it is only in the infinite relation with the other that God passes (*se passe*), that traces of God are to be found. God thus reveals himself as a trace, not as an ontological presence.

“Dialogue with Emmanuel Levinas,” *Face to Face with Levinas*

In the history of twentieth-century Western philosophy, the figure of Emmanuel Levinas (1906-1995) clearly stands out as one of the thinkers who has exerted tremendous influence in both French- and English-speaking worlds. His philosophy is centered on ethics and its meaning, as shown in his major works *Totality and Infinity* (*Totalité et infini: Essai sur l'extériorité*, [1961]) and *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence* (*Autrement qu'être ou au-delà de l'essence*, [1974]). But in these very works, and more clearly in his other works such as *De Dieu qui vient à l'idée* (1982), Levinas also addresses the issues of transcendence, the Infinite, and God. Thus, the question arises as to what Levinas is exactly doing in his works. Is he doing philosophical ethics that is rooted in Husserlian phenomenology, as he claims? Or is he doing theological

ethics that is rooted in Judaism? Is his philosophy basically theology? ¹ The two quotations above may serve as examples of the intertwining of ethics and religion in Levinas's works.

A preliminary note regarding Levinas's notion of ethics is important here. Levinas is not interested in establishing new principles or standards for moral conduct. His concept of ethics rather pertains to the encounter with the Other that fundamentally underlies every moral norm and rule. Every ethical issue indeed involves some sort of meeting with the Other, human and non-human alike. In this sense ethics in Levinasian sense can also be rendered as the ethical, which is the domain in which every ethical experience and relation occurs. Every encounter with the Other is an ethical situation because it demands a response. Levinas's analysis seeks the possibility of a more respectful encounter with the Other that is proper to human subjectivity.

While Levinas's concept of ethics or the ethical may only cause some initial confusion among his readers, the other elements in his work, including his writing style, may pose lasting challenge to them. B.C. Hutchens raises the problem of introducing the philosopher's thought given his repetitive books, oblique textual strategy, the ubiquitous contradiction, paradox, and circular reasoning, as well as his blizzards of hyperbole.² Derrida compares Levinas's movement of thinking to the crashing of a wave on a beach, always the same wave returning and repeating its movement against the same shore with

¹ See Adriaan Peperzak's preliminary remark on this issue in his book, *Beyond: The Philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas* (Northwestern University Studies in Phenomenology & Existentialism). Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1997), 6.

² B.C. Hutchens, *Levinas: A Guide for the Perplexed* (New York: Continuum, 2004), 3-5. Colin Davis addresses the problem of reading Levinas in his book *Levinas: An Introduction* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1996), particularly pp. 129-141.

deeper insistence.³ Indeed, language itself seems to be a major issue for Levinas, particularly in terms of his overall project to abandon the ontological language of Western philosophy, which, in his opinion, holds no place for the otherness of the Other. *Otherwise than Being* testifies to his attempt to speak a new language of ethics that is permeated with religious significance.

The present study seeks to address the general question of the relation between Levinas's ethics and his concept of religion. The specific questions pursued here include the following: Is his ethics secular or religious, and in what sense is it so? Does his ethics depend on religion, and if so, to what extent? Insofar as Levinas's ethics is inherently religious, is his work essentially a theology? This thesis will show that any interpretation of Levinas's ethics cannot be separated from its religious dimension, namely, the openness to exteriority as Desire for the Infinite. Religion, despite all consolations it may bring, cannot dispense with this ethical demand.

In order to facilitate the reader's understanding of the importance and relevance of this study to the contemporary discourse on Continental philosophy in general and on Levinas's philosophy in particular, I will first discuss Levinas's own claim about the nature of his works, namely, that his philosophy is rooted in phenomenology. Then I will address two opposite movements in the interpretation of Levinas's works. On the one hand, there is what is commonly known as "the French phenomenological turn to religion," to which Levinas's works are said to belong. This reading of Levinas basically

³ Jacques Derrida, "Violence and Metaphysics: An Essay on the Thought of Emmanuel Levinas," *Writing and Difference*, hereafter *WD*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1978), 312, n. 7.

sees the philosopher's thought as a theological discourse. On the other hand, there emerges a tendency to read Levinas in a non-religious way, with a sole focus on his ethics without an adequate treatment of the religious elements of his thought. It seems paradoxical that a philosopher's works could be read in totally opposite ways. Thus, the question of how to read Levinas and of what is the relation between his ethics and religion, again, becomes crucial.

1. Levinas's Claim on the Nature of His Works

The question of how Levinas understands the relation between philosophy and theology or religion, or between the Bible and philosophical texts, appears in almost every single interview he gives and also in a good number of his writings, particularly those that deal with the question of God. For one thing, the interviewers know that Levinas took courses in Hebrew language and studied the Hebrew Bible when he was very young.⁴ Moreover, Levinas wrote several books on Talmudic readings, offered Talmudic lessons and even spoke almost regularly at the colloquia for Jewish intellectuals in France.⁵ Thus, it is always important to know how he would see the difference between philosophy and religion, or how his religious thought might have influenced his philosophical thinking. For another, Levinas himself seems to realize that some commentators may question his methodology or wonder what exactly he is doing

⁴ See, for example, "Interview with François Poirié." *Is It Righteous To Be: Interviews with Emmanuel Levinas*, hereafter *IRB*, ed. Jill Robbins (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001), 26-7.

⁵ Salomon Malka, *Emmanuel Levinas: His Life and Legacy*, trans. Michael Kigel and Sonja M. Embree (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 2006), 125 ff...

since he uses a good number of theological concepts in his philosophical works. Thus, the question of the relation between philosophy and theology is hardly new for the reader of Levinas.

In general Levinas would argue that what he is doing is philosophy, and not theology, as he emphasizes in his essay “Transcendence and Height”: “Ultimately my point of departure is absolutely nontheological. I insist upon this. It is not theology that I am doing, but philosophy.”⁶ More precisely, Levinas holds that he employs the phenomenological method, which he studied with Edmund Husserl.⁷ Although he may have been influenced considerably by the Bible and the Jewish tradition, his primary concern and method are mainly philosophical. Thus, when asked how he would reconcile the phenomenological and religious dimensions of his thinking, he replies:

I always make a clear distinction, in what I write, between philosophical and confessional texts. I do not deny that they may ultimately have a common source of inspiration. I simply state that it is necessary to draw a line of demarcation between them as distinct methods of exegesis, as separate languages. I would never, for example, introduce a Talmudic or biblical verse into one of my philosophical texts to try to prove or justify a phenomenological argument.⁸

In Levinas’s philosophical texts, we do find some allusions to religious texts or stories as examples of the point he is making. Such a writing style, in my opinion, may not be

⁶ Emmanuel Levinas, “Transcendence and Height.” *Basic Philosophical Writings*, hereafter *BPW*, eds. Adriaan T. Peperzak, Simon Critchley, and Robert Bernasconi (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1996), 30. Cf. Levinas’s contention that his philosophical method remains phenomenological. See Richard Kearney, “Emmanuel Levinas: Ethics of the Infinite.” *Debates in Continental Philosophy: Conversations with Contemporary Thinkers* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2004), 66.

⁷ Levinas seems to be so well trained in phenomenology that he even uses this method when delivering his the Talmudic lesson, making it look like, at least to Rabbi Daniel Epstein, a “phenomenological midrash.” See Malka, *Emmanuel Levinas: His Life and Legacy*, 125.

⁸ Kearney, “Ethics of the Infinite,” *Debates*, 70; Emmanuel Levinas and Richard Kearney, “Dialogue with Emmanuel Levinas.” *Face to Face with Levinas*, ed. Richard A. Cohen (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1986), 18.

helpful in maintaining the clear distinction between philosophical and theological discourse, as he insists on doing.⁹

Levinas's claim about his roots in phenomenology is beyond doubt. His studies of Husserl led to his first book *The Theory of Intuition in Husserl's Phenomenology* (*Théorie de l'intuition dans la phénoménologie de Husserl*, first edition 1930) and many phenomenological essays in *En découvrant l'existence avec Husserl et Heidegger* (first edition 1949). Levinas's phenomenology also appears very prominently in *Totality and Infinity* (1961), for example, when he discusses the dwelling and the enjoyment that the *I* experiences "living from" things of the world. Thus, we can understand his insistence on the phenomenological method in his writings: "I think that, in spite of everything, what I do is phenomenology, even if there is no reduction, here, according to the rules required by Husserl; even if all of the Husserlian methodology is not respected."¹⁰ One may wonder how anyone could claim to do phenomenology without paying attention to the Husserlian phenomenology. It seems to me that what constitutes the phenomenological method for Levinas is the search for "that which has been dissimulated in the intending of the object," the acute listening to "what is implicit," and the attentiveness to

⁹ There is a sense in which philosophical reflection is for Levinas derived from religion; what distinguishes the two traditions is simply a matter of language ("Emmanuel Levinas: Ethics of the Infinite," *Debates in Continental Philosophy*, 70-1). See also his statement in the interview with Philippe Nemo: "I have never aimed explicitly to 'harmonize' or 'conciliate' both traditions [namely, the Biblical theology and the philosophical tradition]. If they happen to be in harmony, it is probably because every philosophical thought rests on pre-philosophical experiences, and because for me reading the Bible has belonged to these founding experiences." Emmanuel Lévinas, *Éthique et Infini : Dialogues avec Philippe Nemo*, hereafter *EeI* (Le Livre de Poche, Librairie Arthème Fayard et Radio-France, 1982), 50. *Ethics and Infinity : Conversations with Philippe Nemo*, hereafter *EaI*, trans. Richard A. Cohen (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1982), 24.

¹⁰ Emmanuel Levinas, "God and Philosophy." *De Dieu qui vient à l'idée*, seconde édition revue et augmentée, troisième tirage, hereafter *DVI* (Paris: Librairie Philosophique J. Vrin, 1998), 139-40. *Of God Who Comes to Mind*, hereafter *GCM*, trans. Bettina Bergo (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), 87.

“what is illusive in thinking.”¹¹ This way of understanding phenomenology would take us beyond intentionality or what is intended by human consciousness. What is important here is not the result, namely, what is implicit that has now been made explicit, but rather the *search* for such a ‘thing.’ Every phenomenologist then may come up with a different result. Thus, Levinas holds that he is faithful to the Husserlian phenomenology by bringing out and making explicit the horizons of the phenomenon: “Phenomenology is not about elevating phenomena into things in themselves; it is about bringing the *things in themselves* to the horizon of their appearing, that of their phenomenality; phenomenology means to make appear the appearing itself behind the quiddity that appears, even if this appearing does not encrust its modalities in the meaning that it delivers to the gaze.”¹²

Indeed, the phenomenological character of Levinas’s thought is very strong. It is evident in many different places, such as his discussion of the notion of the trace of God in the face of the Other, as we will see. His claim about the phenomenological method of his works, however, does not go without challenge. Some commentators see him, as well as some other French thinkers, as having turned phenomenology to theology, thus betraying Husserl and his original ideas of phenomenology. We will address this issue in the next section.

¹¹ Levinas, “Interview with Salomon Malka,” *IRB*, 94.

¹² Levinas, “God and Philosophy,” *DVI*, 140/*GCM*, 87.

2. The Phenomenological Turn to Theology

The phrases “theologically saturated phenomenology” or “phenomenological turn to religion” are clearly two best descriptions of what Dominique Janicaud saw when conducting a review of modern French philosophy from around 1975-1990. They point to the new direction that some French phenomenologists have taken during the period, despite the “fecundity” of their works, namely, turning phenomenology into theology.¹³ Relying heavily on Husserl’s 1911 essay “Philosophy as Rigorous Science” and his 1913 book *Ideas I*, Janicaud accuses Levinas, Jean-Luc Marion, Jean-Louis Chrétien, and Michel Henry of having introduced the content of faith into phenomenology to where it does not belong: “The dice are loaded and choices made; faith rises majestically in the background.”¹⁴ In doing so, these philosophers have abandoned Husserl’s intention to develop phenomenology in the rigorous path of science. When Levinas says in *Totality and Infinity*, “Desire is desire for the absolutely Other [*Autre*],” for example, this statement contains, for Janicaud, a thorough imposition of “nothing less than the God of biblical tradition.”¹⁵ Similar charges are leveled against other philosophers, whenever they seem to have abandoned Husserl’s original idea of phenomenology and to have entertained some theological ideas. All this accusation has stirred a lot of debate regarding the phenomenological method and the nature of the works that have been

¹³ Dominique Janicaud, “Contours of the Turn.” *Phenomenological and the “Theological Turn”: The French Debate*, eds. Janicaud et al. (New York: Fordham University Press, 2000), 16.

¹⁴ Janicaud, “Contours of the Turn,” 27.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 27; Emmanuel Lévinas, *Totalité et Infini. Essai sur l’extériorité*, hereafter *TeI* (Livre de Poche. The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1971), 23. *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, hereafter *TaI*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969), 34.

originally inspired by such a method. For our purpose, I will focus solely on Janicaud's critique of Levinas, thus leaving aside his criticism of other philosophers to other studies.

Before we proceed, I would like first to clarify the use of the terms 'religion' and 'theology' in this context. The term 'religion' is used here in a general sense as pertaining to the monotheistic heritage of the Abrahamic religions.¹⁶ The reference to these specific religious traditions is made not out of a deliberate choice to exclude other religious traditions, but rather because the discourse employs terminology that is derived from these traditions instead of others. The term 'theology' refers to a study that pursues the questions about reality, both divine and human, using the faith content that exists in a certain religious tradition. Thus, when phenomenology is said to have turned to religion, what is meant is that, instead of adhering to its philosophical tools, it has invoked some elements of religious beliefs in its argumentation. By doing so, the phenomenologists have changed the nature of their activity, namely, from phenomenology to theology. Hence, one could also speak of a phenomenological turn to theology to denote the nature of the activity of the phenomenologists as well as to the kind of text they produce. All this presupposes a sharp distinction, which one may find in Janicaud, between phenomenology as purely philosophical study and method, on the one hand, and theology as a religious study, on the other. Whether or not the two meet is too huge a debate to deal with here.¹⁷ For our purpose I will use the phenomenological turn to theology and that to religion interchangeably with the meaning that I have given above.¹⁸

¹⁶ We will see later in this dissertation that Levinas has his own understanding of religion, which, in some important ways, may have to be distinguished from the general definition I am using at the moment.

¹⁷ One may recall Heidegger's early essay, "Phenomenology and Theology" (1927), in which he sharply distinguishes philosophy as *the* science of being or the ontological science from theology as a positive

In reference to the phenomenological turn, Janicaud's reservations about Levinas's writings fundamentally involve two major issues: first, Levinas's criticism (and use) of phenomenological method, and second, his theologically saturated phenomenology. Despite the "singular originality" of his works, as Janicaud himself admits, Levinas, first of all, seems to share the mistake of "a fundamental misunderstanding" and "oversimplification" of Husserl.¹⁹ For Janicaud, Levinas reduces phenomenology to the eidetic elucidation and forgets what André de Muralt calls "two dimensions of intentionality," namely, that intentionality involves a two-way traffic between subjectivity and object, or between *telos* and origin.²⁰ Intentionality as such does not exhaust the phenomenological project. In fact, it is fundamentally transcendental without Levinas's appeal to the call of the Other. By discovering in me the idea of the infinite, I discover at the same time that my subjectivity exceeds the representation I have of it. In this sense, according to Janicaud, Levinas's introduction of the Other's face to

science that is founded primarily by faith, which does not need philosophy. In his book *In Excess: Studies of Saturated Phenomena*, Jean-Luc Marion acknowledges the polemical character of this issue and seeks to traverse the 'gap' between phenomenology and theology by arguing for their common origin in the phenomenality of the event of lived experience that they both attempt to articulate. See Martin Heidegger, "Phenomenology and Theology," trans. James G. Hart and John C. Maraldo. *Pathmarks* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 39-62; Jean-Luc Marion, *In Excess: Studies of Saturated Phenomena*, trans. Robyn Horner and Vincent Berraud (New York: Fordham University Press, 2002), particularly pp. 27 ff. See also "Levinas, phenomenology, and theology," chapter I of Michael Purcell's *Levinas and Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 7-44.

¹⁸ Hent de Vries's book, *Philosophy and the Turn to Religion*, does not particularly serve our purpose here, as it mainly explores the relation between religion and contemporary ethical and political institutions and practices based on Derrida's writings. It does claim, however, to counterbalance the common misunderstanding that Janicaud's argument for the theological turn of French phenomenology has generated, even though no exposition in response to Janicaud is presented in the work. See Hent de Vries, *Philosophy and the Turn to Religion* (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999), xi-xii.

¹⁹ Janicaud, "Contours of the Turn," 16-7; 35.

²⁰ André de Muralt, *The Idea of Phenomenology: Husserlian Exemplarism*, trans. Garry L. Breckon. Northwestern University Studies in Phenomenology and Existential Philosophy (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1974), 3-4; 358.

the Same is an unnecessary move because the phenomenological descriptive point of view is already transcendental.²¹ Janicaud reminds Levinas that the discovery of the transcendental a priori is precisely the principle that drives the whole of Husserl's enterprise.²²

What makes matters worse, in Janicaud's view, is that after having challenged the phenomenological method, Levinas reintroduces phenomenology in his writings, for example, when he discusses the "phenomenology of Eros" in *Totality and Infinity* (*TeI*, 286-98/*TaI*, 256-66). By doing so, Levinas is virtually, as Derrida puts it, "betraying his own intentions in his philosophical discourse."²³ Moreover, such a move, according to Janicaud, only creates problems since the phenomenological description, as Levinas envisages it, is to be done from a transcendental perspective: "We wonder how this phenomenology can be spoken or written about, since it is beyond the face."²⁴ Janicaud is also puzzled with the place of phenomenology in Levinas's dichotomy between ontology and metaphysics, or between the return to the Self and exteriority. In such a framework, phenomenology "falls on the side of ontology and philosophies of representation."²⁵ The move to assimilate phenomenology to ontology is for Janicaud questionable.

The second major criticism of Levinas pertains to the presence of theology in his writings. For Janicaud, Levinas's *Totality and Infinity* is the first major work of French philosophy "in which this theological turn is not only discernible, but explicitly taken up

²¹ Janicaud, "Contours of the Turn," 38-9.

²² *Ibid.*, 37.

²³ Derrida, "Violence and Metaphysics:." *WD*, 151.

²⁴ Janicaud, "Contours of the Turn," 40.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 37.

within a phenomenological inspiration.”²⁶ Unlike Sartre and Merleau-Ponty who, in Janicaud’s eyes, remain faithful to the Husserlian inspiration by seeking the essence of intentionality in phenomenal immanence, Levinas seeks transcendence beyond the scope of phenomenology. In the strictly Husserlian phenomenological framework, according to Janicaud, intentional transcendence, if any, is to be grasped as it is given itself in the world, and not by “a flight to another world or to the restoration of absolute idealism, but to a deepening of the transcendental regard vis-à-vis experience and for it.”²⁷ But what Levinas has done is different. The appeal to the biblical God in his writings, Janicaud charges, only shows that Levinas has abandoned phenomenology for theology and let the former be taken by the latter “that does not want to say its name.” Janicaud accuses Levinas of investing himself more in “the restoration of the metaphysical (and theological) dimension” rather than in the pure phenomenological description of experience.²⁸ Janicaud seems to draw this conclusion not only from Levinas’s appeal to the God of biblical tradition in his works, but also from the nature of Levinas’s ethics. For Janicaud, Levinas’s ethics is too demanding to be phenomenological. The only way to secure its ground is by way of religion.²⁹

Janicaud’s criticisms of Levinas clearly involve a wide range of issues. His contention that “phenomenology and theology make two” is clearly open to conversation and debate.³⁰ His reading of Husserl is also arguable, given, as mentioned above, his primary reliance on Husserl’s early works. As Bernard Prusak notes in his introduction to

²⁶ Janicaud, “Contours of the Turn,” 36.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 35.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 44.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 45.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 103.

Phenomenology and The Theological Turn, Janicaud is himself vulnerable to the charge that he ignores Husserl's development of thought and turns Husserl's method into a doctrine.³¹ What concerns us more here is the fact that for some readers, Levinas's philosophical works are not an obvious phenomenology, since it is seemingly so entangled with theology. How are we to understand the nature of such works then? Ironically, some commentators read Levinas in a completely different way, namely, from purely non-religious perspectives, which we shall see in the next section. This is only to show that the nature of Levinas's writings continues to be debated. The question of the relation between his ethics and religion particularly, which this study attempts to pursue, is intimately linked to this issue.

3. 'Non-religious' or Humanistic Interpretations of Levinas's Works

In the past twenty years many thinkers, even those outside the fields of philosophy and theology, have been drawn to Levinas's works. Sociologists, psychiatrists, educators are among those who have attempted to make use of Levinas's thoughts for their own fields. There are a good number of reasons for the increasing attention to Levinas. In the area of ethics, for which the philosopher is mainly famous, one may find Levinas's ethics very unique and provocative, if not strange, in comparison with other ethical 'theories' known in Western philosophy.³² The sociologist Zygmunt

³¹ Bernard G. Prusak, "Introduction." *Phenomenological and the "Theological Turn": The French Debate*, eds. Janicaud et al. (New York: Fordham University Press, 2000), 7.

³² I have some reservation about calling Levinas's ethics a 'theory' because I do not think he presents one, as do moral philosophers such as Aristotle, Kant, and Mill. What Levinas gives us is, I would argue, a kind

Bauman finds, among others, Levinas's concept of an asymmetrical relation with the Other very uncharacteristic of an ethics because it runs counter to the tendency to universalize ethics and to hope for reciprocation. Unlike Martin Buber's I-Thou relationship and Heidegger's *Mitsein* that suggest "the symmetry of attitudes and responsibilities," Levinas's ethics promotes "attitudes *before* the relations; one-sidedness, *not* reciprocity; a relation that cannot be reversed."³³ In this ethics it is the *I* alone, and not the all-embracing 'we' usually present in any universal ethics, that is responsible for the command from the Other. Bauman argues that Levinas's ethics, with its peculiar concepts, represents a response to the postmodern situation in that it is characterized by ambivalence, 'non-rationality,' aporia, and non-universality. The fact that such ethics does not prescribe a code or set of principles nor is established under the law of reason, makes it an excellent candidate for postmodern ethics whose condition is precisely to be without foundation or universality.³⁴

There are indeed a lot of similarities between Levinas's philosophy and postmodern thought. His non-universalizable ethics, for example, is shared, for a different reason, by postmodern thinkers who are acutely aware that all theory, including ethical one, is to some extent "culture-laden" and therefore cannot claim unconditional universal validity. Such convergence may lend itself to the fact that Levinas himself is sometimes considered one of postmodern thinkers, since his thought clearly cannot find a secure place in the so-called modern philosophy wherein ethics is nothing more than "applied

of foundation for ethics, or in Kantian terms, a condition for the possibility of ethics that goes beyond any ethical theory. I think this is the reason why Derrida calls Levinas's ethics "an ethics of ethics." See Derrida, "Violence and Metaphysics," *WD*, 111.

³³ Zygmunt Bauman, *Postmodern Ethics* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 1993), 48-9.

³⁴ Bauman, *Postmodern Ethics*, 10-12, 84.

general theory” or “applied metaphysics.”³⁵ Levinas himself often makes sharp criticism toward Western philosophy and its heritage for the tendency to deny the otherness of the Other and to subsume such otherness under the control of the Same. Thus, as far as his critical stance toward Western philosophy is concerned, Levinas’s philosophy, including his ethics, is radically different from that of modern thinkers. I believe Bauman’s characterization of Levinas’s ethics as *postmodern ethics*, as the title of his book suggests, has this background.

It is also the meeting point between Levinas’s ideas and postmodern thought, I believe, that has brought some postmodern thinkers to the study of, and dialogue with, the philosopher. In this context the relation between Derrida and Levinas perhaps provides the best example for such influence and dialogue. As Simon Critchley points out, Derrida’s 1964 essay “Violence and Metaphysics,” which was the only extended analysis of Levinas’s works in the 1960s, shows the problem of deconstructive reading that Derrida has to face and that already appears in Levinas’s writings.³⁶ After being read deconstructively, according to Critchley, Levinas responds “responsibly” to Derrida by giving an ethical reading of deconstruction in his “*Tout autrement*” (1973), which could be called “Levinas’s linguistic or deconstructive turn.”³⁷ Not surprisingly, this reading of Levinas leads Critchley to an interpretation of the philosopher as an ally of deconstruction. More specifically, Critchley sees Levinas’s works as a defense of the

³⁵ Gary B. Madison and Marty Fairbairn (eds.). “Introduction.” *The Ethics of Postmodernity: Current Trends in Continental Thoughts*. Northwestern University Studies in Phenomenology and Existential Philosophy (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1999), 3.

³⁶ Simon Critchley, *The Ethics of Deconstruction: Derrida and Levinas* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 1992), 11.

³⁷ Critchley, *The Ethics of Deconstruction*, 8. See “Jacques Derrida: Wholly Otherwise.” *Proper Names*, hereafter *PN*, trans. Michael B. Smith (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996), 55-62.

ethical aspect of deconstruction, arguing that Derrida's deconstruction should be read as an ethical demand, with ethics understood in the Levinasian sense of the word. Deconstruction is not devoid of ethics, as it is often accused of, but has an ethical structure in its reading of philosophical texts.³⁸ On this view Levinas's ethics itself, insofar it promotes the service to the other, is a form of humanism, "but it is a humanism of the other human being."³⁹

Levinas's humanism for the Other, according to Critchley, is a consequence of "the death of a certain god."⁴⁰ That is to say, Levinas accepts that the god of onto-theology, the god that "congeals" transcendence into a "world behind the scenes" (*AE*, 6/*OB*, 5) is already dead, and he does not attempt to reintroduce it in his writings. The death of such a god allows the ethical subject to discover the sense of transcendence that was lost in metaphysics, namely, the transcendence of the Other. Together with the critique of metaphysical transcendence, it becomes "preconditions for the possibility of religiosity and morality."⁴¹ For Critchley Levinas's God is an empty place, "the anarchy of an absence at the heart of the community."⁴² In order to avoid the onto-theological connotation of the word 'God,' according to Critchley, Levinas employs the term 'Illeity' to describe "the non-thematizable relation with the Infinite." It is the trace of this Illeity that constitutes the first act of ethical obligation to the Other; this trace, for Critchley, is

³⁸ *Ibid.*, xi, 2-3.

³⁹ Simon Critchley, *Ethics-Politics-Subjectivity: Essays on Derrida, Levinas and Contemporary French Thought* (London: Verso, 1999), 67; *The Ethics of Deconstruction*, 181.

⁴⁰ Emmanuel Levinas, *Autrement qu'être ou au-delà de l'essence*, hereafter *AE*, Livre de Poche (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1978), 284. *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*, hereafter *OB*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1998), 185; Critchley, *The Ethics of Deconstruction*, 113.

⁴¹ Critchley, *The Ethics of Deconstruction*, 114.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 228.

“the opening of the divine as an absence.”⁴³ Critchley thus concludes that for Levinas, “ethics is religion, but not theology.”⁴⁴ This reading Levinas’s works leaves no room for religion other than in the ethical responsibility for the Other.⁴⁵ Critchley is indeed committed to a reading of Levinas, as he himself admits, as more of “a secular pragmatist” rather than of a religious metaphysician.⁴⁶ But one may ask whether or not this is a faithful reading of Levinas.

Levinas’s works have become an object of study not only for postmodern thinkers, but also for those who work in the field of psychoanalysis. What mostly interests psychoanalysts in general is Levinas’s account of subjectivity as having the structure of *le traumatisme originel*: “The subject is constituted as a subject of persecution, outrage, suffering or whatever, through an original traumatism toward which I am utterly passive.”⁴⁷ This trauma stems from the very pre-original condition of the subject as hostage to the Other. It seems almost natural for some that Levinas’s concept

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 228.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 115.

⁴⁵ John D. Caputo makes a similar claim in an unpublished paper: “On a theological register, Levinasian ethics makes for a death of God theology [*sic*]: immortality, another world, life after death, celestial happiness, some higher supersensible, being beyond sensible beings – those are all so many fantasies trapped within being, dreams of replacing this world with another, hoping to exchange a worldly kingdom for celestial one with the coin of “meritorious works,” which is the celestial narcissism of Kierkegaard’s ultra-eudaemonistic search for eternal happiness that Levinas dislikes. The very meaning of our being turned to God (*à dieu*), for Levinas, is to be deflected or turned by God (*à dieu*) to the neighbor. And nothing more. The name of God boils down without remainder into our being turned to the neighbor, *tout court*. What then is accomplished by ethical trans(a)cendence to the other? In one very definite sense, nothing. Ethics is not *for* something; it is a non-profit enterprise. Ethics is all the transcendence there is. It does not buy us a ticket somewhere else. There is nowhere else to go.” See John D. Caputo. “Temporal Transcendence: The Very Idea of “*à venir*” in Derrida,” Graduate Student Seminar, Boston College, 30 Mar. 2007, 2.

⁴⁶ Simon Critchley, “Deconstruction and Pragmatism – Is Derrida a Private Ironist or a Public Liberal?” *Deconstruction and Pragmatism* (New York: Routledge, 1996), 26. It is also worth noting that Derrida describes Levinas’s philosophy as a kind of (renewed) ‘empiricism’ that has been determined as ‘nonphilosophy’ because it cannot justify itself. See Derrida, “Violence and Metaphysics,” 151-52.

⁴⁷ Critchley, *Ethics-Politics-Subjectivity*, 189.

of the subject is comparable to Jacques Lacan's. David Ross Fryer's book, *The Intervention of the Other*, for example, is devoted to the study of Levinas and Lacan's ethical subjectivity as "both an approach to the study of ethics that takes as its goal the explication of the ethical nature of the human person, and an approach to the study of the human person that takes as its starting point the antihumanist critique of the self and positing of the 'subject' in its place."⁴⁸ He argues with Levinas that the ethical is anarchic structure of subjectivity that constantly presents itself to us in our daily life, and with Lacan that we have the choice to accept or reject it, as a desire for the good of the other. In her article Suzanne Barnard points out that the two thinkers provide an alternative to the binary poles of foundationalism and relativism that have hitherto structured the debate concerning the place of the ethical in psychological praxis. She argues that while certain overlapping points in their works may provide a framework for moving beyond the binary poles, there are certainly irreconcilable differences in their approaches to ethics.⁴⁹

All these works and other studies of Levinas's ethical subjectivity usually focus on the 'secular' element of this subjectivity at the expense of its religious aspect, as the authors attempt to make use of Levinas's thought in their own fields. Likewise, one can

⁴⁸ David Ross Fryer, *The Intervention of the Other: Ethical Subjectivity in Levinas and Lacan* (New York: Other Press, 2004), 5.

⁴⁹ Suzanne Barnard, "Diachrony, *Tuché*, and the Ethical Subject in Levinas and Lacan," *Psychology for the Other: Levinas, Ethics, and the Practice of Psychology*, eds. E. Gantt and R. Williams (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 2002), 161-62. Critchley wrote a piece on this subject, "*Das Ding*: Lacan and Levinas" in his *Ethics-Politics-Subjectivity* (1999). See also C. Fred Alford, *Levinas, the Frankfurt School and Psychoanalysis*. Disseminations: Psychoanalysis in Contexts. Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2002.

find studies already done on the relation between Levinas and the political,⁵⁰ sexual difference,⁵¹ literary studies,⁵² Jewish philosophy,⁵³ and other areas of study. The richness of Levinas's works and the fact that they can be interpreted and made use of by scholars outside the fields of philosophy and theology really make the study of such works exciting as well as challenging. For the interpretations of Levinas's ethics, I find that many of them focus solely on his ethics without any adequate treatment of its religious character. In fact, the religious element of his works often disappears, as if it never existed in them. One may ask then, as this study attempts to do, whether this is the proper way to read Levinas's works. On the issue of ethical subjectivity, one may wonder whether it is adequate to read Levinas's account of subjectivity, or his ethics in general, solely from a humanistic perspective. How are we to make sense of the religious dimension of this very subjectivity, for instance, when Levinas says, "The subject who says "Here I am!" *testifies* to the Infinite. It is through this testimony, whose truth is not the truth of representation or perception, that the revelation of the Infinite occurs" (*EeI*, 103/*EaI*, 106). If one recalls Janicaud's critique of Levinas in the previous section, one may wonder how Levinas's works could be interpreted in completely different ways. Is there religion in Levinas's ethics? Or is it too much of it, as Janicaud charges? Or ethics

⁵⁰ See, for example, Howard Caygill, *Levinas & The Political* (London and New York: Routledge, 2002); Bettina Bergo, *Levinas Between Ethics and Politics: For the Beauty that Adorns the Earth*. *Phenomenologica* (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1999).

⁵¹ See Luce Irigaray, "Questions to Emmanuel Levinas: On the Divinity of Love," trans. Margaret Whitford. *Re-Reading Levinas*, eds. Robert Bernasconi and Simon Critchley (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1991), 109-118; Catherine Chaler, "Ethics and the Feminine." *Re-Reading Levinas*, 119-29; Tina Chanter (ed.), *Feminist Interpretations of Emmanuel Levinas* (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2001), and many others.

⁵² See Jill Robbins, *Altered Reading: Levinas and Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999).

⁵³ See Richard A. Cohen, *Elevations: The Height of the Good in Rosenzweig and Levinas* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1994); Robert Gibbs, *Why Ethics?: Signs of Responsibilities* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000).

for Levinas is nothing but religion, as Critchley claims? It is these questions that the present study attempts to address.

4. Arguments of This Study

In the present study I generally hope to explore the relation between Levinas's account of ethics and that of religion. There are indeed other studies on Levinas as a philosopher of religion. Jeffrey Kosky's excellent book, *Levinas and the Philosophy of Religion*, explains how Levinas "offers a way to think and speak about religion within the contemporary horizon of thought."⁵⁴ He argues that Levinas's ethics gives rise to an account of subjectivity that is accessible to those who are not committed to a particular religious tradition. More than simply an account open to religious questions, I will argue that Levinas's ethics is inherently tied to his perspective on religion, as an infinite openness to the infinite Other. Without taking his religious perspective into account seriously when analyzing his ethics, one may do injustice to the overall project that Levinas is undertaking. In this sense I see as inadequate any attempt to interpret Levinas's ethics that neglects his religious perspective, as if the two aspects were completely divorced from each other. This is not to say that Levinas's ethics is theology, as Janicaud charges. Here I agree with Critchley who argues that Levinas's ethics is "not theology."⁵⁵ But I disagree with his claim of the total equivalence between ethics and

⁵⁴ Jeffrey L. Kosky, *Levinas and the Philosophy of Religion* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2001), xviii. See also Michael Purcell, *Levinas and Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

⁵⁵ Critchley, *The Ethics of Deconstruction*, 115. See section 3 above.

religion in Levinas, namely, that religion has no place in Levinas other than in ethics. Instead, I argue that for Levinas the ethical relation with the human other is a necessary condition for one's relation with God. Only in the relation with the Other can one find what Levinas calls the traces of God.⁵⁶ But the ethical responsibility for the Other as such, I argue, does not exhaust the meaning of religion. In this sense Levinas's ethics must be understood in the wider perspective of religion.

By placing Levinas's ethics in the larger context of religion, I will also argue that any true religion, for Levinas, must be necessarily ethical. By emphasizing the fact that the trace of God is to be found in the encounter with the Other, Levinas challenges religion to look into its ethical stance in a very concrete manner. Religion may offer the much needed consolations for humanity, but it cannot dispense with the ethical requirement that is predicated upon itself, as Levinas has shown.⁵⁷ Thus, it is my hope that this study will establish a firmer link between Levinas's ethics and his account of religion, showing not only their deep affinity, but also the inadequacy of one without the other.

In pursuing the argument of this study, I will use Levinas's philosophical writings rather than his Talmudic ones. The use of the latter, only few of them, serves only to illumine the issue of the relation between ethics and religion. The reasons for this choice are as follows. First, Levinas often claims that what he is doing is philosophy, or more

⁵⁶ Richard Cohen (ed.), "Dialogue with Emmanuel Levinas," in *Face to Face with Levinas* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1986), 20, 31.

⁵⁷ See Levinas's comment on the consolations of religion: "Religion in fact is not identical to philosophy, which does not necessarily bring the consolations which religion is able to give. Prophecy and ethics in no way exclude the consolations of religion; but I repeat again: a humanity which can do without these consolations perhaps may not be worthy of them" (*EeI*, 117/*EaI*, 118)

specifically, phenomenology, and not theology. This claim finds a great deal of support in his philosophical writings, although one can always argue that what he is doing is quasi-phenomenology or even beyond phenomenology. As I argue, ethics as the responsibility for the Other remains his major concern. It is more than appropriate, therefore, to rely on his philosophical writings when analyzing his notion of ethics. Second, as early as 1951 in his philosophical essay “Is Ontology Fundamental?,” Levinas begins to introduce the notion of religion in his writings. Ten years later in *Totality and Infinity* he elaborates the meaning of this term, particularly in relation to his concept of ethics. I take this to mean that Levinas wants the discourse on religion to take place as a philosophical issue, and not a theological one. Ethics and religion are indeed intimately connected in his thought. It would be proper, therefore, to treat these issues at the level where he wants it to be done. Third, the decision to focus on Levinas’s philosophical writings in pursuing the argument of this study is also made in order to avoid any influence of his Jewish perspective in which context he composes his Talmudic writings. While in many cases such influence is inevitable, I think it is important to keep it minimal.

As seen in the title of this dissertation, the whole discussion of the relation between ethics and religion in Levinas can be carried out by focusing on three important terms: Totality, the Other, and the Infinite. ‘Totality,’ in the first place, signifies the philosophical intuition to bring every thought into a whole. As such, it lacks nothing because it brings to itself anything that is within the grasp of consciousness. More concretely, totality is where human beings are seen simply as terms or parts of the whole and not as valuable in themselves. It is deeply linked to the economic life in which the

adding up of the sum total occurs incessantly. It is 'the Other' (*l'Autre*), or more precisely, the face of the human Other (*Autrui*), that breaks up this totality. This is because the face signifies transcendence: it expresses itself without being limited by any social condition or quality that can be given to the human being. Its double feature of weakness and demand puts the freedom of the *I* into question. Finally, it is 'the Infinite' within us, produced as Desire for the Infinite, that orients us toward the Other. The responsibility for the Other, which defines Levinas's ethics, is the order of the Good through the Desire for the Infinite. This ethics is deeply religious not only because it arises from the beyond Being, but also because it is where one may encounter the trace of God.

I will thus begin this study in Chapter One with the analysis of Levinas's account of ethics as the outward movement toward the Other and the putting into question of the *I* by the Other. The face of the Other challenges the self-preoccupation and the *conatus essendi* of the *I*, including its tendency to incorporate everything into itself. Through its appeal and demand, the face calls the *I* to responsibility. The shift from self-preoccupation to responsibility for the Other constitutes the asymmetrical relation between the *I* and the Other. The chapter will end with the discussion of justice that involves the third party, given the fact that we live in a world that consists of a multiplicity of beings.

In Chapter Two I will examine the subjectivity of the human subject that makes possible the responsibility it carries for the Other. It will show that instead of a conscious and thinking subject that often characterizes the modern conception of human

subjectivity, Levinas offers us a sensible and feeling subject. Sensibility allows the human subject to feel the appeal of the face of the Other and to respond to its demand. The analysis of the relation between the subject's exposure to the Other and temporality brings out the religious dimension of such human subjectivity that is manifested in the election by the Good to be responsible for the Other.

Chapter Three discusses the metaphysical desire for the Infinite that the very Infinite within the subject produces. It begins with the Levinasian distinction between Desire and Need, which is based on their cause of movement toward their object as well as on their potential fulfillment. The distinction allows us to see that the tendency toward totality in which the face plays no role proceeds from Need. The chapter then analyzes the Cartesian idea of the Infinite and Levinas's appropriation of it in order to show both the limitation of the intending consciousness and the infinity of the Infinite. After the discussion of the relation between the Infinite, God, and the Good, it brings us to a deeper analysis of the Desire for the Infinite that never reaches satisfaction, but instead gets diverted to the neighbor. The responsibility for the Other is thus never the result of the free choice of the subject, but rather of the order of the Infinite.

Chapter Four brings us to a more evident link between ethics and religion in Levinas's thought, namely, to the discussion of the face of the Other as a trace of the Infinite. Navigating between presence and absence, the notion of a trace brings out not only the unique signification of the face, but also a new conception of God as Illeity that always escapes representation. As a trace of the Infinite, the face is no longer a phenomenon, but rather an enigma. The chapter ends with the discussion of the structure

of ethical language through the distinction between the *Saying* and the *Said* that roughly shows the relation between the subject's exposure to the Other and the effort to thematize the encounter.

Chapter Five discusses the major elements that bring together ethics and religion in Levinas's thought. It begins with the analysis of his general concept of religion, which emphasizes, among other things, the relation between God and the human being without totalization and sociality. Then it brings forth the religious character of Levinas's ethics that was discussed in the previous chapters. Following this analysis is the discussion of the ethical character of religion that is centered on the responsibility for the Other. Religion becomes meaningful only if it fully commits itself to the horizontal and sensible dimension of human existence.

I hope this analysis may help us not only better understand the nature of Levinas's ethics in relation to religion, but also reflect more critically on ethics in general. Through his analysis of ethics Levinas invites us to look more deeply into moral principles and codes that we live by. Is it not the encounter with the Other that underlies them? There is clearly a certain degree of abstractness to the principles, as opposed to that of concreteness to the encounter with the Other. The actual encounter may offer us a rich experience, particularly when we use sensibility as the measure of reality. It may tell us more about who we really are and our relation to one another than may our consciousness. For Levinas, the 'more' is our responsibility for the Other. His analysis brings forth religious issues that pertain to the significance of the encounter and human subjectivity. Indeed, ethics will look very different if it is conceived broadly as the

encounter and the challenge to respond to the Other. It may cease to occupy a separate realm from religion.

CHAPTER ONE

INTERRUPTION BY THE OTHER:

LEVINAS ON THE ETHICAL RELATION

It is hardly disputable that the issue of ethics is intimately linked to the presence of the Other with and before us. In different segments of our society, at home and workplace, ethical codes are, formally or informally, put in place with the realization that we do not live alone in that particular area. Even if one lives all by oneself on an island where there is no other human being, one may still, presumably, have some ethical relation with the non-human Other such as the environment in general, the trees, the land, animals, etc. The increasing awareness of living with other living beings may perhaps have led to the emergence of environmental ethics as one of the crucial issues that the present generation needs to deal with. But most of the time when ethical issues are discussed, they mainly concern the interaction with the human Other. Throughout the human history different moral philosophers have proposed different principles and rules for proper conduct with other people and for proper solution when ethical issues emerge. What brings all these ethical formulas together is, I believe, the encounter between the subject and the Other. All principles and rules for human conduct are generally proposed so that the proper ethical relation between them may be achieved.

In this chapter I will discuss Levinas's account of the ethical relation that constitutes the encounter between the subject or the *I* and the Other. We will see that

Levinas is not so much interested in concrete moral principles for human conduct that have hitherto dominated moral philosophies as in the metaphysical account or the ethical meaning of such encounter. His description of the loss of genuine alterity of the Other in the history of Western thought bears significant consequences for the ethical character of such thinking. Here the link between metaphysics and ethics cannot be more intimate, and Levinas's project has been aptly called 'ethical metaphysics.'⁵⁸ For this reason, Levinas's account of ethics cannot be properly called an ethical theory, as we usually understand it, because it is not a theory at all.⁵⁹ What Levinas is doing surpasses the sheer field of ethics or metaphysics. His ethical account indeed has shown far-reaching effects, provoking critical thoughts from many thinkers. It has also been developed and applied to different fields of study, including politics and psychology.⁶⁰ This only shows the widespread influence of Levinas's philosophy on contemporary academic discourse.

As an attempt to describe Levinas's account of ethics, this chapter also purports to highlight some fundamental differences between such ethics and the general character of Western moral philosophies. This is important for our better understanding of what Levinas is getting at, which admittedly takes some time to digest. I will therefore point out such differences whenever possible. For Levinas's account of ethics I will mostly rely

⁵⁸ Edith Wyschogrod, *Emmanuel Levinas: The Problem of Ethical Metaphysics* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2000).

⁵⁹ Derrida describes Levinas's ethics as an "Ethics of Ethics." See Derrida, "Violence and Metaphysics," *WD*, 111.

⁶⁰ I would like to name only some of these works: Roger Burggraeve, *The Wisdom of Love in the Service of Love: Emmanuel Levinas on Justice, Peace, and Human Rights* (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 2002); Steven Henley, *From Communicative Action to the Face of the Other: Levinas and Habermas on Language, Obligation, and Community* (New York: Lexington Books, 2000); Edwin E. Gantt and Richard N. Williams, eds. *Psychology for the Other: Levinas, Ethics, and the Practice of Psychology* (Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press, 2002); Howard Caygill, *Levinas & The Political* (London & New York: Routledge, 2002).

on his first major book *Totality and Infinity* (1961) in which such account was comprehensively developed. Of course, one will not find his relatively final account of ethics until the publication of his second major book *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence* (1974). But his *Totality and Infinity* is, I believe, the best source for Levinas's account of ethics, definitely not without the supplement of other writings on the issue.

Thus, I will first begin with the discussion of ethics or the ethical as consisting in the questioning and interruption of the *I* by the Other and eventually in the responsibility of the former for the latter. This account stems from the tendency of the self to incorporate everything into itself, thus reducing the alterity of the Other. For Levinas, the dominant tradition in Western philosophy, which culminates in the thought of Heidegger, shares the same character: the particular and concrete beings are all subsumed under the impersonal Being. The ethical event then occurs when the Other challenges and put into question the self-preoccupation of the *I*. After this initial account of ethics, I will explore Levinas's account of transcendence expressed in the face of the Other. In his view, only the face, the radical alterity, can bring the self out of its self-centeredness by putting its freedom into question. Ethics is thus based on the asymmetrical relation between the *I* and the Other, as the call for transcendence always comes from the latter, which is the height. I will end this chapter with a brief discussion of justice through the notion of the third party. We attend to the issue of justice, according to Levinas, because we live in a world with a plurality of beings, and not simply with one particular Other. Levinas's account of justice will clearly help us better understand his concept of the ethical relation to which this chapter is devoted.

1.1. Beyond Self-Enjoyment: Ethics as the Interruption by the Other

We usually understand the term *ethics* as a theory that establishes some principles or rules of conduct that we should apply in our lives, or that concerns what we should and should not do for proper living as human beings. Thus, an ethical theory may aim at the cultivation of virtue, the increase of happiness, or the pursuit of justice, just to name a few. Levinas's concept of ethics is clearly far from this common understanding of the word. When using the term 'ethics,' Levinas does not mean a particular moral perspective, as one may find in Aristotle or Kant, but rather the putting into question of the ego, the knowing subject, self-consciousness, or what he calls 'the Same,' by the Other (*TeI*, 33/*TaI*, 43). In the original preface to the 1961 edition of *Totality and Infinity* where he uses the word *éthique* for the first time, Levinas describes ethics as "an optics" (*TeI*, 8/*TaI*, 23). Such description of ethics is definitely far from clear for the general reader and even for those who are familiar with Western ethical theories. The obscurity around Levinas's concept of ethics would thus justify my judgment to quote a rather lengthy description of the term by Levinas below:

A calling into question [*mise en question*] of the Same – which cannot occur [*se faire*] within the egoist spontaneity of the same – is brought about [*se fait*] by the Other [*l'Autre*]. We name this calling into question of the spontaneity by the presence of the Other [*Autrui*] ethics. The strangeness of the Other, his irreducibility to the I [*Moi*], to my thoughts and my possessions, is precisely accomplished [*s'accomplit*] by a calling into question of my spontaneity, as ethics. Metaphysics, transcendence, the welcoming of the Other [*l'Autre*] by the Same, of the Other [*Autrui*] by me, is concretely produced [*se produit*] as the calling into question of the Same by the Other [*l'Autre*], that is, as the ethics that accomplishes [*accomplit*] the critical essence of knowledge (*TeI*, 33/*TaI*, 43).

First of all, we need to understand the terms *the Same* (*le Même*) and *the Other* (*l'Autre*) that occupy a central place in Levinas's major writings. These terms are clearly not Levinas's coinage since they are already present in Plato's dialogues such as *The Sophist* and *Timaeus*. In the *Timaeus*, for instance, Plato describes the creation of a new union between the Same and the Other and characterizes the nature of the latter as "loath to mix," presumably with the former.⁶¹ Likewise, he discusses them in the *Sophist* in their relation to "Being itself, Rest, and Motion."⁶² Levinas uses the terms *the Same* and *the Other* and their relation to each other to signify the ethical relation. He characterizes the Same as having an inherent tendency to incorporate, actually or potentially, everything that lies outside it. The Same, as Levinas describes it, naturally aims at a totality that is always all-encompassing and in which it needs nothing else. It is into such totality that the Other (*l'Autre*), as the Same attempts to do, will be incorporated. I will speak more about Levinas's conception of the nature of the Same later. Further, regarding the term *the Other*, we may notice from the citation above that Levinas uses interchangeably the terms *l'Autre* and its personalized form, *Autrui*, thus giving the impression that his concept of the Other is broad enough to include anything other than the subject, including non-human animals. But as he begins to speak more about the face of the Other (*Autrui*) or the trace of the Other (*l'Autre*), it becomes more obvious that the Other is for Levinas

⁶¹ *Plato's Timaeus*, translation, glossary, appendices, and introductory essay by Peter Kalkavage. The Focus Philosophical Library (Newburyport, MA: Focus Publishing, 2001), 35b.

⁶² *Plato's Sophist or The Professor of Wisdom*, translation, introduction, and glossary by Eva Brann, Peter Kalkavage, and Eric Salem. The Focus Philosophical Library (Newburyport, MA: Focus Publishing, 1996), 254-55.

either the human person or the Divine.⁶³ The choice for the specific forms of the Other may have to do with their absolute otherness, which cannot be absorbed and incorporated into the Same.⁶⁴ Indeed, it would not be easy to find some good textual support for the argument that for Levinas anything other is the Other, as Derrida would argue later when he says, “*Tout autre est tout autre.*”⁶⁵

With this preliminary account of the Same and its counterpart, the Other, we may begin to understand Levinas’s account of ethics. If ethics generally concerns one’s relation with the Other, this relation occurs because the Other challenges the *I*, which Levinas characterizes as the Same, that is self-absorbing and self-complacent. The Other here puts into question the tendency of the Same to incorporate everything into itself, including the otherness of the Other, in such a way that the Same no longer feels the need to learn anything from the Other. We may notice from the quote above that Levinas characterizes the Other as “strange” and “irreducible to the I.” Indeed, the philosopher argues that, with such fundamental characters, the Other cannot be absorbed into the scheme of the Same. Thus, the ethical relation is not to be pursued by reducing the otherness of the Other to the I (*Moi*), as the latter is accustomed to do, but rather by letting the Other (*Autrui*) continue to call my spontaneity and enjoyment into question. At the epistemological level, it can be said that the ethical relation challenges the tendency

⁶³ This position gives rise to some objections from Levinas’s commentators such as John Llewelyn who asks why Levinas does not include non-human animals in his concept of the Other. See John Llewelyn, “Am I Obsessed by Bobby? (Humanism of the Other Animal).” *Re-Reading Levinas*, eds. Robert Bernasconi and Simon Critchley (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1991), 234-45.

⁶⁴ See Jeffrey L. Kosky, *Levinas and the Philosophy of Religion*, 16-8; Colin Davis, *Levinas : An Introduction* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1996), 43.

⁶⁵ Jacques Derrida, *The Gift of Death*, trans. David Wills (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1995), 68, 78.

of the subject to thematize the Other, as often done in Western theories of knowledge. Levinas would argue that the ‘alterity’ (*altérité*) of the Other always escapes the cognitive powers of the knowing subject: “Being in direct relation with the Other is not to thematize the Other and consider him in the same manner one considers a known object, nor to communicate a knowledge to him. In reality, the fact of being is what is most private; existence is the sole thing I cannot communicate; I can tell about it, but I cannot share my existence... The social is beyond ontology.”⁶⁶

From the last quote we may sense that ethics, or the ethical, is for Levinas ‘existential’ rather than ‘theoretical,’ as it designates the concrete encounter between the Same or the subject and the Other. Anything that is existential cannot be fully accounted for in theory.⁶⁷ This is the main reason why Levinas’s ethics is not a theory because it is beyond theory and does not primarily involve an application of an ethical theory to any real-life situation. Levinas argues that the encounter between the Same and the Other, which is the ethical, is grounded in the most originary and primordial “dimension” of human existence. In this way it determines and characterizes metaphysics right from the outset. That is why he calls ethics ‘first philosophy’ (*la philosophie première* or *prôtê philosophia* – *TeI*, 340/*TaI*, 305), not in the sense that ethics must be given priority over metaphysics or epistemology since this would assume that ethics is just another branch of philosophical studies. Rather, as first philosophy, ethics, or the ethical, designates the

⁶⁶ Emmanuel Lévinas, *Éthique et Infini : Dialogues avec Philippe Nemo*, hereafter *EeI* (Le Livre de Poche, Librairie Arthème Fayard et Radio-France, 1982), 50 ; *Ethics and Infinity : Conversations with Philippe Nemo*, hereafter *EaI*, trans. Richard A. Cohen (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1982), 57-58.

⁶⁷ This is clearly one of the meeting points between Levinas and Kierkegaard, comparable to the latter’s criticism of Hegel.

analysis of the encounter between the Same and the Other, which is the foundation of all knowledge.⁶⁸

1.1.1. The Self as the Same

Since ethics fundamentally concerns the relation between the subject or the self and the Other, it is important for us to understand how Levinas characterizes the self. This characterization of the self will help us grasp his concept of ethics generally as the opening to, and movement toward, the Other and particularly as the calling into question of the Same by the Other. First of all, Levinas describes the self, at least initially, as having the qualities of the Same, namely, as we recall, exhibiting the tendency to incorporate into itself everything that is alien to it. All the project of incorporation takes place within the self, which is the locus of the identity of the *I*. Thus, the self is the location where the Same identifies itself as such.⁶⁹ This is not to say that the self, characterized as the Same, never changes. In fact, it has the ability to incorporate into itself every single alteration that has happened to it: “The I is not a being that always

⁶⁸ Adriaan Peperzak, *To the Other: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas* (West Lafayette, Indiana : Purdue University Press, 1993), 65.

⁶⁹ It is important here to note Derrida’s observation, in his “Violence and Metaphysics,” of an apparent inconsistency in Levinas’s use of the categories of the Same and Other. In Levinas’s earlier works such as *De l’existence à l’existant* and *Le temps et l’autre*, according to Derrida, the former warns against the identification of the Ego with the Same and against that of Others with the Other. But this is what precisely happens in *Totality and Infinity* where the Ego is identified with the Same and Others with the Other. This confusion, in Derrida’s view, “returns as a kind of silent axiom.” I would argue, however, the identification does not mean the collapse of the distinction. The distinction between the Ego and the Same is intact in Levinas’s later work, despite his characterization of the former as the latter. This observation of Derrida, moreover, needs to be placed in the general context of the essay where he sees Levinas’s philosophy as an attempt to abandon or displace the Greek heritage of Western philosophy. See Derrida, “Violence and Metaphysics,” 109-110.

remains the same, but is the being whose existing consists in identifying itself, in recovering its identity throughout all that happens to it... The I is identical in its very alterations” (*TeI*, 25/*TaI*, 36). Thus, even as it undergoes changes, the self is still able to re-identify itself in the process of self-identification such that it never loses its own identity. This is precisely why it is called “the Same,” because “in representation the I precisely loses its opposition to its object; the opposition fades, bring out the identity of the I despite the multiplicity of its objects, that is, precisely the unalterable character of the I. To remain the Same is to represent to oneself” (*TeI*, 132/*TaI*, 126). Thus, the Same can be said to designate “the confinement of self within itself and its tendency, through knowledge, to annex otherness to itself by knowledge, possession, mastery.”⁷⁰ It is, as Levinas argues in “Transcendence and Height” (1962), the knowing ego, “the melting pot” of the transmutation of the alterity of the Other, that weaves disparate and diverse events into its history.⁷¹ Since prior to the call of the absolute Other, the self remains the same, despite the constant changes, the relation between the self and the Other, which constitutes the concept of the ethical, can generally be described as that between the Same and the Other.

It is crucial for us now to understand that there are for Levinas two essential components of the self, that is, *separation* and *interiority*. The term *separation* here designates the relation between the self and the Other, namely, that the self is *separate* from the Other. The self emerges as a separated being in its encounter with the world and

⁷⁰ Michael Smith, *Toward the Outside: Concepts and Themes in Emmanuel Levinas* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 2005), 37.

⁷¹ Emmanuel Levinas, “Transcendence and Height,” *Basic Philosophical Writings*, hereafter *BPW*, eds. Adriaan T. Peperzak, Simon Critchley, and Robert Bernasconi (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1996), 11.

everything in it. It soon finds itself living a life of real and radical independence through its tendency to classify the world in terms that make it manageable and accessible. Given its separation, it practically maintains itself in existence all by itself.⁷² For Levinas, it is this tendency of the separated being that becomes the basis for the production of totality. Totality is generated through the very inclination to incorporate anything other into itself at the expense of the otherness of the Other. In any case, separation for Levinas suggests a metaphysical relation of the self with the Other without their falling into a unity or totality.⁷³ Such relation of separation, together with the metaphysical distance it creates, is the condition for the possibility of a genuine relation between them. This is why Levinas does not say that the self is *different* from the Other because such position would assume some grand viewpoint from which one could compare the qualities of the two.⁷⁴ This would amount to reducing the otherness of the Other. Neither does Levinas hold that the self, as the Same, is *opposed* to the Other because this position would also entail a totality to which both the self and the Other belong: “If the Same would establish its identity by simple *opposition to the Other*, it would already be a part of a totality encompassing the Same and the Other” (*TeI*, 27/*TaI*, 38). Here we find that Levinas is very careful not to presuppose in his position any kind of totality that he has attempted to shun. If the relationship with the absolute Other through the metaphysical desire is to be established, the relation between the Same and the Other cannot simply be “the simple reverse of

⁷² Levinas calls this complete separation “atheism” because the separated being, capable of maintaining itself, no longer wants to participate in the Being from which it is separated: “One lives outside of God, at home with oneself; one s an I, an egoism” (*TeI*, 52/*TaI*, 58).

⁷³ This ‘structural/metaphysical’ totality is to be distinguished from the kind of totality that Levinas often talks about, which is caused by the encroachment of the Same upon the Other.

⁷⁴ Davis, 42.

identity, and is not formed out of resistance to the Same, but is prior to every initiative, to all imperialism of the Same” (*TeI*, 28/*TaI*, 38-9). Furthermore, in delineating the relation between the self and the Other, as we have observed, Levinas also attempts to establish a position in which both keep their independence and self-sufficiency, and yet have some relation with each other. He does so, among others, by portraying the self, not as different or opposed to the Other, but rather as *separate* from it.

Moreover, Levinas also describes the self as constituted by *interiority* in that it is always “bound to the first person of the I” (*TeI*, 50/*TaI*, 57). Interiority for Levinas designates the self-presence of the I that allows it to experience the world as a self. It is “a presence at home with oneself” (*TeI*, 112/*TaI*, 110) that brings unity to the self’s experiences with the outside world. Such self-presence can be called “inner life” or “psychism” (*TeI*, 46/*TaI*, 54; cf. *TeI*, 112/*TaI*, 110). This interiority makes every self unique, or *ipseity*, that cannot be absorbed into any system: “Interiority is the refusal to be transformed into a pure loss figuring in an alien accounting system” (*TeI*, 49/*TaI*, 56). In fact, for Levinas, the constant presence of the I to itself constitutes a way of being that never yields to a totality: “The original role of the psychism does not, in fact, consist in only *reflecting* being; it is already *a way of being* [*une manière d’être*], resistance to the totality” (*TeI*, 46/*TaI*, 54). Such resistance for Levinas is “necessary for the idea of Infinity” on which his philosophy is to be founded (*TeI*, 51/*TaI*, 57).

It is quite clear that Levinas sees an intimate link between separation and interiority: it is the separation of the self from the Other that makes interiority possible. More precisely, the separation is to be recognized exactly as an inner life or psychism:

“The separation of the Same is produced in the form of an inner life, a psychism. The psychism constitutes an *event* in being” (*TeI*, 46/*TaI*, 54; cf. *TeI*, 112/*TaI*, 110). Both separation and interiority of the self, according to Levinas, enable the self to derive meaning from a non-historical order:

Separation designates the possibility of an *existent* being set up and having its own destiny to itself, that is, being born and dying without the place of this birth and this death in the time of universal history being the measure of this reality. Interiority is the very possibility of a birth and a death that do not derive their meaning from history. Interiority institutes an order different from historical time in which totality is constituted, an order where everything is *pending*, where what is no longer possible historically remains always possible” (*TeI*, 48/*TaI*, 55).

This is why he can argue that memory, as an inversion of historical time, is “the essence of interiority” (*TeI*, 49/*TaI*, 56).

With the self conceived as separation and interiority, we can understand Levinas’s phenomenology of dwelling and enjoyment. A presence at home with oneself, for him, means “habitation and economy” (*TeI*, 112/*TaI*, 110). Enjoyment that is experienced from the self’s economic relation with the world is only possible if the self is separate from the Other and possessing an inner life unique to itself: “The interiority of enjoyment is separation in itself, is the mode according to which such an event as separation can be produced in the economy of being. Happiness is a principle of individuation, but individuation in itself is conceivable only from within, through interiority” (*TeI*, 157/*TaI*, 147). As it dwells in the world, the self, as the Same, shows itself as “the egoism of *possessing and enjoying*.”⁷⁵ In all its actions it aims at self-realization, and its

⁷⁵ Stephan Strasser, “Emmanuel Levinas: Phenomenological Philosophy,” trans. H. Spiegelberg. *The Phenomenological Movement: A Historical Introduction*, by Herbert Spiegelberg. Third revised and enlarged edition (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, 1984), 620.

consciousness invariably turns into self-consciousness. Eating or drinking, for example, is done for the sake of what is beyond mere survival: “These enjoyments, be they the simple bodily or the more complex pleasures by which life is nourished, may mean more to me than survival without them.”⁷⁶ Thus, the basic feature of Levinas’s phenomenology of human life is not “knowing but enjoyment” (*TeI*, 115/*TaI*, 112). What all these movements mean is simply the return to the self.

In this way Levinas shows how his phenomenology of human life is different from Heidegger’s. He holds that human life is essentially not about care (*Sorge*), as Heidegger argues, but rather about love of life itself; it is “living on” (*vivre de...*) the elements of life: “The bare fact of life is never bare. Life is not the naked will to be, an ontological *Sorge* for this life. Life’s relation with the very conditions of its life becomes the nourishment and content of that life. Life is *love of life*, a relation with contents that are not my being but more dear than my being: thinking, eating, sleeping, reading, working, warming oneself in the sun” (*TeI*, 115/*TaI*, 112; *TeI*, 112/*TaI*, 110). In a seemingly humorous note, he comments on what Heidegger’s *Dasein* has become when the enjoyment of life and its content is not taken into account: “It is interesting to observe that Heidegger does not take the relation of enjoyment into consideration... *Dasein* in Heidegger is never hungry” (*TeI*, 142/*TaI*, 134). With the basic concern of the self for possession and enjoyment of life, one could argue that such preoccupation “may take priority over preoccupation with my *mourir*, my being dead.”⁷⁷ The utility of what is

⁷⁶ John Llewelyn, *Emmanuel Levinas: The Genealogy of Ethics* (London and New York: Routledge, 1995), 78.

⁷⁷ Llewelyn, *Emmanuel Levinas: The Genealogy of Ethics*, 78

lived on, including the nourishment from food and drink, is thus only “a derivative feature of a more fundamental ontological mode of existence,”⁷⁸ namely, their very enjoyment.

When the living being is immersed in its enjoyment of the world and its content, according to Levinas, it knows nothing of the exterior world. That is to say, through its constant assimilation of the Other, it remains the Same without being determined by the Other: “The identity of a living being throughout its history contains nothing mysterious: the living being is essentially the Same, the Same determining every Other, without the Other ever determining the Same.”⁷⁹ Due to this ignorance of exteriority, it is never directly affected by the outer world. This is precisely what constitutes its freedom. In such a state of freedom, however, there is one form of exteriority that can interrupt the enjoyment of life that the living being experiences. But when it comes, it terminates altogether not only the freedom, but also the very life of the being upon which all the enjoyments hinge. That form of exteriority is death (*la mort*). This is why Levinas says that what simply lives does so under the banner of freedom or death: “If the Other did determine the Same – if exteriority collided with what lives --- it would kill instinctive being. The living being lives beneath the sign of liberty or death.”⁸⁰ For the living being, death is indeed a radical transcendence that puts an end to its life; it is fundamentally

⁷⁸ Wyschogrod, *The Problem of Ethical Metaphysics*, 59.

⁷⁹ Emmanuel Levinas, “The *I* and the Totality,” *Entre Nous: Thinking-of-the-Other*, hereafter *ENT*, trans. Michael B. Smith and Barbara Harshav (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 14; *Entre Nous: Essais sur le penser-à-l'autre*, hereafter *ENP* (Éditions Grasset & Fasquelle, 1991), 24.

⁸⁰ Levinas, “The *I* and the Totality,” *ENP*, 24/*ENT*, 14.

“*ungraspable*.”⁸¹ Since it is absolutely unknowable and never present, death marks the end of the subject’s mastery of the world and its affairs. Death is something absolutely other that the living being cannot assimilate through enjoyment: “This approach of death indicates that we are in relation with something that is absolutely other, something bearing alterity not as a provisional determination we can assimilate through enjoyment, but as something whose very existence is made of alterity. My solitude is thus not confirmed by death but broken by it” (*TA*, 63/*TO*, 74).

It is important to note here that death, for Levinas, only terminates the freedom of the subject to enjoy the world and to grasp things in it. As such, death tells the living being that such freedom does not last forever, but will one day come to an end. But death, according to Levinas, never calls into question *the way* the subject lives and operates, namely, without any determination from the Other. The living being continues to live the life of enjoyment until death comes to put an end to it:

A miracle of modern Western freedom unhindered by any memory or remorse, and opening onto a ‘glittering future’ where everything can be rectified. Only by death is this freedom thwarted. The obstacle of death is insurmountable, inexorable and fundamentally incomprehensible. The recognition of finitude will of course characterize a new test for ontology. But finitude and death will not have called into question the *bonne conscience* with which the freedom of knowledge operates. They will simply have put a check on its powers.⁸²

Thus, even though it is a form of radical transcendence, death does not challenge the supremacy of the subject’s mode of being. This is why Levinas has to find another kind

⁸¹ Emmanuel Levinas, *Time and the Other*, hereafter *TO*, trans. Richard A. Cohen (Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press, 1987), 72; italics original; *Le temps et l’autre*, hereafter *TA* (Quadrige/PUF, 2004), 59.

⁸² Emmanuel Levinas, “Ethics as First Philosophy,” *The Levinas Reader*, hereafter *LR*, ed. Seán Hand (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing Ltd., 1989), 78; *Éthique comme philosophie première*, hereafter *EEP*, préfacé et annoté par Jacques Rolland (Paris : Éditions Payot & Rivages, 1998), 74-5.

of radical transcendence that will ground the ethical relation between the Same and the Other, which he calls “the face of the Other.”

At any rate, the above analysis suggests that for Levinas, the primordial relation of human beings with the material world “is not negativity, but enjoyment and agreeableness [*agrément*] of life” (*TeI*, 160/*TaI*, 149), even though such a relation continues to be under the threat of being interrupted permanently by death. But as long as the human beings live, their lives are marked by “an absence of thought... a consciousness without problems, that is, without exteriority.”⁸³ It is interesting to see here that Levinas links the life of enjoyment to the absence of thought as if the two states of being were incompatible. But he does argue that thinking marks the beginning of the movement toward exteriority. It is, of course, not any kind of thinking, but specifically that which is aware of the exteriority that lies beyond the confines of its being: “Thought begins the very moment consciousness becomes consciousness of its particularity, that is to say, when it conceives of the exteriority, beyond its nature as a living being, that encloses it; when thought becomes conscious of itself and at the same time conscious of the exteriority that goes beyond its nature, when it becomes metaphysical.”⁸⁴ This emergence of consciousness is at the same time the beginning of an ego (*moi*) that is not absorbed by a totality. Although it exists in relationship with a totality, the living being, through its ego, remains separated from the totality. Thus, the movement toward exteriority or the Other, which constitutes the basis for the ethical, according to Levinas, begins with thinking.

⁸³ Levinas, “The *I* and the Totality,” *ENP*, 24/*ENT*, 14.

⁸⁴ Levinas, “The *I* and the Totality,” *ENP*, 25/*ENT*, 15..

It is important to note that for Levinas the egotism of the self, its unawareness of the outer world, is not a vice. In its state of enjoyment the self simply does not think at all, as it deals with the forces of life as related to its enjoyment. In fact, all the components of the self we have discussed, that is, separation and interiority, egoism and enjoyment, are necessary for the opening of the self to the Infinite: “Egoism, enjoyment, sensibility, and the whole dimension of interiority – the articulations of separation – are necessary for the idea of Infinity, the relation with the Other which opens forth from the separated and finite being” (*TeI*, 158/*TaI*, 148; cf. *TeI*, 160/*TaI*, 150). The opening to transcendence becomes possible when, through its encounter with exteriority, the self realizes its own insufficiency, which will take it to go beyond the gratification of its needs:

“The totality of contentment betrays its own phenomenality when an exteriority that does not slip into the void of needs gratified or frustrated supervenes. The totality of contentment reveals its phenomenality when this exteriority, incommensurable with needs, breaks interiority by this very incommensurability. Interiority then discovers itself to be insufficient, but this insufficiency does not designate any limitation imposed by this exteriority” (*TeI*, 195/*TaI*, 179).

Thus, in Levinas’s view, the constant return to the self can be avoided only if the self, as separate and interiority, makes a turn to exteriority or a movement toward the Other. This is what Levinas conceives as fundamentally constituting the ethical: “Only if it starts from me as a separated being and goes as a host to the Other, welcoming the Other as guest, only in this manner can an eternal return within the interiority of the circle of being be escaped. For when I turn to the Other interiority turns into exteriority.”⁸⁵

⁸⁵ Llewelyn, *Emmanuel Levinas: The Genealogy of Ethics*, 67.

1.1.2. Ethics as First Philosophy: The Critique of Western Philosophy

Levinas's account of ethics as the encounter with the Other that puts the Same into question, to a large extent, has become a critique of a dominant tradition in Western philosophy. He argues that Western philosophy since Plato has predominantly been an ontology, which is the attempt to comprehend the Being of what is, or beings (*TeI*, 13/*TaI*, 43). It takes up the project of acquiring and taking possession of entities through the activity of labor, which is "the very *en-ergy* of acquisition" (*TeI*, 132/*TaI*, 159). It is like the movement of the hand that grasps, takes hold of (*prend*) and comprehends (*comprend*) beings in order to possess them. By doing so, Western philosophy has reduced the alterity of beings to the comprehension of Being. It is fundamentally a "movement toward oneself; it is not a transcendence" (*TeI*, 132/*TaI*, 159). To put it in another way, Western philosophy, as ontology, in its due course has set the priority of Being over beings, depriving them of their otherness: "To affirm the priority of *Being* over *existents* is to already decide the essence of philosophy; it is to subordinate the relation with *someone*, who is an existent, (the ethical relation) to a relation with the *Being of existents*, which, impersonal, permits the apprehension, the domination of existents (a relationship of knowing), subordinates justice to freedom" (*TeI*, 36/*TaI*, 45). Heidegger's fundamental ontology, for Levinas, serves as a good example of such ontology because it subordinates the relation with the Other to that with the anonymous

Being and espouses the Nietzschean will to power.⁸⁶ Such a will, however, is dressed up as the Logos, which attempts to make everything fit within its conceptual frames. Its goal is to create a world in which a Self has a total rule, neither disturbed nor impeded by any Other. For this purpose, the otherness of the Other needs to be suppressed. In Levinas's view, the question of the meaning of Being, which Heidegger pursues and elaborates in *Being and Time*, already presupposes a comprehension of Being, which does not recognize the alterity of the Other (*TeI*, 36/*TaI*, 45). What at stake here is the ethical relation with beings whose otherness has been suppressed.

The ontological character of Western philosophy, according to Levinas, manifests itself eminently at the epistemological level, as it underlies the long-standing project to attain absolute knowledge. Here the object of knowledge becomes an object *for* consciousness through internalization, or grasped through an adequate representation. Nothing is left out by, and for, consciousness, which embraces everything that is to form a totality: "[The history of philosophy] can be interpreted as an attempt at universal synthesis, a reduction of all experience, of all that is reasonable, to a totality wherein consciousness embraces the world, leaves nothing other outside of itself, and thus becomes absolute thought. The consciousness of self is at the same time the consciousness of the whole" (*EeI*, 69/*EaI*, 75). It is the very adequation of the two consciousnesses that is being challenged in Levinas's ethics.

⁸⁶ Emmanuel Levinas, "Philosophy and the Idea of Infinity," *Collected Philosophical Papers*, hereafter *CPP* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1998), 52; "La Philosophie et l'Idée de l'Infini," *En découvrant l'existence avec Husserl et Heidegger*, hereafter *EDE* (Paris: Librairie Philosophique J. Vrin, 2001), 236. See Derrida's critical analysis of this argument in "Violence and Metaphysics," particularly pp. 135 ff.

What has happened in Western philosophy, as Levinas reads it, is intimately linked to the notion of truth that gets developed in the history of such philosophy. We recall that in traditional metaphysics, or ontology, as Levinas calls it, the source of intelligibility and meaning lies in the correlation between knowledge and being. Truth, which is the goal of human knowing, is defined as the adequation of intellect and thing (*adaequatio intellectus et rei*), which is often called ‘the correspondence theory of truth.’ In the Aristotelian-Thomistic tradition one is said to have acquired knowledge of an object when the form in the object is the same as the form in one’s intellect. For Husserl, the genuine *adaequatio intellectus et rei* occurs when “*the object is actually ‘present’ or ‘given,’ and present as just what we have intended it*; no partial intention remains explicit and still lacking fulfillment.”⁸⁷ Whether understood as the adequation of forms or the fulfillment of signifying intention, such notion of truth lends itself to the activity of knowing that consists in reaching out and grasping the object of knowledge in order to appropriate it, to reach the adequation between ego and non-ego, Same and Other.⁸⁸ Such activity assumes that consciousness will always remain the source of meaning. The act of understanding turns into an attempt to possess what is to be known: “Absolute knowledge, such as it has been sought, promised or recommended by philosophy, is a thought of the Equal. Being is embraced in the truth... In the limit where this task is accomplished, it consists in making the other become the Same” (*EeI*, 85/*EaI*, 91). To put it in another way, “in the realm of truth, being, as the *other* of thought becomes the

⁸⁷ Edmund Husserl, *Logical Investigations*, Volume II, Investigation VI, trans. J.N. Findlay (London and New York: Routledge, 2001), 261, italics original; see *TIPH*, 113/*TIHP*, 74.

⁸⁸ See *EDE*, 196-97; *Discovering Existence with Husserl*, hereafter *DEH*, trans. Richard A. Cohen and Michael B. Smith (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1998), 127.

characteristic *property* of thought as knowledge” (*EFP*, 68/LR, 76). It is this comprehension of Being, more than anything else, in Levinas’s view, that becomes *first philosophy* and that determines the course of Western philosophy (*EFP*, 67/LR, 76).

For Levinas, Husserl belongs to this particular tradition in Western philosophy. In fact, his mentor was often portrayed as the culmination of the tradition that sees knowledge as the absolute rule of the conscious *I* in which all that is meaningful is to be found. The Husserlian phenomenology is, in Levinas’s view, “the conclusion to which one of the characteristic traditions of philosophy leads, according to which knowledge of entities and of their presence is the ‘natural place’ of the senseful and is equivalent to spirituality or to the psychic life of thought itself.”⁸⁹ In a language that is reminiscent of the Nietzschean struggle for power, Levinas describes the transcendental reduction that Husserl proposes as, in effect, suspending all independence in the world save for that of consciousness itself and, in doing so, causing the world to be rediscovered as *noema*. This reduction necessarily leads to the full affirmation of the self as absolute being and as “master of its own nature as well as of the universe and able to illuminate the darkest recesses of resistance to its powers” (*EFP*, 79/LR, 79). Philosophy as ontology is for Levinas nothing but a philosophy of power “insofar as knowing is always mastery.”⁹⁰ In this manner knowing is nothing but “re-presentation, a return to presence, and nothing may remain *other* to it,” (*EFP*, 71/LR, 77). This return to presence, for Levinas, eliminates all transcendence, and is, therefore, unethical. One may argue that there is

⁸⁹ Levinas, “Beyond Intentionality,” hereafter *BI*, *Philosophy in France Today* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 100-101.

⁹⁰ Levinas, “Intention, Event, and the Other,” *IRB*, 155.

transcendence or exteriority in thought, as consciousness reaches out and intends an object. But for Levinas, thought in intentionality is still “transcendence in immanence” (*BI*, 112), because it does not really respond to the call of the other: “The transcendence of the object is exactly what it is in conformity with the inner meaning of the thought that intends that object... The exteriority of objects proceeds from the absolute respect given to the interiority of its constitution” (*EDE*, 72/*DEH*, 86).

Since intentionality merely signifies “an exteriority in immanence and the immanence of all exteriority” (*BI*, 106), Levinas asks whether all the ways in which thought is meaningful can only be found in intentionality. More poignant questions that move toward his ethics are posed this way: “Does thought have meaning only through consciousness of the world? Or is not the potential surplus of the world itself, over and beyond all *presence*, to be sought in an immemorial past – that is, irreducible to a bygone present – in the trace left by this past which, perhaps, marks it out as a part of creation” (*BI*, 106). The search for meaning beyond self-presence fundamentally guides Levinas’s thinking about ethics, metaphysics, and even religion.

Levinas describes the path he walks on as moving toward “a relation anterior to” or “irreducible to comprehension.”⁹¹ It is not to deny the validity of knowledge, but rather to relativize knowledge in order to make room for ethics.⁹² What he sees as the dominant tradition of Western philosophy is the fact that “the very spontaneity of freedom is not put into question,” evocative of his definition of ethics (*CPP*, 57/*EDE*, 243). Here we

⁹¹ Levinas, “Is Ontology Fundamental?,” *ENP*, 16/*ENT*, 4.

⁹² This is reminiscent of Kant’s rejection of the possibility of pure reason to attain the knowledge of God, freedom, and immortality in order to make room for faith.

find the link between ethics and metaphysics in Levinas's philosophy. His critique of knowledge as pursued in the dominant tradition in Western philosophy is intimately linked to his claim about the primordially of ethics, or ethics as first philosophy. He argues that in the climate in which knowledge always means a return to presence, it would be impossible to do proper ethics, namely, to exercise the responsibility for the Other. Ethics, as he understands it, would be fatally compromised and corrupted if it developed from the standpoint of what he calls 'ontology,' which sets the priority of Being over beings, and which denies the otherness of the Other. In fact, the attitude that is promoted in such ontology fundamentally runs counter to the spirit of the ethical relation: ethics is not, in Levinas's terms, about dominating the other, but rather about being put in question by the Other: "Ethics is when I not only do not thematize another; it is when another *obsesses* me or puts me in question. This putting in question does not expect that I respond; it is not a question of giving a response, but of finding oneself responsible. I am the object of an intentionality and not its subject."⁹³ Ethics for Levinas concerns the act of surrendering the *I* in order to find meaning beyond presence, self-mastery, or comprehension: "It is in the laying down by the ego of its sovereignty (in its "hateful" modality), that we find ethics and also probably the very spirituality of the soul, but most certainly the question of the meaning of being, that is, its appeal for justification" (*EFP*, 104/*LR*, 85). Thus, unless ethics becomes first philosophy, it will never develop properly into what it is supposed to be. One can only exercise one's

⁹³ Emmanuel Levinas, "God and Philosophy," *De Dieu qui vient à l'Idée*, hereafter *DVI* (Paris: Librairie Philosophique J. Vrin, 1998), 156; *Of God who Comes to Mind*, hereafter *GCM*, trans. Bettina Bergo (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), 99.

responsibility for the Other where there is room for the alterity of the Other, which is exactly lacking in the dominant tradition of Western philosophy that Levinas criticizes. That is why Levinas holds that his preoccupation with ethics is not primarily concerned with “the purpose of developing *ab ovo* a code in which the structures and rules of good private conduct, public policy, and peace between the nations would be set forth, however fundamental the ethical values implied in these chapters may appear to be. *The main intent here is to try to see ethics in relation to the rationality of the knowledge that is immanent in being, and that is primordial in the philosophical tradition of the West*” (ENP, 9/ENT, xi; emphasis added).

In the preceding exposition of Levinas’s account of ethics, one may sense a rather strong Heideggerian overtone. Indeed, it is hard to separate Levinas’s works from Heidegger’s philosophy, as they often emerge through various critical conversations with it. All this occurs through both Levinas’s constant fascination with Heidegger’s works, particularly, *Being and Time* (1927), and his later disappointment with the political turn of the German philosopher. The events of World War II, particularly the Shoah, forced Levinas to rethink not only his own philosophical stand, but also the whole Western philosophical tradition, including Heidegger’s philosophy.⁹⁴ This historical background helps us understand Levinas’s insistence in his philosophy on the movement *beyond* being (*au-delà de l’être*) and ontology as well as on transcendence. It deeply shapes his preoccupation with the question of the Other, hence ethics, in relation to metaphysics.

⁹⁴ See Ethan Kleinberg, *Generation Existential: Heidegger’s Philosophy in France, 1927-1961* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2005), 249.

In reading Levinas's works, one may thus sometimes feel that one must choose between Being and the Other. This is because for Levinas, the question of the Other is equally important as that of Being, as both can serve as the starting point of thought and the source of meaning. But in the thought of Being, one "affirms the fact of remaining in oneself, returning to oneself, positing oneself as a oneself, as the sense of the world, as the sense of life, as spirit. As if the meaningful or the reasonable always came back to the event of the perseverance in existence, which finds its full expression in the apparition of an 'I' understood at the same time as an 'in itself' and a 'for itself'." ⁹⁵ Such character of Being leads Levinas first to ask this question: "Does Being provide its own reason for existing as the alpha and omega of intelligibility, first philosophy and eschatology? Does it not, on the contrary, carry on with its task of being, while still calling for a justification (as a question preceding every other question)?" (*BI*, 100). With Being comparable to "an atom which is closed unto itself," Levinas further wonders whether this is not a threat against all forms of alterity. The question of the Other, by contrast, disrupts "the 'easy conscience' of the *conatus*, of the animal persistence of beings in Being, concerned solely for their own space and for the time of their own life" (*BI*, 100). Here in the *for-the-other*, for Levinas, lies the possibility of the ultimate intelligibility and meaning, as he poignantly puts in "Ethics as First Philosophy": "Whether he (i.e., the Other) regards me or not, he 'regards' me. In this question being and life are awakened to the human dimension. This is the question of the meaning of being: not the ontology of the understanding of that extraordinary verb, but the ethics of its justice. The question *par*

⁹⁵ Levinas, "The Vocation of the Other," *IRB*, 106.

excellence or the question of philosophy. Not ‘Why being rather than nothing?’ but how being justifies itself” (*LR*, 86).

Levinas further argues that thinking the Other as other before affirming oneself is bearing the sign of goodness. In his view, letting the Other be other in the act of contemplation seems to already presuppose what he calls ‘dis-interestedness’ or a “relaxation of the allegiance to being” (*IRB*, 106-7). This is because one really needs to go beyond the realm of being (*inter-esse*) in order to fully respect the otherness of the Other. Disinterestedness is thus another way of speaking about transcendence, which is the desire for the Good (cf. *DVI*, 111/*GCM*, 67). Only in the realm of disinterestedness or transcendence does ethics, as Levinas uses it, become possible: “Ethics is not a moment of being; it is otherwise and better than being; the very possibility of the beyond” (*DVI*, 114/*GCM*, 69). To put it in another way, transcendence finds its meaning or signification in ethics, which is structured as the movement toward the Other.

All this exposition does not suggest that Levinas had developed a thorough philosophy of his own, as he was criticizing Heidegger. In fact, it often appears that he had not really elaborated his own critical thought in his early writings, even though one could see its seeds here and there. On the issue of transcendence, Levinas owes a great deal of debt to Jean Wahl, his best friend and promoter for the *doctorat d’état* degree in 1961. It is to the topic of transcendence expressed in the face of the Other that we are going to turn in the next section.

1.2. The Face of the Other as the First Signification of Transcendence

We have seen above Levinas's account of ethics or the ethical as being put into question by the Other. The presence of the Other disturbs my freedom and stands in the way of my enjoyment of the world. But this is only the first part of what constitutes the ethical because the ethical consists not only in being called into question by the Other, but also in being summoned by the Other. Here Levinas's account of the face of the Other, which we shall see shortly, becomes crucial because the appeal comes through the face. Being appealed, the subject finds itself responsible for the Other. There begins the movement of the *I* toward the Other, leaving behind its security and enjoyment. The ethical is thus a turn to exteriority, a movement toward the "elsewhere" (*l'<ailleurs>*), and the "otherwise" (*l'<autrement>*), and the "other" (*l'<autre>*) (*TeI*, 21/*TaI*, 33). Being ethical means going out of oneself and being responsible for the Other. It never means returning to oneself and to one's own needs because if it did, ethics would be nothing but egology. Neither does the ethical mean taking care of oneself, even partially. For Levinas, the search for universal moral principles that would govern the lives of all human beings, which is often the case in Western philosophy, is not radical enough because it does not show a full responsibility for the Other. In other words, every time one seeks for universal ethics, the Other fails to become the center of one's preoccupation. The whole description of the ethical above can be summed up in the term *transcendence*, the issue of which we are going to see next. Afterwards, we shall discuss Levinas's idea of the face of the Other in which such transcendence is expressed.

1.2.1. The Notion of Transcendence

Transcendence is certainly one of the most important keywords in Levinas's philosophy. Etymologically meaning 'going beyond,' the term has been closely associated with the Divine. But it has also been used to designate the ability of human beings to escape from their natural preoccupation with themselves, which is usually called 'self-transcendence.'⁹⁶ Indeed, since Kant modern philosophy has been engaged in the question of how to think transcendence. The importance of Levinas's *Totality and Infinity* lies, among others, in the audacity to speak about it philosophically, not only theologically, as customarily done. Of course, the danger of mixing faith with philosophy is always present in such an endeavor, which Levinas attempts to avoid.⁹⁷

How are we to understand Levinas's concept of transcendence then? In *Totality and Infinity* Levinas begins to explicate his notion of transcendence by first denying its association with negativity. That is to say, transcendence is not an expression of dissatisfaction with one's environments or living conditions nor a longing for a better life or world because the "elsewhere" (*l'ailleurs*) or the "otherwise" (*l'autrement*) they miss still belongs to the very world they reject (*TeI*, 30-31/*TaI*, 41).⁹⁸ More positively, the

⁹⁶ See Merold Westphal, *Transcendence and Self-Transcendence: On God and the Soul* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2004), 2.

⁹⁷ See, for example, *EI*, 14-15/24-25; *DVI*, 136-37/*GCM*, 85-86.

⁹⁸ Here my interpretation of Levinas's rejection of the identification of transcendence with negativity in *Totality and Infinity* differs from that of Michael Purcell who, following B. Forthomme, sees negativity as a form of descent toward the lower levels of being. What Levinas rejects here, I would argue, does not necessarily involve a downward movement or transdescendence (this will be explained below). The misconception of transcendence as negativity may simply take place at the ordinary level of being. What most important here is that transcendence does not primarily suggest the feeling of discontent with one's being. See Michael Purcell, *Mystery and Method: The Other in Rahner and Levinas* (Marquette: Marquette University Press, 1998), 218-19.

term designates a metaphysical movement that cannot be reduced to “a simple presence of self to self” (*TeI*, 24/*TaI*, 35). Rather, it is a metaphysical relation with the exterior being or with a reality “infinitely distant from my own reality, yet without this distance destroying this relation and without this relation destroying this distance, as would happen with relations within the same” (*TeI*, 31-32/*TaI*, 41). It is a ‘relation without relation’ in that it ‘connects’ me with the reality without either my subjecting it to my power or my subjection to it (*TeI*, 79/*TaI*, 80). Transcendence thus signifies ‘the breach of totality’ (*rupture de la totalité*), always resistant to totalization, which is a refusal of acknowledging the limitation of thought.⁹⁹ Since the self is characterized by separation, as we have seen, such a relation will not create a “confusion” with the Other nor “affect the very identity of the same, its ipseity,” (*TeI*, 32/*TaI*, 42).

It is important to note that the movement of transcendence, for Levinas, expresses not only a going-beyond or crossing-over (*trans*), but also an ascent (*scando*).¹⁰⁰ That is to say, transcendence always involves an outward and upward movement toward the height or something superior, and not a descent toward some elemental forces. That is why the metaphysical movement, as transcendence, is always a *transascendence* (*TeI*, 24/*TaI*, 35). Here the term ‘transascendence’ is opposed to ‘*transdescendence*,’ a distinction that Levinas learns from Jean Wahl. For Wahl, transascendence and transdescendence signify the two movements of transcendence in opposite directions: one, upward outside of oneself and the other, downward toward “the bottom of being.”¹⁰¹ Their difference

⁹⁹ Jean Wahl, *Existence Humaine et Transcendence* (Neuchâtel: Éditions de La Baconnière, 1944), 35.

¹⁰⁰ Emmanuel Levinas, “Sécularisation et Faim,” *Cahier de l’Herne* (L’Herne, 1991), 76.

¹⁰¹ Wahl, *Existence Humaine et Transcendence*, 38. Cf. “Transcendence is perhaps the essential element of Wahl’s teachings – but a transcendence indifferent to hierarchy. A bursting toward the heights or a descent

depends on whether or not the distance they express “enters into the way of existing of the exterior being” (*TeI*, 24/*TaI*, 35). In a true movement of transcendence, namely, transascendence, the distance between the metaphysician and the Other to which he aspires is absolutely maintained, that is to say, there is no totalization between them. It is no coincidence that this oppositional pair is linked to the rare distinction between the good infinite and the bad infinite: while the bad infinite allows for no relation with it and annihilates anyone who approaches it, the good infinite keeps a distance such that the metaphysician remains separate (*TeI*, 75/*TaI*, 77).¹⁰² As Wahl later corrects himself following the question of Gabriel Marcel, transdescendence does not suggest a degeneration nor relate to some demonic forces, hence invoking the moral categories of good and evil.¹⁰³ Later Levinas would interpret transdescendence as a movement, through feeling, transcending “transcendence toward immanence.”¹⁰⁴ Feeling becomes the way in which we descend into ourselves and get in touch with the real through “a bare, blind contact with the Other” (*PN*, 117; *HS*, 108/80). In the downward movement one encounters the birth of subjectivity that signifies “the absolute felt in a very small thing” and that renders the metaphysical experience possible (*HS*, 111/*OS*, 82). For Levinas, genuine experience must take us “beyond what constitutes our nature,” beyond what is familiar to us (*CPP*, 47/*EDE*, 229). It assumes a contact with a reality that overflows any

toward the depths of the sensible world; trans-ascendence and trans-descendence are purely, and pure, transcendences.” Emmanuel Levinas, “Jean Wahl: sans avoir ni être,” *Hors Sujet*, hereafter *HS* (Fata Morgana, 1987), 109; “Jean Wahl: Neither Having nor Being,” *Outside the Subject*, trans. Michael B. Smith (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993), 81.

¹⁰² See Rudi Visker, *Truth and Singularity: Taking Foucault into Phenomenology* (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1999), 237.

¹⁰³ Wahl, *Existence Humaine et Transcendence*, 113, 117.

¹⁰⁴ Emmanuel Levinas, “Jean Wahl and Feeling,” *Proper Names*, hereafter *PN*, trans. Michael B. Smith (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996), 116.

a priori idea found in human subjectivity, hence transcendence. Such experience, according to Levinas, is possible only through the real encounter with the Other. That is why Levinas likes to quote Wahl's assertion about human subjectivity: "The human being is always beyond him- or her-self. But that being-beyond-oneself must finally be conscious of being itself the source of that beyond, and thus transcendence doubles back toward immanence" (*HS*, 110/*OS*, 82).¹⁰⁵ In the next chapter we will discuss more about the nature of human subjectivity that makes possible the ethical relation with the Other.

It thus suffices to say at this point that for Levinas, transcendence finds its proper meaning in the ethical relation with the Other. The 'relation' and the experience of it are for Levinas characteristically metaphysical precisely because they are constituted by the reality that human thought cannot contain: "It is the tension of being in consciousness containing (as the "cogito" contains the idea of God) what it cannot contain, consciousness that thus stretches itself into philosophy 'plunged into such an experience.' But it is that tension that is first: transcendence prior to being. It is *qua* metaphysical that experience is experience, i.e. subjectivity, i.e., beyond being" (*HS*, 102-3/*OS*, 75). The experience of transcendence and the metaphysical relation with the Other is to take place through the encounter with the face of the Other. The next section will treat the famous topic in Levinas's philosophy, which hopefully may help us better understand the meaning of transcendence.

¹⁰⁵ In *Outside the Subject* this quotation is said to have been taken from Wahl's book *Traité de Métaphysique*, (Paris: Payot, 1955), page 721, but it is nowhere to be found on the page.

1.2.2. The Face of the Other

As a commonly used term, the term ‘face’ (*le visage*), as Levinas employs it, may easily generate some misunderstanding as to its precise meaning. In fact, this could be said of many aspects of Levinas’s philosophy. One can easily overlook the subtlety of his thoughts and make some hasty comparison between his and others’s philosophy. Just as one tends to think of ethics as consisting in living out universal moral principles, one might as well conceive of moral consciousness in Levinas as an experience of values, for instance, justice, goodness, impartiality, etc. This tendency is quite strong because it is around such moral values that Western moral philosophies are generally centered. For Levinas, however, moral consciousness is not primarily about an experience of values, but rather “an access to exterior being” (*DF*, 409). This exterior being is what Levinas calls the ‘face’ (*le visage*), which is “the way in which the Other [*l’Autre*] presents himself, exceeding *the idea of the other in me*” (*TeI*, 21/*TaI*, 50). That is to say, the face is the way in which the Other manifests herself before me that goes beyond my ability to evaluate, comprehend, and thematize her. This general account of the face of the Other later allows Levinas to conceive of the face as signifying transcendence. But how exactly are we to understand what Levinas means by the face?

I find Erich Maria Remarque’s *All Quiet on the Western Front* very helpful in showing how the face both manifests and reveals transcendence.¹⁰⁶ As a soldier on the

¹⁰⁶ For this inspiration I am deeply indebted to Merold Westphal who has shown how well-suited this story is for understanding Levinas’s account of the ethical encounter with the Other. See Merold Westphal, *Levinas and Kierkegaard in Dialogue* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2008), 3 ff.

battlefront, the leading character in the story first thinks mainly about killing the enemy. When he finds himself separated from his comrades and hiding in a crater full of water and mud, he starts thinking about how to defend himself: “If anyone jumps in here I will go for him. It hammers in my forehead; at once, stab him clean through the throat, so that he cannot call out; that’s the only way; he will be just as frightened as I am; when in terror we fall upon one another, then I must be first.”¹⁰⁷ Here the soldier is utterly thematizing the human Other for his own interest. He has not encountered the face yet, and therefore, the Other remains impersonal to him. But when a body of an enemy soldier does fall over him, he begins to feel the shock: “The man gurgles. It sounds to me as though he bellows, every gasping breath is like a cry, a thunder – but it is only my heart pounding. I want to stop his mouth, stuff it with earth, stab him again, he must be quiet, he is betraying me” (155). He spends the next hours watching the wounded soldier closely. He even tries to comfort him, certainly not without fear. But finally the three stabs into the already dying body end everything. The whole event that leads to the violent death begins to torture this character: “This dying man has time with him, he has an invisible dagger with which he stabs me: Time and my thoughts” (158). What is most touching, and indeed relevant to our study here, is the speech he gives to the dead man:

“Comrade, I did not want to kill you. If you jumped in here again, I would not do it, if you would be sensible too. *But you were only an idea to me before, an abstraction that lived in my mind and called forth its appropriate response. It was that abstraction I stabbed. But now, for the first time, I see you are a man like me. I thought of your hand-grenades, of your bayonet, of your rifle; now I see your wife and your face and our fellowship.* Forgive me, comrade. *We always see it too late.* Why do they never tell us that you are poor devils like us, that your mothers are just as anxious as ours, and that we

¹⁰⁷ Erich Maria Remarque, *All Quiet on the Western Front*, the illustrated edition, trans. A.W. Wheen (Boston: Little, Brown & Company, 1958), 154. The page numbers following each quote from this story are taken from this edition.

have the same fear of death, and the same dying and the same agony – Forgive me, comrade; how could you be my enemy? *If we threw away these rifles and this uniform you could be my brother just like Kat and Albert*” (159-60, italics mine).

This speech contains some important aspects of Levinas’s notion of the face. *First*, we often see and treat the other person with our own idea or abstraction about him or her. The intersubjective relation occurs with mediation, that is, through our thinking about the person. But in truth it cannot even be properly called a relation because we have not met the person yet. A proper relation, in Levinas’s view, can only begin with the encounter with the face of the other person. *Second*, the face of the Other opens up a new kind of relation. It helps us see the other person as real, as another human being like us. Fellowship and kinship begin to form. A dimension of transcendence starts to open up. *Third*, we always come too late to this realization because we dwell too long, and comfortably, in our own idea about the Other. Only through the encounter with the naked face can we experience the meaning of ethical transcendence.

It is very important to note here that what Levinas means by the ‘face’ is beyond the physical form of it. One immediate misunderstanding of the meaning of the face occurs when one simply identifies it with the physical face of the people we encounter in daily life. In this regard one assigns a narrow and common meaning to the face, pointing to the frontal area of the body where the eyes and the mouth are located and the place people will look at in order to identify a person.¹⁰⁸ Such a mistake occurs quite naturally because that is how human beings encounter one another. With Levinas’s background in phenomenology, one may even think that what the philosopher is doing is a

¹⁰⁸ See Bernhard Waldenfels, “Levinas and the Face of the Other,” *The Cambridge Companion to Levinas*, eds. Simon Critchley and Robert Bernasconi (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 64.

phenomenology of the face. Levinas himself rejects the description of his project as a phenomenology of the face because phenomenology always deals with what appears through perception, whereas what he attempts to point to is precisely beyond the physical appearance of the face. One cannot see and touch the face, he says, precisely because it is “present in its refusal to be contained”(TeI, 211/TaI, 194). That is why he argues that the real encounter with the Other can only take place beyond the physical appearance of the face that we come across every day: “The best way of encountering the Other is not even to notice the color of his eyes! When one observes the color of the eyes, one is not in social relationship with the Other. The relation with the face can surely be dominated by perception, but what is specifically the face is what cannot be reduced to that” (EeI, 79-80/EaI, 85-6). This is not to say that the alterity of the Other lies simply beneath the face that one encounters. Nor does it consist in the condensation of some invisible aspects of the Other. One could say that the face, in Levinas’s view, expresses the very otherness of the Other, irreducible to anything visible or invisible beneath it.¹⁰⁹ When the main protagonist in Remarque’s story realizes that the dead man is another human being like himself, such a realization occurs not because he sees that the enemy has a physical face just like he does. There is rather something else that shines through the face of the dead soldier that brings the main character to the realization about the fellowship. The protagonist begins to experience transcendence through the face of the soldier.

¹⁰⁹ See Jacob Meskin “The Role of Lurianic Kabbalah in the Early Philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas,” *Levinas Studies: An Annual Review*, vol. 2, ed. Jeffrey Bloechl (Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press, 2007), 60-1.

Here we may sense that Levinas wants to take us to the realm beyond phenomenology because he clearly does not think that the phenomenological method is adequate to express the proper meaning of the face. In *Otherwise than Being* he describes the face as “the very collapse of phenomenality” [*la défection même de la phénoménalité*] (AE, 141/OB, 88). The signification of the face, for Levinas, cannot be gleaned through vision, which is basically “a search for adequation,” because vision is “what *par excellence* absorbs being” (EeI, 81/EaI, 87). The absorption of being, Levinas would argue, will lead to totalization, which cannot be ethical. That is why the encounter with the face cannot take place at the level of pure perception: “Meeting the face is not of the order of pure and simple perception, of the intentionality which goes toward adequation” (EeI, 92/EaI, 96).

In an important way Levinas holds that the face is “signification without context” or that it is “meaning all by itself” (EeI, 80/EaI, 86). What he means is that we often encounter a person through a particular context in such a way that the designation of the person is intelligible only when seen within such a context. The ‘character’ (*personnage*) of a person as a professor of philosophy makes sense only within the context of the academic world. Other designations or characters such as the son or daughter of this person, or the president of such organization, are always relative to particular contexts. The face, on the contrary, is never within a particular context, or relative to it; it is meaningful in and of itself. The face destroys and surpasses any plastic image one has of it; it “expresses itself,” *καθ’ αὐτό* (TeI, 43/TaI, 51). Consequently, *toi, c’est toi*, Levinas

would say, or a face is “the very identity of a being.”¹¹⁰ For this very reason one can say that the face is beyond the description of phenomenology because it is not ‘seen.’ The face always resists the absorption of thought to become its content; it is “the desensibilization, the dematerialization of the sense datum.”¹¹¹ Uncontainable, it takes us beyond being. That is why for Levinas the relation to the face is immediately ethical. One clearly cannot kill such a face. As the main character in Remarque’s story puts it, what one can kill is the abstraction or the idea about the other person, but not the face as such, or more precisely, not transcendence that shines through it.

It may sometimes seem, however, that Levinas is doing a phenomenology of the face, which he has denied. In one of his interviews, for example, Levinas speaks of three moments of the epiphany of the face, namely, its rectitude of exposure and defenselessness, its facing, and its demand on me.¹¹² But I would argue that the phenomenological investigation of the face serves only as a springboard for a further and deeper analysis and discussion about the alterity and transcendence of the Other. Through such an analysis Levinas attempts to take us to the deeper meaning of the face and to speak of the ethical demand of the Other expressed in the face. This method will eventually take us beyond phenomenology.

The first moment of the epiphany of the face, according to Levinas, is its uprightness and rectitude, which signifies its exposure and defenselessness. One cannot see one’s own face and has no control over it, as it is always exposed to the gaze of the

¹¹⁰ Levinas, “The *I* and the Totality,” *ENP*, 43/*ENT*, 33.

¹¹¹ Levinas, “The *I* and the Totality,” *ENP*, 43/*ENT*, 33.

¹¹² Levinas, “The Philosopher and Death,” *IRB*, 127. See also “Philosophy and the Idea of Infinity,” *EDE*, 240/*CPP*, 55.

various others. The human face thus occupies such a position that it is always exposed to threat and danger, and even death: “A being face forward precisely as if it were exposed to some threat at point-blank range, as if it presented itself wholly delivered up to death. I sometimes ask myself whether the idea of the straight line – the shortest distance between two points – is not originally the line according to which the face that I encounter is exposed to death. It is probably the manner in which my death regards and intends me, but I do not see my own face” (*IRB*, 127). That is why Levinas often speaks of the nakedness or the nudity of the face, which suggests its defenselessness before any threat, for instance, “This nudity which is a call to me – an appeal but also an imperative – I name *face*.”¹¹³ Faced with death, the rectitude of the face shows its mortality, namely, the possibility of its murder. It is on the defenselessness and mortality of the face that Levinas’s ethics is based. Thus, the ethical meaning of the face, as Edith Wyschogrod observes, lies in the human face “not as a form apprehended in perception but as an ethical datum exuded, as it were, from the exposure and defenselessness of the Other.”¹¹⁴ It is in this context that the injunction “Thou shall not kill” is to be understood.

The second moment of the epiphany of the face lies in the face-to-face encounter with the Other. For Levinas, the interpersonal relationship does not consist in thinking about the self and the Other together, which grounds many ethical theories, but rather *to be facing*. The true union or true togetherness is thus “not a togetherness of synthesis, but a togetherness of face to face” (*EeI*, 71/*EaI*, 77). This *facing* of the Other, or the fact that

¹¹³ “Being-for-the-Other,” *IRB*, 115.

¹¹⁴ Edith Wyschogrod, “Preface to the Second Edition.” *Emmanuel Levinas: The Problem of Ethical Metaphysics*, xi.

he or she *faces*, provides the irreducible and ultimate experience of the ethical relation. The ethical relation is one in which I am related to the face of the Other (*le visage d'autrui*). The face-to-face encounter becomes for Levinas the source and origin of ethics, beyond any attempt to formulate the universal moral principles. In this sense ethics comes “not as a secondary layer, above an abstract reflection on the totality and its dangers”; it has “an independent and preliminary range. First philosophy is an ethics” (*EeI*, 71/*EaI*, 77). The way in which the person *faces*, that he or she is alone in doing so, at the same time becomes the measure for assessing the degree of violence that is penetrated in death (*IRB*, 127).

The third moment is that the face makes a demand on me. The face of the Other before me does not remain silent. It speaks, and when it does, my being is interrupted by the Other: “The face looks at me and calls to me. It lays claim to me. What does it ask? Not to leave it alone” (*IRB*, 127; *TeI*, 61/*TaI*, 66). The fact that the face speaks, according to Levinas, renders possible and begins all discourse (*EeI*, 82/*EaI*, 87). The proper response to the request not to be left alone would be to say, “Here I am” [*Me Voici*] (*EeI*, 93/*EaI*, 97). It suggests the availability and readiness of the self to be responsible for the Other. In his later work, *Otherwise than Being*, Levinas will speak of the disposition of the subject to be a hostage to the Other, ready to become a substitute for the Other. For Levinas, to give the response “here I am” is already to encounter the face of the Other (*IRB*, 127).

We see here that for Levinas the presence of the face is not one signification among others, but rather the “first” signification or expression of transcendence.¹¹⁵ Taking us beyond intentionality, or beyond being, the face *immediately* breaks up a totality that has created an unethical situation (cf. *TeI*, 9-10/*TaI*, 24). This immediacy is for Levinas due to the “obsessive proximity” of the Other that skips the stage of consciousness. The approach of the Other through the face is so excessive that consciousness always comes too late for a relation with the Other: “The neighbor is not to the measure and rhythm of consciousness.” This is why Levinas calls the face “the auto-signifyingness par excellence.”¹¹⁶

It is the immediate and excessive proximity of the face that makes possible the disruption of any attempt for totalization. The totalizing force, the anonymous, the impersonal, all these render the face of the Other faceless. All these belong to a “philosophy of the neuter,” which includes the Heideggerian Being and Hegel’s impersonal reason. It is precisely this kind of philosophy and its derivations that the face challenges:

Materialism does not lie in the discovery of the primordial function of the sensibility, but in the primacy of the Neuter... To begin with the face as a source from which all meaning appears, the face in its absolute nudity, in its destitution as a head that does not find a place to lay itself, is to affirm that being enacted in the relation between men, that Desire rather than need commands acts. Desire, an aspiration that does not proceed from a lack – metaphysics – is the desire of a person (*TeI*, 333/*TaI*, 298).

The face of the Other, in other words, opens up the dimension of infinity, which puts an end to “the irresistible imperialism of the Same and the I” (*EDE* 240/*CPP*, 55). In this

¹¹⁵ *TeI*, 194/*TaI*, 218. See Anthony J. Steinbock, “Face and Revelation: Levinas on Teaching as Way-Faring,” *Addressing Levinas*, 127.

¹¹⁶ Levinas, “Language and Proximity,” *CPP*, 119-20.

way the face makes possible the transcendence of an *I*. Only an *I*, says Levinas, can respond to the injunction of a face (*TeI*, 341/*TaI*, 305). Such injunction is not based on some physical force, but rather ethical one, as it is marked by infinity: “This infinity, stronger than murder, already resists us in his face, is his face, is the primordial *expression*, is the first word: ‘you shall not commit murder’” (*TeI*, 217/*TaI*, 199). The face, with all its resistance to violence, challenges me, puts me into question, and invites me to responsibility from which I cannot run away: “The epiphany of the absolutely Other is a face by which the Other challenges and commands me through his nakedness, through his destitution.”¹¹⁷ It is thus through the face of the Other, according to Levinas, that ethics becomes meaningful.

1.3. The Asymmetrical Relation between the *I* and the Other

We have seen how the issue of the ethical emerges in Levinas’s thought. Generally concerned with the relation between the subject and the Other, it arises from the propensity of the *I* to master and incorporate everything that is other into itself. In doing so the *I* commits violence, as it reduces the alterity of the Other. For Levinas this is unethical. The event of the ethical occurs precisely when the Other challenges the *I* and puts it into question in its existence as a being for itself. This happens through the face of the Other and the face-to-face encounter between the *I* and the Other. The Other, by way of his exteriority, causes the *I* to exit the self, putting an end to its cyclic propensity to

¹¹⁷ Levinas, “Transcendence and Height,” *BPW*, 17.

return to itself. This causes a crisis in the subjectivity of the *I*, as it faces the Other which it cannot contain or master. In this way, the Other becomes for the *I* the path toward transcendence. Indeed, for Levinas, true transcendence can only come from exteriority and not from the interiority of a being.

The transcendental movement of the *I*, as we have noted, is marked not only by the act of crossing-over (*trans*), but also that of ascent (*scando*). This means that the movement of the *I* toward the Other, which is the ethical, does not take place on a horizontal plane or a leveling ground, but rather involves an upward shift. There seems to be a huge gap and marked discontinuity between the *I* and the Other. All this sets up what Levinas calls the ‘*asymmetrical*’ relation between the *I* and the Other. There is no balanced position between them, as the latter occupies a much higher position than the former. It is this kind of relation that makes possible our utterances such as “After you, sir!” before an open door (*EeI*, 84/*EaI*, 89). In such a relation, the *I* does not put itself in question, but rather is constantly being questioned by the Other and called to respond. The call and appeal from the Other thus come from an “elevation” [*élévation*] and a “height” [*hauteur*] (*EeI*, 83/*EaI*, 88-9). This is also to say that one must defend the rights of the other person, not primarily those of the *I* itself. That is why the kind of humanism that Levinas proposes is often the ‘humanism of the Other,’ as opposed to the ‘humanism of the *I*.’¹¹⁸ This humanism of the Other certainly involves the dethronement and decentralization of the *I*. For Levinas, transcendence is only possible when one takes the Other as one’s point of departure and when this occurs from a height.

¹¹⁸ Emmanuel Levinas, *Humanism of the Other*, trans. Nidra Poller (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2006), xxvi.

It is this asymmetrical relation between the *I* and the Other that constitutes Levinas's account of ethics. In his account, the ethical, as concerning the relation with the Other, does not arise in reference to the universality of a law. Ethics has often been pursued on the basis of equality among human beings, each of them thought as a member of the same species. The Kantian ethics may perhaps be a prime example of the enterprise that seeks for the common law that will bind all rational beings. The assumption here is that all human beings are alike. For Levinas, such assumption is unintelligible because everybody is different from one another. In this sense the general concept of the human being (*homme*) is simply beyond comprehension (*BPW*, 27). The ultimate structure of humanity, according to Levinas, does not lie in an egalitarian and reciprocal relation, but rather in the infinity of the face of the Other. The face of the Other, in its transcendence and exteriority, becomes "the living refutation of the pretension of the social totality, the economic and administrative structure" that claims to be self-sufficient.¹¹⁹ For Levinas any attempt to create a universal and egalitarian code for the whole society would not only betray the call of the Other, but also preclude one from having the metaphysical experience through the encounter with the Other:

The beyond of metaphysical experience does not mean the universality one attains by being classified within a species – no the world in which beings assemble, delegate their freedoms to one another and form a collectivity. The beyond-onself is the uniqueness of oneself, a new identity of the incomparable, the tip of metaphysical experience having already pierced the *order* of the universal identity in which individuals and things remain in their places, mirrored in impossible mirrors of knowledge (*HS*, 104/*OS*, 76).

¹¹⁹ Levinas, *Alterity and Transcendence*, Preface, xxii.

That is why he finds it important to avoid using certain terms that suggest some similarities among human beings and their belonging to the same essence, which include the words ‘neighbor’ (*prochain*) and ‘fellow human being’ (*semblable*).¹²⁰

Instead of the commonalities that all human beings share as members of the same species, Levinas would base his ethics on the uniqueness of the other person (*IRB*, 114). This uniqueness is not based on the different attributes that this person has, nor on the fact that the person comes from a different ethnic or religious background. Rather, “the other is other because of me: unique and in some manner different than the individual belonging to a genus. It is not difference which makes alterity: alterity makes difference.”¹²¹ That is to say, what makes the Other other is not some social or personal differences that it has with the subject, but rather the very fact that it is an Other. In “Transcendence and Height,” Levinas suggests that the uniqueness of every human being lies in the fact that he or she is an *I* (*BPW*, 29). For him, transcendence is only possible when the *I* and the Other, as another *I*, are “absolutely different, without this difference depending on some quality” (*BPW*, 27).

The intersubjective, asymmetrical relation based on the uniqueness of the Other bears extensive consequences for the ethical practices as well. Since the relation is non-reciprocal and the *I* is to treat the Other in all its uniqueness, there will not be a moral prescription or a universal law that binds all human beings. In other words, the relation between the *I* and the Other cannot be made universal. As a result, the responsibility for

¹²⁰ Levinas, “Transcendence and Height,” *BPW*, 27. In his later note on the 1957 essay “Phenomenon and Enigma,” Levinas revised his initial reservation about the use of the term ‘neighbor’ by emphasizing in it “the abruptness of the disturbance, which characterizes a neighbor inasmuch as he is the first one to come along.” See Levinas, “Phenomenon and Enigma,” *EDE*, 288, n.2; *CPP*, 65, n. 7.

¹²¹ Levinas, “The Vocation of the Other,” *IRB*, 106.

the Other, as the ultimate form of the ethical relation, is to be exercised on a one-to-one basis without any appeal to reciprocity: “The intersubjective relation is a non-symmetrical relation. In this sense, I am responsible for the Other without waiting for reciprocity, were I to die for it. Reciprocity is *his* affair” (*Eel*, 94-5/*EaI*, 98). For many of us this position may be counter-intuitive because we are so used to dealing with a universal law of ethics that is often summed up in the saying, “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.” But Levinas insists that transcendence is only possible when one appeals not to the universal law, but rather responds to the call of the Other.

I think there is a way to understand Levinas’s insistence on the asymmetrical relation between the *I* and the Other, namely, to see this relation as a basic, yet ideal, unit of ethics, so to speak. That is to say, ethics must begin from a relation (1) between one person and another, and not from a universal moral principle that binds all human beings; (2) that is asymmetrical, namely, that the *I* has an infinite responsibility for the Other. Whatever the *I* does to the Other as an exercise of her responsibility will never be adequate. In this sense this ethical relation is ideal, as it is never fully realized. This one-to-one and asymmetrical relation, consisting in an individual obligation to another, is the basis of ethics or where ethics begins. This is why I would call it ‘a basic unit of ethics.’ We will better understand the importance and relevance of this ethical unit when we discuss the notion of justice in Levinas. For in Levinas’s view, as we will see below, justice must be founded upon this one-to-one and asymmetrical relation between the *I* and the Other. Without such a foundation, justice may simply be another form of covert totalization, which Levinas seeks to avoid.

1.4. The Third (*Le Tiers*) and the Search for Justice

One may feel uneasy with Levinas's notion of the asymmetrical relation between the *I* and the Other. First, one may worry about the needs and interests of the *I*. Are they somehow to be met through the encounter with the Other? Then, more importantly for our purpose, one may ask about the rights of the *other* Others, that is, those outside the *I* and the particular Other that the former feels responsible for. How are we to fulfill their rights? The feeling of uneasiness, together with the questions that follow, basically arises from the fear that the asymmetrical relation may not render justice to everyone. Certainly, leaving reciprocity to the sheer decision of the Other without any ethical demand can pose danger to the fulfillment of justice, at least as we ordinarily conceive it. With the notion of a non-reciprocal relation, one may feel that one's sense of justice has been violated. How are we to build justice and social equality in our society, then? How will Levinas account for the foundation of a moral society?

Levinas clearly does not confine his ethics simply to the intimate relation between the *I* and the Other. Everything that takes place between them, he says, 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" (*TeI*, 234/*TaI*, 212; italics mine). To address the question of social justice, therefore, Levinas introduces the notion of *the third party* (*le tiers*) to suggest the presence of the *other* Other and to address the issue of justice for them (*TeI*, 234/*TaI*, 213; *AE*, 33/*OB*, 16). He states it simply this way: "But we are never, me and the other,

alone in the world. There is always a third: the men (*sic*) who surround me. And this third is also my neighbor. Who is the nearest to me? Inevitable question of justice which arises from the depth of responsibility for the unique, in which ethics begins in the face of that which is incomparable. Here is the necessity of comparing what is incomparable – of knowing men.”¹²² Levinas reminds us that there still exists a whole world outside us, besides the *I* and the Other. While the face-to-face relation between the *I* and the individual Other may call for the absolute responsibility of the former for the latter, the presence of innumerable others, the third party, requires the response of the *I* as well. Therefore, the privilege of the particular Other needs to be “moderated” (*EeI*, 84/*EaI*, 90). Here we are dealing with the issue of justice, which will not be fully addressed without taking this third party into account:

The third party looks at me in the eyes of the Other --- language is justice. [...] the epiphany of the face qua face opens humanity. The face in its nakedness as a face presents to me the destitution of the poor one and the stranger; but this poverty and exile which appeal to my powers, address me, do not deliver themselves over to these powers as givens, remain the expression of the face. The poor one, stranger, presents himself as an equal. His equality within this essential poverty consists in referring to the *third party*, thus present at the encounter, whom in the midst of his destitution the Other already serves (*TeI*, 234/*TaI*, 213).

It is important to note that the relation of the *I* with the third party does not occur *after* its relation with the Other. That is to say, the two relations are not chronologically sequential, but rather simultaneous and contemporaneous, namely, that the third party is already present *in* the Other. The concern for the other Others already takes place in the immediate concern of the particular Other: “The others *immediately* (*d’emblée*) concern me ... My relationship with the Other as neighbor gives meaning to my relations with all

¹²² Levinas, “Being-for-the-Other,” *IRB*, 116.

the others” (*AE*, 247/*OB*, 159). As Simon Critchley observes, the community for Levinas has a double structure, which includes a commonality among equals that stems, at the same time, from the inegalitarian moment of the ethical relation.¹²³ That is why Levinas does not use Buber’s *I-Thou* categories, but rather employs the term ‘social relation’ (*TeI*, 111/*TaI*, 109) or “social reality.”¹²⁴ The face of the Other, from its very beginning, implies a social relation, as there is no distinction between the proximate and the distant Other. In this way I become, through my responsibility for the Other, also responsible for the other Others. This is fundamentally the condition for the possibility of justice (*AE*, 248/*OB*, 159). Thus, the ethical relation always takes place within a political context or public realm.

Moreover, the responsibility that follows the awakening of the issue of justice through the realization of the presence of the third party is not to be done on the basis of some compassion or emotion, but rather on that of the unconditional demand from the face of the Other. The face remains the very source and origin of justice, and not simply a instance of justice (cf. *EDE* 241/*CPP*, 56). That is why Levinas seems to prefer the term ‘justice’ to ‘love’ to designate responsibility for the Other and for society as a whole. Responsibility that is based on love, as Roger Burggraeve observes, can give the impression that it arises from some feeling for the Other such as pity, mercy, or sympathy.¹²⁵ Indeed, one can easily get involved in the activities of social justice out of compassion for the Other. But the discourse of justice and right, for Levinas, cannot stem

¹²³ Critchley, *The Ethics of Deconstruction*, 227.

¹²⁴ Levinas, “Philosophy and the Idea of Infinity,” *EDE* 239/*CPP*, 54; “The *I* and the Totality,” *ENP*, 31/*ENT*, 21.

¹²⁵ Roger Burggraeve, *From Self-Development to Solidarity: An Ethical Reading of Human Desire in its Socio-Political Relevance according to Emmanuel Levinas* (Leuven: Peeters, 1985), 99.

from such feelings, but rather from the absolutely inescapable demand of the face: “The desire for infinity does not have the sentimental complacency of love, but the rigor of moral exigency” (*EDE* 246/*CPP*, 59). More importantly, love for Levinas cannot become the basis for social justice because it is the nature of the relationship of love to be completely exclusive, negligent of the third party. To love, he says, is “to exist as though the lover and the beloved were alone in the world” and as such, it is the negation of society.¹²⁶ The presence of the third party would thus only be felt as a disturbance to this intimate society, hence the very transgression of justice. For justice requires a universality, the expression of responsibility for both the Other and the third party, as demanded by the face. Such a demand clearly cannot be met through an exclusive relation on the basis of love.¹²⁷

The suggestion that the ego is in relationship with a human totality, for Levinas, constitutes the notion of earthly morality (*la morale terrestre*) in the strong sense. Such morality does not consist in the denial of any supernatural assistance in the search for ethical principles. Rather, operating in a different horizon than that of the supernatural, it “invites one into the difficult detour that leads to third parties that have remained outside of love.”¹²⁸ The ethical relation, as Levinas conceives it, seeks for, and reaches out, to those who have been marginalized in the closed relation of love, to whom injustice has

¹²⁶ Levinas, “The *I* and the Totality,” *ENP*, 30/*ENT*, 20.

¹²⁷ For the same reason Levinas argues that a full and complete pardon cannot be given in a society with a plurality of beings. It would be possible only in a closed society that consists only of two people, a society of me and you in which the traffic of the intentions and meanings of the acts is still manageable. But in a real society that includes the third party such pardon cannot be fully made available because the meaning of one’s act is beyond one’s control. In such a society social wrongdoings can be done without one’s intention and knowledge. One cannot recover one’s faults simply by way of the examination of conscience. This is where occur real wounds caused by real violence, hence injustice. See “The *I* and the Totality,” *ENP*, 28 ff./*ENT*, 18 ff.

¹²⁸ Levinas, “The *I* and the Totality,” *ENP*, 33/*ENT*, 23.

been done. It is no longer satisfied with mere charity, which cannot meet the demand for pure justice. The earthly morality seeks, instead, to establish laws on the basis of the affinity of the ego with the whole of humanity.

The presence of the third party that already reveals itself in the face of the Other later becomes the foundation of what Levinas calls ‘human fraternity’ (*la fraternité humaine*). This fraternal community includes both “individualities whose logical status is not reducible to the status of ultimate differences in a genus, for their singularity consists in each referring to itself...” and “the commonness of a father, as though the commonness of race would not bring together enough” (*TeI*, 236/*TaI*, 214). That is to say, the community involves a double structure that embraces both the unequal and the equal, the asymmetrical and symmetrical, the Other and the third party. The ‘commonness of a father’ here refers to the dimension of height, and here Levinas explicitly points to monotheism as signifying this kind of fraternity. This reference shows a strong link between the question of God and the political community in Levinas’s philosophy. In any case, such human fraternity is to be attained through the mediation of political institutions.¹²⁹

Thus, the social relation, as Levinas conceives it, arises from the face of the Other, which includes both the proximate and distant Other. Whereas the proximity to the other’s face is the source of justice, “the relationship with the third party is an incessant correction of the asymmetry of proximity in which the face is looked at” (*AE*, 246/*OB*,

¹²⁹ Levinas’s political view can be gleaned from his numerous essays on the state of Israel, Zionism, the philosophy of Hitler, etc. See *LR*, 235 ff.; *Unforeseen History*, trans. Nidra Poller (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2004).

158). The concept of human fraternity, I believe, serves as a tool to keep the balance. The implementation of such a fraternity with proper respect for every Other will certainly encounter difficulty and challenge. The main question is, how to maintain the ethical within the political? For the faces of the Other can easily turn into “objective and plastic forms” and become “de-faced.” In such a situation, “the other is no longer the unique person offering himself to the compassion of my responsibility, but an individual within a logical order or a citizen of a state in which institutions, general laws, and judges are both possible and necessary.”¹³⁰ The community would fall back into a totalizing society in which the ethical disappears. This is clearly the main challenge of building a human fraternity: “Would ethics disappear in the justice that it requires and in the politics that justice requires?” (*IRB*, 116). This poignant question from Levinas needs to be heard again and again.

We have seen in this chapter Levinas’s account of the ethical relation. The relation occurs between the *I* and the Other when the former is being challenged and put into question by the latter. What is interrogated is the freedom and enjoyment of the *I*, its tendency to incorporate the alterity of the Other into itself. With its continuing efforts to appropriate everything other, the *I* turns into a self that bears the character of the Same since it never truly accepts the otherness of the Other. The dominant tradition of Western philosophy that culminates in Husserl and Heidegger, too, according to Levinas, has a similar tendency because it never really provides a proper place for the Other. For

¹³⁰ Levinas, “Being-for-the-Other,” *IRB*, 116. See *EeI*, 84/*EaI*, 90. It is important to note here that the word ‘compassion’ is clearly not a typical term that Levinas would use in describing the responsibility for the Other. It may sound too soft to delineate the radicality of such an ethics.

Levinas, only the Other can really shake up our self-centered consciousness and make us realize about who we really are. This occurs through our encounter with the face of the Other, which takes us beyond being, toward transcendence. Thus, ethics for Levinas can be described as a movement toward the Other, as opposed to a return to oneself. Such a movement becomes the basis for social justice, as we realize that there are other people, the third party, outside our relation with a particular Other.

Thus, the ethical relation, for Levinas, never simply concerns some moral principles or rules of conduct. As a movement toward the Other, it is rather inscribed within our subjectivity, an-archically he claims, in a way that makes possible our ordinary ethical encounter with the Other. This is why the ethical relation is for Levinas metaphysical, and ethics is first philosophy. In the next chapter we will look into human subjectivity that hosts these characteristics and pursue the topics, among others, of sensibility as the basis for ethics and the ethical subject as the hostage of the Other. Indeed, Levinas's view of the ethical relation would be unintelligible without a certain presupposition about the human subject. It is my hope that the analysis of the ethical subject may help us better understand Levinas's notion of ethics and its importance in his philosophy.

CHAPTER TWO

SENSIBILITY AND THE RESPONSIBLE SUBJECT

In the previous chapter we discussed Levinas's concept of the ethical, which is significantly different from what we usually encounter in the history of Western moral philosophy. Instead of centering around moral principles and values, the ethical in Levinas points to the calling into question of the *I* and its freedom by the Other (*Autrui*) in an asymmetrical relation, or the appeal of the face of the latter to the former in a call to transcendence. In its encounter with the Other, the *I* finds its 'calling' to take care of, and be responsible for, the Other. It means that the *I* would have to abandon its self-preoccupation and enjoyment as well as its tendency to neutralize the alterity of the Other. If this is what the ethical relation for Levinas consists in, one may ask what kind of human subjectivity that such a relation presupposes. By 'human subjectivity' I mean the basic constitution of the human being or, 'that which is thrown under,' which the Latin term *subjectum* literally means, as a condition for the possibility of such an ethical relation between the *I* and the Other to exist.

It is indeed a great challenge to speak about subjectivity after the antihumanist or poststructuralist critique of the concept. What or who is the subject? Descartes holds that the human being is essentially a thinking thing (*res cogitans*). This move, in Heidegger's reading, has turned the human being into a subject. That is to say, the metaphysical foundation for understanding entities is no longer to be found in a form or substance, as Aristotle understands it, but rather in the human subject. Roughly speaking, the human

subject is equated with self-consciousness, considered free and autonomous, to which all its representations belong. The post-structuralist critique of human subjectivity reveals that the human subject is far from being autonomous, self-determining, and self-sufficient as previously thought. She is rather the product of different forces beyond her immediate control, both outside her through some social and historical contingencies and inside her such as the Lacanian Unconscious. The human subject thus cannot be deemed as self-present or fully cognizant of the motives behind all her actions, an experience which Derrida describes as a “noncoincidence with self.”¹³¹ In Lacan’s thinking there exists no norm that may ground the idea of a ‘human subject.’ Levinas is aware of such rejection of the free and autonomous human being, which he calls “modern antihumanism” (*AE*, 203/*OB*, 127). The representatives of such antihumanism, we recall here Lacan in psychoanalysis, Althusser in political theory, Lévi-Strauss in anthropology, and Foucault in the genealogies of knowledge and power, share a presupposition that identifies humanism with the idea of the human being as first and foremost the author of her acts. Kantianism can easily be associated with this type of humanism. Likewise, Sartre who emphasizes freedom and spontaneity in his philosophy readily embraces this kind of humanism, which he sees as the core of existentialism. The proponents of the so-called modern antihumanism, however, claim that such a concept of the human being is already dead.

Levinas’s concept of human subjectivity can be seen as a response to this modern antihumanism. He challenges the tacit assumption of the movement that humanism is

¹³¹ Jacques Derrida, “‘Eating Well,’ or the Calculation of the Subject: An Interview with Jacques Derrida,” *Who Comes after the Subject*, eds. Eduardo Cadava et al. (London: Routledge, 1991), 103.

fundamentally a humanism of the first person singular subject with her free thought, act, and speech. Levinas walks on a fine line in speaking about human subjectivity and proposes the type of subjectivity that has a different structure than that of consciousness and freedom (*AE*, 46/*OB*, 25). Ironically, perhaps, his response remains a humanism, but it is a humanism of the other human being. In any case, insofar as we speak of human subjectivity as, in Kantian terms, the condition for the possibility of the ethical relation, as Levinas understands it, the discussion of human subjectivity also becomes that of ethical subjectivity.¹³² It suggests an intimate link between a person's subjectivity and her being ethical; the latter cannot be fully understood without taking the former into account and vice versa.¹³³ The analysis of human subjectivity as ethical is important here because it is, I believe, intimately linked to the issue of religion that this study seeks to explore in Levinas's philosophy. The ethical subject, in its very constitution, already bears the mark of transcendence *before* any actual encounter with the Other.¹³⁴

In this chapter I will explore the kind of human subjectivity that Levinas's concept of the ethical assumes. Here the analysis will yield an account of the constitution of ethical subjectivity and not just a general human subjectivity.¹³⁵ Given the complexity of this issue, a full account of the ethical subject will be given in the next few chapters. In

¹³² I suppose human subjectivity, generally speaking, has a much wider scope than ethical subjectivity. That is to say, on the one hand, the investigation of the former does not necessarily yield the latter, as there are other alternatives such as religious or even atheistic subjectivity. On the other hand, human subjectivity can be conceived as having an ethical structure within it insofar as the human subject is seen as originally bound to the Other from which it cannot escape. The view that the human subject has such an ethical subjectivity is very clear in Levinas's philosophy, as the subject is structured as 'for-the-other.'

¹³³ See David Ross Fryer, *The Intervention of the Other: Ethical Subjectivity in Levinas and Lacan* (New York: Other Press, 2004), 15-18.

¹³⁴ This 'before' does not suggest a chronological sequence, but rather an event that occurs beyond time, or as Levinas puts it, an-archically.

¹³⁵ This is why Levinas claims that ethics is first philosophy, and not simply a branch of philosophy.

this chapter I will focus on the ethical subject as a sensible being who feels so responsible for the Other that she becomes, in Levinas's strong claim, a hostage for the Other. How such an account of the human subject is linked to the issue of religion will be discussed in the next chapter. For this purpose I will mostly make use of Levinas's second major work *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence* (1974) in which human subjectivity is a major concern. I will begin with the discussion of Levinas's approach to human subjectivity by way of sensibility, instead of consciousness or intentionality. This approach leads to the claim that human subjectivity signifies through sensibility that is animated by the exposure to the Other. The following section will explore Levinas's argument that the human subject is a subjectivity that is responsible for the Other, to the point of substituting herself for the Other. The link between the exposure to the Other and temporality, as will be discussed in the next section, will reveal the election of the subject by the Good to be a responsible subject. While pointing out the link between ethics and religion in terms of human subjectivity, I will also raise several questions about this claim, including that which pertains to the argument that the subject is responsible for the Other to the degree that she becomes a hostage of the Other. Adequate attention to what Levinas is attempting to do, I believe, will help us considerably in giving a fair assessment of his argument.

2.1. Sensibility as the Basis for Human Subjectivity

What is a human subject? Levinas's concept of the ethical, as we saw in Chapter 1, actually provides us with a clue to answering this question. If the ethical concerns the questioning of my enjoyment and freedom by the Other, it must assume that I, as a subject, am 'questionable.' That is to say, I must have the capability for *sensing* and *feeling* the question and challenge that the Other poses me. Otherwise, such a conception of the ethical would not make sense. The *I* here is not a subject that seeks for a middle ground between two extremes in order to acquire virtue, nor that which attempts at universalizing its maxim for a justifiable ethical decision. Rather the *I* for Levinas is a subject that is capable of welcoming the questioning of the Other as well as responding to her appeal. In short, it is a *sensible* subject.¹³⁶ Thus, the ethical relation for Levinas is not mediated through reason, as it does not take place at the level of consciousness. Instead, it occurs at the level of sensibility; the Levinasian ethics, as Critchley puts it, "is *lived* in the sensibility of a corporeal obligation to the other."¹³⁷

We see in Levinas's conception of subjectivity a strong orientation toward a *living* subject rather than simply a *conscious* subject. In *Totality and Infinity* Levinas shows that we live a life of enjoyment, "living from... air, light, spectacles, work, ideas, sleep, etc." (*TeI*, 112/*TaI*, 110). Humans are conceived as beings of sensibility and enjoyment, and not simply those of consciousness or intentionality. This shift from the Husserlian

¹³⁶ It is important to note that the word 'sensible' in English may also mean 'acting with or exhibiting good sense' as in 'a sensible person.' This is clearly not what Levinas means, as he uses it in French. It should become clear that the term rather suggests being sensitive or responsive.

¹³⁷ Simon Critchley, "Prolegomena to Any Post-Deconstructive Subjectivity," in *Deconstructive Subjectivities*, eds. Simon Critchley and Peter Dews (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996), 30.

conception of the human subject suggests, I would argue, a more holistic approach.¹³⁸

Already in *Theory of Intuition* Levinas has indicated his dissatisfaction with Husserl's rational approach to intentionality that seems to equate 'to sense' (*avoir un sens*) with 'to represent' (*représenter*). One needs to take into account, he says, "an intention which is irreducible to a purely theoretical representation" (*TIPH*, 75/*TIHP*, 44-5). Such an intention is directed to a concrete life, a "life of action and feeling, will and aesthetic judgment, interest and indifference, etc." Our world, according to Levinas, is not only an object of theoretical contemplation, but also "a sensed or wanted world, a world of action, beauty, ugliness, and meanness" that relates to our affective life (*TIPH*, 75/*TIHP*, 45). In his essay "The Ruin of Representation" (1959), Levinas speaks of "the situation of the subject" with "unsuspected horizons" that tacitly guide every presence and intentional movement. He holds that there is always the exceeding of the intention in the act of intending itself. Intentionality carries within itself "the innumerable horizons of its implications and thinks of infinitely more 'things' than of the object upon which it is fixed. To affirm intentionality is to perceive thought as tied to the implicit, into which it does not accidentally fall, but in which it maintains itself by essence" (*EDE*, 181/*DEH*, 116). The unsuspected horizons play a transcendental role in that they are the presupposed conditions of all reflective life: "The notion of access to being,

¹³⁸ This is why I find Critchley's use of the term 'reduced' in describing the shift somewhat problematic: "The self-conscious, autonomous subject of intentionality is reduced to a living subject that is subject to the conditions of its existence." The standard meaning of the word 'reduction' suggests a diminishment, which is clearly not the case here. On the contrary, the reverse shift from a living subject to a conscious subject would certainly be conceived as a reduction in the above sense of the word. Perhaps Critchley means in the statement a reduction from a subject that already engages in the philosophical activity of reflection through intuition to a completely 'pre-reflective' subject. Even if this is the case, I still do not see how it fits with the Husserlian concept of reduction. See Critchley, "Prolegomena," 30.

representation, and thematization of a said presuppose sensibility” (*AE*, 110/*OB*, 68). Sensibility and sensible qualities for Levinas structurally belong to the very horizons of the implicit, of the non-represented, of the incarnate existence. They are the very situation in which “the subject already places itself in order to accomplish a categorial intention” (*EDE*, 183/*DEH*, 117). In this sense the subject is not only constituting the object of intentionality, but also is itself constituted by these horizons in all its movements. It is no longer a pure subject, just as the object itself ceases to be a pure object. In Levinas’s own words, the phenomenon is “at once what is revealed and what reveals, being and access to being” (*EDE*, 185/*DEH*, 118).¹³⁹

Levinas’s subject is thus not simply a subject of representation, but rather that which is shaped by innumerable unsuspected horizons that are animated by sensibility. It is a “concrete being” with flesh and blood, a being that lives “a concrete life” (*TIPH*, 214/*TIHP*, 150).¹⁴⁰ Concreteness here refers to the experience of immediacy (*TeI*, 44/*TaI*, 51-2), which allows the exterior to express itself fully without the intervention of the ego for the production of meaning. The relation of the subject with the exterior thus remains pure with no reliance on the work of constitution or representation. Such immediacy later

¹³⁹ This claim is clearly an initial insight for Levinas, as he will later speak more about the beyond being. But, as we shall see, it opens up the way for Levinas to argue that the Infinite is always “more” and “otherwise” than what the *I* thinks, that the cogito of transcendental consciousness is not the ultimate source of all significations.

¹⁴⁰ Levinas’s careful attention to the concrete could be seen, at least partially, as the result of Jean Wahl’s influence. In his essay on Wahl, he writes that Wahl’s philosophy gives emphasis to the “faculty of feeling [*le sentir*] and to feelings [*le sentiment*]” as “the source of a new spiritual life” (“Jean Wahl and Feeling,” *Proper Names*, 111). Wahl himself wrote a book that bears the orientation, *Vers le Concret: Études d’Histoire de la Philosophie Contemporaine* (Paris: J. Vrin, 1932) in which he analysed certain aspects of contemporary empiricism in the works of William James, Alfred North Whitehead, and Gabriel Marcel. These thinkers, according to Wahl, have some philosophical interests in common: the insistence upon the immediate, the given, the concrete, intuition, philosophy as description, etc. They tend to give prominence to the categories of feeling than those of consciousness. These elements are certainly part of Wahl’s own interests, and Levinas seems to have inherited them as well.

makes possible the disclosure of the face of the Other to be rendered as absolute. As Levinas later puts it in *Otherwise than Being*, “The immediacy of the sensible which is not reducible to the gnoseological role assumed by sensation is the exposure to wounding in enjoyment, which enables the wound to reach the subjectivity of the subject complacent in itself and positing itself for itself” (*AE*, 104/*OB*, 64). For Levinas, an ethical *Sinngebung* becomes possible only in a phenomenology in which representation finds itself placed within horizons that are beyond its intention, which it cannot get rid of, either. The meaning bestowed in this regard would be “respectful of the Other” (*EDE*, 188/*DEH*, 121). Permeating and constituting the subject, sensibility serves as the basis and prerequisite for an engagement in the ethical relation.¹⁴¹ In an otherwise unintelligible statement, Levinas claims that only a subject “that eats can be for-the-other, or can signify” (*AE*, 119/*OB*, 74). That is to say, for the kind of ethical relation that Levinas conceives to work out, a sensible subject, that can feel hungry or thirsty, is required. Such ethics is possible only for beings that can enjoy the world and its elements, for it is their very capability for “sinking into the depths of the element, into its incomparable freshness” that enables them to be interrogated and put into question by the Other (*AE*, 105/*OB*, 64).

Moreover, the appeal to the signification of sensibility later allows Levinas to speak of the passivity and interiority of the subject from which the bestowal of meaning can also occur. Such meaning arises from the “pre-original anteriority” of the subject,

¹⁴¹ Here sensuous experience is given a privilege because “within it that ambiguity of constitution, whereby the noema conditions and shelters the noesis that constitutes it, is played out.” See “The Ruin of Representation,” *EDE*, 186/*DEH*, 119.

which is *beneath* consciousness, and therefore cannot be captured in representation: “Couldn’t a sense be found... to liberty itself, going from the very passivity of the human where its inconsistency seems to appear?... It would mean a new concept of passivity, a passivity more radical than that of effect in a causal series, *beneath* consciousness and knowledge, but also *beneath* the inertia of things reposing on itself as substances and opposing their nature, material cause, to all activity.”¹⁴² For Levinas, this is precisely what interiority means, namely, that in being the beginning “is preceded but that which precedes is not presented to the free gaze that would assume it, does not make itself present or representation.”¹⁴³ In other words, interiority cannot solely be a function of the cogito. Rather, it must include the other horizons that constitute the subject as well, all of which, for Levinas, signify as sensibility. Such sensible signification cannot be simply interpreted in terms of ‘consciousness of’ because it never accounts for the sensible, no matter “how little intellectualist one means it” (*AE*, 109/*OB*, 67).

In an important way Levinas’s characterization of human subjectivity is an attempt to think *otherwise than being*, or as he puts it at the beginning of his book that bears that title, “to conceive of the possibility of a break out of essence” (*AE*, 21/*OB*, 8). Irreducible to consciousness and thematization, such a subjectivity or humanity refuses the encroachment by essence; it is a “unicity withdrawing from essence” (*AE*, 21/*OB*, 8). Beyond freedom and representation, it signifies “a null-site” (*non-lieu*), without the identity of the ego coinciding with itself. It has immeasurably multi-level horizons, one

¹⁴² Emmanuel Levinas, “Humanism and An-Archy,” *Humanism of the Other*, hereafter *HO*, trans. Nidra Poller (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2006), 50; “Humanisme et An-Archie,” *Humanisme de L’Autre Homme*, hereafter *HAH* (Fata Morgana, 1972), 73.

¹⁴³ Levinas, “Humanism and An-Archy,” *HAH*, 75/*HO*, 51.

of which is representation. Ontological thinking thus cannot capture what human subjectivity is all about: “To say that in sensibility this structure [of signification] is secondary, and that sensibility qua vulnerability nonetheless signifies, is to recognize a sense somewhere else than in ontology” (*AE*, 104/*OB*, 64). Instead, by designating the human subject as primarily sensible, Levinas allows the possibility of the Other touching upon the different horizons of the subject. Sensibility that determines the subjectivity of the human subject signifies the breakup of essence, and this breakup is, in Levinas’s view, is ethics (*AE*, 30/*OB*, 14).

I find Levinas’s decision to ground the human subject in sensibility very appealing, as it speaks to our own experience in the intersubjective relation. We slowly come to the realization about the limitations of the words we use in conversation, that it takes more than *logos* to be deeply engaged in such a relation. The very presence of the other person in front of us may speak more and louder than any word she could utter. It can touch us deeply precisely because we are sensible subjects. This is what ethics is all about for Levinas.

What does it mean then for the human being to be a sensible subject? It means, first of all, that the human subject is receptive, capable of being touched and moved. It is structurally predisposed to welcoming anything from the outside and to being affected by it. There is no ‘firewall’ that can prevent the traffic from coming into the subject. The subject thus remains exposed to anything that comes its way. This is also to suggest that the subject is not only touched by itself, but also by the world. Thus, the subject cannot simply engage in a pure auto-affection. Such affectivity of the subject, Rudolf Bernet

suggests, is the privileged place for the experience of the self because “I am in the most immediate way related to myself in the sensual feeling of myself...”¹⁴⁴ The subject is a self precisely because it is capable of feeling itself being affected by the world. Second, the receptivity and affectability of the subject implies that the subject has no control over what touches and moves it. This is what vulnerability means, that the subject, as a sensible being, cannot pick and choose the kind of things it wants to be affected by. In fact, as Alphonso Lingis points out, sensibility eventually suggests not only opening to, and contact with, alterity, but also “susceptibility to being appealed to and to being ordered.”¹⁴⁵ It calls for subjection to that with which one is in contact. This feature refers to what has been called ‘the reversal of intentionality,’ namely, that the bestowal of meaning comes not from the inside or the subject, but rather from the outside. There is always uncertainty for the subject about what will come its way, as it opens itself up to the immediate concreteness of existence. This unknownability also means that the subject is exposed to an infinite future that is beyond its grasp: “This ‘not knowing,’ this fundamental disorder, is the essential. 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” (*TO*, 82/*TA*, 89). For Levinas, growing old, as what it is to come, is also an experience of vulnerability, as it is fundamentally tied to sensibility. In a paradoxical manner the subject’s exposure to the unknown precisely becomes its source of strength in its

¹⁴⁴ Rudolf Bernet, “The Other in me,” *Deconstructive Subjectivities*, 170, 180.

¹⁴⁵ Alphonso Lingis, *Deathbound Subjectivity* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1989), 142-43.

relationality: “Vulnerability is the power to say “*adieu*” to this world. One says “*adieu*” to it in growing old. Time endures in the form of this *adieu* and this *à-Dieu* [unto God].”¹⁴⁶

For Levinas, to speak of the subject as having no control over its own destiny is precisely to render it as transcendence. The subject is not in possession of itself in its relation with something other than itself. The experience of emotion, for example, disrupts the equilibrium of the subject, throwing it into the realm outside itself: “Emotion puts into question not the existence, but the subjectivity of the subject; it prevents the subject from gathering itself up, reacting, being someone. What is positive in the subject sinks away into a nowhere. Emotion is a way of holding on while losing one’s base” (*EE*, 121/68). What is fundamentally shaken here is the subjectivity of the subject, as it is being dispossessed of itself. The subject as transcendence, as Drabinski puts it, *is* its being outside itself.¹⁴⁷ Dispossession, or unfreedom, definitely characterizes Levinas’s conception of human subjectivity, which we are about to see more deeply below. In his notion of expiation or substitution for another, we will also find the deeper meaning of sensibility as the subjectivity of the subject.

2.2. The Responsible Subject: the Self as the Hostage of the Other

¹⁴⁶ Levinas, “God and Philosophy,” *DVI*, 134/*GCM*, 83.

¹⁴⁷ John E. Drabinski, *Sensibility and Singularity: The Problem of Phenomenology in Levinas* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2001), 61.

The signification of sensibility, which Levinas brings out from within the Husserlian phenomenology, is the key to understanding his claim for a much richer meaning-bestowal for the subject. In fact, for Levinas it serves as the basis for the ethical relation. As a sensible being, the subject clearly experiences more than what is yielded from the intentional grasp of consciousness. Meaning (*sens*) cannot be restricted to representation because there are other ways in which it may be given, particularly by way of sensibility. This is because a sensible subject is eager to be in touch with the general Other; it is open to the Other. While representation involves the freedom of the subject with consciousness constituting the object, sensibility exposes the subject to vulnerability by unseating it from its base in its relation with the Other. In its relationality the subject realizes its loss of complete freedom to constitute the object, as it finds itself already affected by the Other. This is what Levinas calls in *Otherwise than Being* “the breakup of identity” (*AE*, 30/*OB*, 14), as the subject turns from its function in terms of being and non-being, into signification. The failure of the subject to register its own constitution suggests a surpassing of the intending power of consciousness: “In the approach to others, where others are from the start under my responsibility, “something” has overflowed my freely made decisions, has slipped into me *unbeknownst to me*, alienating my identity.”¹⁴⁸ Finding out what this “something” is has become for Levinas part of his exposition of human subjectivity.

¹⁴⁸ Levinas, “Without Identity” (*Sans Identité*), *HAH*, 91/*HO*, 62. Here Levinas suggests that whatever has slipped into the subjectivity of the subject and surpassed its constituting freedom, *alienates* the identity of the subject. But in just a few years he seems to have changed his mind about this claim. In *Otherwise than Being*, he makes just the opposite claim that the structure of subjectivity as the Other-in-the-Same is not an alienation at all. In this structure, he argues, I am “inspired” by the Other (*AE*, 181/114-15). See the discussion about alienation below.

2.2.1. Subjectivity as the Other-in-the-Same

The general claim that the subject is open to the Other, in Levinas's view, can take on different meanings. It may suggest the the openness of the intentional consciousness to the presence of objects that are to be constituted, or the readiness of the subject to be influenced and even affected by the Other. A new and more radical meaning of the opening of the subject to the Other reveals the kind of subjectivity that is proper to the ethical relation. Using corporeal images Levinas describes how the subject is exposed to the Other: "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."¹⁴⁹ Here the openness of the subject to the Other is not merely the nakedness of the skin that offers itself to contact. Rather, it presents itself in the form of wound that continues to disturb and agitate the subject. This kind of opening, according to Levinas, cannot be seen merely as "simple exposure to the affection of causes" because the Other by whom the subject suffers is not a natural 'stimulus' or cause that can be thematized. It rather turns out to be "the aptitude... for 'being beaten'... 'being slapped'."¹⁵⁰ Indeed, sensibility already carries within itself the possibility of being attacked and wounded, rendering the subject completely defenseless "like a city declared open to the

¹⁴⁹ Levinas, "Without Identity," *HAH*, 92/ *HO*, 63; see *AE*, 63/*OB*, 49.

¹⁵⁰ Levinas, "Without Identity," *HAH*, 93/ *HO*, 63.

approaching enemy”¹⁵¹ But the wound occurs in the subject at a much deeper level than that of bare skin, to the effect that it cannot be recovered by the act of representation. In fact, as we shall see, it happens without the prior conscious consent of the subject. The opening to the Other thus not only causes the loss of freedom on the part of the subject, but also creates a wound that the subject always carries beyond its knowledge. This wound occurs because of the Other, or more precisely, *for the Other*.

Levinas thus first finds human subjectivity to be structured as the-Other-in-the-Same [*l'autre dans le Même*] (AE, 46/OB, 25). This structure is possible precisely thanks to sensibility. Sensibility, he says, is “maternity, gestation of the other in the same” (AE, 114/OB, 75). The subject is bearing the Other within it, so to speak. But soon the structure of the subjectivity becomes one-for-the-Other: the subject not only bears the Other within itself; it is *for the Other*. Thus when the subject opens itself to the Other, it is giving itself to the Other. This structure of one-for-the-other that characterizes the human psyche, according to Levinas, is “the passivity of being-for-another, which is possible only in the form of giving the very bread I eat. But for this one has to first enjoy one’s bread, not in order to have the merit of giving it, but in order to give it with one’s heart, to give oneself in giving it. Enjoyment is an ineluctable moment of sensibility” (AE, 116/OB, 72). The exposure to the Other animates sensibility, namely, our perception, hunger, sensation, etc. (cf. AE, 114/OB, 71; AE, 113/OB, 70). In fact, the *I* is already exposed to the Other even before it is tied to a body:

Sensibility – the proximity, immediacy, and restlessness which signify in it – is not constituted out of some apperception putting consciousness into relationship with a body.

¹⁵¹ Levinas, “Without Identity,” *HAH*, 92/ *HO*, 63.

Incarnation is not a transcendental operation of a subject that is situated in the midst of the world it represents to itself; the sensible experience of the body is already and from the start incarnate. The sensible – maternity, vulnerability, apprehension – binds the node of incarnation into a plot larger than the apperception of self. In this plot I am bound to others before being tied to my body” (*AE*, 123/*OB*, 76).

For Levinas, incarnation is the way in which the-one-for-the-other signifies, that is, through “nourishing, clothing, lodging.. maternal relations”(AE, 124/*OB*, 77). Therefore, the subject is called incarnate not as a result of a materialization, but rather because “subjectivity is sensibility... and because matter is the very locus of the for-the-other, the way that signification signifies before showing itself as a said in the system of synchronism... that a subject is of flesh and blood, a human being that is hungry and eats, entrails in a skin, and thus capable of giving the bread out of his mouth, or giving his skin” (*AE*, 124/*OB*, 77).

Thus the subjectivity of the subject is, for Levinas, fundamentally animated by and for the Other. It is what Levinas calls ‘proximity,’ ‘approach’, or ‘neighborhood’ [*voisinage*] (*AE*, 129/*OB*, 81) because it has a relentless drive, so to speak, to be in touch with the Other. Proximity, Levinas says, “is not a state, a repose, but, a restlessness, null site, outside of the place of rest... 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” (*AE*, 131/*OB*, 82). It is a passivity that is “more passive than all passivity” (*AE*, 30/*OB*, 14), which allows the subject to be completely affected by the Other. Animated by an outward movement, proximity signifies as responsibility for the Other. For Levinas, the primary and

fundamental structure of human subjectivity is this very responsibility (*EI*, 91/95). This structure makes possible the ethical relation of the subject with the Other, not only to be questioned by the Other, but also to exercise responsibility for the Other: “Before the Other (*Autrui*), the I is infinitely responsible. The Other is the poor and destitute one, and nothing which concerns this stranger can leave the I indifferent.”¹⁵² The responsibility for the Other characterizes the human person as such without placing her in a particular social category. It is “the originary place of identification,” the principle of individuation.¹⁵³ Every human person is unique, and her uniqueness lies in “the very fact of bearing the fault of another” (*AE*, 177/*OB*, 112). The identification of the subjectivity of the subject as responsibility for the Other allows each individual to say “I” (*moi*) without appealing to any genus to which she is said to belong.

The responsibility for the Other is thus for Levinas not simply an attribute of subjectivity, but rather its very structure that defines it as such. To be an *I*, in Levinas’s view, means “not being able to escape responsibility.”¹⁵⁴ The question here is not whether the subject is to assume or to escape responsibility because there is no such a choice. Rather, it is about the subjectivity of the subject, “its non-indifference to others in limitless responsibility, limitless because it is not measured by commitments going back to assumption and refusal of responsibilities. It is a question of the responsibility for others, where the movement of recurrence is diverted to others in the ‘moved entrails’ of the subjectivity it tears apart.”¹⁵⁵ The self may try to run away from this responsibility, but

¹⁵² Levinas, “Transcendence and Height,” *BPW*, 18.

¹⁵³ Levinas, “The Vocation of the Other,” *IRB*, 110.

¹⁵⁴ Levinas, “Transcendence and Height,” *BPW*, 17.

¹⁵⁵ Levinas, “Without Identity,” *HAH*, 98/*HO*, 67.

it undergoes an incessant recurrence to itself, falling back on itself, as it attempts to do so. This simply means that the subject cannot escape the responsibility. Such a sense of responsibility for the Other lies much deeper in the subjectivity than intentionality. For Levinas, the movement of recurrence itself is “but an ‘undoing’ [*surenchère*] of unity” (AE, 170/OB, 108), which renders intentional consciousness powerless and helpless. Beyond the reach of consciousness, human subjectivity is thus “responsibility before being intentionality.”¹⁵⁶ In intentionality the subjectivity plays itself out as the Ego (*le Moi*) that constitutes the object in representation. The emphasis is thus placed upon the act of consciousness that reaches out to the world in order to return to itself. In contrast, in the subjectivity identified as responsibility for the Other, the subject displays its utmost passivity in being affected and even wounded by the Other. Such level of vulnerability is “sincerity,” as the subject discovers itself totally defenseless: “Sincerity exposes – unto wounding.”¹⁵⁷ The subject no longer takes charge of the relation with alterity, but rather finds itself subjected to whatever it makes contact with. Here the subjectivity is not the Ego (*le Moi*), but rather me (*moi*).¹⁵⁸ As Bernhard Waldenfels points out, the subject does not begin as “I,” much less as “the” or “an I.”¹⁵⁹ The assertion “here I am” (*me voici*) is pertinent in this context because it expresses the very subjectivity of the subject, its readiness and willingness to give and to do something for the Other, or to be responsible for the Other. As Levinas puts in in his essay, “The Vocation of the Other,” it is such

¹⁵⁶ Levinas, “Humanism and An-Archy,” *HAH*, 75/HO, 52.

¹⁵⁷ Levinas, “Without Identity,” *HAH*, 94/HO, 64.

¹⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, *HAH*, 99/HO, 68.

¹⁵⁹ Bernhard Waldenfels, “Response and Responsibility in Levinas,” *Ethics as First Philosophy: The Significance of Emmanuel Levinas for Philosophy, Literature, and Religion*, ed. Adriaan T. Peperzak (New York and London: Routledge, 1995), 45.

availability that defines true subjectivity: “The true ego is the ego which discovers itself precisely in the urgency of responding to a call.”¹⁶⁰

2.2.2. Subjectivity as Substitution for the Other

For Levinas, to be responsible for the Other is precisely what it means to be concretely challenged and put into question by the face of the Other. The face calls me out of my concern for being to the exterior in the form of responsibility. My responsibility is unique in the sense that only I can respond to the demand of the face. But at the same time, I am also treating the Other as unique in my very responsibility:

Someone concerns me; the other concerns me. From the interestedness which is the rapport to being, as concern for being, there is passage to the human, the discovery of the death of the other, of his defenselessness and of the nudity of his face, and in turn the response to this discovery: goodness. This discovery of his death, or this hearing of his call, I term the face of the other. I also term this “responsibility.” Responsibility is the first language... Responsibility is the love without concupiscence of which Pascal spoke: to respond to the other, to approach the other as unique, isolated from all multiplicity and outside collective necessities. To approach someone as unique to the world is to love him.¹⁶¹

In the description of the subjectivity of the subject as responsibility for the Other, the character of the Levinasian intersubjective relation is also emphasized, namely, as a *non-symmetrical* relation. As we saw in Chapter One, the relation between the *I* and the Other is not an egalitarian one, as that expressed in the Golden Rule. Rather, it tilts toward the Other in such a way that there is no possibility or expectation that the Other will return the favor. Here the non-symmetrical relation expresses itself in the *I*’s feeling

¹⁶⁰ Levinas, “The Vocation of the Other,” *IRB*, 112.

¹⁶¹ *Ibid.*, *IRB*, 108.

more responsible than others for the Other. The *I* of Levinas shares the sentiment of Alyosha Karamazov in Dostoyevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov* who cries out, "We are all guilty of all and for all men before all, and I more than the others."¹⁶² Even though everyone is guilty, still the *I* is more guilty than the others. This is because the *I* or the subject is responsible not only for what it does but also for the very responsibility of the Other: "Since the Other looks at me, I am responsible for him, without even having *taken* on responsibilities in his regard; his responsibility is *incumbent on me*. It is responsibility that goes beyond what I do... Responsibility is initially a *for the Other*. This means that I am responsible for his very responsibility" (*EI*, 92/96). In other words, the subject assumes the guilt of the Other as well, even though it may have nothing to do with the crime of which the Other is guilty. The self is indeed "a *sub-jectum*; it is under the weight of the universe, responsible for everything" (*AE*, 183/*OB*, 116). It is "accused of what the others do or suffer, or responsible for what they do or suffer" (*AE*, 177/*OB*, 112). In the end, as Levinas puts it, the subject substitutes for the Other, for her suffering and guilt.

Substitution for the Other, therefore, originally defines human subjectivity in Levinas's philosophy. From the moment of sensibility, he says, the subject is "*for the other*: substitution, responsibility, expiation."¹⁶³ The subject cannot but take the place of the Other, precisely because it assumes the very kind of subjectivity. The human psyche, Levinas says, is "the form of a peculiar dephasing, a loosening up or unclamping of identity; the same prevented from coinciding with itself, at odds, torn up from its rest,

¹⁶² Fyodor Dostoyevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, trans. Constance Garnett (New York: New American Library, 1957), 264, quoted by Levinas in *EI*, 95/98.

¹⁶³ Levinas, "Without Identity," *HAH*, 94/*HO*, 64.

between sleep and insomnia, panting, shivering” (*AE*, 111/*OB*, 68). It finds itself consumed by the Other, ready to suffer and sacrifice itself for the Other. Put in another way, substituting myself for the Other is my way of being responsible, and there is no other way. Again, it is to be done without any expectation that the Other would do the same to me. It requires “an ingratitude of the Other” because gratitude would mean “the return of the movement to its origin.”¹⁶⁴ I can thus only concern myself with my responsibility and substitution for the Other without any worry about whether or not the Other would ever return the favor: “What the other can do for me is his affair. If it were mine, then substitution would only be a moment of the exchange and would lose its gratuity. My affair is my responsibility, and my substitution is inscribed in my I [*moi*], inscribed as *I* [*moi*]. The other can substitute himself for whomever he will, except me.”¹⁶⁵ Moreover, as substitute, I cannot slip away nor be replaced (cf. *AE*, 95/*OB*, 56; *AE*, 181/*OB*, 114). That is to say, I am the only one who can respond to the Other. This is because I am “unique and chosen; the election is in the subjection” to the Other (*AE*, 201/*OB*, 127; *DVI*, 117/71). Since I am elected prior to my freedom, I cannot refuse; the substitution is thus “incumbent on me exclusively” (*EI*, 97/100-01).

The allusion above to the inscription of my substitution as *I* (*moi*) is very important here because it points to the very structure of subjectivity as “the Other in the Same” [*l'autre dans le Même*] (*AE*, 46/*OB*, 25). It suggests the initial structure of subjectivity as hostage for the Other, which accounts for the subject’s response to the

¹⁶⁴ Emmanuel Levinas, “The Trace of the Other,” *Deconstruction in Context: Literature and Philosophy*, hereafter *DC*, ed. Mark C. Taylor (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1986), 349/*EDE*, 267. See also Vanghélis Bitsoris’s notes on Jacques Derrida, *Adieu to Emmanuel Levinas*, trans. Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), 129n.12.

¹⁶⁵ Levinas, “God and Philosophy,” *DVI*, 148/*GCM*, 93.

Other “the point of expiating for others” (*EI*, 96/100). This structure, according to Levinas, is different from that of consciousness because it is already in place before the Other appears to consciousness in a perception of a corporeal presence. It is rather defined by “the restlessness of the Same disturbed by the Other” (*AE*, 46/*OB*, 25), which lies deep beyond the reach of consciousness. Put in place “prior to consciousness and choice,” the structure of the Other in the Same involves, as we have seen, a passivity that is more passive than any passivity because it is empty of any free initiative or act of consciousness. Later Levinas would argue that this passivity is the very being “of the *beyond being* of the Good,” and not simply its effect.¹⁶⁶ The fact that the Good has played itself out before the entrance of consciousness rules out for oneself “the very possibility of choice, of coexistence in the present.”¹⁶⁷ For this reason Levinas argues that the absolute responsibility for the Other is not servitude because it does not take place at the level of the “determinism-servitude alternative,” but rather beneath it. The contention that the subject is in servitude assumes that it can still break free from such condition. But the alternative is not available for the subject since the latter is completely ‘seized’ by the Good. Thus, the subject can only find the Other lying deeply and irrecoverably in itself, causing disturbance and restlessness in the subject. We will discuss more about the Good later in this chapter.

Here we must realize what Levinas is attempting to do with this account. As far as I understand it, he is trying to find the ‘ground’ in human subjectivity for our actions ‘for-the-other,’ from opening the door for our neighbor to sacrificing ourselves for our friend.

¹⁶⁶ Levinas, “Humanism and An-Archy,” *HAH*, 78/*HO*, 54.

¹⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, *HAH*, 77/*HO*, 53.

Put in terms more faithful to Levinas's own usage, he is performing a phenomenological reduction of the *Said* (*le Dit*) to the *Saying* (*le Dire*), "the going back to the hither side of being, to the hither side of the said" (*AE*, 76/*OB*, 45). This reduction does not reveal fundamental structures of consciousness or the sovereignty of the transcendental Ego, as we find in Husserl. Instead, it leads us back to something pre-original, pre-phenomenological, prior to consciousness and freedom. Since the responsibility for the Other is "a saying prior to anything said" (*AE*, 75/*OB*, 43), the reduction to Saying brings us to an analysis of the 'prehistory' of the subject prior to the birth of consciousness.¹⁶⁸ Levinas thus asks what is to be presupposed in human subjectivity for all human acts of solidarity to be possible. His answer is that the human subject is a hostage for the Other, to the point of substituting for others. He says:

It is through the condition of being hostage that there can be in the world pity, compassion, pardon and proximity – even the little there is, even the simple 'After you, sir.' The unconditionality of being hostage is not the limit case of solidarity, but *the condition for all solidarity*. Every accusation and persecution, as all interpersonal praise, recompense, and punishment presuppose the subjectivity of the ego, substitution, the possibility of putting oneself in the place of the other, which refers to the transference from the 'by the other' into a 'for the other,' and in persecution from the outrage inflicted by the other to the expiation for his fault by me. But the absolute accusation, prior to freedom, constitutes freedom which, allied to the Good, situates beyond and outside of all essence (*AE*, 186-7/*OB*, 117-8, italics mine).

I wonder whether it is necessary to take such an extreme view of human subjectivity in order to explain all kinds of human solidarity. Are persecution and being hostage of the Other necessarily part of them? Do we feel persecuted when we show solidarity with others? If not, why does Levinas need to put forth a rather masochistic account of a

¹⁶⁸ We will discuss the distinction between the Said and Saying more extensively in Chapter Four.

human subject? Let us bear these questions in mind, as we explore further Levinas's view of human subjectivity.

By arguing that the responsibility for the Other is a *structure* in human subjectivity, Levinas wants to keep it distinct from mere altruism or love (cf. *AE*, 177/*OB*, 111-2). Such responsibility does not arise from intentionality or even human freedom. I never take the initiative to be responsible for the Other, but only find myself to be. The sense of responsibility cannot be attributed to some benevolent instinct, either. This is why Levinas will argue, as we will see later, that the structure of the Other-in-the-Same in human subjectivity is linked to the immemorial past, which consciousness can never recover. Since it is a structure in my subjectivity, I am left with no choice but to be responsible for the Other.

Levinas's characterization of the subjectivity of the subject as responsibility and substitution for the Other can be seen as his response to the post-structuralist critique of human subjectivity. The critique aims at the collapse of such subjectivity in that it becomes indefinable given the various unknown factors that condition and shape the human identity, as has been exposed by social sciences. Levinas comes along with "a defense of subjectivity" (*TeI*, 11/*TaI*, 26) and gives a kind of 'so what?' response to the critique, arguing that one does not need such knowledge in order to be responsible for the Other:

One can, to be sure, invoke, against the signifyingness of the extreme situations to which the concepts formed on the basis of human reality lead, the conditioned nature of the human. The suspicions engendered by psychoanalysis, sociology and politics weigh on human identity such that we never know to whom we are speaking and what we are dealing with when we build our ideas on the basis of human facts. But we do not need this knowledge in the relationship in which the other is a neighbor, and in which before

being an individuation of the genus *human being*, a *rational animal*, a *free will*, or any essence whatever; the human being is the persecuted one for whom I am responsible, to the point of being a hostage for him, and in which my responsibility, instead of disclosing me in my “essence” as a transcendental ego, divests me without stop of all that can be common to me and another human being, who would thus be capable of replacing me (AE, 98/OB, 58-9).

In a similar manner Levinas’s account of subjectivity as deep-seated responsibility for the Other can be seen as a criticism of Heidegger’s version, which is, in the former’s view, fundamentally lacking. For Levinas, Heidegger’s subject “has nothing interior to express... Our own interrogation is situated there: is subjectivity not sincerity – putting oneself out in the open, which is not a theoretical operation but an offering of self – *before* standing in the ‘opening of the truth,’ before ‘unveiling being.’”¹⁶⁹ It lacks an interior movement toward the exterior and seems content with the sheer waiting for the truth to be disclosed. In Levinas’s view, a subject is only a subject when it is capable of expressing its very structure to the outside. Without such a movement, an intersubjective relation would only mean a return to oneself, or egoism.

One should recall, however, that this movement to the exterior only partially defines Levinas’s ethics. Before the subject makes such a move, it needs first to be touched and affected by the Other. In other words, the presence of the Other is the condition for the possibility of the subject’s outward movement to leave its self-enclosure, namely, to be responsible for the Other. The Other addresses me, solicits me in such a way that I feel persecuted and taken hostage by the Other. Thus, the prime concern of Levinas’s ethics is not how I affect the Other in my encounter with her, which usually

¹⁶⁹ Levinas, “Without Identity,” *HAH*, 109-10n.4/*HO*, 75n.4.

leads to the injunction to let the Other be other. Rather, it primarily deals with the way in which the Other affects me such that I feel responsible for her. With the Other in me, I am no longer alone, attending to my own concerns. The Other forces me, as Rudi Visker puts it, “to come out of my shell (for he or she smokes me out of every hiding place, every *refugium*), to step outside, to bare myself and stand in a nakedness which... is still more naked than that of my bare skin.”¹⁷⁰

It is worth noting here Robert Bernasconi’s concern over the two apparently different portraits of both the *I* and the Other in *Totality and Infinity* and in *Otherwise than Being*. In the earlier book, according to Bernasconi, the *I* is described as an oppressor with “the face of the Other who appears to me in his or her destitution and hunger,” whereas the Other is portrayed as ‘the primordial phenomenon of gentleness.’¹⁷¹ In his later work, by contrast, it is the Other who persecutes me, hence the reversal of role. The Other who earlier commands me not to kill, now “also threatens me with violence.” I disagree with Bernasconi’s suggestion that these radically different portraits of the *I* and the Other may not represent two elaborations of a single scheme. I believe we can still find their unity by noting that the *I*, particularly in *Totality and Infinity*, does not really persecute the Other, at least not as much as the Other does to me, as Levinas describes in his later book. The *I* may turn away from the face of the Other in her destitution because of its egoistic nature. But this turning away does not suggest a direct persecution of the Other by the *I*. This is perhaps the reason why Levinas in *Totality and*

¹⁷⁰ Rudi Visker, “The Price of Being Dispossessed: Levinas’s God and Freud’s Trauma,” *The Face of the Other and the Trace of God*, 248.

¹⁷¹ *TI*, 219/200; 161/150. Robert Bernasconi, “‘Only the Persecuted...’: Language of the Oppressor, Language of the Oppressed,” *Ethics as First Philosophy*, 77.

Infinity does not use the term ‘persecution’ or describe the *I* explicitly as an oppressor, even though one might draw such a conclusion. In *Otherwise than Being*, however, he uses the term to describe the agony of having the structure of subjectivity as the Other-in-the-Same. Persecution means that the Other is really bothering me, and that I cannot escape. This is because the persecution comes from within and thus evasion becomes impossible. The reduction of the otherness of the Other by the *I*, in my opinion, cannot be properly called ‘persecution.’ It may be a form of violence, but not of persecution.

In any case, the ways in which the Other affects me – through persecution, substitution, and responsibility – have invariably created a situation in which I am no longer myself; I am completely for the Other. What I do now is basically responding to the summons and demand of the Other. Another term that Levinas uses to describe this situation is *obsession*, that is, I am completely obsessed by the Other. To be obsessed by anything means to lose control over that thing and whatever it does. This is what happens to the subject, according to Levinas: consciousness is incapable of putting the Other under control by thematizing or representing it. Here the Other is “the thorn in the flesh of reason” (*AE*, 133/*OB*, 84). Much worse is the inability of the subject to reverse the course of obsession: it is irreversible, which is “the universal subjectness of the subject” (*AE*, 134/*OB*, 84). This is because, as Levinas repeatedly argues, “the knot of subjectivity consists in going to the other without concerning oneself with his movement toward me” (*AE*, 134/*OB*, 84).

With this description of human subjectivity, one may ask whether I am not experiencing alienation in the strongest sense. If human subjectivity is understood as the-

Other-in-the-Same, is the subject still herself? In his essay “Without Identity” (1970), as we saw above, Levinas argues that the ‘something’ which surpasses the freedom of the subject alienates the very identity of the subject.¹⁷² He even suggests that it is more than the experience of alienation, as the structure of the-Other-in-the-Same in human subjectivity is to be understood in the most radical sense: “Is it certain that Rimbaud’s ‘I is another’ means only alteration, alienation, betrayal of self, strangeness of self, and servitude to that stranger? Is it certain that the most humble experience of the one who *puts himself in the other’s place*, that is, accuses himself of the other’s illness or pain, is not already animated by the most eminent sense in which ‘I is another’?”¹⁷³ But in *Otherwise than Being* that was published four years later, he claims that such a structure of human subjectivity does not mean that I am alienated from myself. My substitution for the Other, he says, is not an alienation because the Other in the Same is “my substitution for the Other through responsibility, for which, I am summoned as someone irreplaceable. I exist through the Other and for the Other, but without this being alienation: I am inspired. This inspiration is the psyche. The psyche can signify this alterity in the Same in the form of incarnation, as being-in-one’s-skin, having-the-other-in-one’s-skin” (AE, 181/OB, 114-15). Thus, far from being a cause of alienation in the subject, the Other now becomes *the* source of inspiration for the subject in its responsibility for the Other.

This switch of position, it seems to me, suggests the uneasiness and struggle that Levinas is faced with, as he identifies the subjectivity with the responsibility and

¹⁷² Levinas, “Without Identity,” *HAH*, 91/*HO*, 62.

¹⁷³ *Ibid.*, *HAH* 91/*HO*, 62.

substitution for the Other. On the one hand, he seems to recognize the inevitable sense of alienation on the part of the subject that has that kind of subjectivity, as a hostage of the Other. On the other hand, he does not want to give an impression of a split personality in his description of human subjectivity, as if the Other were hijacking my personality or subjectivity. By arguing that the Other inspires me, Levinas apparently attempts to reduce the sense of alienation in the subject. But I argue that such alienation will never go away because human consciousness never assumes the responsibility that the structure of the-Other-in-the-Same has given rise to. The subject may find itself obsessed by the Other, but its consciousness is too paralyzed to do anything with the obsession. Levinas's claim that the subject is the hostage of the Other shows precisely the acute sense of alienation within the subject. I find the unassumable responsibility for the Other *by the conscious subject* very problematic because it creates a kind of disunity within the human subject and makes human subjectivity never rendered a whole. Even if the structure of the Other-in-the-Same occurs anarchically, as we will see in the next section, the conscious subject still needs to accept and embrace its unique responsibility for the Other and make it its own. Otherwise, the sense of alienation would remain there. We will return to this problem later in the chapter.

Another question that one can ask Levinas on this issue is the following: Does the responsibility for the Other exhaust human subjectivity? Is there anything else we can find or say about human subjectivity other than that it is an ethical subjectivity? I assume we can interpret human subjectivity in many different ways, including as ethical subjectivity. But is it the only element in human subjectivity? William Richardson's

suggestion of irresponsible subjectivity, based on his own personal experience with Levinas, deserves our attention.¹⁷⁴ For there may be some elements of the unconscious within human subjectivity, which are not ‘inscribed’ in the *Saying* and yet at work in our conscious life. What appears here, according to Richardson, is not so much the responsible subject, but rather the irresponsible subject, “insinuating itself into the ‘I’ of the ‘I’ speaking, conscious subject, sabotaging its best intentions.”¹⁷⁵ Here I agree with Richardson’s suggestion about the importance of finding a place in Levinas’s philosophy for psychoanalysis that deals with the elements of the unconscious in human life. For human subjectivity is so complex and multi-faceted, and therefore cannot simply be reduced, in the sense of diminishment, to ethical subjectivity.

The last two points I made point to the importance of the role of the psyche in Levinas’s account of human subjectivity. Levinas indeed paints a particular kind of psyche that accounts for the ethical subjectivity and the responsibility for the Other that the subject bears. I believe the same psyche provides us with the most important key to the understanding of the self as bearing a religious character as well. But before we take up the issue and continue to do so in the next chapters, we will first discuss the relation of the presence of the Other with temporality. The issue is important for our understanding of the emergence of time in connection with exteriority and of the temporal character of our subjectivity.

¹⁷⁴ William J. Richardson, “The Irresponsible Subject,” *Ethics as First Philosophy: The Significance of Emmanuel Levinas for Philosophy, Literature, and Religion*, 123-131.

¹⁷⁵ Richardson, “The Irresponsible Subject,” 127.

2.3. Exteriority and Temporality

Ethics in Levinas's philosophy cannot but be intimately tied to the issue of temporality. This is because it is understood in a special way as the putting into question of the *I* by the Other and ultimately as the responsibility of the former for the latter. An immediate question may be raised here as to when I become responsible for the Other. Is it when I actually encounter the Other, or beyond any actual meeting? Am I responsible for those whom I have never met? What is actually the temporal structure of the responsibility of the subject for the Other? This section will purposely address this issue, and we will see that Levinas's notion of the ethical does take us beyond Being.

Let us begin by noting that there are at least two respects in which the concept of the ethical in Levinas's philosophy is linked to the notion of time. First of all, time occurs only when the subject is having a true connection with the Other. So long as the subject is unable to escape from itself, or always bound to return to itself, which is what totality is all about, it has only the present (time). For Levinas, the present alone does not constitute time yet because time, generally speaking, always includes the past and the future as well. Without a proper relation with the Other, according to Levinas, the subject is locked into the present. In fact, only the Other can bring the subject out of its self-enclosure. When it occurs, time then begins to exist. Second, the structure of the Other-in-the-Same, which defines the ethical subjectivity, points to the immemorial past of the Other that no memory can retrieve or reassemble. Responsibility and substitution for the Other are

already in place before any conscious deliberation made. These two points will be further discussed below.

For Levinas, time is not merely the structure of Being, or to be interpreted in relation to Being, as Heidegger conceives it, but takes us beyond Being. More specifically, time must be understood through the relationship between the subject and the Other. In *Existence and Existents* Levinas describes the present as the instant at which beings emerge from Being, which later forms the substantiality of the subject, or the hypostasis. While modern philosophy tends to see the instant as always in relation to other instants in time, Levinas holds that the instant has its own dialectic that is distinct from that of time. In its present, which is not yet time without its connection with other instants, the emerging existent is fully engaged in Being, “without reserve and as it were disconsolate” because it is stuck with itself, having nothing more to accomplish (*EEt*, 132/*EEs*, 76). Its full engagement with Being is due to its evanescence of the future: “Because the present refers only to itself, starts with itself, it refracts the future” (*EEt*, 125/*EEs*, 71). As the instant and pure beginning, the present may try to establish contact with other instants, but “in its initiating contact, an instantaneous maturity invades it; it puts its pin in itself and is caught in its own game” (*EEt*, 135/*EEs*, 78). It thus inevitably returns to itself. For Levinas, this is the most profound paradox of the concept of freedom, namely, that a being capable of emerging from Being in general in the present, turns out to be locked in itself. The result is the negation of this very freedom. Before the advent of another being, the solitary existent remains locked into the present, thus

incapable of making an ecstatic movement out of itself. Without the Other, there is nothing but the present.¹⁷⁶

The subject thus needs the Other in order to break out of its bondage to itself. Only when there is the presence of the Other before the subject, does time occur. This is because time, for Levinas, fundamentally involves the relationship between the present moment and another, a genuinely new moment. Time should take the subject somewhere else than a return to itself: “Time is not a simple experience of duration, but a dynamism which leads us elsewhere than toward the things we possess” (*EeI*, 54/*EaI*, 61). According to Levinas, only the Other can provide this bridge. As we saw in Chapter One, death is a form of exteriority that can challenge the subject’s solitary way of life and bring it out of its self-enclosure. But when it does come, it puts an end to the freedom of the subject altogether. Therefore, the kind of exteriority that is best suited for the task of bringing the subject out of itself, in Levinas’s view, is not death, which is the annihilation of the very freedom of the subject, but rather the human Other, or the face of the Other, as he usually calls it. Through its encounter with the Other, which never fully reveals itself, the subject leaves its own secure territory, or its present, and embarks on a new journey with the Other toward the future. The erotic relationship, which is arguably one of Levinas’s prime examples of the social relation, expresses this outward movement well because the subject, as the lover, is now filled with the longing for the Other as the beloved, which Levinas calls “voluptuosity” [*la volupté*] (cf. *TeI*, 290 ff./*TaI*, 259 ff.). Such a relation inaugurates the emergence of time, as the present is now connected to the

¹⁷⁶ Robert John Sheffler Manning, *Interpreting Otherwise than Heidegger: Emmanuel Levinas’s Ethics as First Philosophy* (Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press, 1993), 65.

future. For Levinas, the relation of the subject with the Other, which is basically with the future, involves mystery that is “the very dimension of alterity” (*TA*, 81/*TO*, 88). Despite the relation, the Other remains unknown, a radical transcendence.

In a more important way the relation between the ethical and temporality, for Levinas, lies in the fact that the subject is already in relation with the Other before the Other appears in any form to consciousness. We recall that Levinas defines the structure of subjectivity as the Other-in-the-Same, not in the sense that the Other is represented in the subject through consciousness because the structure is already in place prior to one’s freedom (cf. *AE*, 46/*OB*, 25). Rather, the Other-in-the-Same, the structure of subjectivity as responsibility for the Other, points to the immemorial past from which it comes. Already in his 1970’s essay “Without Identity,” thus prior to the publication of *Otherwise than Being*, Levinas raises the question about the proper structure of subjectivity without being identified with the act of consciousness: “Does the free act (freedom as correlative to intentionality) respond to the vocation of subjectivity? Can’t subjectivity relate to – without representing it to itself – a past that passes all present and thus overflows the measure of freedom?”¹⁷⁷ It is the past that overflows freedom, according to Levinas, that constitutes subjectivity, which is manifested in the excessive responsibility for the Other.

The phrases “immemorial past” or “a past that cannot be made present” run through Levinas’s later works and clearly require more explanation. In a way we are mostly familiar with a kind of a past that is recoverable in our memory: events that took place in our childhood or any past event. They are recuperable, namely, that they can be

¹⁷⁷ Levinas, “Without Identity,” *HAH*, 91/*HO*, 62.

brought to the present. We may even have the signs of those events, for example, pictures or videos related to them. For Levinas, this kind of the past is a *historical* past, which together with our future, can be brought to our present. We can retain the memory of those events, re-present and convert them into one simultaneous time, hence, a *synchrony*. The kind of the past that Levinas speaks of, in relation to the temporal structure of ethical subjectivity, is not a historical past, but rather, *unhistorical*, so to speak. Its occurrence does not involve an act of our consciousness, and therefore, it cannot be recovered. In fact, it is the past that is already there before any act of consciousness. This is why it is an immemorial past, absolute and irrecovable. The temporal gap suggests a *diachrony*, instead of synchrony. For Levinas, diachrony is the refusal of conjunction, the non-totalizable. In this sense it is a “transcending diachrony,” which is infinite (AE, 23.26/OB, 9.11). We will discuss in Chapter Four Levinas’s concept of a *trace* in contradistinction to *sign*, precisely because the former suggests an irrecuperable past. Unlike signs that are meant to be integrated into the order of the world, traces, as Levinas understands it, do not fit into such an order. They belong to the *beyond* Being, as he would put it.

Since the immemorial past that constitutes the ethical subjectivity is already in place before any act of consciousness, the responsibility of the Other cannot but be beyond legality and obliges beyond any contract. It comes to me prior to my freedom, from a nonpresent, from an immemorial: “In proximity is heard a command come as though from an immemorial past, which was never present, began in no freedom. This way of the neighbor is a face” (AE, 141/OB, 88). In the first pages of *Otherwise than Being*, Levinas

already suggests that the attempt to conceive the otherwise-than-being “will look beyond freedom” because freedom “does not escape the fate in essence and takes place in time and in the history which assembles events into an *epos* and synchronizes them, revealing their immanence and their order” (*AE*, 20/*OB*, 8). The breaking out of essence and of immanence “signifies a null-site (*non-lieu*)” that is not simply negativity, nihilation, or non-being because they are still “correlative with being” (*AE*, 21-2/*OB*, 8-9). Between me and the other there gapes a “difference which no unity of transcendental apperception could recover. My responsibility for the other is precisely the non-indifference of this difference: the proximity of the other.”¹⁷⁸ The Other is closer to me than I am to myself because my relationship with the Other is already established before I come to know myself in the present. What I find within me is the trace of the Other in which “has passed a past absolutely bygone. In a trace its irreversible lapse is sealed.”¹⁷⁹ Indeed, consciousness always attempts to bring things of the past into the present. But no one can bring to consciousness this immemorial past from which the structure of the Other-in-the-Same comes because it is “already too old for the game of cognition.”¹⁸⁰ This past thus can never be made present: “It leaves me without a present for recollection or a return into the self.”¹⁸¹ It should be made clear here that the inability of consciousness to retrieve the immemorial past is not caused by the frailty of memory. Its cause lies beyond any human weakness: “The immemorial is not an effect of a weakness of memory, an incapacity to cross large intervals of time, to resuscitate pasts too deep. It is the

¹⁷⁸ Levinas, “God and Philosophy,” *DVI*, 117/*GCM*, 71.

¹⁷⁹ Levinas, “The Trace of the Other,” 357.

¹⁸⁰ Levinas, “Phenomenon and Enigma,” *CPP*, 71.

¹⁸¹ Levinas, “God and Philosophy,” *DVI*, 117/*GCM*, 71.

impossibility of the dispersion of time to assemble itself in the present, the insurmountable diachrony of time... It is diachrony that determines the immemorial; a weakness of memory does not constitute diachrony” (*AE*, 66/*OB*, 38). As we have seen, the structure of time here is not synchronic, but fundamentally diachronic. We shall take up the issue of the diachony of time again when discussing the structure of the *Saying* and the *Said* in Chapter Four.

The second aspect of the relation between the ethical and temporality, that is, the immemorially established relation between the subject and the Other, is pertinent for our purpose here because it raises further questions about the meaning of the structure of the-Other-in-the-Same in subjectivity. What do we make of it? If consciousness cannot recover the past in which the structure is born, does it mean that phenomenology has reached its limits? Are we now entering into the religious domain, or as Levinas says, beyond Being? It is important for us to keep these questions in mind, as we proceed further to seek for the significance of the structure of subjectivity in the section below and in the next chapters.

2.4. Subjectivity, Passivity, and the Traumatic Self: Toward a Phenomenality of Religion

We have seen above Levinas’s characterization of the subjectivity of the subject as responsibility and substitution for the Other. This responsibility, for Levinas, does not stem from one’s own free initiative, like when one decides to exercise a moral obligation

toward the Other, but rather from a “nonpresent,” an “immemorial,” that is inaccessible to consciousness. The subject is primordially constituted, not by the “I think,” or the unity of the “transcendental apperception,” but rather by responsibility for the Other. Before I am even myself, I am already responsible for the Other, absolutely and without appeal; it is “dia-chrony before all dialogue” (*EI*, 94/97), Levinas would say. To put it in the language of his later work, *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*, I am, from the very constitution of my subjectivity, the hostage of the Other. One may say that the relationship with the Other is the (pre-)original event of subjectivity: “The relationship with the non-ego precedes any relationship of the ego with itself” (*AE*, 189/*OB*, 119). The constitution by the Other creates within the subject a primordial sense of passivity and accusation from which the subject cannot escape. Thus, ethics for Levinas begins not from the conscious *I*, but rather from the sensible, passive, and vulnerable, subject. Since the exposure to the Other is what animates my subjectivity, the only proper response to the Other is “here I am -- *me voici*” (*AE*, 226/*OB*, 146; *AE*, 233/*OB*, 149): It is I, a singular self, who am obliged to respond to the summons of the Other.

We see that Levinas’s language to describe the effects of the structure of subjectivity as the Other-in-the-Same becomes increasingly stronger, not dissimilar to the language of psychoanalysis: the subject is not only sensible, passive, and vulnerable, but also accused and persecuted, all of which point to the “identity of the hostage who substitutes himself for the others” (*AE*, 31/*OB*, 15). The subject experiences the trauma of persecution by the Other as it continues to be called into question by the Other; its responsibility for the Other is infinite. Generally speaking, a trauma arises, as Rudolf

Bernet explains, “when the subjective tension caused by the affection is so great that the subject reaches a point of being completely overwhelmed. An impression becomes traumatic when the subject in no way can defend itself against it and can give no meaning to it, when the subject is turned inside out by it and is crushed by it.”¹⁸² The subjective tension occurs, first of all, because the subject cannot recognize and make sense of the strangeness of the Other; its capabilities for representation have been muted by the otherness of the Other. The subject is seized by something other than itself that it can in no way grasp or lay hold of. Secondly, and more importantly, the *I* realizes its irreversible separation from the Other, which is the very source of disturbance within itself. The differential gap causes trauma in the subject that has the habit to return to itself. The subject feels completely overwhelmed and helpless as the trauma becomes unassumable. This unassumable trauma, according to Levinas, “is to be stricken by the *in-of* the infinite, devastating presence and awakening subjectivity to the proximity of the other... This trauma – as unassumable – is inflicted upon presence by the Infinite. It is this affectation by the Infinite – this affectivity – that takes shape as a subjection to the neighbor.”¹⁸³ In other words, animating the subjectivity of the subject is a source of meaning greater than the *I*, generating the sense of absolute responsibility for the Other.

All this brings us to Levinas’s deeper characterization of human subjectivity, that it is itself marked by transcendence. Human subjectivity, he argues, is not defined by essence or immanence, but rather by the otherwise-than-being: “The exception of the ‘other than being,’ beyond being, signifies subjectivity or humanity, the *oneself* which

¹⁸² Rudolf Bernet, “The Other in me,” *Deconstructive Subjectivities*, 182.

¹⁸³ Levinas, “God and Philosophy,” *DVI*, 116/*GCM*, 70.

repels the annexations by essence” (*AE*, 21/*OB*, 8). The human being is “a unicity that has no site, without the ideal identity a being derives from the kerygma that identifies the innumerable aspects of its manifestations, without the identity of the ego that coincides with itself, a unicity withdrawing from essence – such is a human being” (*AE*, 21/*OB*, 8). We often find him arguing for this position even when he is writing about somebody else’s philosophy: “May not the human be, *per se*, the original gesture of going beyond (*dépassement*), even if that gesture is first designated on the basis of the articulation brought about by that function?”¹⁸⁴ Transcendence is not to be sought for and found in a higher reality, as it has become the intimate structure of human subjectivity. Thus, the movement of transcendence can now begin from human subjectivity: “The human being is always beyond herself. But that being-beyond-oneself must finally be conscious of being itself the source of that beyond, and thus transcendence doubles back toward immanence.”¹⁸⁵ For Levinas, this is a new birth of human subjectivity that he defends, a birth accompanied by transcendence. What is important here is not rendering transcendence subjective, but rather “being surprised at subjectivity... as the very *mode* of the metaphysical.”¹⁸⁶

Human subjectivity for Levinas is thus characterized by transcendence, the going beyond, or otherwise than being: “Subjectivity, prior to or beyond the free and the non-free, obliged with regard to the neighbor, is the breaking point where essence is exceed by the infinite” (*AE*, 27/*OB*, 12). The subject is to live as if it “were not a being among

¹⁸⁴ Levinas, “Jean Wahl: Neither Having nor Being,” *HS*, 101/*OS*, 74.

¹⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, *HS*, 110/*OS*, 82.

¹⁸⁶ Levinas, “Sécularisation et Faim,” *L’Herne*, 81-82.

beings” (*EeI*, 97/*EaI*, 100). Otherwise than being, Levinas notes, is different from Being otherwise because the latter still belongs to the category of Being. Subjectivity that is otherwise than Being is constituted by the non-equality with being or dis-interestedness. As such it is always put into question and awakened by the Other; it lives a life of disquiet and unease: “A truly human life cannot remain life *satis*-fied in its equality to being, a life of quietude, that is awakened by the other, that is to say, it is always getting sobered up, that being is never – contrary to what so many reassuring traditions say – its own reason for being, that the famous *conatus essendi* is not the source of all right and all meaning” (*EeI*, 121/*EaI*, 122).

According to Levinas, the beyond Being, or the *otherwise than Being*, situated here in diachrony, is precisely what Plato means by the Good (*agathon*).¹⁸⁷ We recall that in the *Republic* Socrates holds the Good to be the most important thing to learn (504e-505b). Just as the sun makes things visible and provides them with the power of reproduction, growth, and nourishment, without itself being generated, likewise the Good makes things known and even make them possible to exist, even though the Good is itself not Being, but superior to it in rank and power (509b). We see that Levinas often emphasizes the non-identification of the Good with Being, namely, that the Good is beyond Being. He first takes it to mean that the Good cannot become present or enter into a representation. The *I* cannot bring the Good to appear in consciousness as it does the ordinary objects. To be in the present is for Levinas to have freedom. But toward the Good the *I* does not have freedom because the Good has chosen it before it can do

¹⁸⁷ See *AE*, 36/*OB*, 19.

anything with the Good. That is to say, the *I* has been chosen by the Good prior to its being, before it has freedom to choose: “Goodness is always older than choice; the Good has always already chosen and required the unique one... On the hither side of consciousness, they consist in this pre-original hold of the Good over it, always older than any present, any beginning” (*AE*, 95/*OB*, 57). This is, again, the anarchical structure of human subjectivity that is characterized by nonfreedom and penetrated with the ways of the Good unknown by the subject itself. Since all this occurs prior to time and the freedom of the subject, we cannot say, according to Levinas, that the subject is enslaved to the Good because it never chose the Good in the first place. Or, as Levinas often says, “No one is good voluntarily,” (*AE*, 25/*OB*, 11), because the category of freedom makes sense only in reference to time, whereas the constitution of the subject by the Good occurs anarchically. His rather lengthy explanation runs as follows:

If ethical terms arise in our discourse, before the terms freedom and non-freedom, it is because before the bipolarity of good and evil presented to choice, the subject finds himself committed to the Good in the very passivity of supporting. The distinction between free and non-free would not be the ultimate distinction between humanity and inhumanity, nor the ultimate mark of sense and nonsense. To understand intelligibility does not consist in going back to the beginning. There was a time irreducible to presence, an absolute unrepresentable past. Has not the Good chosen the subject with an election recognizable in the responsibility of being hostage, to which the subject is destined, which he cannot evade without denying himself, and by virtue of which he is unique? A philosopher can give to this election only the signification circumscribed by responsibility for the other. This antecedence of responsibility to freedom would signify the Goodness of the Good: the necessity that the Good choose me first before I can be in a position to choose, that is, welcome its choice. That is my pre-originary *susceptiveness*. It is a passivity prior to all receptivity, it is transcendent. It is an antecedence prior to all representable antecedence: immemorial. The Good is before being. There is diachrony: an unbridgeable difference between the Good and me, without simultaneity, odd terms. But also a non-indifference in this difference. The Good assigns the subject, according to a susception that cannot be assumed, to approach the other, the neighbor” (*AE*, 194-5/*OB*, 122-3).

This exposition helps us understand Levinas's usage of the term "election" (*élection*) to designate the constitution of the subject by the Good.¹⁸⁸ The Good 'elects' the subject to be responsible for the Other without the subject's consent to do so. In other words, the subject never took the initiative nor made the decision to be responsible for the Other: "This non-initiative is older than any present, and is not a passivity contemporaneous with and counterpart of an act. It is the hither side of the free and non-free, the anarchy of the Good" (*AE*, 120/*OB*, 75). For this reason the subject cannot run away from this responsibility; it cannot undo the commitment because it is beyond its choice. This is why the subjectivity of the subject is, as we saw above, a passivity more passive than all passivity because it is not because of the subject's determination or choice that it feels responsible for the Other. Such responsibility is then "a sacrifice without reserve, without holding back... the sacrifice of a hostage designated who has not chosen himself to be hostage" (*AE*, 31-2/*OB*, 15). Here we may say that as hostage, the subject also functions as a host for the Other, though involuntarily. It becomes a host because it is fundamentally at the service of the Other in exercising its responsibility. But the subject does so involuntarily because it never chooses to be such a host. In this case, it becomes a hostage for the Other.

An immediate question may arise here as to whether or not the Good has done violence to the subject with its election. Doesn't the subject become alienated because it never chose to become responsible for the Other? On this question Levinas seems to have given an ambiguous answer. On the one hand, he seems to reject the possibility of

¹⁸⁸ For instance, in *AE* 32/*OB*, 15.

violence on the subject because violence can occur when there is freedom in the subject. Since the election occurs before the subject has freedom, then there cannot be violence: “Goodness in the subject is anarchy itself. As a responsibility for the freedom of the other, it is prior to any freedom in me, but it also precedes violence in me, which would be the contrary of freedom. For if no one is good voluntarily, no one is a slave of the Good” (*AE*, 126/*OB*, 138). In his essay “Humannism and An-Archy,” he even says it more explicitly: “Election by the Good that is, precisely, not *action*; it is non-violence itself.”¹⁸⁹ On the other hand, Levinas seems to have anticipated this objection precisely by acknowledging that there is indeed violence in this election. But he argues that “[the necessities of being of service] are more serious than being or not being. Such service is not slavery. But it is a necessity, because this obedience is prior to any voluntary decision which could have assumed it. This necessity overflows the same that is at rest, the life that enjoys life, since it is the necessity of a service. But, in this non-repose, this restlessness, it is better than rest. Such an antinomy bears witness to the Good” (*AE*, 91/*OB*, 54). Thus, he seems to think that the necessity of the service to the Other is such that it tolerates the alienation of the subject by the Good. Moreover, he says, the Good, as *Good*, “redeems the violence of its alterity, even if the subject has to suffer through the augmentation of this ever more demanding violence” (*AE*, 31-2/*OB*, 15).

These arguments, in my opinion, bear some weaknesses. First of all, no matter how urgent or necessary it is to take responsibility for the Other, such necessity cannot justify the anarchical violence that occurs in the election of the subject by the Good.

¹⁸⁹ Levinas, “Humanism and An-Archy,” *HAH*, 77/*HO*, 53.

Calling it a necessity does not diminish the degree of violence that takes place. Moreover, it remains puzzling how the Good would redeem the violence of its alterity since Levinas never explains further. If the subject experiences the election as traumatic, the violence seems yet to be redeemed. For Levinas does acknowledge that this involuntary election is “not assumed by the elected one” (*AE*, 31-2/*OB*, 15). That is to say, the subject will always experience its responsibility for the Other as an alienation. It would be ironic for the human being to have a subjectivity with a non-assumable responsibility for the Other. Her act of kindness for the Other, as simple as in opening the door for her neighbor, would seem to be done without her full agreement. Her very subjectivity would be divided and could never be made whole. With the human subject portrayed as vulnerable, wounded, and persecuted by the Other, we may wonder whether Levinas is really defending human subjectivity, as he claims in *Totality and Infinity* (cf. *TeI*, 11/*TaI*, 26).

The only way I can make sense of Levinas’s arguments here is to compare the subject’s election by the Good to responsibility for the Other, to the specific calling many people feel to perform a particular task in life. Some people feel called to be artist, teacher, social worker, philosopher, priest, etc. The calling can be so strong that they feel at home with what they are (doing) and that they cannot imagine being otherwise. They may also feel that they would not be happy if they chose another profession. Now, if the calling comes from within, that means that they have never chosen it in the first place. They simply find it in their heart, feel good about it, and decide to follow it. Now, if they feel that they will not be happy without following this calling, does this calling from within violate their freedom? If we follow Levinas’s line of argument, we may have to

answer the question in the negative because the calling is already there before they have freedom to choose. They do not even know where this calling comes from. This is, I think, what Levinas means by saying that the Good has elected the I to be responsible for the Other prior to freedom, and there is absolute goodness about it. To this extent I agree with Levinas that the issue of violation of freedom or 'slavery to the Good' is irrelevant here because the election occurs before the subject has freedom to choose. Or in the analogy given above, those people may not feel enslaved to their calling; rather, they simply embrace it because they know it would bring them happiness and joy. But Levinas himself, to my knowledge, never makes an argument that the subject needs to embrace the responsibility for the Other that it finds in its subjectivity. This is what I find problematic with Levinas's account of human subjectivity.

We may thus ask whether human subjectivity is that kind of 'calling' by the Good to be responsible for the Other. On the one hand, I agree that human subjectivity is predisposed to taking care of the Other. Such a predisposition helps explain why we are so ready to help others and in some cases even sacrifice ourselves for them. Many people feel that when they help others, they feel happier; they often do it with joy. This is because, I believe, they act in accordance with their true human subjectivity, or their 'calling.' Those who refuse to embrace this subjectivity by thinking only of themselves or their needs have not realized who they really are. As a result, they become more alienated from their subjectivity than those who simply follow the calling. On the other hand, I wonder whether the exposure to the Other in human subjectivity needs to reach the degree as Levinas claims, namely, that the subject becomes a hostage of the Other. Is it

part of our experience that we are persecuted by the Other? If Levinas simply wants to give an account of the general orientation of human subjectivity toward the Other, I do not think he needs to go this far. Levinas seems to have given a much stronger argument than needed when he claims that the subject is the hostage of the Other. Or perhaps, this is the effect of what Paul Ricoeur calls the use of *hyperbole* in Levinas's philosophy, that is, the systematic practice of *excess* in philosophical argumentation.¹⁹⁰ Levinas may simply want to point out the excessive strength of responsibility for the Other as felt by the subject. As such, the subject looks like a hostage of the Other. The move that Levinas makes here may be understandable, especially when we recall Levinas's passion to speak of ethics after the Holocaust. By pointing out our infinite responsibility for the Other, to the point of substituting ourselves for her, Levinas may wish to suggest that the matter of responsibility for the Other is really not up to us; we are responsible for our neighbor whether or not we like her. This is because, as Levinas explains to us, such responsibility is grounded in our subjectivity that is structured as the Other-in-the-Same. Therefore, we cannot escape it. Unfortunately, such a description has its own weakness, as it suggests that the subject is alienated from its very self. The subject never manages to take up the responsibility as its own and therefore remains estranged from its own subjectivity.

In any case, Levinas's characterization of human subjectivity as being exposed to, and be responsible for, the Other, is crucial for our purpose because it provides us with some link between ethics and religion. The ethical self, namely, the self that is exposed to the Other, is also a religious self: "Beyond egoism and altruism it is the religiosity of the

¹⁹⁰ Paul Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another*, trans. Kathleen Blamey (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1994), 337.

self” (AE, 186/OB, 117). The animation of the subject by the Other is not simply a “human, all too human” event, if we may use this term, but a religious one. To put it in a more Levinasian language, it does not take place at the level of Being, but rather at that of beyond Being. Any action of the subject that is the manifestation of the responsibility for the Other, therefore, is not simply a human act, but also a religious act, insofar it arises from the religious subjectivity. The self is religious because it has been chosen by the Good prior to freedom to turn to the Other. It is the election of the subject by the Good that animates the subjectivity to be responsible to the Other. Thus, the responsibility for the Other is not the same as the commandment to love one another because the latter would still occur at the level of freedom or Being, whereas the former does beyond Being: “The Infinite does not signal itself to a subjectivity, a unity already formed, by its order to turn toward the neighbor. In its *being* subjectivity undoes *essence* by substituting itself for another. Qua one-for-another, it is absorbed in signification, in saying or the verb form of the infinite. Signification precedes essence” (AE, 29/OB, 13). The human subjectivity, as responsibility for the Other, has its own religious signification without the necessity of a love commandment: “Goodness gives to subjectivity its irreducible signification” (AE, 36/OB, 18). The responsibility for the Other is indeed a way of being religious otherwise than being commanded to love.

To sum up, we have seen in this chapter how Levinas situates human subjectivity in passivity rather than, as has been traditionally done, in activity. Instead of consciousness or intentionality, he approaches subjectivity by way of sensibility that animates it by the exposure to the Other. The human subject is the self that is inescapably

responsible for the Other, thanks to its election by the Good prior to freedom. Here Levinas agrees with the post-structuralist critique of human subjectivity that the conscious subject is no longer in control of its own subjectivity since it is deeply affected by outside forces. But he argues that the ‘force’ affecting this subjectivity does not come from Being, but rather from beyond Being: the subject has been anarchically elected by the Good to be responsible for the Other, to the point of substituting for the Other and being taken hostage by the Other. Such a subject is a religious subject thanks to the election. I have pointed out several weaknesses of this argument, including the necessity of making such a strong claim in order to explain our general orientation to be responsible to the Other. In any case, the characterization of the responsible subject as religious points to the link between ethics and religion at the level of human subjectivity: the ethical relation with the Other in which the subject is awakened and questioned by the Other is at the same time a religious relation of the subject with the Good or the Infinite. That is to say, Levinas’s account of ethics is not an ordinary ethics that takes place at the level of Being, but rather that which takes us beyond Being. Indeed, as Levinas himself says, “The problem of transcendence and of God and the problem of subjectivity irreducible to essence, irreducible to essential immanence, go together” (*AE*, 33/*OB*, 17). I would argue, therefore, that any attempt to treat Levinas’s ethics simply as another ‘secular’ ethical theory would completely miss the mark. As we proceed to the next chapter, we will see the other aspects of the religiosity of the self.

CHAPTER THREE

METAPHYSICAL DESIRE FOR THE INFINITE

The human subject is the responsibility for the Other, a passivity more passive than any passivity, with an inescapable assignment. This is the conclusion of the last chapter in which we explored Levinas's account of human subjectivity. Approaching human subjectivity by way of sensibility, instead of consciousness or intentionality, Levinas finds this sensibility already animated by the exposure to the Other prior to freedom. The human subject, Levinas claims, has been elected by the Good to be responsible for the Other. It is pre-originally geared or gravitated toward the Other, so to speak, as if they were one.¹⁹¹ This is what characterizes and marks the uniqueness of the human subject: "This desire for the non-desirable, this responsibility for the neighbor, this substitution as a hostage, is the subjectivity and uniqueness of a subject" (*AE*, 196/*OB*, 123). What is new in this formulation is the phrase 'desire for the non-desirable.' Why does Levinas call the neighbor "the non-desirable"? This is clearly an interesting topic to discuss, which we will do in this chapter. In any case, what thoroughly animates human subjectivity, in Levinas's view, is the desire for the Infinite. This Desire, I will argue, is a major aspect of the religiosity of the self.

In this chapter I will further explore Levinas's claim of the religiosity of the self by examining its other aspects. I will first begin with the distinction between Desire (*Désir*) and Need (*le besoin*), which Levinas uses to differentiate the ethical movement

¹⁹¹ Recall the metaphor of maternity employed in *Otherwise than Being*, which we discussed in the last chapter.

from the non-ethical one. To help us better understand Levinas's notion of Desire, a discussion of the distinction between Desire and (erotic) Love will follow. The latter, Levinas will tell us, is only quasi-metaphysical because it will eventually bring us back to ourselves. Afterwards, I will bring into the discussion the famous idea of the Infinite within us, which Levinas takes from Descartes's Third Meditation to signify the 'presence' of something within human subjectivity that consciousness cannot capture. The section will begin with a brief comparison between Hegel and Levinas's concept of the Infinite, followed by an analysis of Descartes's idea of the Infinite and Levinas's appropriation of it. The following section will discuss the significance of the terms 'the Infinite,' 'God,' and 'the Good' in Levinas's thought and highlight his preference for the philosophical terms to the religious one. I argue that what we actually desire is the Infinite itself, and not the neighbor for whom we are ordered to be responsible. This claim will help us better understand the role of the Good in the anarchical election of the subject to such a responsibility.

3.1. Desire and Need: Toward the Infinite

The terms *desire* and *need* generally designate an orientation toward something exterior to the subject. They are often used interchangeably, particularly when they aim at a certain fulfilment of what is lacking in the subject. This is certainly not the case in Levinas's thought, as he makes the distinction between the two in order to mark the ethical differences. Indeed, his position must be interpreted in the context of the history

of Western philosophy, which he sees as a series of attempts to reduce the otherness of the Other. The very history of the term *desire*, which we are about to see briefly, already shows us the different kinds of unethical movements in such a philosophy, at least in Levinas's view.

It is relatively incontrovertible to suggest that the first philosopher in the history of Western philosophy who emphasizes the importance of desire is Aristotle. Unlike his predecessor, Plato, who thinks that knowing the good will ensure that one will do the good, Aristotle argues that knowing what is good alone is insufficient for its execution. What is also necessary is the desire to do it. In his *Nicomachean Ethics* Aristotle praises a virtuous person precisely because such a person not only *knows* how to do the good, but also *desires* to do it, and indeed does it. In a virtuous person knowledge and desire are united to attain a common goal. The distinction between a continent person and incontinent one in Aristotle's ethics is based on whether or not desire shares the same understanding with knowledge about what is good. A continent person is the one who knows the good, but actually desires something else; yet, in the end he or she manages to take control of that desire and to do the good. An incontinent person, by contrast, knows what is good, but fails to do the good because of the lack of control over that desire. Thus for Aristotle, desire is a key component for virtue. Knowing what is good alone is insufficient, as it needs to be accompanied by the corresponding desire for a smooth attainment of that good. In the early Middle Ages, particularly in the Augustinian tradition, desire came to be seen as dangerous because it might lead one away from the

true Christian life.¹⁹² Such a desire would then need to be held in check. From the Renaissance period on, as Hugh Silverman points out, the term *desire* came to mean different things, from the yearning to know everything in the universe, to the power to master over other people. In the seventeenth century desire as passion was seen as a threat to the desire to know (reason) because it could generate a conflict of choice. With the alignment of desire and feeling during the Romantic period, the history of Western philosophy began to see desire as “desire to encompass everything – through the fullest expression of the passions (de Sade), through the call to totalize (gain power over) all that can be known (Hegel), through revolution in the very fiber of the bourgeoisie (Marx), through the celebration of the individual subject (Kierkegaard), and through the critique of all ideals of any culture in favor of self-overcoming.”¹⁹³ Desire now became the power to express itself completely, without hindrance, even when it had to negate the alterity of the other. Twentieth-century continental philosophy, in Silverman’s view, saw the corollary of this development in the two major concepts of desire: desire as sex in Freud and desire as power in Hegel.

The point of sketching the historical development of *desire* is first to show that the term has been taken to mean different things throughout the history. Depending on its given meaning, desire has been either promoted because of its being the deepest expression of the human subject, or suspected, if not shunned, because of its potential conflict with the work of reason. Moreover, the brief survey may help us better understand Levinas’s distinction between *desire* and *need*, which virtually collapses in

¹⁹² Hugh J. Silverman, *Philosophy and Desire*, “Introduction” (New York: Routledge, 2000), 4.

¹⁹³ Silverman, *Philosophy and Desire*, 7.

such a history. In this section we will first discuss the distinction as well as its possible complications. A further distinction between desire and love is brought forth and discussed to help us grasp the nuances of such similar terms. Then we will see briefly Levinas's view of Hegel's own concept of *desire* in the context of the distinction he makes for our better understanding of his position.

3.1.1. The Distinction between Desire and Need in Levinas

Levinas begins his *Totality and Infinity* by discussing the Desire for the Invisible (*Désir de l'invisible*), a theme that practically guides the whole book. This Desire, he says, is oriented toward the absolutely other in a completely unknown land.¹⁹⁴ It is metaphysical precisely because metaphysics is, for Levinas, “turned toward the ‘elsewhere’ and the ‘otherwise’ and the ‘other’” (*TeI*, 21/*TaI*, 33). The metaphysical desire never longs to return to its homeland as it is destined to go somewhere else. Levinas further characterizes this desire as beyond the possibility of being satisfied. What it desires is “beyond everything that can simply complete it” (*TeI*, 22/*TaI*, 33-34). It is radically remote as the desire cannot anticipate or think it beforehand; what it desires is an “absolute, unanticipatable alterity” (*TeI*, 22/*TaI*, 34). This metaphysical desire is like goodness, Levinas says, because whatever it desires does not fulfill it, but only deepens it. It is absolute given the fact that the desiring subject is mortal, whereas what is desired

¹⁹⁴ In this study I capitalize ‘Desire,’ and later its opposite, ‘Need,’ as Levinas does in most cases, when they are being used as technical terms to suggest two different kinds of outward movement, which I shall distinguish in a moment. Thus, Desire (with a capital ‘D’) refers to the metaphysical desire that, in contrast to Need, never seeks to return to its originating place.

is invisible. The invisibility of what is desired, according to Levinas, does not suggest a lack of relation. Rather, it implies “relations with what is not given, of which there is no idea” (*TeI*, 23/*TaI*, 34).

Opposed to this metaphysical desire is “Need” (*le besoin*). What Levinas means by “Need” is, generally speaking, that which we, as human beings, want to have for our enjoyment. More concretely, it is what we live from (*vivre de*): the bread we eat, the air we breathe, etc. We thrive on these objects of our Need and are happy for having them (*TeI*, 118/*TaI*, 114; *TeI*, 155/*TaI*, 145). The interest of Need is fundamentally economic and directed to the satisfaction of whatever is necessary for life; it is “the anxiety of an ego for itself.”¹⁹⁵ Our constant living from such needs understandably creates a life of dependence on them. But at the same time we quickly learn how to master this dependency so that our needs may always be met. We seem to be enjoying this adventure; this is why, Levinas holds, we do not wish we had no such needs. Our habit of *living from* the needs is, therefore, “the dependency that turns into sovereignty, into happiness – essentially egoist” (*TeI*, 118/*TaI*, 114). It is the fulfillment of such needs, and not their absence, that makes us happy: “Happiness is made up not of an absence of needs, whose tyranny and imposed character one denounces, but of the satisfaction of all needs. For the privation of need is not just a privation, but is privation in a being that knows that surplus of happiness, privation in a being gratified” (*TeI*, 119/*TaI*, 115). Thus, the categories of happiness and unhappiness is for Levinas applicable only to those beings that have needs (cf. *TeI*, 156/*TaI*, 146).

¹⁹⁵ Levinas, “The Trace of the Other,” *EDE*, 269/*DC*, 350.

The contrast between Desire and Need, with their respective objects, gradually becomes clearer. The “object” of Desire, unlike that of Need, is clearly not material in nature, but rather completely other and invisible: “The other metaphysically desired is not ‘other’ like the bread I eat, the land in which I dwell, the landscape I contemplate, like, sometimes, myself for myself, this ‘I,’ that ‘other.’ I can ‘feed’ on these realities and to a very great extent satisfy myself, as though I had simply been lacking them. Their *alterity* is thereby reabsorbed into my own identity as a thinker or a possessor. The metaphysical desire tends toward something else entirely, toward the *absolutely other*” (*TeI*, 21/*TaI*, 33).¹⁹⁶ One can assimilate the objects of one’s Need to oneself, making them one’s own, but one cannot do so with the ‘object’ of Desire because it is absolutely other. The exteriority “does not slip into the void of needs gratified or frustrated,” and in fact, is “incommensurable with needs” (*TeI*, 195/*TaI*, 179). For this reason, one can never find satisfaction for the metaphysical desire: “In need I can sink my teeth into the real and satisfy myself in assimilating the other; in Desire there is no sinking one’s teeth into being, no satiety, but an uncharted future before me” (*TeI*, 121/*TaI*, 117). What one can do with Desire is simply follow the direction it is taking, namely, toward the absolutely Other.

It is interesting to observe that when describing Desire, Levinas tends to emphasize the fact that Desire does not proceed from a lack (cf. *TeI*, 333/*TaI*, 298; *DVI*, 130/*GCM*, 81). That the subject feels drawn to, or responsible for, the Other in no way

¹⁹⁶ I put the “object” of Desire in quotation marks because it is not an object in ordinary sense of the word. It is absolutely other, which cannot be objectified or reduced to representation. The Other is the “object” of the metaphysical desire insofar as it is the aim of one’s intentionality that cannot be subjected to one’s possession. Objects of Need, by contrast, are real objects, as they are to be assimilated to oneself.

implies that it needs the Other. Here one may justifiably conclude that the opposite of Desire, Need, must be based on a lack. Levinas, however, explicitly denies this conclusion: the fact that we live from food, drink, or air, does not mean that we simply lack them (*TeI*, 21/*TaI*, 33; *TeI*, 118/*TaI*, 114). This means that ‘living from’ is to be distinguished from ‘lacking.’ Indeed, from the perspective of formal logic, it is not easy to understand how a being that needs certain things for its survival does not lack them. Indeed, Levinas himself warns that the distinction between Need and Desire should not be understood in terms of formal logic “where desire is always forced into the forms of need” (*TeI*, 107/*TaI*, 104). The order of Infinity in which Desire operates goes beyond such a logic. With the distinction between Desire and Need, Levinas wants to argue, I believe, that as far as physiology is concerned, Need can be interpreted as a lack: we need food, drink, and air in order to continue living. But the fact that the human being is happy for her needs and even mastering them in order to ensure their satisfaction, shows, in his view, that there is more to Need than simply a lack. Thus, Need cannot be fully identified with a lack.¹⁹⁷

¹⁹⁷ A slight disintegration of the distinction between Desire and Need, as Levinas defines it, often leads to a less-nuanced interpretation, if not misreading, of both terms, for instance, in Drabinsky’s description of it when he says, “When Desire is determined as Need, the intention revealed in the movement of that (nonmetaphysical) Desire remains tied to the boundaries of the self-sufficient, idealist subject, even when that *subject is subjected to a lack*. Desire as Need is a movement that is determined by a void or emptiness in the subject, which in turn determines the directionality of the movement of the Desiring intention as set out from the position of the subject... *The lack in the subject* that desires as Need determines what it desires with regard to its position and interest. Therefore Need does not seek the foreign; Need seeks only what might satisfy *the void opened in lack*.” Drabinsky, *Sensibility and Singularity*, 111-12, italics mine. Besides the too hasty identification of Need with lack, this description is also somewhat problematic in its formulation of the distinction between Desire and Need. Drabinsky seems to think of Need as part of Desire, as if there were a ‘needful’ desire and a ‘needless’ desire. I do not think such characterization of both Desire and Need is faithful to Levinas’s intention and language. To my knowledge, Levinas is far from being ambiguous when making such a distinction. See also the discussion below on this point.

Having said that, I wonder whether or not the distinction between Need and Desire may still leave us with some sense of arbitrariness, particularly with the choice of the latter term (*Désir*) to suggest the metaphysical movement that does not arise either from lack or need. How can I be sure that Desire does not bring me back to myself? If I desire another person, does it always imply that I do not wish the person to be mine? Or perhaps it would be incorrect, in Levinas's view, to say that I desire another person because the 'object' of Desire is not a human being, but something else.¹⁹⁸ But putting this issue aside for awhile, if it turns out that I do wish to possess the person, then my desire has turned into Need. In such a case Levinas's distinction between Need and Desire will fall apart because both terms amount to the same thing, namely, the return to the self. It might have been drawn simply for the sake of the argument about the two different kinds of movement. Levinas himself seems to be aware of this problem, as he writes: "Does not the desiring one derive from the Desirable a complacency [*complaisance*] in desiring, as if it had already grasped the Desirable by its intention? Is not the *disinterestedness* of the Desire for the Infinite an *interestedness*?"¹⁹⁹ But he decides to forego the issue, thus leaving out the explanation of how "interestedness is excluded from the Desire for the Infinite."²⁰⁰ Despite this dismissal, we see here that the issue of 'interestedness' is one of the main factors in the making of the distinction between Desire and Need. It will be helpful, I believe, to compare Desire with Love,

¹⁹⁸ We will discuss this issue below.

¹⁹⁹ Levinas, "God and Philosophy," *DVI*, 111/*GCM*, 67.

²⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, *DVI*, 111/*GCM*, 67.

which Levinas also speaks of in some of his writings. Hopefully this comparison will help us better understand Levinas's notion of the Desire.

3.1.2. Desire and Love

How does a desire differ from a love? This seems to be a natural question that one may raise whenever either topic is discussed. Levinas himself is quite aware of their possible identification when he speaks of a metaphysical desire (or Desire) for the Infinite. It does not take long for the reader of *Totality and Infinity* to find a discussion on this topic. As an object of comparison for his notion of Desire, Levinas chooses the Platonic myth of love (*eros*) that he finds, presumably, in the *Symposium*. The term *eros*, as employed in the dialogue, means love in the sense of romantic love and includes sexual passion. But it can also be used broadly in Greek, as Diotima does, to include desire in all its forms. This seems to be the reason why Levinas finds it appropriate to compare the Greek notion of love with his concept of Desire, which we are about to see below.

Before proceeding further, let me note here that in this section I will use the term *love*, as Levinas does, to designate the Greek *eros*. It is very important to know, however, that Levinas himself is inconsistent even in the usage of the term *love*. While in most cases he means *eros* when speaking of love, in others he suggests precisely a metaphysical desire or the responsibility for the Other. In *Otherwise than Being*, for instance, he describes philosophy as “the wisdom of love at the service of love” (AE,

252-3/*OB*, 162). Love here clearly does not translate *eros*, but rather designates the ethical saying. In any case, the term ‘love’ employed in this section, unless indicated otherwise, invariably designates the Greek *eros*.

To begin the comparison, Levinas suggests that the Platonic notion of love as a child of abundance (*poros*) and poverty (*penia*) be interpreted as “the indigence of wealth itself, as the desire not of what one has lost, but absolute Desire, produced in a being in possession of itself and consequently already absolutely ‘on its own feet’” (*TeI*, 57-8/*TaI*, 63).²⁰¹ We recall that in the dialogue Socrates criticizes Aristophanes’s concept of love as “the desire and pursuit of wholeness,” which lovers follow in order to be fused together into one again after, as the myth tells us, the gods sliced the human being in half.²⁰² Love or *eros*, according to Aristophanes, is a sign that we are missing part of ourselves, without which we would not be complete or fulfilled. While concurring with Aristophanes that love signifies a lack or need, Socrates differs with him on what is needed: love for Socrates is not a desire for one’s lost other half, hence wholeness, but rather, as he learns from Diotima, for what is good.²⁰³ Love, in other words, does not return to the self. We see Levinas’s emphasis on this point in the first part of the quotation from *Totality and Infinity* above.²⁰⁴ In the second part he highlights the

²⁰¹ See Plato, *The Symposium*, 203a-e. Here I follow Levinas’s assumption that the argument presented in this dialogue, as in many others, is to be attributed to Plato, and not to Socrates who actually speaks about it. Nonetheless, I will use the names of Plato and Socrates interchangeably, depending on the context, based on the presupposition.

²⁰² *Ibid.*, 192d2-193a1.

²⁰³ *Ibid.*, 205e4-206a3.

²⁰⁴ In her essay “The Eternal and the New: Socrates and Levinas on Desire and Need,” Deborah Achtenberg suggests that Socrates invokes need for the same reason Levinas rejects it, namely, to highlight human vulnerability. In his claim that love is a kind of need, Socrates wishes to reject the male model of heroic self-sufficiency. Levinas, by contrast, finds any kind of need as an attempt to return to the self. Consequently, he promotes a metaphysical desire that embarks on a journey that knows no return. In both

independence and singularity of the being in which the absolute Desire, that does not return to itself, is produced. Such characters are possible only because of the resistance of the being to the totality or all kinds of determination. We will discuss this issue more below, as we explore more deeply the significance of the Desire for the Infinite in Levinas's thought.

Despite the similarity between the Platonic notion of erotic love and Levinas's concept of Desire in that they both do not return to the self, we will find their differences in many respects. First of all, unlike the former, the latter does not signify a need or lack, as we have seen. It seems to me that for Levinas, saying that a desire is a lack would necessarily mean that it will return to the self. Plato does not seem to see such a correlation, which would have made him inconsistent with his argument. Even if he does, at least he does not consider it as a problem. Further, while the goal of love for Plato is immortality, Desire in Levinas is directed toward the strange Other.²⁰⁵ As Diotima recounts it with Socrates's continuous agreement, love is fundamentally a desire to possess what is eternally good. It expresses itself in the propensity to generate and reproduce offspring in beauty. It is thus a desire for immortality.²⁰⁶ For Levinas, by contrast, immortality is "not the objective of the first movement of Desire, but the Other, the Stranger. It is absolutely non-egoist; its name is justice. It does not link up beings already akin" (*TeI*, 58/*TaI*, 63). In his view, desiring immortality, even with what is good, is a way of returning to the self since immortality that love seeks for is nothing but a

cases the human being finds herself vulnerable. See Brian Schroeder and Silvia Benso, eds. *Levinas and the Ancients* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2008), 24-39.

²⁰⁵ Plato, *The Symposium*, 207a3-4; *TeI*, 58/*TaI*, 63.

²⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 206e6-207a4.

perpetuation of the self. Only when Desire is directed toward that which is completely foreign or strange, can one be assured that it is not a home-bound movement. For this reason Levinas finds the idea of creation *ex nihilo* in the monotheistic tradition very appealing, not because it gives a better story of creation than its counterparts, but rather because “the separated and created being is...not simply issued forth from the father, but is absolute other than him” (*TeI*, 58/*TaI*, 63). Creation *ex nihilo* makes possible the birth of an offspring that is completely new, separated, and independent. In other words, the child produced in the (pro-)creation is not the propagation of its parents who seek for immortality, but rather a completely independent being or “a true other” (*TeI*, 58/*TaI*, 63). We will return to the notion of creation *ex nihilo* later in this chapter.

It is thus clear that for Levinas erotic love cannot accomplish what the metaphysical desire aims at, namely, the “welcome of the Other, hospitality” (*TeI*, 284/*TaI*, 254; cf. *TeI*, 58/*TaI*, 63). What it seeks is but “a connatural being, a sister soul,” and thus ends up presenting itself as “incest” (*TeI*, 285/*TaI*, 254). In Levinas’s view, however, love is actually “an event situated at the limit of immanence and transcendence,” and as such, it is ambiguous. On the one hand, it is hard to deny that love brings the self out of its familiar environment toward the beloved and even beyond her. The face of the beloved “filters the obscure light coming from the beyond the face, from what *is not yet*, from a future never future enough, more remote than the possible” (*TeI*, 285/*TaI*, 254-55). In this respect love, at least initially, is a transcendental movement toward the Other. On the other hand, the subject in love also enjoys the beloved, and this enjoyment, in Levinas’s view, is fundamentally a return to the self. To enjoy something

or someone, he seems to think, is to attend to the need of the self, hence a movement back home. By returning to immanence that is expressed in the enjoyment of the Other, love breaks and brings to satisfaction its initial movement of transcendence. This is why he finds the phrase “an enjoyment of the transcendent” almost contradictory in terms (*TeI*, 285/*TaI*, 255). This “simultaneity of need and desire, of concupiscence and transcendence” is for Levinas what constitutes “the originality of the erotic” (*TeI*, 285-86/*TaI*, 255).

Two points are worth making here. First, if the problem with erotic love, as Levinas conceives it, is that it is fundamentally selfish and thus unable to make a metaphysical movement toward the Other, it may not be the only form of relation that suffers from such a shortcoming. Friendship has the same weakness, too, as it is generally based on mutual advantage and share of interest. Both erotic love and friendship are actually forms of self-love, or as Kierkegaard puts it, “passionate preferential love” because they are based on certain preference and selection that would satisfy *my* drives and inclinations.²⁰⁷ The reason why Levinas does not entertain friendship as a form of metaphysical relation is perhaps because it is, arguably, more clearly a self-serving relation than erotic love. In erotic relation the lover may be drawn to the beloved as if she were in a metaphysical movement that knows no return. But for Levinas, as we saw earlier, such a movement is only quasi-metaphysical, as it is eventually bound to immanence. It is thus not without reason that Levinas calls the Other ‘the Stranger’ (*TeI*, 58/ *TaI*, 63) because familiarity often dictates our preference and selection. Only when

²⁰⁷ Søren Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, edited and translated by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995), 53.

we let ourselves be bound to the strange Other, will such an unethical standard cease to play a role in our intersubjective relation. Second, we may sometimes get the sense that what Levinas means by metaphysical desire is roughly equivalent to the notion of *agape* that implies an unconditional and self-sacrificing love. Actually, in one of his later interviews Levinas himself calls the responsibility for the Other *agape*.²⁰⁸ But he considers such a responsibility “the harsh name for love” because “it gives much less pleasure, because it ‘coos’ so much less than love.”²⁰⁹ Indeed, since ethics means putting into question our very being and the *conatus essendi*, Levinas seems to think, it cannot be a pleasant situation. At least, it will not be as pleasurable as any kind of love.²¹⁰ This is probably the main reason why Levinas does not often use the phrase *love for the neighbor* to designate the metaphysical desire for the Other. When he does, however, he invariably means it as the responsibility for the Other.

In any case, the failure of erotic love to qualify as a metaphysical desire only shows that a movement toward true transcendence requires more than a sheer act of reaching out to the Other. What starts out as a transcendental movement may turn out to be a return to the self. Levinas makes it clear that Desire is all about the Other, not about the self in any way (*TeI*, 57-8/*TaI*, 63; *TeI*, 284/*TaI*, 254). The history of Western philosophy, Levinas argues, is filled with attempts to take account of the Other without, unfortunately, fully respecting its alterity. Hegel’s concept of *desire* in particular can be

²⁰⁸ Johan F. Goud, “‘What One Asks of Oneself, One Asks of A Saint’: A Dialogue with Emmanuel Levinas, 1980-81,” *Levinas Studies*, vol. 3, ed. Jeffrey Bloechl (Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press, 2008), 24.

²⁰⁹ Goud, 24.

²¹⁰ We may be able to see this point more clearly in a later discussion of the ‘object’ of a metaphysical desire.

viewed as the main target of Levinas's criticism of quasi-metaphysical movement in that history. Its brief comparison with Levinas's understanding of the term may help us see the radical position that the French philosopher takes in this regard.

3.1.3. The Making of Desire: Levinasian or Otherwise

We have seen now what Levinas makes of desire: it is Desire for the Infinite that in no way seeks to return to its originating place. This interpretation of desire can be seen as a response to Hegel's notion of desire as power. The latter's concept of *Aufhebung* is seen as a threat to the recognition of the full status of the Other as other insofar as the supersession is considered a self-mediation of consciousness by its own alterity of thought. If consciousness's quest for recognition reveals itself to be a narcissistic longing and self-fulfilling aggrandizement, or as Lyotard puts it, a "caprice of identity," then this historical progression of Spirit will always mean a return to itself.²¹¹ This very self-same movement, which the concept *Aufhebung* implies, contains within itself the seed of violence, which is nothing but the suppression or the negation of that which is other. Here Levinas's distinction between Desire and Need becomes important, as he attempts to show that the metaphysical desire for the Infinite is not a form of Need in any way. Desire does not make use of the alterity of the Other as a springboard for one's own self-understanding and recognition. Completely needless, it does not make a self-bound movement. Animated by this Desire, the subject rather feels drawn to the Other in

²¹¹ Jean-François Lyotard, "Levinas' Logic," *Face to face with Levinas*, ed. Richard A. Cohen (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1986), 118.

responsibility. Here the Other is not in any way treated as part of the project of the subject. Thus, the integrity of her difference is fully preserved. The Hegelian desire (*Begierde*), in other words, is actually Need in the Levinasian sense insofar as it seeks to overcome a lack or separation in the intersubjective relation. The moment of reconciliation, of mutual and self-forgiveness after the initial clash or conflict for recognition becomes a teleological movement in which the Other is drawn within the totalizing domain of self-same consciousness. It is clear then that the Hegelian desire is quite different from the Levinasian one.

Thus the distinction between Need and Desire helps us see once again, as we already saw in Chapter One, that the assimilation process of the Other in which Need is involved, is “the primary movement of the Same” (*TeI*, 119/*TaI*, 116). We recall that the *I* always seeks to preserve the identity of the Same by subjecting the general Other to itself. In doing so it reduces the alterity of the other. Need, as the movement of the Same, sees the general other as its source of completion, “of plenitude and wealth” (*TeI*, 118/*TaI*, 114-15). Its reaching out to the Other is only a temporary movement as it is bound to returning to itself. By contrast, Desire, as a metaphysical movement, always aims at the beyond of satisfaction and happiness. Its interest is never economic or integrative in nature. The metaphysical desire is for Levinas a transcendental movement whose trajectory knows no end, much less returns to its originating place. Nothing can hold back such a movement: “Freedom, reduced to the identity of the Same, cannot repress the Desire for the *absolutely Other*.”²¹² The life of Desire, so to speak, is destined

²¹² Levinas, “Transcendence and Height,” *LC*, 62-3/*BPW*, 12.

not for itself, but rather for the absolutely Other. In the ethical relation, according to Levinas, it is Desire rather than Need that governs human action; the Desire for the Other is “our very sociality.”²¹³ The subject approaches the Other not because it needs something from the Other for its own satisfaction or completion, but rather because it feels responsible for the Other, thanks to Desire within: “Desire, an aspiration that does not proceed from a lack – metaphysics – is the desire of a person” (*TeI*, 333/*TaI*, 298). We recall from Chapter Two that the structure of subjectivity is the Other-in-the-Same. This means that the Other is very intimate to the subject, closer than the subject is to itself. This proximity, paradoxically, does not diminish the desire for the Other, but rather intensifies it. The subject can never have enough of the Other despite the “presence” of the Other within it: “The desirable does not fill up my desire but hollows it out, nourishing me as it were with new hungers.”²¹⁴ This is for Levinas what metaphysics is all about, namely, that it is bound to the absolutely Other beyond satisfaction. To posit metaphysics as Desire, in his view, is “to interpret the production of being... as goodness and as beyond happiness... as being for the Other” (*TeI*, 340/*TaI*, 304). Metaphysics does not seek its own completion through assimilation, which often results in totalization, but rather respects the otherness of the Other. Here Levinas’s usage of the term *desire* is significant because it suggests both a relation and a constant separation between the subject and the Other. Desire is the mode of relation between the subject and the Other

²¹³ Levinas, “The Trace of the Other,” *EDE*, 269/*DC*, 350.

²¹⁴ *Ibid.*, *EDE*, 270/*DC*, 351. The “presence” of the Other within the subject, as we have seen, is not actually in the present. It is due to the occurrence in the immemorial past that can never be brought to the present.

that does not suggest the intention to close their distance.²¹⁵ It thus prevents the collapse of the difference of the two parties through assimilation and thematization. What Desire calls for is the respect for the otherness of the Other. In the alterity of the Other, according to Levinas, lies the locus of the Most-High: “The very dimension of height is opened up by metaphysical Desire” (*TeI*, 23/*TaI*, 34). Thus, only in the metaphysical desire can one find the access to the realm of the absolutely other, the dimension of the height.

It is in the metaphysical desire for the absolutely other, I would argue, that one can find another link between ethics and religion in Levinas’s philosophy. Desire opens up the realm of the Infinite that animates the structure of subjectivity. Levinas says in *Ethics and Infinity*, “For my part, I think that the relation to the Infinite is not a knowledge, but a Desire... Desire is like a thought which thinks more than it thinks, or more than what it thinks” (*EeI*, 86-7/*EaI*, 92). We shall discuss more about the Infinite later in this chapter and in the rest of this study. For the time being it would suffice to say that the structure of subjectivity as the Other-in-the-Same and as Desire for the Other involves inexhaustible surplus that leads to a constant searching for proper expressions of the responsibility for the Other: “The dis-quieting of the Same by the Other is the Desire that shall be a searching, a questioning, an awaiting: patience and length of time, and the very mode of surplus, of superabundance. Searching, this time, not as the expression of a lack, but as a manner of carrying the ‘more in the less’.”²¹⁶ The “more in the less,” which

²¹⁵ See Schroeder, *Philosophy and Desire*, 55.

²¹⁶ Levinas, “God and Philosophy,” *DVI*, 130/*GCM*, 81.

is Desire, becomes the “measure” of the Infinite: absolute and, like goodness, beyond satisfaction.

3.2. The Idea of the Infinite Within Us

We have seen above Levinas’s account of Desire as the outward movement toward the absolutely Other. Unlike Need that seeks for its own satisfaction through its objects, Desire aims at the beyond of any satisfaction. It does not suffer from homesickness and thus attempt to return to itself for comfort. Instead, the metaphysical desire brings the subject toward the completely unknown, as if it knew that its destiny would lie beyond itself. Naturally the notion of the Infinite plays itself out in the exposition of this metaphysical movement: there is infinity in the relation between the subject and the Other.²¹⁷ Indeed, Levinas calls “the relation which binds the *I* to the Other (*Autrui*)” the idea of the Infinite.²¹⁸ The intersubjective relation never seeks for a full comprehension or adequation between the two parties, which Western philosophy, in Levinas’s view, attempts to achieve. The idea of the Infinite points to the absolutely irreducible alterity, which is never subject to comprehension. It is “this extravagant movement of going beyond being or transcendence toward an immemorial antiquity.”²¹⁹ Expressed in the face of the Other, it presents itself not as cognition, but rather as

²¹⁷ As in many cases, Levinas is inconsistent with the capitalization of the “I” in the word “Infinite.” Sometimes he capitalizes the *I*, at other times he doesn’t, even in the same text! For the sake of uniformity, I will capitalize the I when writing “the Infinite,” even though it may not necessarily be the case in the original writing.

²¹⁸ Levinas, “Transcendence and Height,” *LC*, 85/BPW, 19.

²¹⁹ Levinas, “Phenomenon and Enigma,” *EDE*, 299/CPP, 71.

unquenchable Desire, because it is “more *cognitive* than cognition itself.”²²⁰ The Other is thus recognized in its full alterity and situated in the dimension of height and of the ideal. This is why the structure of this metaphysical desire, according to Levinas, ought to be different from that of contemplation: “Infinity is not the object of a contemplation, that is, is not proportionate to the thought that thinks it. The idea of infinity is a thought which at every moment thinks more than it thinks. A thought that thinks more than it thinks is a desire. Desire ‘measures’ the infinity of the Infinite.”²²¹

In this section we will look briefly into the notion of the Infinite and what it means for Levinas and Hegel, comparatively. Afterwards, we will discuss the idea of the Infinite in Descartes’s *Meditations* from which Levinas draws much inspiration for his work.

3.2.1. The Infinite: A Brief Comparison between Levinas and Hegel

Let us begin by noting that the Infinite, in Levinas’s view, is not the term for the end of one’s intellectual journey. It is not a Hegelian notion of Infinite that is produced by an infinition of the entire progress to the Infinite, even when one calls the Infinite ‘God.’ This would be what Jean-Luc Marion calls ‘conceptual atheism,’ that is, a conceptual discourse that pretends to accede positively to God through its own construction.²²² The Cartesian ontology, though in itself adopting the idea of the Infinite,

²²⁰ Levinas, “Philosophy and the Idea of Infinity,” *EDE*, 241/*CPP*, 56.

²²¹ Levinas, “Philosophy and the Idea of Infinity,” *EDE*, 242/*CPP*, 56.

²²² Jean-Luc Marion, *God Without Being, Hors-Texte*, trans. Thomas A. Carlson (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1991), 32-3.

makes the same mistake in thinking that the ‘in’ of the Infinite signifies the triumph of the Same over the Other, hence suppressing all transcendence. Descartes himself, according to Levinas, teaches us the idea of the Infinite in a passive subject, namely, that the idea is *placed in us*. This original teaching makes possible the proper thinking of transcendence. The discourse on the Infinite, for Levinas, is not an attempt to thematize it; it rather becomes a searching for the Infinite – under the shock or influence of the Infinite. That is why Levinas finds it important, in his course on *God and Onto-theo-logy*, to quote Descartes’s letter to Mersenne: “I have never treated of the infinite, except to submit to it.”²²³ Levinas’s concept of the Infinite thus registers under the term ‘the inactual’ or ‘out of date’ (*l’inactuel*), which means “*the other* of the actual...of *being-in-act*... of the *esse* of being” (*HAH*, 11/*HO*, 3). It is “a living infinite” (*infini vivant*) that increases infinitely as “an obligation more and more strict in the measure that obedience progresses” (*AE*, 223/*OB*, 142). This is because the Infinite is not the *Sollen* but rather “life without death...a life outside of essence and nothingness” (*AE*, 223/*OB*, 142). Thus, the more I answer to the Other, the more I am responsible: “The more I approach the neighbor with which I am encharged, the further away I am” (*AE*, 149/*OB*, 93).

From the above exposition we may understand that for Levinas the opposite of Infinity is not finitude, as in Hegel, but rather totality. While the Infinite in Hegelian

²²³ Levinas, *Dieu, la mort et le temps*, hereafter *DMT* (Paris: Éditions Grasset & Fasquelle, 1993), 164; *God, Death, Time*, hereafter *GDT*, trans. Bettina Bergo (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000), Lecture on December 12, 1975, 142; 268. One might find instructive a longer excerpt from Descartes’s actual letter to Mersenne, dated January, 28, 1641: “I have read through the booklet of M. Morin, whose principal fault is that it treats everywhere of the infinite, as though his mind were above, and he were able to comprehend its properties, which is a fault common to all; one I have attempted to avoid with care, since I have never treated of the infinite other than to submit to it, and never to determine what it is or what it is not.” See *Descartes: Philosophical Letters*, translated and edited by Anthony Kenny (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1981), 92-3.

metaphysics is conceived as becoming, namely, the self-overcoming of a limited being, in Levinas's philosophy it disrupts any attempt to bring closure to the transcendental movement. For Levinas the Infinite never stops but always goes beyond any form of totality. Thus, Hegel's conception of the Absolute as simulatenously infinite and total as well as the collapse of infinity and finitude into a speculative unity, as Brian Schroeder puts it, betray "the transcendence that infinity implies and so constitutes the initial intersubjective violence."²²⁴ Interestingly, for Levinas the being who lives in a totality is merely a living being, not a thinking being, because it thinks of itself as the center of being and absorbs everything around for its immediate needs:

That which lives in the totality exists as a totality, as if it occupied the center of being and were its source, as though it drew everything from the here and now, but in which it is in fact placed or created. For it, the forces that traverse it are already assumed -- it experiences them as already integrated into its needs and its enjoyment. What is perceived by the thinking being as exteriority inviting it to labor and assume ownership is experienced by the living being as its substance, co-substantial with it, essentially immediate, an element and an environment.²²⁵

What such a being suffers, according to Levinas, is precisely "an absence of exteriority."²²⁶ It is the exterior being, or the Other, that would draw the self-centered being out of its self-preoccupation. The infinity of the Other would then take the initially self-preoccupied being to the beyond where totality can never exist.

Here one may naturally ask about the nature of the Infinite: who or what is the Infinite? Does the term apply only to God, or also to the human being I encounter? It is clear that Levinas uses the term 'the Infinite' only for God, and never for a human being,

²²⁴ Brian Schroeder, "The (Non)Logic of Desire and War: Hegel and Levinas," *Philosophy and Desire*, ed. Hugh J. Silverman (New York and London: Routledge, 2000), 53.

²²⁵ Levinas, "The *I* and the Totality," *ENT*, 13/*ENP*, 23.

²²⁶ *Ibid.*, *ENT*, 14/*ENP*, 24.

despite the characterization of infinity in the encounter with her. The human Other is not the Infinite itself, but bears the marks or traces of infinity.²²⁷ Those traces make possible the infinity of the subject's relation with the Other, which the intention of consciousness can never fully capture.²²⁸ Levinas explicitly says that the human Other is not the incarnation of God, but rather the manifestation of the height through her face (*TeI*, 77/*TaI*, 78-9). She is "the very locus of metaphysical truth," and necessary for my relationship with God. But she is not the Infinite itself: "The Infinite is not 'in front of' me."²²⁹ One can say that true transcendence is born of the intersubjective relation precisely because of the marks of infinity in the human Other. The divine Other, by contrast, is the true and proper Infinite. In fact, it is the Divine Other that allows the human Other to bear the traces of infinity. Levinas makes this point rather clearly in his discussion of the idea of the Infinite within us, which we are about to look deeply into.

3.2.2. The Cartesian Idea of the Infinite and Levinas's Appropriation

Levinas's notion of the idea of the Infinite in us is derived from Descartes's *Meditations on First Philosophy*, particularly the Third Meditation in which the topic of the existence of God is discussed. After examining the different ideas that he finds in him

²²⁷ This is why for Levinas transcendence should become the point of departure for our concrete relations with the Other: "Transcendence is only possible when the Other (*Autrui*) is not initially the fellow human being or the neighbor; but when it is the very distant, when it is Other, when it is the one with whom initially I have nothing in common, when it is in abstraction... Transcendence is only possible with the Other (*Autrui*), with respect to whom we are absolutely different, without this difference depending on some quality." See Levinas, "Transcendence and Height," *LC*, 109/*BPW*, 27.

²²⁸ We will discuss the topic of the face of the Other as a trace of God in the next chapter.

²²⁹ Levinas, "God and Philosophy," *DVI*, 123/*GCM*, 75.

and wondering about their origins, Descartes begins to take up the idea of God and asks whether such an idea could not have originated from him. By “God” he understands “a certain substance that is infinite, independent, supremely intelligent and supremely powerful, and that created me along with everything else that exists.”²³⁰ Although the idea of substance may have come from him for the fact that he is a substance himself, Descartes infers that the idea of an *infinite* substance must have come from some other source than himself because he is only a *finite* substance and cannot therefore produce such an idea regardless of how much his knowledge will have increased. Moreover, he cannot perceive the Infinite simply through an idea of it but only through a negation of the finite, of which he experiences. Indeed, he has a clear understanding that there is more reality in an infinite substance than there is in a finite one. Regarding his own existence, he observes his lack of power to bring it about himself since he is only a thinking thing. Therefore, he must owe his own existence, Descartes concludes, to some other being than himself. From the fact that he exists and that there is the idea of a most perfect being, namely, God in him, he concludes that God exists. Since he himself cannot produce the idea of God, Descartes concludes that such an idea must be “innate” in him, just as the idea of himself is. He further notes, “It is not astonishing that in creating me, God should have endowed me with this idea, so that it would be like the mark of the craftsman impressed upon his work.”²³¹

²³⁰ René Descartes, *Discourse on Method and Meditations on First Philosophy*, trans. Donald A. Cress fourth edition (Indianapolis/Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company, 1998), 76.

²³¹ *Ibid.*, 80.

By interpreting God as an infinite substance, isn't Descartes operating in the realm of ontological thinking? Doesn't a substance, infinite as God is, still belong to the realm of Being? Levinas thinks so. In his view, by thinking of God first as an *eminent* being or as "existence in the superlative mode," Descartes fundamentally maintains "a substantialist language."²³² But Descartes's greatest contribution does not lie there, but rather in the "breakup of consciousness" due to the fact that "God escapes the structure of the *cogito cogitatum* and signifies what cannot be contained."²³³ Thus Levinas sees the Cartesian analysis of the idea of the Infinite as invariably having "meaning in diachrony" or in "two times" that makes it refractory to synthesis: the first time refers to God as "the *cogitatum* of a *cogitatio*," and the second to "what signifies the uncontainable *par excellence*, what surpasses all *capacity*."²³⁴ This diachrony, Levinas suggests, is perhaps "what is proper to transcendence."²³⁵

3.2.2.1. Differences of Focus

Despite the Cartesian import of the idea of the Infinite, it is important for us to realize the differences of focus in Descartes and Levinas in using and determining the role of such an idea in their respective projects. In the Third Meditation Descartes basically seeks to prove God's existence by appealing to the presence of such an idea within us that cannot be attributed to us. He accordingly emphasizes the nature of the idea

²³² Levinas, "Outside of Experience: The Cartesian Idea of the Infinite," *DMT*, 249/*GDT*, 215-16.

²³³ *Ibid.*, *DMT*, 249/*GDT*, 216.

²³⁴ *Ibid.*, *DMT*, 248-49/*GDT*, 215-16.

²³⁵ *Ibid.*, *DMT*, 248/*GDT*, 215.

as the truest, clearest, and most distinct, whose reality is guaranteed by all the perfections that he conceives as instantaneously joined in God. For Levinas, by contrast, what matters in this argument is not the proof of God's existence itself, but rather the presence of something within us, namely, the idea of the Infinite, which we cannot account for nor attribute to our own doing or making. Such an idea interrupts the primacy of the *cogito* and undoes the consciousness that is conscious of it. Not surprisingly, the presence of the idea of the Infinite in us is very intriguing for Levinas and practically shapes his understanding of human subjectivity and of the work of human intentionality. Instead of focusing on the proof of God's existence, Levinas makes use of this argument to show the deep-seated structure of the subjectivity of the subject and to elaborate on the significance of the idea of the Infinite in us. Even for Descartes himself, according to Levinas, it is the idea of the Infinite itself that eventually becomes primary, even though he starts off with the *cogito*. This is because the idea of the Infinite is "prior to the *cogito*, and the *cogito* would never have been possible if there had not already been the idea of God."²³⁶

Let us now look more deeply into the distinguishing marks of the idea of the Infinite, whose importance Levinas will point out, in comparison with other ideas we have. First of all, for Descartes, as we have seen above, all ideas present in a human subject, except for the idea of the Infinite, can be attributed to the creation of the human

²³⁶ Levinas, "Transcendence and Height," *LC*, 103/*BPW*, 25. It is doubtful that Descartes himself makes such an argument. The first part of the argument may be defensible in that since the idea of the Infinite has been 'placed' in us, it must be prior to any other ideas or even to the *cogito* itself. The second part does not seem easy to defend: how is it that the idea of the Infinite makes possible the existence of the *cogito*? Unless, perhaps, what Levinas means is that since I owe my existence to God, I would not have existed or even have had my *cogito* had there not been God who created me. But this suggestion pertains more to my existence and not to my *cogito* as such.

soul. In his estimation the soul does not have the capacities to bring about the idea of the Infinite, as it does with other ideas. The lack of such power is due to, among others, the absence of direct experience of infinity, as he points out in the Meditation. Levinas makes the same point from a different point of view. In the idea of the Infinite, he says, “the distance between idea and ideatum is not equivalent to the distance that separates a mental act from its object in other representations. The abyss that separates a mental act from its object is not deep enough for Descartes not to say that the soul can account for the ideas of finite things by itself.”²³⁷ For Levinas, however, the fact that a finite thought could accommodate the idea of the Infinite should be puzzling us.²³⁸ Second, related to the first point, the idea of the Infinite is exceptional because its ideatum, that is, the object of the idea, surpasses its very idea. There is no adequation between the ideatum and the idea: “The exception of the idea of the Infinite implies the awakening of a psyche that cannot be reduced to the pure correlation and the noetic-noematic parallelism which the least prejudiced analysis finds in human thought approached in the context of knowledge.”²³⁹ This is what Levinas means by ‘infinity.’ He thus takes the idea of the Infinite in us as “the breakup of consciousness, which is not a repression into the unconscious but a sobering or a waking up [*réveil*] that shakes the ‘dogmatic slumber’ that sleeps at the bottom of all consciousness resting upon the object.”²⁴⁰ Echoing the Kantian realization of the subject-object relation, he points to the contradiction that exists in the laws of the life of consciousness, due to the idea of the Infinite in us. For such an

²³⁷ Levinas, “Philosophy and the Idea of Infinity,” *EDE* 238/*CPP*, 54.

²³⁸ Levinas, “The Idea of the Infinite in Us,” *ENP*, 227/*ENT*, 219.

²³⁹ *Ibid.*, *ENP*, 228/*ENT*, 220.

²⁴⁰ Levinas, “God and Philosophy,” *DVI*, 105/*GCM*, 63.

idea clearly does not fit in the classical phenomenology that is built on the premise of the adequation between the thinking and what is thought, or between the intending and what is intended. The ‘cogitatum’ here, namely, the Infinite, cannot be seized in principle, and is therefore far from being the correlate of my cogito, as classical phenomenology generally claims. The cogito is unable to take control over or to command this particular ‘cogitatum’; it is beyond representation and thematization. As a result, the *cogito* becomes dumbfounded: “The placing in us of an unencompassable idea overturns this presence to self which is consciousness; it thus forces through the barrier and the checkpoint, it confounds the obligation to accept or adopt all that enters from without.”²⁴¹

Given the infinity of the idea of the Infinite in us, the intentionality that operates here is different from that of other ideas in that it aims at what it cannot embrace. The *I* that thinks infinity cannot subject the Infinite to its power nor extinguish such alterity. The Infinite is the radically, absolutely, other. In thinking infinity, Levinas says, from the very beginning the *I* “*thinks more than it thinks.*”²⁴² Already in *Totality and Infinity* he makes this very point: “The idea of infinity is exceptional in that its *ideatum* surpasses its idea, whereas for the things the total coincidence of their ‘objective’ and ‘formal’ realities is not precluded; we could conceivably have accounted for all the ideas, other than that of Infinity, by ourselves... The distance that separates *ideatum* and idea here constitutes the content of the *ideatum* itself.... The transcendent is the sole *ideatum* of which there can be only an idea in us; it is infinitely removed from its idea, that is, exterior, because it is

²⁴¹ *Ibid.*, DVI, 107/GCM, 64.

²⁴² Levinas, “Philosophy and the Idea of Infinity,” *EDE*, 239/CP, 54; italics original. See “Transcendence and Height,” *LC*, 85/BPW, 19.

infinite” (*TeI*, 40-1/*TaI*, 49). It basically means that the Infinite overflows the thought that thinks it. What is given in the idea of the Infinite exceeds what this idea could mean or intend. The intentionality cannot be reduced to the act of comprehending or grasping, if any, since what is actually happening simply goes beyond what the *I* can ever account for:

The idea of infinity is then not the only one that teaches what we are ignorant of. It has been *put* into us. It is not a reminiscence. It is experience in the sole radical sense of the term: a relationship with the exterior, with the other, without this exteriority being able to be integrated into the same. The thinker who has the idea of infinity is *more than himself*, and this inflating, this surplus, does not come from within, as in the celebrated *project* of modern philosophers, in which the subject surpasses himself by creating.²⁴³

The idea of infinity is simply not a concept that captures its whole content. For this reason the relationship between the *I* and the Infinite should not be conceived of as that between a container and a content because, in Levinas’s view, “the *I* cannot contain the Infinite.”²⁴⁴ Neither should one think of the *I* as necessarily bound to the Infinite because they are separate from each other. In other words, the Infinite remains transcendent despite the presence of its idea in us.

3.2.2.2. Metaphysical Experience

It is interesting to note that for Levinas this is what *metaphysical experience* is all about, as it leads the subject into a relation with true exteriority. It can even be called “outside of experience” (*hors l’expérience*) because it is not an ‘ordinary’ experience that

²⁴³ Levinas, “Philosophy and the Idea of Infinity,” *EDE*, 239/*CPP*, 54.

²⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, *EDE*, 238/*CPP*, 53-4.

we take for granted.²⁴⁵ Unlike an ordinary experience, which consists in “the always and ever active activity of *identification* of a unity across the multiplicity,” there is resistance in a metaphysical experience for the identification process to take place because of the presence of ‘something’ that consciousness cannot gather.²⁴⁶ That ‘something’ is, for Levinas, the idea of the Infinite, which does not originate in the *cogito* but rather is placed in us. The presence of such an idea, which consciousness cannot contain, creates a tension, as it cannot be brought to immanence where consciousness finds at home. But at the same time it allows us to have the experience of transcendence and takes us beyond Being: “It is the tension of being in consciousness containing (as the “cogito” contains the idea of God) what it cannot contain, consciousness that thus stretches itself into philosophy, ‘plunged into such an experience.’ But it is that tension that is first: transcendence prior to being. It is *qua* metaphysical that experience is experience, i.e. subjectivity, i.e., beyond being.”²⁴⁷

It is important to note here that a metaphysical experience, for Levinas, is not to be equated with the engagement with *religious experience*. In other words, the preoccupation with religious teaching and theological discourse do not count as a metaphysical experience, no matter how deeply we are engaged in them. This is because they are predicated on the kind of thinking that fundamentally belongs to “the *I think*” and are thus “turned toward the philosophy of experience.”²⁴⁸ The narrative of religious experience, Levinas says, insofar as it is a narrative, “does not shake what philosophy

²⁴⁵ One of Levinas’s lectures in the “God and Onto-theology” course, given on May 14, 1976, bears this very title: “Outside of Experience: The Cartesian Idea of the Infinite.” See *DMT*, 246-251/*GDT*, 213-18.

²⁴⁶ Levinas, “Outside of Experience: The Cartesian Idea of the Infinite,” *DMT*, 247/*GDT*, 214.

²⁴⁷ Levinas, “Jean Wahl: Neither Having nor Being,” *HS*, 102-3/*OS*, 75.

²⁴⁸ Levinas, “Outside of Experience: The Cartesian Idea of the Infinite,” *DMT*, 247/*GDT*, 214.

will say in purifying the narrative; therefore it could not disrupt the present whose fulfillment is philosophy.”²⁴⁹ In the making of the narrative, the religious human being assimilates the religious revelation to the disclosure characteristic of philosophy and ultimately interprets God, which she claims to experience, in terms of being. To do so is, in Levinas’s view, to return, inevitably, to immanence, which is antithetic to his philosophy of transcendence.²⁵⁰ This is why, I believe, Levinas gives a more concrete (which is ethical) thrust to the significance of having the idea of the Infinite in us: to have the idea of the Infinite within is, in his view, to be in relationship with the Infinite, or the “social relationship.”²⁵¹ A metaphysical experience occurs preeminently in our relationship with the Other. What kind of relationship is it? He writes:

This relationship consists in approaching an absolutely exterior being. The infinity of this being, which one can therefore not contain, guarantees and constitutes this exteriority. It is not equivalent to the distance between a subject and an object. An object, we know, is integrated into the identity of the same; the I makes of it its theme, and then its property, its booty, its prey or its victim. The exteriority of the Infinite is manifested in the absolute resistance which by its apparition, its epiphany, it opposes to all my powers. Its epiphany is not simply by its apparition of a form in the light, sensible, or intelligible, but already this *no* cast to powers; its logos is: ‘You shall not kill.’²⁵²

We find in this passage the link that Levinas makes between the relationship with the Infinite and the ethical command. The social relationship cannot but be intimately bound to ethics because the very idea of the Infinite in the subject itself suggests the resistance to any form of conquest and suppression of alterity by the cogito. Ethical resistance

²⁴⁹ Levinas, “Outside of Experience: The Cartesian Idea of the Infinite,” *DMT*, 247/*GDT*, 214.

²⁵⁰ We will discuss more Levinas’s understanding of theology or religious discourse and particularly religion in Chapter Five.

²⁵¹ Levinas, “Philosophy and the Idea of Infinity,” *EDE* 239/*CPP*, 54.

²⁵² *Ibid.*, *EDE* 239-40/*CPP*, 54-55.

fundamentally means the presence of the Infinite.²⁵³ In this sense the experience is not only metaphysical, but also ethical. This is another way of saying that ethics is first philosophy: “The irreducible and ultimate experience of relationship appears to me in fact to be elsewhere: not in synthesis, but in the face to face of humans, in sociality, in its moral signification... Morality comes not as a secondary layer, above an abstract reflection on the totality and its dangers; morality has an independent and preliminary range. First philosophy is an ethics” (*EeI*, 71/*EaI*, 77).

3.2.2.3. The “In” Factor

Another way of looking at the relationship between the subject and the Infinite within is by elaborating the meaning of the “In” in the In-finite. First of all, the “in” suggests the negation of the finite. That is to say, it points to the beyond-being of the finite, or to the “otherwise than being” of the Infinite. This ‘quality,’ so to speak, causes the breakup of human consciousness (the “I think”) and disrupts the ordinary working of intentionality that grasps the content of its object and “as investment, synopsis, and synthesis – merely encloses in a presence, re-presents, brings back to presence, or lets be.”²⁵⁴ But the “in” implies not only the negation of the finite, Levinas quickly adds, but also the *within* (*le dans*) of the Infinite in the finite. Here the idea of the Infinite is equivalent to “the Infinite in me.”²⁵⁵ Both the *non-* (or the negation) and the *within*, as the

²⁵³ *Ibid.*, *EDE* 241/*CPP*, 55.

²⁵⁴ Levinas, “God and Philosophy,” *DVI*, 105/*GCM*, 63.

²⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, *DVI*, 105-6/*GCM*, 63-4.

simultaneous meanings of the “in” of the Infinite and thus should be understood at once, are intimately linked because the negation occurs *because of* the idea of the Infinite *within*, or because it “resides in subjectivity *qua* the idea of the Infinite.”²⁵⁶ Thus in Levinas’s view, the “in” of the Infinite signifies simultaneously the *non* and the *within*; the negation is the very subjectivity of the subject. For subjectivity, the idea of the Infinite therefore means “the non-able-to-comprehend-the-Infinite-by-thought” (*le ne-pas-pouvoir-comprendre-l’Infini-par-la-pensée*).²⁵⁷

The “in” of the Infinite, moreover, also suggests the being affected of the finite (*l’affection du Fini*). We recall Levinas’s argument, following Descartes, that the idea of the Infinite does not originate in our own *cogito*, but rather is put into us. This putting of such an idea suggests the passivity of our subjectivity. It is possible only because there is within us, as affected subjects, a certain fundamental passivity that is “unlike any other because it cannot be assumed... more passive than any passivity appropriate to a consciousness.”²⁵⁸ The idea of the Infinite is found to have already been within us even before the beginning of the *cogito*. The appearance of the Infinite is then not restricted to the measure of the *cogito*. An interrogation of consciousness cannot account for the origin of such an idea.

This affection of the finite by the Infinite, in Levinas’s view, is thorough and irreversible; the ‘placing’ of the Infinite in the finite re-shapes the subjectivity of the

²⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, DVI, 106 n.5 /GCM, 198n.10.

²⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, DVI, 108/GCM, 65.

²⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, DVI, 105-6/GCM, 63-4.

subject completely.²⁵⁹ The affection, however, is not Heidegger's *Befindlichkeit* in *Being and Time*, which is expressed in Dasein's anxiety of the *Jemeinigkeit* for its finitude of being-toward-death. It does not concern Dasein's affection by its being-in-the-world. Rather, it is "an emergence from the *Jemeinigkeit* of the *cogito* and its immanence construed as authenticity, toward a thought that thinks more than it thinks, and does better than think."²⁶⁰ That is to say, the idea of the Infinite in us changes the nature of human thought, or more precisely, the subjectivity: it ceases to be concerned with self-preservation by taking in everything alien or grasping it, but opens itself up to the exteriority. Its transcendental movement does not end up returning to immanence, but rather aims at the absolutely Other without return; it has the sort of excellence "proper to Spirit: perfection, or the Good."²⁶¹ In other words, thanks to the idea of the Infinite in the subject, the human thinking has become "a search for God."²⁶² Of course, this search for the Infinite, or Desire, is not an attempt to thematize or grasp the Infinite. Such attempts would be bound to failure. This Desire, as we have seen, is the kind that "withdraws from its satisfaction as it draws near the Desirable."²⁶³ It thus cannot be interpreted in terms of intentionality of consciousness. Any approach to the Desirable would only create distance [*éloigne*], and enjoyment is only the increase of hunger. Levinas cites Kierkegaard to make this point: "In the case of worldly goods, to the degree to which man feels less need for them, he becomes more perfect... But in the relationship between man and God the

²⁵⁹ Levinas, "The Idea of the Infinite in Us," *ENP*, 228/*ENT*, 220-1; "God and Philosophy," *DVI*, 110/*GCM*, 66.

²⁶⁰ Levinas, "The Idea of the Infinite in Us," *ENP*, 229/*ENT*, 221.

²⁶¹ *Ibid.*, *ENP*, 229/*ENT*, 221.

²⁶² See Levinas, "God and Philosophy," *DVI*, 150/*GCM*, 95.

²⁶³ *Ibid.*, *DVI*, 111/*GCM*, 67.

principle is inverted: the more man feels the need for God, the more he is perfect.”²⁶⁴

Unlike Need, as Levinas understands it, Desire seeks no end precisely because it arises from beyond Being. For Levinas, love (*l'amour*) is only possible through the idea of the Infinite in us, “by the ‘more’ that ravages and wakes up the ‘less,’ turning away from teleology, and destroying the time and the happiness [*l'heure et le bonheur*] of the end.”²⁶⁵ True love does not aim at satisfaction or fulfillment, but rather leads us to the Beloved, to the beyond.

We see, then, that for Levinas the idea of the Infinite in us changes the whole structure of human subjectivity. The human subject is not an egoistic being, concerned only with its own self-preservation and happiness. Rather, it has a fundamental orientation toward true exteriority thanks to the idea of the Infinite in her. Levinas boldly claims that humanity is not “some kind of explosion, egoist in the original egoism of being itself. It is the voice of God which reverberates in being.”²⁶⁶ In this sense the humanness of a human being (*l'humanité de l'homme*) can be understood as theology in

²⁶⁴ Levinas, “Hermeneutics and Beyond,” *DVI*, 171/*GCM*, 109. Unfortunately, this point becomes a bit weaker due to the use of the word “need” (*besoin*) to which Levinas has opposed the term *Desire*. Since the word is used in the citation from Kierkegaard, it is not necessarily Levinas’s mistake, since the latter clearly means, in the quote, the infinite desire for God as a mark of perfection.

²⁶⁵ Levinas, “God and Philosophy,” *DVI*, 112/*GCM*, 67. In the preface to *Totality and Infinity* Levinas makes a distinction between teleology and eschatology: “[Eschatology] does not introduce a teleological system into the totality; it does not consist in teaching the orientation of history” (*TeI*, 7/*TaI*, 22). Teleology reveals the finality of being, and as such operates in the realm of ontology of totality. Eschatology, by contrast, “institutes a relation with being *beyond the totality* or beyond history,” and makes possible “a signification without a context” in ethics (*TeI*, 7-8/*TaI*, 22-3). In a way true love is eschatological because it does not attempt to reach a particular finality, but beyond it. But the reader of Levinas may also be aware of the philosopher’s reservation about eschatology in his later thinking, for instance, in his interview with Richard Kearney in 1981. In it he seems to identify eschatology precisely with teleology in which a finality has been reached. To reach the eschaton, he says, would mean that “we could seize or appropriate God as a *telos* and degrade the infinite relation with the other to a finite fusion.” See Kearney, “Emmanuel Levinas, ‘Ethics of the Infinite,’ Interview, *Debates in Continental Philosophy: Conversations with Contemporary Thinkers*, 81. We will return to this issue in Chapter Four.

²⁶⁶ Levinas, “The Vocation of the Other,” *IRB*, 107.

the sense that it bears within it the divine presence that not even human thinking can ever fully comprehend.²⁶⁷ This is, I believe, the kind of subjectivity that Levinas wants to defend, as he states in the preface to the *Totality and Infinity*.

Having said that, I cannot help but ask myself these questions: Do I really have the desire for the Infinite? Or more precisely, do I truly desire the Other who bears the trace of the Infinite or through whom my experience of the Infinite becomes possible? If I do, why do I have a traumatic subjectivity that is a hostage of the Other, as if I never liked the Other for whom I am called to responsible? Of course, the trauma, which is unassumable, occurs because of the affectation by the Infinite. But since it calls me to responsibility for the Other, which I never choose in the first place, I may not like the calling. If this is the case, why would I desire the Other at all, even if it is only through the responsibility with the Other, as Levinas claims, that I may encounter the Infinite? Do I actually want to encounter the Infinite alone, and not necessarily the Other that bears its trace? In other words, I may have the Desire for the Infinite, but not for the Other as such. I will argue along this line later in this chapter. For the time being let us bear these questions in mind as we move along. I will also address them more extensively, in a broader context as well, in Chapter Five where the relation between ethics and religion in Levinas's thought, which is the topic of this study, will be specifically discussed.

3.3. The Infinite, God, and the Good

²⁶⁷ Levinas, "The Idea of the Infinite in Us," *ENP*, 230/*ENT*, 222.

In his philosophy Levinas often speaks of the beyond Being as the realm that animates human subjectivity or that to which the ethical relation with the Other takes us. As references to this realm, Levinas uses several terms, most notably, the Infinite, God, and the Good.²⁶⁸ We may ask whether all these terms have the same signification and therefore can be used interchangeably. Another question would be whether or not Levinas prefers one term to others, and if he does, why. These questions are important, as we explore more deeply the religious aspects of Levinas's ethics through the use of those terms. We will see how the religious terms are not simply elements of his ethics, but also, and more importantly, its pillars. That is to say, as I argue in this study, Levinas's ethics cannot be fully understood without the religious view that underpins it. It is not a secular ethics, but rather a religious one.

We will first take a look at the notion of the Infinite, which we discussed at length in the previous section. Levinas's preference for this philosophical term over the religious term 'God' is quite obvious, certainly not without good reasons. In order to deepen our understanding of the metaphysical desire for the Infinite, I will address the question why Levinas rarely speaks of a desire for the Other. This issue is linked to the topic of the following section about the role of the Good in the election of the subject to responsibility for the Other. We will see that this responsibility is for Levinas the very relation to the Infinite.

3.3.1. The Infinite and God

²⁶⁸ Another related term that Levinas often uses in his works is *illeity*, which suggests the withdrawal of God in the relation with the human being. It will be discussed in Chapter Four.

The discussion of Levinas's appropriation of Descartes's Third Meditation on the idea of the Infinite in the human subject may lead us to the following question: Is for Levinas the Infinite invariably the same as God? We see that in the Meditation Descartes defines God as an infinite and independent substance (*substantiam quandam infinitam, independentem*), the creator of everything that exists, including Descartes himself. This definition is pertinent to what he is attempting to do, namely, to prove the existence of God through the investigation on the nature and source of the idea of God (*idea Dei*) in him. He thus uses the phrase "the idea of God" extensively, as opposed to "the idea of the Infinite," as Levinas would employ in his writings. For Levinas himself the idea of the Infinite is virtually identical with the idea of God, although the frequency of their usage is markedly different. The idea of the Infinite, he says, "as such is the idea of God" (*l'idée de l'infini... pour autant est l'idée de Dieu*).²⁶⁹ In a way he has a different starting point than does Descartes: while Descartes begins with the idea of *God* and identifies it with that of an *infinite* substance, Levinas focuses on the idea of the *Infinite* and identifies it with that of *God*. Unlike Descartes, however, Levinas uses the phrase "the idea of the Infinite" much more often than its possible equivalents.²⁷⁰

There are good reasons for Levinas, I believe, to prefer the terms "the Infinite" or "the idea of the Infinite" to those like "God" or "the idea of God." First of all, he is aware of the context in which he is writing, which is philosophy, where the word "God" is not

²⁶⁹ Levinas, "The Idea of the Infinite in Us," *ENP*, 228/*ENT*, 220.

²⁷⁰ One good exception to this rule can be found in his 1975's essay, "God and Philosophy," in which both phrases are widely and interchangeably used.

always readily acceptable.²⁷¹ An essay in which the use of such a word is pervasive could be seen as theological writing, a charge that Levinas's commentators often bring against him. Using the term "the Infinite" helps him stay in a more neutral, or philosophical, zone, so to speak. It is for the same reason, I believe, that Levinas sometimes uses the term *the transcendent*, which is equivalent to the Infinite. Thus he does not hesitate to line them up together: "To think the Infinite, the transcendent, the Stranger, is hence not to think an object" (*TeI*, 41/*TaI*, 49). Second, and more importantly, the terms "the Infinite" or "infinity" fit much better in Levinas's overall project to show the inadequacy of the traditional account of the Husserlian intentionality. As we have seen, he calls the Infinite "an inassimilable alterity, a difference and absolute past with respect to everything that is shown, signaled, symbolized, announced, remembered, and thereby 'contemporized' with him who understands. It is absolution, anachoretism."²⁷² By showing that there are things, elements, and horizons that human intentionality cannot grasp such as the alterity of the Other, he attempts to show that the Other bears the marks of infinity. It is the infinity of the Other that allows the subject to make a genuine transcendental movement. This infinity, however, does not reside in the human Other because, as we have seen, she is not the incarnation of God (cf. *TeI*, 77/*TaI*, 79). Rather, it is grounded in the Infinite or God, of which the face of the Other is a trace. The Infinite, though found within the subject, maintains "its total exteriority with respect to him who thinks it" (*TeI*, 42/ *TaI*, 50). The subject is thus infinite, that is, unthematizable

²⁷¹ See, for instance, his statement in a later interview (1980-81): "The philosophy of our time barely tolerates that the little word 'God' is used. He who does use it is no longer regarded as a philosopher but is looked upon as a preacher." Johan F. Goud, "'What One Asks of Oneself, One Asks of A Saint': A Dialogue with Emmanuel Levinas," *Levinas Studies*, vol. 3, 22.

²⁷² Levinas, "Phenomenon and Enigma," *EDE*, 299/*CPP*, 71.

and uncontainable by human thought, thanks to the idea of the Infinite within. But at the same time there is in the subject a metaphysical Desire for the Infinite, namely, for what is beyond its possible satisfaction. As we have seen, this Desire does not arise from a lack that can be fixed with quick remedy. In fact, it nourishes the subject, hollows it out, and even feeds it with more hunger. The relation between the subject and the Infinite, according to Levinas, is precisely this kind of Desire. The term “infinity” thus points to the ‘quality’ of both the human Other thanks to the presence of the Infinite within, and the Desirable or the ‘object’ of Desire in the human subject. The first meaning points to the irreducibility of the human Other to the object of intentionality and representation or to a totality. The second meaning of infinity refers to the ‘object’ of Desire that makes the subject’s desire insatiable. Both senses of infinity are there thanks to the Infinite that Levinas often identifies with God.²⁷³

It is important to note, however, that the God whom Levinas speaks of here is not the God sought in the history of philosophy. The God of the philosophers, Levinas says, “from Aristotle to Leibniz, by way of the God of the scholastics, is a god adequate to reason.”²⁷⁴ The adequation occurs, in Levinas’s view, due to the very nature of philosophy that cannot get out of the circle of being in which it confines itself. As a result, Western philosophy – more specifically, consciousness and intentionality – cannot conceive of the strangeness or the beyond-being of God and thus naturally suppresses or annuls it. The God it produces is “a comprehended god who could not trouble the

²⁷³ I suppose it is possible to conceive of the Infinite not as God, at least in the way that Levinas portrays it. The Other could just be irreducible or ungraspable, actually or potentially, because the way the Other is, without the idea of God within. In other words, the Infinite is not necessarily identified with God. But Levinas does make such a move, thus making the Other a theological issue.

²⁷⁴ Levinas, “The Trace of the Other,” *EDE*, 263/DC, 346.

autonomy of consciousness.”²⁷⁵ Since the comprehension of Being is always made accessible and adequate to us or our thinking, the history of Western philosophy, in Levinas’s view, has been “a destruction of transcendence”.²⁷⁶ This is why in *Otherwise than Being* he explores the possibility of hearing “a God not contaminated by Being,” a project he deems no less important or precarious than Heidegger’s project “to bring Being out of the oblivion in which it is said to have fallen in metaphysics and in onto-theology” (*AE*, 10/*OB*, xlviii). We will return to the topic of the God of the beyond Being in Chapter Five where the different aspects of the relation between ethics and religion in Levinas’s thought, to which this study is devoted, are to be discussed.

At this point, however, it is important for us to ask these questions: What is the usage of the religious terms such as the Infinite or God in Levinas’s writings all about? What does he attempt to argue when exposing the Cartesian idea of the Infinite within us? How does such an idea relate to ethics? Does it serve as the condition for the possibility of ethics, namely, that Levinasian ethics would be possible only because of the presence of the idea of the Infinite within the subject? In his article that explores the Jewish dimensions of radical ethics, Robert Gibbs suggests a common theological starting point in both Franz Rosenzweig and Levinas’s ethical preoccupation. He writes, “The theological relations in *The Star of Redemption*...lead directly to the ethics of relations with another person. Hence, as in Levinas, we have an ethical reading of theological concerns. This is clearest when God’s love toward us commands us to love our neighbor. The responsibility we have to the infinite commits us to approach the one

²⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, *EDE*, 263/*DC*, 346.

²⁷⁶ Levinas, “God and Philosophy,” *DVI*, 95/*GCM*, 56.

nearest us, the neighbor.”²⁷⁷ Here Gibbs seems to argue that the relation with the Infinite or God, in both Rosenzweig and Levinas, leads us to the ethical responsibility for the Other. In this sense it is the condition for the possibility of ethics.²⁷⁸ This kind of thinking, as Jeffrey Kosky suggests, has its weaknesses, not only because it would put both God and the responsible subject in the order of causality, which is applicable only to beings, but also because it would contradict Levinas’s own claim about the primacy of ethics.²⁷⁹ Kosky himself claims, if I read him correctly, that the relation between Levinas’s account of ethical phenomenology and his notion of the Infinite must be read according to the Hegelian schema of philosophy of religion. Based on his reading of Levinas’s essay “The Idea of the Infinite in Us” that alludes to the Hegelian path of return of wisdom from heaven to earth, he suggests that in his ethical phenomenology Levinas succeeds in articulating theological notions in philosophical language “without leaving divine transcendence in a silent faith or purely subjective opinion and at the same time without destroying transcendence or denying the possibility of a revelation.”²⁸⁰ Here Kosky seems to refer to Levinas’s deep respect for transcendence in a unique way that leads him neither to the Kierkegaardian subjective relation with God, nor to an account in which an utter immanence prevails. This analysis is indeed correct since Levinas, as I have pointed out earlier, wishes to speak of God that is uncontaminated by Being or of God’s

²⁷⁷ Robert Gibbs, “Height and Nearness: Jewish Dimensions of Radical Ethics,” *Ethics as First Philosophy*, 18.

²⁷⁸ Here Gibbs’s apparent identification of the ethical responsibility for the Other with God’s commandment to love the neighbor is very intriguing because they do look similar, at least at first glance. But there are some important differences between the two orders that do not allow their easy identification. We will discuss this issue in Chapter Five.

²⁷⁹ Jeffrey L. Kosky, *Levinas and the Philosophy of Religion*, 182.

²⁸⁰ Kosky, *Levinas and the Philosophy of Religion*, 185.

transcendence in the wake of the promulgation of the death of God. But I am not sure how Kosky's claim helps us better understand the nature of the relation between the idea of the Infinite in us and the responsibility for the Other since he does not spell it out. Instead, he continues by speaking of the ethical possibility of God that is expressed in the face of the Other.

What would help us gain more insight into this issue, I believe, is an elaboration of the term the Good (*le Bien*), which Levinas often links to infinity. As we saw in Chapter 2, Levinas often speaks of the Good in connection with the election of the subject to be responsible for the Other. That is to say, the responsibility for the Other in the subject is in place not because of the subject's free choice, but rather because of the election of the Good, which occurs before the subject itself has freedom. The Good, which constitutes the subject anarchically, is beyond Being precisely because it is "Good *in itself* and not by relation to the need to which it is wanting; it is a luxury with respect to needs" (*TeI*, 105/*TaI*, 102-3). Here Levinas links the Good to Desire in that they are both beyond Being and satisfaction. The abode (*séjour*) of the Infinite, he says, is "in Goodness, which excludes precisely all complacency in oneself and in one's definition."²⁸¹ He also insists that the Place of the Good (*la Place du Bien*) beyond Being is "the most profound teaching, the definitive teaching, not of theology, but of philosophy" (*TeI*, 106/*TaI*, 103).²⁸² To recognize the Good as having "the pattern of Desire," for Levinas, is to endorse the Cartesian claim that the subject, as constituted by

²⁸¹ Levinas, "Phenomenon and Enigma," *EDE*, 299/*CPP*, 71.

²⁸² I suppose this insistence arises from the criticism Levinas may have received that his philosophy involves the Good so much that it begins to look like a theology. Here, I think, Levinas wants to assure his critics that the appeal to the Good beyond all essences is fundamentally philosophical, as it is founded on Plato.

the Good, has the idea of the Infinite within itself.²⁸³ Here, I believe, we can find the deep connection between Desire, the Good, and the Infinite in Levinas's thought. An elaboration of this correlation is to be given below.

Before we proceed further, however, it is important for us to note that the import of philosophical terms from the founding fathers of philosophy such as Plato in Levinas's writings does not necessarily guarantee that the original meaning of those terms will also be carried over. They may not entirely fit in their new setting. Take the notion of the Good beyond Being, for example. It is definitely a philosophical concept, which Levinas makes use of in order to support his metaphysical project that can speak of events of transcendence. But the original meaning of this term may not serve his purpose well. In the *Republic* from which the term *the Good beyond Being* is usually taken, Plato lays out his program of philosophical education whose ultimate goal is to see the Good. The Good provides truth and intelligence, existence and being to all things, he says. Therefore, the philosopher in training "who is going to act prudently in private or in public must see it."²⁸⁴ The metaphor of sight here is very important because it conveys the possibility for the philosopher to apply what he sees in the Good to the whole city. The very metaphor, however, clearly does not sit well in Levinas's general project. The ability to see something, whether externally or internally, presumably presupposes one's dwelling in the realm of Being: "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" (*TeI*, 301/*TaI*, 268). The Good may be said to be beyond Being, but in fact, it remains in the

²⁸³ See *TeI*, 106/*TaI*, 103.

²⁸⁴ Plato, *The Republic*, 517c.

realm of Being. This means that the Good ‘beyond Being’ in Plato may not be as transcendent as Levinas actually wishes it to be. Deborah Achtenberg suggests that it may not be a non-being but “hyper-being or second-order being.”²⁸⁵ This is not to mention, with such a metaphor, the danger of representation, thematization, and even totalization of what is being seen, which in this case is of the Good. All this fundamentally runs contrary to what Levinas himself attempts to do.

In any case, as we saw in Chapter Two, Levinas claims that the Good has elected the subject before the subject itself has freedom. It constitutes the subject in such a way that the subject is permeated with goodness. For the subject the constitution by the Good means a “subjection to an absolute order, to authority par excellence, or to the authority of excellence or of the Good.”²⁸⁶ The election of the subject by the Good fundamentally changes the subjectivity of the subject. The subject no longer operates on the level of being, as its subjectivity is already constituted by the beyond Being. In the words of Descartes’s Third Meditation, the subject has the idea of the Infinite within. This is also to say that the subject is transcendent in that it has the sort of “excellence proper to Spirit: perfection, or the Good” (*ENP*, 229/*ENT*, 221). From such a subjectivity arises the Desire for the Infinite, for the beyond Being. This is because the Good that has elected the subject before time is itself infinite: “Infinity opens the order of the Good” (*TeI*, 107/*TaI*,

²⁸⁵ Deborah Achtenberg, “The Eternal and the New: Socrates and Levinas on Desire and Need,” 37. She makes a similar claim, for a different reason, that the Good beyond Being in Plato and Levinas may mean different things: while in the former it is responsible for the ‘fitting’ or the congruence between the mathematical (the *this*) and the eidetic aspects (the *what*) of beings, in the latter it designates a radical singularity. If they were the same, she claims, the distinction between Platonic and Levinasian love and desire would collapse. See particularly pp. 35-8.

²⁸⁶ Levinas, “Diachrony and Representation,” *ENP*, 181/*ENT*, 174; see *AE*, 200/*OB*, 126.

104).²⁸⁷ As the Infinite, Levinas says, the Good has no other, “not because it would be the whole, but because it is Good and nothing escapes its goodness” (*AE*, 25n.1/*OB*, 187n.8). The impossibility of escaping and of slipping away from the Good, according to Levinas, is “a firmness more firm and more profound than that of the will, which is still a tergiversation” (*AE*, 178/*OB*, 112).

Before we delve more deeply into the signification of the Good, however, I think it would be more fruitful if we could address the question regarding the ‘object’ of our desire: Do we simply desire the Other, namely, our neighbor, or actually only the Infinite that shines through her face? By addressing this question first, I hope we can better grasp the presupposition of Levinas’s ethical responsibility as well as its link to the notion of the Good we just discussed.

3.3.2. Desire for the Other?

Until now we have discussed Levinas’s notion of Desire, in opposition to Need, as well as its correlation with the Infinite or the Good. In this analysis we may notice that Levinas speaks a lot about the Desire for the Infinite, less frequently about that for the Good or God. As I mentioned above, one of the reasons for this choice is that in Levinas’s view, the Infinite, as a philosophical term, suits better for his philosophical project than its roughly equivalent terms. What Levinas speaks of much less frequently,

²⁸⁷ See also the parallel between the Good and the Infinite here: “The beyond being, *being’s other* or the *otherwise than being*, here situated in diachrony, here expressed as infinity, has been recognized as the Good by Plato” (*AE*, 36/*OB*, 19).

interestingly enough, is the Desire for the Other, both in the sense of the general Other (*l'Autre*) and the personal or human Other (*Autrui*).²⁸⁸ Only in very few occasions, which I will point out very soon, would he speak of Desire for the Other. If this is the case, a question may be raised as to whether we actually have a Desire for the Other. Do we desire or love our neighbor?²⁸⁹ Or perhaps, we have the Desire for the Infinite, but not for our neighbor. I argue that the last statement is actually Levinas's position, even though he does not always make it explicit. This interpretation, I believe, occupies a solid ground in his general ethics of responsibility.

As we have seen, Levinas begins his *Totality and Infinity* by speaking of metaphysics as *desire for the invisible*. "True life is absent," he says, but "we are in the world. Metaphysics arises and is maintained in this alibi. It is turned toward the 'elsewhere' and the 'otherwise' and the 'other'" (*TeI*, 21/*TaI*, 33). Metaphysics, in other words, is a desire for the completely other, and only when it is such a movement, namely, that which seeks no return to its originating place, will it become transcendent: "Desire is desire for the absolutely other (*Autre*)" (*TeI*, 23/*TaI*, 34). Desire is absolute, he further claims, "if the desiring being is mortal and the Desired invisible" (*TeI*, 23/*TaI*, 34). What the human being desires is absent or invisible, inadequate to the capability of consciousness. It can in no way be represented, as it is beyond the reach of consciousness. The metaphysical desire, Levinas would say then, is Desire for the

²⁸⁸ The identification of the personal Other with the human Other, as I noted in Chapter One, is Levinas's choice, since he does not think that the face of the non-human animals can bear the absolute otherness and thus the trace of the Infinite.

²⁸⁹ I use the terms 'desire' and 'love' in this sentence in a way that may suggest their identity, even though their distinction has been made earlier in this chapter. They are clearly not identical, at least for Levinas. Their further differences, particularly in relation to their respective objects, will be discussed shortly.

Infinite. To put it negatively, what the human being desires is not another human person as such, but rather the Infinite whose trace the person bears.

This thesis may come to us without any surprise, but I find it important to make it explicit so that we may better understand Levinas's point. Levinas realizes, I would argue, that we cannot be expected to desire our neighbor in a purely ethical way. Our friendship with another person, and even our love relation, always contain some interest on our part. We like or even love a person because he or she, to a certain extent, fulfills our own dream or project; the relationship at least would benefit us in some way. All this means an eventual return to ourselves, which is clearly not a metaphysical desire as Levinas defines it. This is the reason, as we have seen above, why Levinas refrains from using the term *love (eros)* to designate the movement without return toward the absolutely Other. Even in the so-called objective theories of morality such as Kantian ethics we may find some of our self-interest embedded in them. Indeed, Being always has interest attached to it. This is why Levinas highlights in the preface of *Totality and Infinite* the importance of knowing "whether we are not duped by morality" (*TeI*, 5/*TaI*, 21). He warns against the delusion in which we think we promote and practice an impartial morality while in reality we serve, in part or wholly, our own interest. For the same reason he claims that true ethics will only come from beyond Being.

Since our relations with other people, as they occur in Being, are always saturated with interest, we tend to find ourselves unable to engage a purely ethical relation with them. These kinds of relations are governed or dictated by the interest we have, even to the extreme practice of "getting rid of" those people whom we find obstructing the

promotion of our self-interest. All forms of genocide, in this reading, occur precisely because the perpetrators find a certain group of people standing in the way of the realization of their project or not fitting in their worldview.²⁹⁰ We can say in general that in those kinds of relations we do not like or love the neighbor. Even when we do, we do not desire them as such; what we seek, rather, is our own interest. These kinds of relations are clearly not ethical in the Levinasian sense, as they serve our own interest. Levinas thus never assumes that we always like or love each other.

Of course, this is not the whole picture of human relationships. We recall from Chapter Two that in portraying the subjectivity of the subject as the responsibility for the Other, Levinas wants to explain all acts of human solidarity and their presupposition. His thesis is that all these acts are possible because the human being does have such a responsible subjectivity. We are capable of carrying out selfless acts of kindness for other people, even to the point of sacrificing ourselves, thanks to the election of the Good that binds us to our neighbor. How exactly we acquire such a responsible subjectivity is beyond the retrieve of consciousness because it occurs anarchically in the realm that is beyond Being. The fact is that the human being is a responsible subject, and as we have seen, this is the kind of human subjectivity that Levinas defends. But even in this case what we desire through those acts, Levinas seems to argue, is not the human being(s) as such for whom we perform acts of solidarity or even sacrifice ourselves, but rather the Infinite itself whose trace these people bear. We definitely do not desire the Infinite when

²⁹⁰ The reason why I brought up these extreme cases is because of my conviction about the strong influence of the Holocaust on Levinas's thinking. We recall his dedication of his second major work, *Otherwise than Being*, to the millions of people who became the victims of hatred by other people. He must have been acutely aware of the fact that human beings can dislike each other to such an extreme.

what we do merely serves our own interest. Only when we are engaged in the acts of solidarity with fellow human beings do we seek for the Infinite. In other words, we express our desire for the Infinite only when we put into practice the humanism for other people.

All this does not mean that Levinas never speaks of the desire for another. In his essay “The Trace of the Other” (1963) he opposes Need to the “desire for the other which proceeds from a being already replenished to overflowing and independent, and who does not desire for himself.”²⁹¹ This desire for another, he says, is born “on the other side of all that can be lacking him or can satisfy him,” such that it is impossible for the desiring subject to convert the Other into the Same.²⁹² Levinas then asks this question, “Is the desire for another an appetite or a generosity? The desirable does not fill up my desire, but hollows it out, nourishing me as it were with new hungers. Desire is revealed to be goodness.”²⁹³ These claims are quite revealing. First, if desire for another is an appetite, it will be insatiable, as it makes the desiring subject ever more hungry. Second, as the subject moves toward the Other, this desire appears more clearly as generosity, as it does not seek for a return to the subject. It is thoroughly goodness when the desiring subject makes such a movement of pure transcendence.

All this is possible, as I have argued, not because of the human being as such that the subject desires, but rather thanks to the Infinite that the Other bears. Levinas’s essay “God and Philosophy” (1975) gives a strong support for this claim:

²⁹¹ Levinas, “The Trace of the Other,” *EDE*, 269/DC, 350.

²⁹² *Ibid.*, *EDE*, 269/DC, 350.

²⁹³ *Ibid.*, *EDE*, 270/DC, 351.

In order that *disinterestedness* be possible in the Desire for the Infinite – in order that the Desire beyond being, or transcendence, might not be an absorption into immanence, which would thus make its return – the Desirable, or God, must remain separated in the Desire; as desirable – near yet different – Holy. This can only be **if the Desirable commands me [*m’ordonne*] to what is the nondesirable, to the undesirable *par excellence*; to another [*autrui*]**. The referring to another is awakening [*éveil*], awakening to proximity, which is responsibility for the neighbor to the point of substitution for him.²⁹⁴

There are several important claims made in this passage. First, Levinas makes it clear here that what we desire or the Desirable is the Infinite or God, and not the neighbor as such. Second, as the desiring subject makes its movement of transcendence toward the Infinite, something must be done in order to prevent the Desire from turning into Need. What is done here in this regard, as Levinas describes it, is the separation between God as the Desirable and the Desire. In other places it is called “an extra-ordinary turning around of the desirability of the Desirable, of the supreme desirability calling to itself the rectilinear rectitude of Desire. A turning around by which the Desirable escapes the Desire.”²⁹⁵ The Desire, it turns out, never gets to the Infinite, even though it is going in that direction. Instead, it is forced to make a detour. It turns out that the Infinite, which the subject desires, orders the very subject to the undesirable. What is most interesting here, this is the third point, is that the undesirable (*l’indésirable*) or the non-desirable (*le non-désirable*), Levinas says, is precisely the human Other (*autrui*).²⁹⁶

The claim that the Other is the undesirable, I suppose, can mean two things. The first meaning is rather neutral, as it suggests that the human Other is not the original ‘object’ of our Desire. We desire the Infinite, but our movement is diverted to our

²⁹⁴ Levinas, “God and Philosophy,” *DVI*, 113/*GCM*, 68, bold face mine.

²⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, *DVI*, 113-4/*GCM*, 69.

²⁹⁶ See also *AE*, 196/*OB*, 123.

neighbor. In this sense, the neighbor is not desirable as such, hence the non-desirable. The second one is much stronger than the first, suggesting that the neighbor is completely unwanted. We do not like our neighbor, Levinas seems to say, at least not naturally, but we are bound to them in the Desire for the Infinite. Our responsibility for the Other is the price we have to pay, so to speak, for having the Desire for the Infinite. I think the latter meaning fits very well with Levinas's understanding of the human subjectivity as the hostage of the Other. The presence of the Other obsesses us, creating wound and trauma within us that are never healed. It is indeed more than what we can take, as we have seen. What is important here, however, is that the desiring subject never wants the Other as such in the first place, and yet finds itself necessarily bound to her. In Levinas's view we are no longer free to choose whether or not we want to be bound to our neighbor because the binding already takes place anarchically prior to freedom. We find ourselves to be responsible subjects, and we have such a subjectivity.

Of course, the portrayal of the Other as the undesirable cannot be true in all respects. In some cases our relation with the neighbor may be sour and even negative, such that we may find ourselves repulsed by her. In others, however, it can take the form of solidarity acts, which suggest that we do want the human Other. As I pointed out in Chapter Two, Levinas fails to take into account the fact that we often carry out these acts with joy, even when we sacrifice ourselves for others. To say that even in these cases the Other is undesirable would be to betray the original sensible orientation of the desiring subject. What is forgotten here is our capability to embrace the responsibility for the Other and to make it our own.

In any case, the ethical engagement with the neighbor is for Levinas the way to be in relation with the Infinite. Our Desire for the Infinite, which is the Good, never reaches its destination and instead gets diverted to the Other.²⁹⁷ This diversion is clearly not a distraction from the original movement, but rather the necessary part of our relation with the Infinite. This new orientation toward the Other is described as goodness:

The goodness of the Good – of the Good that neither sleeps nor slumbers – **inclines the movement it calls forth to turn it away from the Good** and orient it toward the other, and only thus toward the Good. An ir-rectitude going higher than rectitude. Intangible, the Desirable separates itself from the relationship with the Desire that it calls forth and by this separation or holiness, remains a third person: he at the root of the You [*Tu*]. He is Good in this very precise, eminent sense: He does not fill me with goods, but compels me to goodness, which is better than to receive goods.²⁹⁸

Levinas calls this turning around (*retournement*) to the neighbor in an attempt to relate to the Infinite, a *strange mission* in “God and Philosophy,” or *assignation* in *Otherwise than Being*.²⁹⁹ In both texts he emphasizes that the relation with the neighbor is fundamentally non-erotic, that is, outside of concupiscence and thus simply for the Other. This is precisely, in his view, what ethics is all about, which comes only from the beyond. Through this turning-around God’s transcendence is secured from its possible fall into immanence: “Ethics is not a moment of being, it is otherwise and better than being; the very possibility of the beyond. In this ethical turnabout, in this reference [*renvoi*] from the Desirable to the Undesirable, in this strange mission commanding the approach to the other, God is pulled out of objectivity, out of presence and out of being. He is neither

²⁹⁷ We will discuss the relation between the Infinite and the Good a bit more below.

²⁹⁸ Levinas, “God and Philosophy,” *DVI*, 114/*GCM*, 69; bold face mine.

²⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, *DVI*, 115/*GCM*, 69; *AE*, 196/*OB*, 123.

object nor interlocutor. His absolute remoteness, his transcendence, turns into my responsibility – the non-erotic *par excellence* – for the other.”³⁰⁰

Here we find the importance of Levinas’s claim of the anarchical election of the subject by the Good, as we already saw in Chapter Two. The election accounts for all gestures of responsibility and solidarity with the Other. Levinas explains the effect of the election this way:

This antecedence of responsibility to freedom would signify the Goodness of the Good: the necessity that the Good choose me first before I can be in a position to choose, that is, welcome its choice. That is my pre-originary *susceptiveness*. It is a passivity prior to all receptivity, it is transcendent. It is an antecedence prior to all representable antecedence: immemorial. The Good is before being. There is diachrony: an unbridgeable difference between the Good and me, without simultaneity, odd terms. But also a non-indifference in this difference. The Good assigns the subject, according to a susception that cannot be assumed, to approach the other, the neighbor. (*AE*, 194-5/*OB*, 122-3)

The election by the Good, in Levinas’s view, makes possible the turning of the subject toward the Other (*Autrui*). The responsibility for the Other, which is the subjectivity of the subject, is to be attributed to the goodness of the Good, which permeates the subject. Only by turning toward the Other, as we have seen, the subject can turn toward the Good. As Peperzak puts it, “a human subject is an inspired body. It is moved by a breath that comes from an immemorial past.... A human life is breathing for others, the repetition of obedience to the Good’s command. The Good itself can be neither chosen nor contemplated but can be loved only by accepting the responsibility for goodness in the

³⁰⁰ Levinas, “God and Philosophy,” *DVI*, 114-5/*GCM*, 69.

world.”³⁰¹ For this reason I agree with Jacques Rolland’s suggestion that we should think of the Good in Levinas’s philosophy as “the other name of the Infinite.”³⁰²

Further, our analysis of the Good may help us better understand the relation of this notion with that of pluralism. We see that the subject’s turning toward the Other means that it abandons its self-preoccupation and *conatus essendi*. The subject no longer focuses its attention on one object, namely, itself, but rather on multiple objects, that is, the plural Other, which is expressed in the notion of justice. This is what pluralism is for Levinas, and there is something inherently good about it. Goodness always entails multiplicity, not singularity. The responsibility for the Other is goodness precisely because it orients the subject toward this multiplicity. This is why Levinas claims that transcendence or goodness is produced as pluralism (*TeI*, 342/*TaI*, 305). But the production of goodness does not occur by first isolating the subject that would then turn toward the exterior. Rather, the subject, as an I, finds itself already turning toward the Other. It is with the Other anarchically, and responsible for her, thanks to the election of the Good. The Other, therefore, must not be regarded as the opposite of the Same. Pluralism as the co-existence of beings is the product of goodness. In this sense the essence of language is goodness because it presupposes pluralism; it is “friendship (*amitié*) and hospitality (*hospitalité*),” Levinas says (*TeI*, 341/*TaI*, 305). We will see below how Levinas connects the idea of the goodness of pluralism with the theological notion of creation.

³⁰¹ Peperzak, “Transcendence,” 191.

³⁰² Jacques Rolland, “He (*Il*),” trans. Bettina Bergo, *Levinas: Critical Assessments of Leading Philosophers*, Vol. III, eds. Claire Katz with Lara Trout (London and New York: Routledge, 2005), 266.

3.3.3. The Infinite and the Good: Further Considerations

As philosophical terms that suggest transcendence, therefore, the Infinite and the Good perform different functions in Levinas's works. The former, first of all, designates what consciousness and intentionality cannot grasp and bring to identity. It thus makes impossible the attempt to return to the originating place after the initial outward movement. The Infinite, moreover, which is beyond the grasp of consciousness, is so because it does not originate in the *cogito* but is rather placed within us. In fact, it does not even come from Being but rather from beyond Being. Here we find the term the Infinite operates at the level of phenomenology, even if it is to suggest the very limit of this method. By contrast, the latter term, the Good, is employed mainly in connection with the ethical constitution of the subject: the subjectivity of the subject is the responsibility for the Other *because of* the anarchical election of the subject by the Good. This Good is also beyond the reach of consciousness and intentionality since it is from the beyond Being. In this sense we can say that it is the Infinite, *qua* the Good, that elects the subject, prior to freedom, to be responsible to the Other. Here we can also say, I believe, that the Infinite or the Good is the condition for the possibility of ethics, not in the sense of what Kosky is wary of, as if the Good and the responsibility were in a sequential order.³⁰³ We recall that the election of the subject by the Good occurs anarchically or beyond Being, and therefore, both the Good and the responsible subject are not placed in the same order of causality, which is possible only in the realm of

³⁰³ See Kosky, *Levinas and the Philosophy of Religion*, 182.

Being. In fact, I would argue that in Levinas's view the very relation with the Infinite or the Good, by way of the election, *precisely means* the responsibility for the Other, just as the relation with the Christian God, if I may use this analogy, concurrently means to be loving or of Love because this God, as Christians understand it, is Love. Thus there is no temporal gap between the relation with the Infinite and the responsibility to the Other; they are bound together anarchically. In this sense one cannot say that the relation with the Infinite or God *leads* to the ethical relation with the neighbor because it would suggest a temporal separation between the two relations. Even worse, as Merold Westphal points out, the possibility of having a relation with God prior to the relation with the neighbor may mean encouraging indifference to the neighbor or even legitimizing oppression of the neighbor.³⁰⁴ This is clearly not the direction that Levinas wants to take. I believe this is one of the key differences between Levinas's thought of the relation between God and the ethical relation with the neighbor, on the one hand, and God's commandment to love the neighbor, on the other. As I mentioned earlier, we will return to this topic and discuss it more extensively in Chapter Five.

For the time being we may note that the anarchical relation of the human subject with the Good renders for Levinas a new meaning to the word *creation*. The theological term, he says, designates a signification "older than the context woven about this name" (*AE*, 179-80/*OB*, 113). The context he alludes to here is ontology in terms of which the relation between God and human beings is traditionally understood. Ontological thinking, as we have seen, presupposes a totality from which Levinas's philosophy wants to break

³⁰⁴ Westphal, *Levinas and Kierkegaard in Dialogue*, 70.

away. Transcendence precisely suggests the refusal to subject to any encompassing view from the outside. The new meaning of creation thus points to “entities situated in the transcendence that does not close over into a totality” (*TeI*, 326/*TaI*, 293). It specifically suggests multiplicity of beings or the social relation, which engenders the “surplus of the Good over being, multiplicity over the One. The concept of a Good beyond Being and beyond the beatitude of the One announces a rigorous concept of creation, which would be neither a negation nor a limitation nor an emanation of the One. Exteriority is not a negation, but a marvel” (*TeI*, 325/*TaI*, 292). Thus the idea of creation, for Levinas, first expresses a kinship of entities among themselves, all of which are situated in transcendence.³⁰⁵ It also suggests the radical separation of these beings from one another or their reciprocal exteriority. It connects “not terms that complete one another and consequently are reciprocally lacking to one another, but terms that suffice to themselves” (*TeI*, 106/*TaI*, 103). First of all, this kind of exteriority, according to Levinas, does not imply a limitation, a negation, or even a threat to one’s self; it is rather something to be admired or marveled at. Second, the mutual separation of all beings prevents their subjection to a totality, which is for Levinas the source of violence. It is not open to any exterior gaze or ‘viewing.’ It is in this kind of pluralism that transcendence or goodness may be produced (cf. *TeI*, 342/*TaI*, 305). This is why he suggests that the idea of totality through which Western philosophy comprehends multiplicity be replaced with the idea of “a separation resistant to synthesis” (*TeI*, 326/*TaI*, 293).

³⁰⁵ In *Totality and Infinity* one can find the allusion to the creation story through the idea of *tzimtzum*, although Levinas himself never mentions this term explicitly (see *TeI*, 106-7/*TaI*, 103-4). The idea suggests God’s initial self-contraction or self-withdrawal in order for independent creation to take place. We will discuss this concept briefly in Chapter Five.

In a special way the exteriority of all beings finds its basis on the new meaning that Levinas gives to the concept of creation *ex nihilo*, which we saw briefly earlier. The idea of creation *ex nihilo* now expresses “a multiplicity not united into a totality; the creature is an existence which indeed does depend on an other, but not as a part that is separated from it” (*TeI*, 108/*TaI*, 104). The created being is never in relation with other beings simply as a part of something because it would presuppose a totality under which they all fall. Instead, creation *ex nihilo* “breaks with system, posits a being outside of every system, that is, there where its freedom is possible” (*TeI*, 108/*TaI*, 104). Levinas’s notion of *fecundity* suggests the very resistance to totality that precludes newness in that a child produced by its parents does not simply belong to them but has its own independent existence. Both this biological meaning of the term and its extension to the intersubjective relation and to that of the I with itself, designate a relation to another’s future that is not power, cognition, or old age, but always ‘otherness’ and ‘youth’: “The relation with such a future, irreducible to the power over possibles, we shall call fecundity” (*TeI*, 300/*TaI*, 267; see *TeI*, 301/*TaI*, 268). To affirm the notion of creation *ex nihilo*, for Levinas, is “to contest the prior community of all things within eternity, from which philosophical thought, guided by ontology, makes things arise from a common matrix” (*TeI*, 326/*TaI*, 293). Eternity in the ontological thinking, according to Levinas, represents a static condition, lack of development, fixation in the Same, and idealization of the undifferentiated One as asserted by Parmenides. In this idea in which the multiple is one and the present would be conferred a full sense, Levinas asks, “is it not always suspect of only dissimulating the fulgurating of the instant, its half-truth, which is

retained in an imagination capable of playing in the intemporal and of deluding itself about a gathering of the non-gatherable?” (TA, 9/TO, 31). Does it not amount to the idea of totality, which Levinas vehemently rejects? Such an idea of eternity, in his view, is inherently abstract and leads, ironically, to the idea of “a dead God” (TA, 9/TO, 31). This is because it fails to leave room for development, alterity, and even the Infinite itself.³⁰⁶ Levinas thus admits that since Parmenides through Plotinus “we have not succeeded in thinking otherwise” (TeI, 108/TaI, 104).³⁰⁷

The notion of *creatio ex nihilo*, as Levinas understands it, is also given a new meaning in relation to the subjectivity of the subject. We saw in Chapter Two that the human subjectivity for Levinas is responsibility for the Other prior to the birth of freedom. This responsibility is unassumable by consciousness due to the anarchic election by the Good. The notion of creation *ex nihilo* precisely means that, namely, that “what is called to being answers to a call that could not have reached it since, brought out of nothingness, it obeyed before hearing the order” (AE, 180/OB, 113). It suggests that in the self as a creature there is a passivity more passive than any passivity, which is the responsibility for the Other. This kind of self, according to Levinas, signifies the goodness of creation: “The self, the persecuted one, is accused beyond his fault before freedom, and thus in an unavowable innocence. One must not conceive it to be in the

³⁰⁶ For this reason Levinas suggests, in another context when speaking of Rosenzweig and the notion of redemption as future, that eternity not be conceived as “a logical ideality in which the individual absorbed, but as the penetration of the world by love, as the accession of every creature to the word ‘we,’ without the creature’s vanishing utterly into the community.” See Levinas, “Franz Rosenzweig: A Modern Jewish Thinker,” *HS*, 80/OS, 58.

³⁰⁷ Levinas’s critique of the ontological notion of eternity is apparently directed toward what he calls “Spinozism” (TeI, 108/TaI, 105). For the evaluation of Levinas’s reading of Spinoza, see Michel Juffé, “Levinas as (mis)Reader of Spinoza,” *Levinas Studies: An Annual Review*, vol. 2, ed. Jeffrey Bloechl (Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press, 2007), 153-173.

state of original sin; it is, on the contrary, the original goodness of creation” (AE, 193/OB, 121).

To sum up, we have seen in this chapter Levinas’s account of the metaphysical Desire for the Infinite. In contradistinction to Need, Desire does not assimilate everything other to itself. Its movement does not even begin from a lack and therefore never returns to its originating place. Rather, it moves toward the Desirable, beyond everything that can possibly fulfill it. This Desire, for Levinas, is metaphysical because it takes us beyond Being without return. The Desirable is the Infinite, the idea of which, through Levinas’s reading of Descartes’s Third Meditation, is found in human subjectivity. As “the more in the less,” the Infinite does not originate in the *cogito*, but is rather put into the subject before the birth of consciousness. With the idea of the Infinite that thinks more than it thinks, consciousness is dumbfounded. This unique idea shows the limits of consciousness and intentionality in grasping the experience of the Infinite. Since the relation with the Infinite is, in Levinas’s view, a metaphysical Desire that takes us beyond Being, it is not very surprising that he uses the terms “the Infinite,” “the Good,” and “God” almost interchangeably, with certain emphasis for the use of each term. Levinas seems to prefer the first two terms precisely in order to speak of the third term philosophically in the wake of the promulgation of “the death of God” by philosophers like Nietzsche.

This discussion helps us better see, in the context of the study of the relation between ethics and religion, that the ethical relation with the Other is the manifestation of the Desire for the Infinite. Or better, it is the command of the Infinite or the Good

through a turning around of the Desire, from the Desirable to the undesirable, which is the human Other. Elected anarchically by the Good to be responsible for the Other, the human subject finds such a responsibility to be infinite and always directed toward the Other without a return to itself. This responsibility is the Desire for the Infinite, that is, the mode of relation of the subject with God in which, as Levinas puts it, the name of God may come to mind. This claim shows, once again, the deeper link between ethics and religion in Levinas's thought. We will see more in the next chapters how religion plays a fundamental role in Levinas's ethics.

CHAPTER FOUR

THE FACE OF THE OTHER

AS THE TRACE OF THE INFINITE

In the previous chapters we saw Levinas's concept of the ethical and how such a notion is grounded on the kind of subjectivity that is constituted by the Good and thus permeated with goodness. It is a subjectivity that has the idea of the Infinite or the structure of the Other-in-the-Same in it. This kind of subjectivity, I believe, makes possible the religiosity of the subject in the sense that the human subject is capable of operating beyond the ontological level. Elected by the Good beyond Being, the subject is capable of doing things beyond the range of its *conatus essendi*. In the ethical realm it can see the face of the Other as the trace of the Infinite, or as traditionally called, of God. Here the meeting between ethics and religion in Levinas's thought becomes more evident.

This chapter will discuss Levinas's famous idea of the face of the Other as the trace of the Infinite. In Chapter One we already analyzed the notion of the face as the *mode* of appearance of the Other that goes beyond our natural capacity to grasp and to thematize. We will now link this notion to the trace of the Infinite, as Levinas proposes, to explore the full significance of the concept. Here the term 'trace' will be distinguished from the concept of 'sign,' which is much discussed in phenomenology. We will begin this chapter by discussing the concept of the 'trace' that entails both a presence of an object and an absence of that which leaves that trace. Afterwards, we will analyze

Levinas's idea of the face of the Other as the trace of the Infinite. This concept is crucial to the thesis of the present study, as it clearly indicates the link between ethics and religion in Levinas's thought. Suggesting the withdrawal of God, the face as trace becomes an enigma, instead of an ordinary phenomenon. The distinction between the *Saying (le Dire)* and the *Said (le Dit)*, which we will see next, will reveal both the ethical and the religious structures of language.

4.1. The Concept of 'Trace': A Phenomenological Consideration

The notion of trace, it seems, does not naturally fit in phenomenology. The main reason for this impression is that phenomenology generally deals with phenomena, which are to subject to intentional analysis. In order to qualify as a phenomenon, a thing must first exist. The object must be somehow present or presentable in order to be intended and analyzed. Existence is thus the condition for the possibility of a phenomenon. A trace, by contrast, suggests just the opposite: instead of *presence*, it connotes *absence* because the object of which it is a trace is no longer there. How can one speak of absence as such? Is it possible to discuss *non-being* philosophically or even think of it? If the object is no longer present or if it cannot in principle exist for us, phenomenologists may argue, there is nothing they can do or talk about. As absence of the object, in this line of thinking, a trace therefore does not belong to phenomenology. For it is necessary for the object of phenomenology to be presentable and thematizable. Otherwise, it belongs somewhere else.

This natural objection to the notion of a trace and its place in phenomenology actually does not stand alone. It is rather intimately linked to other concepts in Levinas's philosophy such as 'immemorial past,' 'pre-original,' or 'anarchy,' which we discussed in Chapter Two. Similar to the objection to the concept of trace, the questions arise here as to how one speak of the past that no memory can retrieve, or how to bring it to the present so that it can be analyzed phenomenologically. Again, one may wonder how to talk about something that is not present. For Levinas, all these objections and questions stem from the presuppositions that there is only a duality between presence and absence, and that there is no third alternative. Philosophy itself, it seems, or at least Western philosophy, entails a commitment to being or presence, and therefore, it can only deal with things that are presentable or can be thematized. It subscribes to the Parmenidean principle that non-being does not exist and thus cannot be conceived. Without denying the Eleatic wisdom, Levinas proposes a third alternative through the concept of trace. A trace, in his view, lies between presence and absence, being and non-being, knowledge and ignorance.

In order to make this argument, Levinas needs to develop a careful account of trace in contradistinction to better known notions in phenomenology such as 'sign.' But he must first begin with a general account of intentionality, which aims at the comprehension of being. Intentionality, as he describes in the 1965 essay "Intentionality and Sensation," implies a movement of thought that goes out of the self. Unlike psychologism in which "the soul imprisoned itself within itself," phenomenology conceives of thought as opening itself and reaching out to the world; to be conscious is

thus to be conscious of something “in the street and on the road” of the world.³⁰⁸ This marks the transcendental character of thought. Phenomenology also assumes “a rigorous correlation between the object’s structures and the processes of the thought that intends it.”³⁰⁹ That is to say, as consciousness intends its ideal object, there is a continuing process of identification or correlation, through a multiplicity of intentions, between the structures of this ideal object and the subjective thoughts that process them. Through this process all the “forgotten horizons” of thought are being reactivated. With the idealizing character of intentionality, what is real is constituted as “an ideal identity, confirmed or crossed out or corrected through the evolution of subjective or intersubjective life.”³¹⁰

It is clear that in the synthesis of idealization process, the *I* inevitably plays a major role as the principle of identification. It is the *I* that confirms, crosses out, or corrects the ideal identity of the object through the multiplicity of subjective thoughts. The *I* is, for Levinas, “the origin of the very phenomenon of identity... an ipseity – that I can identify every object, every character trait, and every being.”³¹¹ Perhaps, due to the peculiar character of consciousness, we tend to think that we are the source of the external things that come to us. Even Descartes thought, according to Levinas, that he could have accounted for the heavens and the sun, with all their magnificence, out of himself. Such thinking is possible because “every experience, however passive it be, however welcoming, is at once converted into a ‘construction of being’ which it receives, as though the *given* were drawn from oneself, as though the meaning it brings were

³⁰⁸ Levinas, “Intentionality and Sensation,” *EDE*, 201-2/*DEH*, 135.

³⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, *EDE*, 203/*DEH*, 136.

³¹⁰ *Ibid.*, *EDE*, 204/*DEH*, 137.

³¹¹ Levinas, “The Trace of the Other,” *EDE*, 261/*DC*, 345.

ascribed to it by me.”³¹² In other words, there is always a natural tendency for the *I* to transform the alterity of the Other (*l’Autre*) into the Same in such a way that the *I* thinks it can possess everything outside of it. Is this the only kind of experience we have, Levinas asks? Is there another kind of experience in which such transmutation does not occur or which the alterity of the Other is respected?

4.1.1. Heteronomous Experience

To the last question of whether there is the kind of experience in which the otherness of the Other is respected, Levinas answers in the affirmative. Such an experience would be that of “the absolutely exterior” to the effect that the *I* cannot own or suppress the alterity of the Other. Levinas call it a “heteronomous experience” (*expérience hétéronome*), apparently to suggest that the otherness of the Other remains intact in the experience, or even more strongly that instead of the *I*, it is the Other that prevails in it. What this experience consists in is “an attitude that cannot be converted into a category, and whose movement unto the other is not recuperated in identification, does not return to its point of departure.”³¹³ The transmutation and reduction of the Other to the Same cannot occur in the heteronomous experience because the infinity of the Other overwhelms intentionality and its appetite for comprehension. The Other resists to be converted into a content of consciousness. The idea of infinity, as we saw in Chapter

³¹² *Ibid.*, EDE, 263/DC, 346.

³¹³ *Ibid.*, EDE, 266/DC, 348.

Three, consists precisely in thinking more than it thinks, “entering into relationship with the ungraspable while certifying its status of being ungraspable.”³¹⁴

It is important to note here that heteronomous experience does not entail a non-conformity with the ordinary way in which things of the world are manifested. Levinas makes it clear that the manifestation of the Other is *first* produced according to the way every signification is produced. The heteronomous experience, however, goes beyond the first form of the manifestation of the Other. While the Other is first present “in a cultural whole and is illuminated by this whole, like a text by its context,” it cannot but show a signifyingness of its own, independently of the signification it receives from the world.³¹⁵ Here the Other comes not only out of a context, but also without mediation. The face of the Other (*Autrui*), as we already saw in Chapter One, signifies by itself. It comes from the *beyond* Being, which is not “a world behind our world,” but rather beyond every disclosure.³¹⁶

Heteronomous experience, in which the otherness of the Other cannot be converted into the Same, thus breaks with the philosophy of identity. The refusal of the absolutely exterior to yield to this logic of identity accounts for the fact, as Levinas puts it in his essay “Signification and Sense,” a 1972’s revision of “Trace of the Other” (*La Trace de L’Autre*), that “the ‘absolutely other’ (*l’absolument autre*) is not reflected in consciousness.”³¹⁷ Even this resistance, Levinas says, is not convertible into a content of consciousness. This amounts to saying that the absolutely Other challenges the primacy

³¹⁴ *Ibid.*, EDE, 274DC, 354.

³¹⁵ *Ibid.*, EDE, 270/DC, 351.

³¹⁶ *Ibid.*, EDE, 275/DC, 354.

³¹⁷ Levinas, “Signification and Sense,” *HAH*, 49/HO, 32-3.

of consciousness and the tendency to subject everything to the Same. With heteronomous experience, consciousness and the sovereignty of the *I* are called into question, which is the very meaning of the ethical according to Levinas. The visitation of the absolutely Other causes a “disturbance” or “upsetting” for intentionality that operates on the logic of identity. The Other remains “absolutely unencompassable,” too foreign to consciousness to be integrated with.

Since the absolutely Other, with all its strangeness, signifies on its own, we may wonder how we are to describe the experience with such otherness. How can we articulate a heteronomous experience in which the alterity of the Other cannot be converted into a content of consciousness? Here Levinas’s notion of *trace* plays a pivotal role in the description of such signifyingness. It also provides an answer to the earlier question as to how to think phenomenologically about, or to be in relationship with, an *absence* “radically withdrawn from disclosure and from dissimulation.”³¹⁸ For if the absolutely Other comes from the *beyond* Being, it cannot be reduced to presence. Yet, its absence is not a form of hiddenness, either. Thus, a solution must be sought for in order to avoid this apparent contradiction. More positively, it would be a way of signifying that involves both presence and absence, Being and beyond Being. The concept of trace, for Levinas, constitutes “a third way” that is “excluded by these contradictories,” yet without their belonging to the same realm.³¹⁹ How does it work for Levinas?

³¹⁸ Levinas, “The Trace of the Other,” *EDE*, 275/DC, 354.

³¹⁹ *Ibid.*, *EDE*, 276/DC, 355. It is always tempting to speak of the *beyond* Being as if it belonged to the same level as Being, or “as if it were a sphere, a place, a world.” Levinas repeatedly warns us against making such a move: “Have we been attentive enough to the interdiction against seeking the *beyond* as a world behind our world?” (*ibid.*).

4.1.2. Trace and Sign

The best way to understand Levinas's concept of *trace* is through a comparison with *sign*. In many ways a trace may indeed function like a sign: a detective examines a crime scene searching for traces, "as revealing signs," left by the perpetrator; an archaeologist carries out an excavation to find clues to ancient civilization. In these examples traces sought for are treated as signs that may reveal something else that is yet to be known. In the world of signs, "everything lines up in order in a world where each thing reveals the other or is revealed with regard to it."³²⁰ Signs are generally conceived of as clues in that they may communicate something to us. They appear in the world and permit themselves to be integrated into the order of the world. When a trace is taken as a sign, according to Levinas, it is thus inscribed in the very order of the world, for example, a check written for payment functioning as a trace of the transaction. It manifests itself as a lead to another sign within the order of the world.

A trace for Levinas, however, is more than simply a sign, even though it can function that way. The "significance" of a trace, first of all, consists in signifying without manifesting anything. A trace, as Levinas conceives it, is not meant to convey a message. Its origin cannot be explained with reference to the intention of communicating something. It is like "fingerprints left by someone who wanted to wipe away his traces and commit a perfect crime."³²¹ The person clearly did not intend to leave them behind. A trace, thus, "signifies outside of every intention of signaling and outside of every project

³²⁰ Levinas, "Signification and Sense," *HAH*, 60/*HO*, 41.

³²¹ Levinas, "The Trace of the Other," *EDE*, 279/*DC*, 357.

of which it would be the aim.”³²² It occurs by “overprinting” (*surimpression*). Such a trace, or “unintended sign,” however, causes a disturbance in the order of the world irreversibly. The trace has been left behind; it is there. But the person who left it has passed absolutely: “*To be qua leaving a trace* is to pass, to depart, to absolve oneself.”³²³ In this sense a trace is a unique sign, as it does not fit into the mundane order.

Since a trace suggests a departure, it always implies an absence. A letter from a lover may contain various messages in the form of both explicit and implicit signs. After all the possible signlike messages are exhausted, there remains a certain emptiness because the writer of the letter is not there. For the recipient the letter itself is *the trace of an absence* because the writer has withdrawn from it. Levinas writes, “In a trace has passed a past absolutely bygone. In a trace its irreversible lapse is sealed. Disclosure, which reinstates the world and leads back to the world, and is proper to a sign or a signification, is suppressed in traces.”³²⁴ Thus, the recipient not only interprets the signifyingness of the sender in the letter, but also confronts the past that cannot be made present. But there is no manifestation or revelation for him or her to wait for because as a trace, the letter hides nothing. A trace, for Levinas, is “the very emptiness of an irrecoverable absence. The gaping open of emptiness is not only the sign of an absence. A mark traced on sand is not a part of a path, but the very emptiness of a passage.”³²⁵

Since a trace always implies an irrecoverable past, it has a temporal structure to it. It suggests that the Other (*l’Autre*) who leaves the trace has already passed, and that this

³²² *Ibid.*, EDE, 279/DC, 357.

³²³ *Ibid.*, EDE, 279/DC, 357.

³²⁴ *Ibid.*, EDE, 279/DC, 357.

³²⁵ Levinas, “Phenomenon and Enigma,” EDE, 290/CPP, 65-6.

passing can no longer be retrieved. In other words, the past cannot be re-presented; it becomes an “immemorial past, pure *lapse* of time.”³²⁶ In Chapter Two, as we recall, we discussed the structure of ethical subjectivity as the-Other-in-the-Same, which is also fundamentally diachronic. The Other is already in relationship with the subject even before the former appears in the consciousness of the latter. This is the proper place to speak of the trace of the Other in Levinas’s philosophy, precisely because the trace suggests the Other who has already passed or departed: “This way of passing, disturbing the present without allowing itself to be invested by the *arché* of consciousness, striating with its furrows the clarity of the ostensible, is what we have called a trace”(AE, 158/OB, 100). The irrecovable passing marks the very transcendence of the Other: as transcendent, the Other cannot be made present. Neither does the Other leave signs because the Other does not belong to the world. The only thing the Other leaves is traces.

It is important here to recognize the characterization of a trace as always involving an ‘agent’ that leaves it. Otherwise, a trace would just be an effect, which suggests a belongingness to the world (non-transcendent). A scratch on a stone could either be a trace or an effect, depending on whether or not there was a person who held or touched it before.³²⁷ It would merely be an effect if it occurred by a natural cause such as having somehow been hit by another stone. Such a mark would be a trace only if a personal agent has done something with it. Thus, the discourse on trace, for Levinas, always implies the passing of the transcendent Other and the non-belongingness to the order of the world. Moreover, Levinas seems to assume here that it is possible for us to

³²⁶ See *CPP*, xxvi-xxvii

³²⁷ Levinas, “The Trace of the Other,” *EDE*, 281/DC, 358.

distinguish a sign from a trace, or to recognize whether or not an agent is involved in the making of the mark. This is because a mark as such, phenomenologically speaking, does not tell us whether it should be considered a sign or a trace. It is ultimately the observer who draws the conclusion, based on her sensibility, about the belongingness of the mark. All this is very important to keep in mind as we move to the next section where we will discuss the topic that can be considered as the major meeting point between ethics and religion in Levinas's philosophy, namely, the face of the Other as the trace of the Infinite. For we might ask whether the face must necessarily be the trace of the Infinite, or whether it could not simply be a signlike phenomenon that belongs to this world. How do we know about this, and if we do, how can we tell them apart? We will return to these questions later in this chapter.

Before we proceed, it is worth noting that Levinas's way of casting ideas becomes more and more complicated in his later works. While his earlier works, including *Totality and Infinity*, are dominated by dualisms such as existence (Being) against existent (being) or totality against infinity, his later writings show an internal intrigue of various philosophical concepts. The concept of *trace*, for instance, evokes not only presence but also, and more strongly, absence. This is not to say that the Husserlian phenomenology does not deal with absence. The difference here is that what is absent in a trace, unlike that in phenomenology, can never be brought to presence because it has irrevocably passed. This way of presenting such ideas, as some commentators have pointed out, may indicate Levinas's eventual departure from phenomenology. Likewise, the distinction between phenomenon and enigma, as we will see below, gives us a rather complex

account of the manifestation of the Other. Instead of simple dualisms, we are now presented with an intricate entanglement of ideas. The intricacy here, I argue, is due to the non-belongingness of the epiphany of the Other to the order of the world. Here ethics in the Levinasian sense cannot but intersect with religion. This is the main thesis of this study, which we have gradually seen.

4.2. The Face of the Other as the Trace of the Infinite

The phrase “the face of the Other is the trace of the Infinite” is clearly one of the heavy-loaded terms in Levinas’s thought that requires a great deal of explanation. We discussed in Chapter One the face of the Other as the center of the ethical dimension of his thought. The notion of the face is now linked to the concept of the trace of the Infinite because Levinas definitely does not think that the former alone can adequately constitute his concept of the ethical. Here we find an explicit juncture between ethics and religion in Levinas’s philosophy, to which this study is devoted. We will take up the issue in this section by considering the kind of “Being” that leaves a trace, the notion of the face as a trace, and its effects on both the ethical and religious dimensions of human life.

4.2.1. That Which Leaves Traces

Traces are indeed part of our ordinary human experiences. We leave traces all the time and wherever we go through our fingerprints, body liquids from which our DNAs

can be extracted, footprints, etc. But as we have seen, this is not the kind of trace that Levinas speaks of. It is true that a trace always points to the past and suggests the absence of the Other (*Autrui*) who leaves the trace. Yet, the so-called traces that the human being leaves, in Levinas's view, still belong to the world. Although now absent, the human being was there, occupying space in time. Thus, she did not leave a trace as Levinas understands it, but rather only a sign. A trace, for Levinas, always suggests "a presence that which properly speaking has never been there, of what is always past."³²⁸ It points to an irreversible transcendence that cannot be brought to immanence, hence the resistance to representation and thematization. In this sense, according to Levinas, only that which transcends the world can leave a trace.

Now the transcendent for Levinas is clearly not Being. In *Totality and Infinity* Levinas suggests the identification of the notion of Being with that of totality. The concept of the transcendent, however, "places us beyond the categories of being" (*TeI*, 326/*TaI*, 293). Since transcendence implies a departure from Being or point to the *beyond* of Being, and the transcendent is "what cannot be encompassed" (*TeI*, 326/*TaI*, 293), a discourse about a "Being" that transcends the world would involve a contradiction in terms. In Levinas's view only the transcendent Other can leave a trace. Neither Being nor we, human beings, can do so. He thus speaks of the trace of the Other as *l'Autre*, and not as *Autrui*. It is worth noting here that Levinas in his writings, to my knowledge, never uses the term "the trace of God" as such. The closest term we get is 'the trace of the

³²⁸ Levinas, "The Trace of the Other," *EDE*, 281/*DC*, 358.

Infinite,' as inscribed in proximity.³²⁹ The reason for this choice is perhaps the attempt to remain, as far as he can, in a philosophical discourse, or to avoid having his thought mistakenly identified with a theological discourse. Levinas thus naturally finds *la trace de l'Autre* as the best term to describe the passing of the Infinite in the face of the Other (*Autrui*).

The leaving-a-trace of the transcendent bears extensive consequences on the intentional relation between the signification and the signified. Since the transcendence of the transcendent refuses immanence in a trace, the relation between the sign and the signified cannot be a correlation, which leads to disclosure, but rather “unrightness” (*l'irrectitude*). The unrightness suggests an unbridgeable disparity between them, which is “unconvertible into rightness... answering to an irreversible past.”³³⁰ Thus, in dealing with the transcendent, we are faced with the “uncontainable,” the “unencompassable,” or the “overflow of the Infinite *in* the finite.” The trace that Levinas speaks of is left by the transcendent that no human thought can contain. It points to an immemorial past that no human thought can retrieve. Indeed, the transcendence of God always refuses immanence and resists thematization and representation. It is impervious to human thought. In other words, the intentionality of human thought, which operates on the principle of correlation, can never capture the manifestation of the transcendent. Levinas writes:

The impossibility of manifesting itself in an experience can be due not to the finite or sensible essence of this experience, but to the structure of all thought, which is correlation. Once come into a correlation, the divinity of God dissipates, like the clouds that served to describe his presence. All that could have attested to his holiness, that is, to his transcendence, in the light of experience would immediately belie its own witness already by its very presence and intelligibility, by its chain of significations, which

³²⁹ Levinas, “Substitution,” *BPW*, 91; *AE*, 184/*OB*, 117.

³³⁰ Levinas, “The Trace of the Other,” *EDE*, 277/*DC*, 355.

constitute the world. To appear, to seem, is forthwith to resemble terms of an already familiar order, to compromise oneself with them, to be assimilated to them? Does not the invisibility of God belong to another play...?”³³¹

In this context Levinas warns against confusing a trace with a sign. The former is always marked by transcendence and is of anarchical structure, whereas the latter belongs to the world and only leads to another sign. More concretely, the confusion occurs in “the itinerary by which theological and edifying thought too quickly deduces the truths of faith. Then obsession is subordinated to a principle that is stated in a theme, which annuls the very anarchy of its movements” (*AE*, 192/*OB*, 121). In the footnote to this passage, Levinas explicitly criticizes theological language that does not take seriously the transcendence of the transcendent: “Theological language destroys the religious situation of transcendence. The infinite ‘presents’ itself anarchically, but thematization loses the anarchy which alone can accredit it. Language about God rings false or becomes a myth, that is, can never be taken literally.”³³² In the next chapter we will discuss more the significance of Levinas’s absolute respect for transcendence in relation to his view on religion.

In a trace, therefore, one finds the withdrawal of God who, paradoxically, has never been present. Unlike the human being who stepped on the sands and left her footprints there, God was never there. This is the anarchical structure of a trace. For

³³¹ Levinas, “Phenomenon and Enigma,” *EDE*, 284/*CPP*, 62.

³³² A similar warning against collapsing transcendence with immanence can be found elsewhere, including in this passage: “Is it not folly to ascribe plenitude of being to God who is always absent from perception, and is not any more manifest in the moral conduct of the world, subject to violence, and where peace is established only provisionally and at the price of blood tribute paid to some Minotaur, the price of compromises and politics – where, consequently, the divine ‘presence’ remains an uncertain memory or an indeterminate expectation?” See “Phenomenon and Enigma,” *EDE*, 284/*CPP*, 62.

Levinas, the absence of God in a trace implies that the God that the subject encounters is not a *Thou* because it would suggest a direct relationship between God and the human being. Rather, this God is a third person, a he (*Il*), who is beyond representation. This is because “the relationship with the infinite is not a cognition but an approach, a neighboring with what signifies itself without revealing itself, what departs but not to dissimulate itself.”³³³ Since the beyond Being is a third person or *illeity*, his past and departure cannot be re-presented. The pronoun “He” (*Il*), for Levinas, “expresses exactly its inexpressible irreversibility, already escaping every relation as well as every dissimulation... The *illeity* of the third person is the condition for the irreversibility.”³³⁴ This third person is not the third party we saw in Chapter One who intervenes and opens up a space of justice for all. The third person here is the Infinite, the beyond Being, or “the possibility of the third direction of radical *irrectitude* that escapes the bipolar game of immanence and transcendence proper to being, where immanence always wins out over transcendence.”³³⁵ The *illeity* of the third person points to the non-phenomenality of the alterity of the Infinite. It always escapes the capture of consciousness that operates on the principle of correlation and even eludes the pursuit of Desire: “[*Illeity* is] an extraordinary turning around of the desirability of the Desirable, of the supreme desirability calling to itself... A turning around by which the Desirable escapes the Desire.”³³⁶

³³³ Levinas, “Phenomenon and Enigma,” *EDE*, 301/*CPP*, 73.

³³⁴ Levinas, “The Trace of the Other,” *EDE*, 277-8/*DC*, 356.

³³⁵ Levinas, “Signification and Sense,” *HAH*, 59/*HO*, 40.

³³⁶ Levinas, “God and Philosophy,” *DVI*, 114/*GCM*, 69.

4.2.2. The Illeity of God: A Closer Look

The designation of God as '*Il*' instead of '*Thou*' in Levinas deserves our attention because it renders a different conception of God than that which we are familiar with. Before we proceed, however, it is important to note that, as far as I am concerned, Levinas never explicitly rejects the notion of God as '*Thou*.' But by speaking repeatedly and emphatically about the Illeity and the trace of the Infinite, he gives the reader a rather unambiguous position on the issue. Due to such circumstances, we can only surmise Levinas's reasons for the rejection of the conception of God as '*Thou*' from his general rejection of the I-Thou relationship. It is also crucial to note that Levinas's reading of Buber changed considerably over the years. In his first essay on Buber entitled "Martin Buber and the Theory of Knowledge" (1958), Levinas began by praising Buber for attaching primacy to the I-Thou relation over the I-It. He then raised several objections to the I-Thou relation, particularly its aspect of reciprocity. By designating the relation as reciprocal, according to Levinas, Buber failed to elicit the ethical character of the relation. As a result, such a relation turns into "a totally spiritual friendship."³³⁷ But in his essay "Martin Buber, Gabriel Marcel, and Philosophy" written in 1978, Levinas seems to have set aside the earlier concerns with reciprocity and spiritualism in Buber. Instead, he praised Buber's notion of dialogue as bearing a trace of original responsibility and ethical saying. Despite Levinas's change of position, however, I think we can justifiably work

³³⁷ Levinas, "Martin Buber and the Theory of Knowledge," *PN*, 33.

out Levinas's reservations to the notion of God as 'Thou' from his general concerns with the I-Thou relation.

Levinas's major objection to the I-Thou relation is that the structure of such a relation always implies reciprocity. A reciprocal relation would be a situation in which both terms of the relation are equal (*TeI*, 184-5/*TaI*, 170). Given Levinas's contempt of totalization, it should cause us to worry because such a relation can be established from the outside, hence thematizable. But Levinas goes further by claiming that the reciprocal relation is "somehow lived directly, not just known."³³⁸ This means that it does not primarily concern the totality of knowledge, but rather the ethical constitution. Indeed, reciprocity does not sit well in Levinas's ethics because it destroys the sense of mission on the part of the *I*, due to the election, that only *I* can accomplish the responsibility for the Other. In fact, the relation with the Other for Levinas requires "an ingratitude of the Other" because gratitude would mean "the return of the movement to its origin."³³⁹ Granted this notion of reciprocity in Levinas's ethics, one may ask whether or not this objection is applicable to the relation with God.³⁴⁰ Would such a relation require ingratitude on God's part, namely, that one should not care about what God would do? It seems that the requirement of ingratitude in the relation with God would go against the natural expectation of the believer. A person who is praying clearly hopes that God

³³⁸ *Ibid.*, *PN*, 26. This is also one of Derrida's points in the essay "Violence and Metaphysics," as he reconstructs Levinas's rejection of Buber's I-Thou relationship. See *ED*, 156n.1/*WD*, 314n.37.

³³⁹ Levinas, "The Trace of the Other," *EDE*, 267/*DC*, 349.

³⁴⁰ While the notion of reciprocity often suggests an interchange of favors, it may mean something else, as that which Derrida proposes, which he calls "the transcendental symmetry of two empirical asymmetries" (*ED*, 185/*WD*, 126) in which the *I* relates to the Other as to a height and the Other relates to the *I* in the same way. For the discussion on this issue, see Robert Bernasconi, "'Failure of Communication' as a Surplus: Dialogue and Lack of Dialogue between Buber and Levinas," *The Provocation of Levinas: Rethinking the Other*, 112 ff.

would do or grant something to her. In fact, when it comes to the relation with God, what matters is not so much what the human being does to God as what God does to the human being. Thus, the issue of reciprocity is unlikely to become the reason for Levinas to reject the designation of God as Thou.

The second objection to the I-Thou relation, as Levinas brings forth in “Martin Buber and the Theory of Knowledge” is closely related to the first, namely, that the *I-Thou* relation fails to recognize the essential asymmetry between the *I* and the Other. As a result, the dimension of height from which the Other comes is destroyed (*PN*, 32). Levinas’s concern for the destruction of the dimension of height in the I-Thou relation, in my opinion, may be legitimate in an intersubjective human relation even if one does not subscribe to his notion of the asymmetrical relation. Already in the symmetrical relation the alterity of the Other is often inadequately respected, much less in the asymmetrical relation in which the position of the Other is above that of the *I*. In the relation between the human being and God, however, there is a presupposition of an asymmetrical relation, namely, that God is always above the human being. The person who prays is assumed to acknowledge God’s infinite superiority, which guarantees the bestowal of the beseeched favors. In this sense it is precisely the asymmetrical relation between the human being and God that makes any prayer possible.

In my opinion, Levinas’s biggest objection to the I-Thou relation, as pertaining to the relation with God, is what he calls “angelic spiritualism” (*PN*, 33). In *Totality and Infinity* he speaks of Buber’s I-Thou relation as a sort of “disdainful spiritualism” (*TeI*, 65/*TaI*, 69). I take his charge of spiritualism, first to point to the kind of relation that the

I-Thou relation is: cozy and free from any worry about external circumstances. In such a relation the subject's concern is only for the singular Other before him, forgetting the 'third party' that also demands justice and responsibility. This is what happens in the spiritual relation in which the believer's concern is only for God. The I-Thou relation is an angelic spiritualism because it is oblivious to the fact that human beings are incarnate beings. They are not angels that do not have the concrete dimension of existence in the form of a body. The concrete existence of human beings requires that they live differently than angels do. The daily demand for bodily needs such as food, drink, and shelter, certainly lends itself to the complexity of human society. In Levinas's view, to engage in an I-Thou relation, as an angelic spiritualism, is to be forgetful of the concreteness of human existence. The responsibility for the Other, which defines Levinasian ethics, is considered the appropriate response to the human situation.

If it is true that the angelic spiritualism is Levinas's main objection to the I-Thou relation as pertaining to God, then one can surmise that for Levinas the cozy relation with God as Thou would stand in the way of one's responsibility for the Other. He seems to think that the direct relation with God is incompatible with the demand of the concreteness of human existence. I find this assumption highly questionable because it is not necessarily the case. While the engagement with personal pieties may indeed cause the believer to forget her earthly responsibilities, they are not mutually exclusive. The designation of God as Thou can simply suggest that the relation takes place "between I

and You.”³⁴¹ As Andrew Kelley notes, ‘Thou’ is simply an utterance that indicates the turning of the I to the Other in order to address the Other.³⁴² In fact, Levinas himself says that to say ‘you’ is “the primary fact of Saying (*Dire*)... Saying is that rectitude from me to you, that directness of the face-to-face, directness of the encounter *par excellence*.”³⁴³ The pronounciation of the word ‘God,’ as Buber says, suggests that God is being addressed.³⁴⁴ Thus the designation of God as Thou hardly suggests either the comprehension of God or the removal of one’s responsibility for the neighbor. In other words, we do not need to choose between the relation with God and the responsibility for the Other.

Another issue with regard to the Illiety of Levinas’s God arises from the fact that such designation makes it impossible to distinguish a ‘him’ from an ‘it.’³⁴⁵ Levinas himself acknowledges this point when he writes: “God is not simply the ‘first other,’ or the ‘other *par excellence*,’ or the ‘absolutely other,’ but other than the other, other otherwise, and other with an alterity prior to the alterity of the other, prior to the ethical obligation to the other and different from every neighbor, transcendent to the point of absence, to the point of his possible confusion with the agitation of the *there is [il y a]*.”³⁴⁶ If the confusion is real, why can’t one conclude, as Critchley does, that the kind of

³⁴¹ Martin Buber, *I and Thou*, a new translation by Walter Kaufmann (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1970), 56, 89.

³⁴² Andrew Kelley, “Reciprocity and the Height of God: A Defense of Buber Against Levinas,” *Levinas and Buber: Dialogue & Difference* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 2004), 229.

³⁴³ Levinas, “The Word I, the Word You, the Word God,” *Alterity and Transcendence*, 93.

³⁴⁴ Buber, *I and Thou*, 124.

³⁴⁵ See Westphal, *Levinas and Kierkegaard in Dialogue*, 71.

³⁴⁶ Levinas, “God and Philosophy,” *DVI*, 115 / *GCM*, 69.

transcendence in Levinas is atheistic rather than theistic?³⁴⁷ How are we to distinguish the departing God who orders us to responsibility from the impersonal and ominous *il y a*? Don't they both cause some sort of 'trauma' within us? If they differ in the predicate of goodness assigned to the Illeity of the Infinite, as Critchley suggests, what is the ground for such determination?³⁴⁸

These questions are very important for our purpose because they are closely linked to the religious character of Levinas's ethics that this study attempts to address. The key answer to these questions, I argue, lies in the Desire for the Infinite within us. As we saw in Chapter Three, the subjectivity of the subject is characterized by the movement of transcendence toward the Infinite. The subject never has this Desire satisfied, however, because the Infinite turns it away and orients it toward the Other. Levinas calls the Infinite 'the Good' because the Infinite "does not fill me with goods, but compels me to goodness, which is better than to receive goods."³⁴⁹ Thus, the goodness of the Infinite lies in its turning me to the Other and letting me to do good to the Other. It helps me to go beyond my *conatus essendi* by orienting me toward the Other. We can conclude here that the responsibility for the Other, or the event of sociality to which I turn, is something good as well. To answer the above questions, therefore, I argue, first, that unlike the Infinite, we never desire the *il y a*. Although neither is 'present' to us, one becomes the 'object' of the orientation of our Desire while the other does not. Second, while they both may cause some uneasy feeling within us, to say the least, one important difference is

³⁴⁷ Simon Critchley, *Very Little... Almost Nothing*, 97.

³⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 94-5.

³⁴⁹ Levinas, "God and Philosophy," *DVI*, 114/*GCM*, 69.

clear: the trauma of irreducible responsibility within the subject is, as awkward as it may sound, a ‘good’ one, which we cannot say of the uncomfortable feeling caused by the *il y a*. The trauma is permeated with goodness because it arises from the infinite responsibility for the Other. Goodness itself, in Levinas’s view, consists in assuming the position that the Other counts more than myself (*TeI*, 277/*TaI*, 247). The ominous feeling by the *il y a*, however, cannot be described as good because it causes the subject unable to turn toward exteriority, much less to count this exteriority as infinitely higher than itself.

In any case, the escape of the Desirable and the absence of the Infinite make a trace uniquely ambiguous. Indeed, as Critchley points out, transcendence needs ambiguity in order for transcendence to ‘be’ transcendence.³⁵⁰ The ambiguity of trace stems from the fact that unlike a sign, it does not belong to the world. A sign can find itself fitting in the order of the world and thus become a phenomenon. A trace, by contrast, cannot do so because it comes from the beyond. This is why it appears as an irreducible disturbance which evokes doubts or questions. Levinas finds this quotation from Ionesco in *The Bald Soprano* helpful to describe the ambiguity of a trace: “Ultimately, when there is a ring at the door, we never know whether someone is there or not.”³⁵¹ After the ring, we may or may not find a guest waiting for the door to be opened. The guest may have departed. Here lies the very ambiguity of a trace: it never gives us certainty. In fact, it disturbs the order of the world with a subtle and discrete manifestation of the Infinite. The logic of correlation that operates in the classical

³⁵⁰ Critchley, *Very Little... Almost Nothing*, 93.

³⁵¹ Levinas, “Phenomenon and Enigma,” *EDE*, 283/*CPP*, 61.

phenomenology does not work here precisely because of the beyond that constitutes a trace.

Here we find the relevance of Levinas's distinction between phenomenon (*le phénomène*) and enigma (*l'énigme*) in relation to that between sign and trace. An enigma, for Levinas, is a manifestation without manifesting itself because it comes from the beyond. It is "not a simple ambiguity in which two significations have equal chances and the same light.. [it is] not determined by a phenomenon, by the present and contemporaneousness, and is not measured by certainty...is irreducible to phenomena."³⁵² A sign can become a phenomenon because it belongs to the order of the world. A trace, however, can only manifest itself as an enigma because of its origin in the beyond: "Phenomena, apparition in the full light, the relationship with being, ensure immanence as a totality and philosophy as atheism. The enigma, the intervention of a meaning which disturbs phenomena but is quite ready to withdraw like an undesirable stranger, unless one harkens to those footsteps that depart, is transcendence itself, the proximity of the other as other."³⁵³ For Levinas the Infinite 'works' not by way of phenomena, but rather of enigma, thus leaving a trace that signifies an immemorial past. The modality of an enigma is 'perhaps' (*peut être*) that is irreducible to the modalities of being and certainty: "The signifyingness of an enigma comes from an irreversible, irrecuperable past which it has *perhaps* not left since it has already been absent from the very terms in which it was signaled."³⁵⁴ Beyond and foreign to all forms of cognition, the enigma becomes the way

³⁵² *Ibid.*, EDE, 291/CPP, 66-7.

³⁵³ *Ibid.*, EDE, 297/CPP, 70.

³⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, EDE, 298/CPP, 71.

of the Ab-solute, “not because it would not shine with a light disproportionately strong for the subject’s weak sight, but because it is already too old for the game of cognition, because it does not lend itself to the contemporaneousness that constitutes the force of the time tied in the present, because it imposes a completely different version of time.”³⁵⁵ In other words, the enigma signifies a diachrony that shuts down any attempt of comprehension, which is tied to the present in being. A trace, then, should be approached not as a phenomenon, but rather as an enigma, which signifies an irrecovable past, since it comes from ‘another time,’ and which suggests uncertainty, since it is beyond all cognition.

At this point it is important for us to ask the following questions: when Levinas speaks of trace or enigma, is he only explaining the *structure* of the epiphany of the Other (*autrui*)? Is he also, at the same time, alluding to our own *experience* of the Other? If so, it is possible then to experience the Other as a trace of the Infinite. Back to the question raised earlier, it also suggests the possibility of distinguishing a trace from a sign. It is crucial for us to bear these questions in mind, as we discuss the face of the Other as a trace of the Infinite in the next section. I argue that the exposition on the structure of the epiphany of the Other as trace or enigma would not make sense unless it is grounded in human experience. In other words, Levinas not only speaks of trace as a structure of experience that distinguishes it from the ordinary encounter with signs, but also suggests the possibility of the experience of the face as a trace. We will return to these issues later in the chapter.

³⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, EDE, 298/CPP, 71.

4.2.3. The Face as Trace

We have seen in Chapter One the notion of the face of the Other as the first signification of transcendence. As a particular mode of the manifestation of the Other, the face always refuses any attempt of representation and totalization. It cannot be contained by any thought, but rather signifies by itself, without context nor mediation. Signifying transcendence, the face of the Other puts me and my freedom into question. It makes demand on me and gives its word, “You shall not kill!” This is fundamentally the ethical structure of the face, which Levinas describes at length in *Totality and Infinity*. In his later works Levinas develops the notion of the face as a trace of the Infinite, which we are about to explore in this section.

4.2.3.1. Face as Revelation

In as early as 1963 Levinas has made the linkage between the face and the trace in his essay “The Trace of the Other.” But for our purpose, the 1965 essay “Phenomenon and Enigma” may provide a better exposition on this relation.³⁵⁶ We saw the temporal structure of a trace in that it points to the immemorial past that no human recollection can ever retrieve. A trace has the mark of absence, emptiness, and desolation due to the

³⁵⁶ The date and the journal in which this essay was originally published, were wrongly noted in its English translation in *Collected Philosophical Papers (CPP)*. It says the “*Énigme et phénomène*” was published in the *Revue de Métaphysique et de Morale*, no. 62 in 1957. It was actually first published in *Esprit*, no. 6 in 1965. Levinas’s essay published in *Revue de Métaphysique* in 1957 was entitled “La philosophie et l’idée de l’Infini.” See *CPP*, 47, 61.

withdrawal of the Infinite. Levinas argues that the face of the Other is the very primordial trace that manifests, in itself and without mediation, the transcendence of the Infinite:

How refer to an irreversible past, that is, a past which this very reference would not bring back, like memory which retrieves the past, like signs which recapture the signified? What would be needed would be an indication that would reveal the withdrawal of the indicated, instead of a reference that rejoins it. Such is a trace, in its emptiness and desolation. Its desolation is not made of evocations but of forgettings, forgettings in process, putting aside the past... *What is this original trace, this primordial desolation? It is the nakedness of a face that faces, expressing itself, interrupting order.* If the interruption is not taken up by the context interrupted, to receive a meaning from it, this is because it was already ab-solute. The context was given up before beginning, the breaking of contact took place before engagement: a face is decomposed and naked.³⁵⁷

For Levinas, the breach or break-up of totality is the possibility of a signification without a context; this is the realm where ethics becomes an optics (*TeI*, 8/*TaI*, 23). All this is the signification of the face that expresses itself, *καθ' αὐτό*, and suspends the efficacy of all our horizons: “Knowledge in the absolute sense of the term, the pure experience of the other being, would have to maintain the other being *καθ' αὐτό*” (*TeI*, 60/*TaI*, 65). In expressing itself the face cuts through our own horizons and expectations. This means that we do still bring our own horizons to the encounter with the Other. But the face of the Other can only express itself without the mediation of my *Sinngebung* and horizons. This experience requires a different type of intentionality because the face comes from the beyond: “Within being, a transcendence revealed is inverted into immanence, the extra-ordinary is inserted into an order, the other is absorbed into the same. In the presence of the other do we not respond to an ‘order’ in which signifyingness remains an irremissible disturbance, an utterly bygone past? Such is the signifyingness of a trace.

³⁵⁷ Levinas, “Phenomenon and Enigma,” *EDE*, 289/*CPP*, 65, italics mine.

The beyond from which a face comes signifies as a trace. A face is in the trace of the utterly bygone, utterly passed absent.”³⁵⁸ That is to say, the signifyingness of the face, as we have seen, is not the manifestation of a being by referring from the signifier to the signified, but rather the signifyingness of a trace (*TeI*, 293/*TaI*, 262; cf. 198/181-82). As a trace, the faces signifies not something from this world, but rather from the beyond.

For Levinas, the encounter with the face of the Other is an absolute experience. Since the face bears the trace of the transcendent, I cannot enter into an intentional relation with the Other as if the Other were merely another object. Here the Other is being *absolved* from the relation, hence “absolute” or “separate” from it. The movement of the encounter with the face, then, is absolute, “not something added to an immobile face; it is in the face itself. A face is of itself a visitation and transcendence. But a face, wholly open, can at the same time be in itself because it is in the trace of illeity. Illeity is the origin of the alterity of being in which the in itself of objectivity participates, while also betraying it.”³⁵⁹ Such absolute experience, according to Levinas, is no longer disclosure but rather *revelation*, which constitutes “a veritable inversion [of] *objectifying cognition* (*TeI*, 61/*TaI*, 65-6, italics original). Even though this revelation is not, at least initially, a manifestation of a god, it does occur as “a disturbance imprinting itself... with an unexceptionable gravity.”³⁶⁰ This is because the third person, the illeity, “who in a face has already withdrawn from every relation and every dissimulation, who has passed...is the whole enormity, the inordinateness, the infinity of the absolutely other, which eludes

³⁵⁸ Levinas, “The Trace of the Other,” *EDE*, 276-7/DC, 355.

³⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, *EDE*, 282/DC, 359.

³⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, *EDE*, 282/DC, 359.

treatment by ontology.”³⁶¹ It is this illeity that resists totalization and “forbids me my conquest.”³⁶²

4.2.3.2. Encountering the Face as Trace

It may be worthwhile here to think of human experience of the face as the trace of the Infinite. The story of Erich Maria Remarque’s *All Quiet on the Western Front*, which we already saw in Chapter One, immediately comes to my mind as one of the best illustrations of such experience. In the encounter with the wounded enemy soldier, the main character in the story becomes preoccupied with each and every movement of this combatant. The whole body of of this fighter, including his physical face, as well as its reactions to the bodily wounds turn into the source of disclosure about his condition and what he might do. Indeed, our encounter with the Other always begins and occurs by way of the body, including the physical face. In other words, we do not encounter the Other in abstraction. Levinas himself speaks of the nakedness of the face that is extended into the nakedness of the body (cf. *TeI*, 73/*TaI*, 75). But the whole meaning of the relation with the Other itself, as Levinas makes it clear, cannot be reduced to the manifestation of the body or the physical face. The relation to the (true) face, for Levinas, is not a matter of

³⁶¹ *Ibid.*, *EDE*, 278/*DC*, 356.

³⁶² Levinas, “Philosophy and the Idea of Infinity,” *EDE*, 240/*CPP*, 55.

representation or thematization.³⁶³ The face signifies outside of every context and without mediation.

There is an underlying assumption here, namely, that it is possible to have a concrete experience of the relation with the face of the Other that we can recognize in our lives. This is what Robert Bernasconi calls an *empirical reading* of the face-to-face relation, as opposed to a *transcendental* reading of it that sees such a relation as the condition for the possibility of ethics and of all economic existence and knowledge.³⁶⁴ But we must admit that the term ‘experience’ itself is ambiguous in Levinas’s works. Earlier we discussed *heteronomous experience* in which, instead of the *I*, it is the Other that takes control, so to speak, of the intersubjective relation. We also touched upon *absolute experience* in which the Other is ‘absolved’ from the relation and thus escapes the objectification of the *I*. The question here, however, is whether or not we can recognize that kind of experience in our daily lives. Levinas’s statement in the preface to *Totality and Infinity* may give us a sense of the ambiguity of the term ‘experience’:

The relation with infinity cannot, to be sure, be stated in terms of experience, for infinity overflows the thought that thinks it. Its very *infinition* is produced precisely in this overflowing. The relation with infinity will have to be stated in terms other than those of objective experience; but if experience precisely means a relation with the absolutely other, that is, with what always overflows thought, the relation with infinity accomplishes experience in the fullest sense of the word (*TeI*, 10/*TaI*, 25).

Here Levinas distinguishes two kinds of experience: *first*, our ordinary experience, which what he calls ‘objective experience’ due to the objectifying nature of consciousness

³⁶³ The phrase ‘true face’ here may sound awkward, as if there were true and false faces. But it may be justified given the fact that the term ‘face’ itself is often taken to mean the physical face, which is clearly not what Levinas means by the term.

³⁶⁴ Robert Bernasconi, “Re-reading *Totality and Infinity*,” *The Question of the Other: Essays on Contemporary Continental Philosophy*, eds. Arleen B. Dallery and Charles E. Scott (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989), 23.

toward its object; *second*, absolute or heteronomous experience in which the relation with the Infinite consists. The latter kind of experience cannot be described in terms of objectifying intentionality because it overflows thinking. It involves the breakup of the totality to which ordinary experience is confined, thus manifesting the path to transcendence. Ethical experience, for Levinas, is precisely the experience of transcendence, which nonetheless takes place in our very world: “The transcendence of the face is not enacted outside of the world” (*TeI*, 187/*TaI*, 172). The empirical reading of the face-to-face relation allows us to view such a relation as a concrete experience available to the human being, and not as the condition for the possibility of ethics.³⁶⁵

Thus, Remarque’s *All Quiet on the Western Front* may help us better understand the heteronomous experience that suggests the relation with the Infinite. What happens in the story, particularly following the death of the enemy fighter, brings forth the kind of experience that is irreducible to any attempt of objectification or thematization. First, the protagonist begins to feel the torture from the dead soldier through “an invisible dagger,” as he calls it. The torture definitely does not come from the physical face of the soldier, but rather from something else that lies deeper than that. It shows the resistance of the Other, not as somebody belonging to the totality of beings, but as an infinite, or as a face that bears the trace of the Infinite: “This infinity, stronger than murder, already resists us

³⁶⁵ This empirical reading of *Totality and Infinity* in general and of the face-to-face relation in particular, has lead Derrida in “Violence and Metaphysics” to label Levinas’s thought as ‘empiricism.’ Even worse, according to Derrida, is that such a renewed empiricism is claimed to be metaphysics (*ED*, 225/*WD*, 151). Derrida later turns the charge of empiricism into an analysis of the concept of experience: “Can one speak of an *experience* of the other or of difference? Has not the concept of experience always been determined by the metaphysics of presence?” (*ED*, 225/*WD*, 152). These questions may be viewed as challenging the possibility of concrete experience of the Other and thus leaning toward the transcendental interpretation of the work. For further discussion on this issue, see Bernasconi, “Rereading *Totality and Infinity*,” *The Question of the Other*, 23-34.

in his face, is his face, is the primordial *expression*, is the first word: ‘you shall not commit murder’” (*TeI*, 217/*TaI*, 199). We recall Levinas’s insistence that the face disturbs immanence without settling into the horizons of the world.³⁶⁶ With the torture, the protagonist experiences the disturbance from the face, which lays a claim on him. He begins to recognize the meaning of the ethical, which Levinas attempts to uncover in his works, and learns about the responsibility for the Other. Indeed, access to the face of the Other, as Levinas puts it, is “straightway [*d’emblée*] ethical” (*EeI*, 79/*EaI*, 85; cf. *TeI*, 218/*TaI*, 199). Here the face has ceased to be a phenomenon and turned into an enigma. It breaks up the closed circle of totality in which the protagonist has been trapped. Second, while looking at the body of the dead soldier, the main character gives a speech in response to the epiphany of this particular Other: that he only kills the abstraction of this enemy soldier, and not the real person (or the face) which cannot be killed; that he begins to see the humanity of this combatant and to sense a fellowship with him. The face of this combatant now becomes the source of revelation for the protagonist. This is not the face as image, but as that which bears the trace of the Infinite.

There are several important points to make here. *First*, the protagonist (or we human beings) is able to receive such a revelation because the human being is a sensible subject. We recall from our discussion in Chapter Two that the basis for human subjectivity, in Levinas’s view, is not consciousness, but rather sensibility. Thanks to sensibility, we are able to enjoy the world and its elements, to be addressed and questioned by the Other (*autrui*), and to be responsible for the Other. *Second*, I argue that

³⁶⁶ Levinas, “The Trace of the Other,” *EDE*, 275/*DC*, 354.

the sense of humanity and fellowship that the protagonist has of the dead enemy soldier is part of what Levinas means by the face of the Other as a trace of the Infinite. The encounter with the Infinite cannot but evoke the sense of kinship and fellowship with other human beings. The Other is experienced not simply as a mere human person, but rather as a kind of *locus theologicus* in which the Infinite may be encountered, which the protagonist experiences: “The dimension of the divine opens forth from the human face” (*TeI*, 76/*TaI*, 78). A trace “lights up as the face of a neighbor, ambiguously him *before whom* (or *to whom*, without any paternalism) and him *for whom* I answer” (*AE*, 26/*OB*, 12). Of course, for Levinas, the face, even as a trace, is not the incarnation of God or a visible instantiation of the sacred. To suggest so would be to confer upon the face the status of an idol. The epiphany of the face, for Levinas, is *visitation* and transcendence: “Whereas the phenomenon is already, on whatever score, image, captive manifestation of its mute plastic form, the epiphany of the face is alive.”³⁶⁷ The Infinite, the trace of which is the face, is other than the other person, of a different alterity.³⁶⁸ A strict distinction, therefore, must be made between the Other and the other, God and the other person,

³⁶⁷ Levinas, “Signification and Sense,” *HAH*, 47/*HO*, 31.

³⁶⁸ Alterity is one of the issues that brings Levinas into a debate with Derrida. In “Violence and Metaphysics,” Derrida questions Levinas’s rejection of the notion of *alter ego* as well as his usage of the term ‘the absolutely other.’ He claims that Husserl’s phrase *alter ego* speaks of alterity better than Levinas’s appeal to ‘the absolutely other’: “The other is absolutely other only if he is an ego, that is, in a certain way, if he is the same as I” (*ED*, 187/*WD*, 127). The absoluteness of such alterity is presumably applicable to both the alterity of the other person and that of God (see *TeI*, 23/*TaI*, 34). But Derrida points out the priority of the latter over the former in Levinas’s work, noting that, “The face-to-face... is not originally determined by Levinas as the vis-à-vis of two equal and upright men. The latter presupposes the face-to-face of the man with bent neck and eyes raised toward the God on high” (*ED*, 158/*WD*, 107). In any case, the two alterities are distinguished in Levinas’s work. For further discussion on this issue, see Brian Treanor, *Aspects of Alterity: Levinas, Marcel, and the Contemporary Debate* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2006), particularly chapter 6, “The Other and God.” See also Robert Bernasconi’s essay, “The Alterity of the Stranger and the Experience of the Alien,” *The Face of the Other and the Trace of God: Essays on the Philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2000), 62-89.

between transcendence and alterity.³⁶⁹ As a trace, the face of the Other does not hide a God behind it, as if the hidden God were to be unveiled. Unlike a sign, as we have seen, a trace does not lead to another manifestation because it does not belong to the world but rather signifies an immemorial past: “The trace in which a face is ordered is not reducible to a sign: a sign and its relationship with the signified are synchronic in a theme. The approach is not the thematization of any relationship, but is this very relationship, which resists thematization as anarchic. To thematize this relation is already to lose it, to leave the absolute passivity of the self” (*AE*, 192/*OB*, 121). In the next section we will examine the deeper meaning of the face as a trace of God and discuss its relation to the responsibility for the Other that constitutes the ethical subjectivity.

Third, we have also seen that the relation between the *I* and the Other cannot be reduced simply to that of disturbance. It is true that when the Other puts my freedom into question or interrupts my enjoyment, that is where ethics begins for Levinas. But he does not seem to restrict the ethical relation to interruption, as he also considers the manifestation of the Other *καθ’ αὐτό* as *revelation*, that is, “a coinciding of the expressed with him who expresses, which is the privileged manifestation of the Other, the manifestation of a face over and beyond form” (*TeI*, 61/*TaI*, 65-6). This means that the relation between the *I* and the Other should not be approached only negatively, namely, as the interruption of the former by the latter, but also positively, namely, as the revelation of the Other. Thus, the Other not only interrupts and questions my freedom, but also teaches me. The Other manifests herself as a teacher, showing me what I do not

³⁶⁹ Jacques Rolland, “He (*Il*),” trans. Bettina Bergo, *Emmanuel Levinas: Critical Assessments of Leading Philosophers*, Vol. III, eds. Claire Katz with Lara Trout (London and New York: Routledge, 2005), 264.

yet know. The protagonist in the story definitely realizes how much the dead enemy soldier can teach him about human fellowship. In the intersubjective relation I always receive something from the Other: “To approach the Other in conversation is to welcome his expression, in which at each instant he overflows the idea a thought would carry away from it. It is therefore to *receive* from the Other beyond the capacity of the I, which means exactly: to have the idea of infinity. But this also means: to be taught. The relation with the Other, or Conversation, is a non-allergic relation, an ethical relation; but inasmuch as it is welcomed this conversation is a teaching.”³⁷⁰ The Other teaches me not by way of the Socratic maieutics, according to Levinas, but rather by continuing “the placing in me of the idea of infinity” (*TeI*, 196/*TaI*, 180). The function of the teacher here, as Anthony Steinbock puts it, is simply a “‘point’ that points.”³⁷¹ With the teacher functioning merely as a pointer, what most important is not what she does or says, but rather the movement to the Infinite, or the turning to the neighbor. In teaching, Levinas says, the revealer and the revealed coincide (*TeI*, 38/*TaI*, 67). This is clearly a more positive way of describing the relation between the *I* and the Other than merely an interruption: the Other teaches me, through the revelation in the face, to be responsible for the Other.

³⁷⁰ *TeI*, 43/*TaI*, 51. The capital ‘C’ in ‘Conversation’ (*le Discours*) is original. This is another instance of Levinas’s inconsistency in the use of capital letters.

³⁷¹ Anthony J. Steinbock, “Face and Revelation: Levinas on Teaching as Way-Faring,” *Addressing Levinas*, 126.

4.2.3.3. The Passing of the Infinite – Ordering to Neighbor

In order to better understand the significance of the face as a trace of the Infinite, we need to recall Levinas's characterization of the structure of the idea-of-the-Infinite-in-me. First, it is a surplus or overflowing over intentionality such that it resists any attempt of representation and comprehension. Second, the Infinite does not manifest itself as a phenomenon, but rather as an enigma. This implies that the Infinite has passed beyond being, hence absence: "The other distinguishes himself absolutely, by absolving himself, moving off, passing, passing beyond being, to yield his place to being. Passing beyond being: this is the supreme goodness that would belie itself if it proclaimed itself!"³⁷² The passing of the Infinite suggests that the Other is a trace, and not a sign, of God. Now, if the face of the Other is a trace, and not sign, of God, what does it mean? What are the implications of the face bearing the trace?

In a dense passage at the end of his essay "Phenomenon and Enigma," Levinas provides answers to the above questions: "The infinite, to solicit desire, a thought thinking more than it thinks, cannot be incarnated in a desirable... It solicits across a face, the term of my generosity and my sacrifice. A you is inserted between the I and the absolute He. Correlation is broken."³⁷³ First of all, it would be impossible for the Infinite to become incarnated in the face without turning the face into an idol. As we have seen, the face is to be approached as an enigma, and not a phenomenon, since it bears the revelation of the Infinite. But the Other (*Autrui*), whose face is the trace of God, is not the

³⁷² Levinas, "Phenomenon and Enigma," *EDE*, 297/*CPP*, 70.

³⁷³ *Ibid.*, *EDE*, 301/*CPP*, 73.

incarnation of God (*TeI*, 77/*TaI*, 79). What the face of the Other can do to me is soliciting my response, calling my forth to infinite generosity and sacrifice: “The response to the enigma’s summons is the generosity of sacrifice outside the known and the unknown, without calculation, for going on to infinity.”³⁷⁴ To whom are the gestures of generosity and sacrifice shown, one may ask? It is to the ‘you’ inserted between the *I* and the Infinite, Levinas answers. The ‘you’ is the neighbor whom the *I* encounters and in whose face the Infinite solicits the *I*’s response. It is not simply that the *I* turns to the neighbor in order to find the trace of the Infinite. The whole turning-to-the-neighbor, which we already saw in Chapter Three when discussing the Desire for the Infinite, occurs because of the ‘work’ of the Infinite: “The Infinite transcends itself in the finite, it *passes* the finite in that it orders the neighbor to me [*it m’ordonne le prochain*] without exposing itself to me.”³⁷⁵ The *I* responds to the solicitation of the Infinite by offering itself to the neighbor: “I approach the infinite insofar as I forget myself for my neighbor who looks at me; I forget myself only in breaking the undephasable simultaneity of representation, in existing beyond my death. I approach the infinite by sacrificing myself. Sacrifice is the norm and the criterion of the approach.”³⁷⁶ It is by turning to the Other that the *I* bears witness to the Infinite: “The Infinite is not ‘in front of ‘ me; it is I who express it, but I do so precisely in giving a sign of the giving of signs, of the ‘for-the-other’ in which I am dis-interested: here I am [*me voici*].”³⁷⁷

³⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, *EDE*, 300/*CPP*, 72.

³⁷⁵ Levinas, “God and Philosophy,” *DVI*, 123/*GCM*, 75.

³⁷⁶ Levinas, “Phenomenon and Enigma,” *EDE*, 300/*CPP*, 72.

³⁷⁷ Levinas, “God and Philosophy,” *DVI*, 122-3/*GCM*, 75.

It is important to note that for Levinas, the Infinite not only solicits me to turn to the neighbor, but more strongly, as we already discussed in Chapter Three, *orders* me to do so. The responsibility for the Other is, as Levinas puts it in “God and Philosophy,” *a strange mission*: “The neighbor is not a phenomenon and his presence is not resolvable into presentation and appearing. It is ordered out of *the absence in which the infinite approaches*, out of its *null site [Non-Lieu]*, ordered *in the trace of its own departure*; it is ordered to my responsibility and my love, beyond consciousness, which it obsesses.”³⁷⁸ There are at least two different meanings to the word ‘to order’ (*ordonner*) here. First, it conveys the meaning of a command, namely, that the Infinite commands me to take care of the neighbor. The most famous command we find in Levinas’s writings is “you shall not commit murder!” (*TeI*, 217/*TaI* 199; *TeI*, 238/*TaI*, 216; *TeI*, 339/*TaI*, 303). Two less familiar others can be summed up this way: “You shall not usurp my place in the sun”³⁷⁹ and “You shall not let me die alone.”³⁸⁰ Even if I do not hear the commands as such, I do respond “as though to an order addressed to me” (*AE*, 146/*OB*, 91). Thus, the sense of receiving a command does not need to be taken literally. What most important here is that I answer the solicitation of the Infinite as if I responded to an order. The proper response here would be to obey the order. Second, the term “to order” may suggest the meaning of arranging or directing. Thus, when Levinas says the Infinite orders me to the neighbor, he is suggesting that I am being oriented toward the neighbor. What matters here is not primarily obeying a command, but rather following the direction of the Infinite. The

³⁷⁸ Levinas, “Language and Proximity,” *EDE*, 322/*CPP*, 121. See “God and Philosophy,” *DVI*, 115/*GCM*, 69; *DVI*, 123/*GCM*, 75.

³⁷⁹ “Dialogue with Emmanuel Levinas,” *Face to Face with Levinas*, 24; *ENP*, 139/*ENT*, 130.

³⁸⁰ *ENP*, 140, 175/*ENT*, 130-1, 169; *BI*, 112.

second meaning of the term may be broader and more subtle than the first. In any case, both meanings are equally valid as they are implied in Levinas's usage of the term.

The sacrifice I make, or the expiation for the Other, in Levinas's view, is my response to the solicitation and order of the Infinite. In fact, it is not something added to my personality or being, but rather precisely what constitutes my subjectivity. We saw in Chapter Two how Levinas portrays the ethical subjectivity as having the structure of the Other-in-the-Same. Thus, the response I give to the order of the Infinite does not alienate me, but rather part of who I actually am. This is why Levinas insists that "one should not understand this expiation in a mystical manner. It is not a manifestation of the sacred. One has to take it as the perspective of holiness, without which the human is inconceivable. This means that the human being is responsible for the other person and that she is responsible for the other even when the other does not concern her, because the other always concerns her."³⁸¹ When I show my concern and mercy to the human Other, and even sacrifice my life for her, I witness to the Infinite within me. This is the situation in which "God can come to mind."³⁸²

One important question pertaining to the order of the Infinite for the subject to turn to the neighbor is the following: how does it differ from the biblical command, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself"? As Merold Westphal points out, there are some striking similarities between the two orders. First, they both recognize our reluctance to love our neighbor without preference. For this reason, a command or forced order is

³⁸¹ Levinas, "Interview with Salomon Malka," *IRB*, 99.

³⁸² Levinas, "Being-for-the-Other," *IRB*, 116.

necessary: “Commanded love of neighbor is the end to preference.”³⁸³ In this sense the command to love our neighbor is the Levinasian deflection of our desire to the undesirable. Second, the order or deflection is not the result of human deliberation, but rather is based on divine authority. It is the Infinite that is ultimately ‘responsible’ for the turning to the neighbor.

Some important differences between the two orders are also apparent. First, the biblical command to love the neighbor is intimately linked to the command to love God. Thus, the turning to the neighbor is a necessary component of one’s personal and loving relation with God. In Levinas, however, we do not find a personal relation with God that precedes one’s turning to the neighbor. In fact, Levinas’s God, at least in this case, is not a personal God who gives direct orders, but rather a “He,” or Illeity. Second, Levinas never mentions ‘ourselves’ as the paradigm for loving our neighbor. The idea of substitution for the Other outrightly rejects this identification. We recall Levinas’s insistence on the asymmetrical relation between me and the Other: we are not equal, as the Other is immeasurably above me: “I am of the opinion that ‘saintliness’ is the foundation of morality. All that one demands of oneself, is demanded of a saint, but what one may demand of the Other is always less.”³⁸⁴ Since the responsibility for the Other in Levinas is infinite, self-love never becomes its measure.

In any case, the human relation, or the encounter with the Other in the face, for Levinas, clearly reflects the relation between God and the human being, even from the

³⁸³ Westphal, *Levinas and Kierkegaard in Dialogue*, 69.

³⁸⁴ See Johan F. Goud, “‘What one asks of oneself, one asks of a saint’: A Dialogue with Emmanuel Levinas, 1980-81,” *Levinas Studies*, vol. 3, 23.

immemorial past. In order to describe such a relation Levinas finds it necessary to use the term ‘creation,’ often called ‘tsimtsum,’ in which a separated being is produced through the diminution and contraction of the Infinite. The creation of the independent being shows the absoluteness as well as the humility of the Infinite that “does not close in upon itself in a circle but withdraws from the ontological extension so as to leave a place for a separated being” (*TeI*, 107/*TaI*, 104). This separation, in Levinas’s view, is a form of atheism where one “lives outside of God, at home with oneself” (*TeI*, 52/*TaI*, 58). Yet, it is crucial for a genuine relation between the human being and God, opening up room for a society expressed in a multiplicity that is not united into a totality (cf. *TeI*, 75/*TaI*, 77; *TeI*, 107/*TaI*, 104). Creation leaves a trace of the Infinite, which, as we have seen, cannot be retrieved and brought to the present. It is only in the face of the Other that I encounter the trace again, soliciting and ordering me to move toward the Infinite, toward the neighbor.

4.2.3.4. À-Dieu

The whole discussion up to this point should help us understand the importance of the term *à-Dieu* in Levinas’s thought. First of all, the term precisely indicates the direction or orientation (*sens*) of the subjectivity of the subject as the responsibility for the Other, namely, toward God. Levinas himself calls it a “devotion” because God, as the absolute, always transcends the relation with the human subject: “An invisible God that no relationship could rejoin, because He is a term in no relation, even intentionality,

because He is precisely not a term but the Infinite. This is an Infinite to which I am destined by a non-intentional thought which no preposition in our language – not even the *à* (unto) to which we resort here – could translate the devotion. *À-Dieu*, for which diachronic time is its unique cipher, is at once devotion and transcendence.”³⁸⁵ This is because, secondly, God continues to pass or take-leave (*adieu*). Even with the Desire for the Infinite, the human being never reaches God. In fact, as we have seen, the human being is ordered to the responsibility for the Other: “The face, as *à-Dieu*, is the latent birth of meaning. The apparently negative utterance of the *à-Dieu* or of its signification is determined or concretized as responsibility for the neighbor, for the other man, for the stranger.”³⁸⁶ The responsibility for the Other is thus seen as the concrete manifestation of one’s relation with God.

Third, the incessant departure of God also means that the relation between God and the human being is always ‘on the move,’ just as one lives in time.³⁸⁷ Such a relation, in Levinas’s view, never reaches a permanent state in which the Desire will be fulfilled or the tension will be resolved: “I can never have enough in my relation to God for He always exceeds my measure, remains forever incommensurate with my desire. In this sense our desire for God is without end or term: it is interminable and infinite because God reveals Himself as absence rather than presence... (but) the dissatisfaction is itself

³⁸⁵ Levinas, “Notes on Meaning,” *DVI*, 250/*GCM*, 166. See Catherine Chaliel, *What Ought I to Do?: Morality in Kant and Levinas*, trans. Jane Marie Todd (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1998), 160.

³⁸⁶ Levinas, “Notes on Meaning,” *DVI*, 253/*GCM*, 168.

³⁸⁷ To be in eternity, Levinas says, “is to be *one*, to be *oneself* eternally. To be in time is to be for God (*être à Dieu*), a perpetual taking-leave (*adieu*).” See Kearney, “Ethics of the Infinite,” *Debates*, 74.

sublime.. In the infinite order, the absence of God is better than His presence.”³⁸⁸ In other words, the “unto-God (*l’à-Dieu*) is for Levinas not a finality.”³⁸⁹ This position has led Levinas to reject eschatology that suggests a finality.³⁹⁰ The reason for the rejection of such eschatology is because finality that it entails suggests

an end to the historical relation of difference between the human beings and the absolutely Other, a reduction of the gap which safeguards the alterity of the transcendent, to a totality of sameness. To realize the *eschaton* would therefore mean that we could seize or appropriate God as a *telos* and degrade the infinite relation with the other to a finite fusion... The danger of eschatology is the temptation to consider the man-God relation as a state, as a fixed and permanent state of affairs.³⁹¹

In his other writing, he makes a similar point: “The *to-God* is neither the thematization of theologies, nor a finality, which goes toward an end point and not the Infinite, nor eschatology, preoccupied with ultimate ends or promises rather than obligations to men. The prepositions themselves, including the *to* and the *pro*, are already only metaphors of time, and cannot serve in its constitution.”³⁹²

In my opinion, Levinas takes the danger of eschatology too seriously, as if it could be attained simply through human efforts. In thinking of eschatology as a human project, he is worried that human beings may appropriate God in the attainment of eschatology. In so doing Levinas himself seems to forget that eschatology, whatever form it may take, is always God’s own project and therefore will never yield a sheer finite

³⁸⁸ Kearney, “Ethics of the Infinite,” *Debates*, 82-3; cf. “Hermeneutics and Beyond,” *DVI*, 169/*GCM*, 108.

³⁸⁹ Levinas, “The Bad Conscience and the Inexorable,” *DVI*, 264/*GCM*, 176-7.

³⁹⁰ I put it this way due to Levinas’s change of position with regard to eschatology. As I noted in Chapter Three, in *Totality and Infinity* he favors eschatology over teleology because the former goes beyond history and escapes a finality. But in his later thought, like the one we are discussing at the moment, he becomes suspicious of eschatology as well for the very reason he rejected teleology earlier.

³⁹¹ Kearney, “Ethics of the Infinite,” *Debates*, 81.

³⁹² Levinas, “Diachrony and Representation,” *ENP*, 182/*ENT*, 176.

fusion. The human beings can never seize God as a *telos* in the event of eschatology because eschatology does not belong to them, but rather to God. To entertain such a possibility, as Levinas does, is simply to fail to recognize God's transcendence in this matter.

Fourth, since the movement toward God never reaches an end, even in eschatology, the *à-Dieu*, as the responsibility for the Other, knows no rest or end, either. This means that ethical responsibility in which God may pass always indicates insomnia or watchfulness: "It is a perpetual duty of vigilance and effort which can never slumber."³⁹³ In Levinas's view God never reveals Godself as presence but only in absence in the form of a trace. By the time one finds God's trace, it has become too late as God has passed. For Levinas, such an encounter with God can only take place through the ethical responsibility for the Other.

The claim that the face of the Other is the trace of the Infinite clearly shows the religious underpinning of Levinas's ethics. The human being is pre-originally in relation with God, though in separation. Her responsibility for the Other (*autrui*) is an assignment or a mission through such a relation. It is the *à-Dieu* movement that knows no finality. Here, I argue, Levinas is not simply offering what Zygmunt Bauman calls a "description of the existential condition of 'being with others'."³⁹⁴ It is true that for Levinas responsibility is "the essential, primary and fundamental structure of subjectivity."³⁹⁵ But it is not derived from a sheer human solidarity or fellowship, but rather from a relation

³⁹³ Kearney, "Ethics of the Infinite," *Debates*, 81.

³⁹⁴ Zygmunt Bauman, *Modernity and the Holocaust* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1989), 182.

³⁹⁵ Bauman, *Modernity and the Holocaust*, 183.

with God. In other words, Levinas's ethics is not simply a secular humanism, but more importantly, a religious one. Here we may recall that Levinas does call his ethics a "humanism for the Other," which becomes a title for one of his books. But the reason for the use of the term 'humanism' in this case is the attempt to show a contrast between his type of humanism that is oriented toward the Other, and the kind that is more self- or subject-centered, as the type asserted by Sartre. Levinas's humanism remains religious in nature, I argue, insofar as it is the result of the relation with the Infinite.

It is important for us to ask two important questions here. First, why does Levinas confine the trace of the Infinite to the face of the Other (*autrui*)? Can one find such a trace in the non-human animal? Does the non-human animal have a face? If sensibility is the basis for subjectivity, why can't the structure of the trace as well as ethical responsibility be extended to any sentient being? Is this because only human beings have speech, the topic of which we will discuss in the next section? But why, as John Llewelyn asks, must responsibility be limited to responding to a being that can speak?³⁹⁶ What is the importance of speech for ethics? These questions are very interesting and important, as it bears upon the relation between language and ethics. The next section, on the distinction between the *Saying* and the *Said*, addresses the very topic, although from a different point of view. Second, is there any other way to relate to God than through the ethical responsibility for the Other? Is the face of the Other the *only* way to encounter the Infinite? I do not think Levinas intends to make our relation with the neighbor the

³⁹⁶ John Llewelyn, "Am I Obsessed by Bobby? (Humanism of the Other Animal)," *Re-Reading Levinas*, 240.

exclusive way of encountering the Infinite, despite his emphasis on this particular path. I will elaborate this argument in the next chapter.

4.3. The Saying and the Said: The Structure of Ethical and Religious Language

It may not seem entirely natural, in my opinion, to find a significant philosophy of language in Levinas's thought. At least, it would not be easy for anyone to foresee such a direction of his thinking. Levinas's attention, at least as we have seen, has been largely directed to exploring the significance of the ethical in the encounter with the Other and to analyzing the structure of ethical subjectivity. One might think that if there is any philosophy of language in his thought, it would not occupy a central position. This way of thinking turns out to be completely wrong. Levinas's philosophy of transcendence as ethical alterity is profoundly a philosophy of language. His second major philosophical work, *Otherwise than Being or beyond Essence*, is devoted to an analysis of ethical language adequate to express human subjectivity as the responsibility for the Other. In fact, he already makes the argument early in the *Totality and Infinity* that the relation (*rapport*) between the Same and the Other, which is metaphysics, is language (*le langage*) because it is primordially enacted as 'conversation' or 'discourse' (*TeI*, 28-9/*TaI*, 39). What Levinas means 'discourse' here is clearly much more than a mere exchange of information, as we will see below. At any rate, we find in Levinas's philosophy a deep philosophy of language in general, and of ethical language in particular. To these I would like to add religious (or theological) language, which Levinas

often comments on, as he deals with the above issues. Thus, in this section we will look briefly at the structure of both ethical and religious language in Levinas's philosophy to help us better understand his thought on the relation between ethics and religion to which this study is devoted.

4.3.1. The Saying and the Said: The structure of the ethical language

The linguistic structure of the ethical relation, as Levinas conceives it, finds its basis in the same structure of phenomenology itself. The Husserlian phenomenology, as we recall, concerns the search for a secure foundation of science through the careful analysis and examination of the ways things appear to us. The contact between the inquiring mind and the perceived object is often expressed in the language of *noesis* (the act of thinking) and *noema* (the object of thought). Intentionality, as a phenomenological method, expresses this fundamental notion that our consciousness is always conscious of something, that it is always in relation with the world. Phenomenology, therefore, always involves the relation between the subject and the world, between *noesis* and *noema*, or as Levinas puts it, between the Same and the Other, when it concerns an intersubjective relation. In such a relation there is always an interaction or contact between the subject and the Other, whatever form it may take. Insofar as such a contact exists, the intersubjective relation is already built on a linguistic structure. This structure is expressed not only in the form of communication between the subject and the Other, for example, when one speaks and the other listens, but also, and more importantly, in the

different aspects of the very act of communication itself that leads to Levinas's well-known distinction between the Saying (*le Dire*) and the Said (*le Dit*).

The distinction between the *Saying* and the *Said* in Levinas's philosophy is clearly not a mere linguistic differentiation. Rather, it stems from *within* language and human speaking itself.³⁹⁷ More specifically, it originates from two ordinary ways of human speaking: speaking *to* someone and speaking *about* someone/something. The first form of speaking involves a direct communication with a person, whereas the second form a thematization of a relevant subject. Levinas is much more interested in the first form of speaking because it will eventually lead us to the idea of Infinity. We recall his concept of the ethical as the putting-into-question of the subject by the Other. Such questioning definitely requires a direct encounter with the Other in which the Other addresses, challenges, and even teaches the subject. All these are done without mediation, namely, without thematizing words. We also recall Levinas's criticism of the major trait of Western philosophy, that is, the tendency to thematize and re-present every single aspect of the Other in such way that it reduces the otherness of the Other. In a direct communication between the *I* and the Other, even when it takes the form of the Other questioning the freedom of the subject or the face issuing a command, such a reduction cannot occur because the face resists any attempt of thematization and objectification.

Thus, the *Said* generally refers to the ontological form of language, in which all entities are disclosed and comprehended in the light of Being. Whenever we speak,

³⁹⁷ Not merely a linguistic distinction, this splitting of speech into the *Saying* and the *Said* can be seen as an instance of intricate entanglement that characterizes Levinas's later works, which I have noted above.

Levinas says, we inevitably make use of the language of ontology.³⁹⁸ The *Said* thus always involves assertions or propositions through which truth or falsity can be ascertained, like when one speaks about a person or a thing/event. It arises from the very tendency to thematize an object, to identify it as this or that. In so doing we impose an ideality on a given in that consciousness intends or ‘wills,’ so to speak, the given as an appearance. Here the meaning is “meant, claimed, pretended” by consciousness, instead of immediately given.³⁹⁹ The manifestation of a phenomenon thus always entails kerygmatic proclamation, and every phenomenon is (a) Said (*Dit*). On Levinas’s account thematization of a phenomenon by consciousness is a movement of returning home, as the *I* brings the phenomenon and its otherness into a more familiar territory of the Same.

The *Saying*, by contrast, refers to my direct encounter with, and exposure to, the Other, and my inability to refuse the Other who approaches and addresses me. It fundamentally means *speaking to the Other* before and beyond saying something about her. *Saying* is “the proximity of one to the other, the commitment of an approach, the one for the other, the very signifyingness of signification” (*AE*, 17/*OB*, 5; cf. *AE*, 239/*OB*, 153). It exposes the limitations of the very structure of thematization that makes every being into a Said. This saying is my facing the Other, without my mouth uttering any word to the Other: “Saying opens me to the other, before saying something said, before the said that is spoken in this sincerity forms a screen between me and the other. It is a saying without words, but not with empty words.”⁴⁰⁰

³⁹⁸ Goud, “What one asks of oneself,” *Levinas Studies*, vol. 3, 5.

³⁹⁹ Adriaan Peperzak, “From Intentionality to Responsibility: On Levinas’s Philosophy of Language,” *The Question of the Other: Essays in Contemporary Continental Philosophy*, 7.

⁴⁰⁰ Levinas, “God and Philosophy,” *DVI*, 121-2/*GCM*, 74.

It is important to note that for Levinas language as thematized in actual discourse, on the one hand, is not a unfortunate reduction of alterity. It is rather a gift to the Other, creating a common world: “To thematize is to offer the world to the other in speech” (*TeI*, 230/*TaI*, 209). Philosophy precisely needs this kind of language. On the other hand, the thematized language or the *Said* often stands in the way of a true and direct encounter between me and the Other. It treats the Other simply as a phenomenon comparable to other phenomena. Reducing the alterity of the Other to the intending acts of consciousness that posits itself as self-identity, apophantic language does not allow the Other to remain other. It is almost inevitable for me not to thematize or re-present the Other, but the face of the Other would not allow me to do so: “To enter into being and truth is to enter into the said; being is inseparable from its meaning! It is spoken. It is in the logos. But the reduction is reduction of the said to the saying beyond the logos, beyond being and non-being, beyond essence, beyond true and non-true” (*AE*, 77/*OB*, 45). Indeed, actual discourse or conversation with the Other, for Levinas, always goes beyond simply passing on or communicating certain contents to her. It always first means my being addressed by the Other and my responsible availability for the Other with the “here I am” attitude. The pre-original vocation of the saying, Levinas says, is responsibility (*AE*, 18/*OB*, 6). Since ethics for Levinas always involves the direct encounter with the Other, it has the structure of the *Saying* rather than the *Said*. The *Saying* is never exhausted in the *Said*; it rather imprints its trace in the *Said*. Whatever I say of the Other, even in philosophy, can never be adequate to the full ‘revelation’ of the Other.

With the distinction between *Saying* and *the Said*, one may begin to wonder how this *Saying*, which signifies the otherwise than Being, is ever going to be properly and faithfully articulated. If *the Said* always betrays *Saying*, if whatever I say to the Other invariably remains ‘unfaithful’ or ‘inadequate’ to my exposure to the Other, how is one to give a philosophical exposition to this *Saying* without betraying it? This is indeed Levinas’s biggest challenge in *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence* because as soon as the beyond Being is “conveyed before us, it is betrayed in the said that dominates the saying which states it” (AE, 19/OB, 7). He admits that the correlation of *Saying* and *the Said*, that is, the subordination of the former to the latter, is “the price that manifestation demands” (AE, 17/OB, 6). But at the same time, I would argue, this difficulty exposes to us the very limitations of philosophical language, that is, its inability to subject my exposure to the Other to its thematizing project. We should not overlook the apophantic structure of *Saying* in *the Said* that constitutes language. Levinas writes the following at the beginning of the *Otherwise than Being*:

Language permits us to utter, be it by betrayal, this *outside of being*, this *ex-ception* to being, as though being’s other were an event of being. Being, its cognition and the said in which it shows itself signify in a saying which, relative to being, forms an exception; but it is in the said that both this exception and the birth of cognition [*la naissance de la connaissance*] show themselves. But the fact that the ex-ception shows itself and becomes truth in the *said* can not serve as a pretext to take as an absolute the apophantic variant of the saying, which is ancillary or angelic (AE, 18/OB, 6).

This is the very reason why, according to Levinas, “one must unsay and resay (*dedire*). Unsayings does not counter what one wanted to say; it is always a protest against what one

has already said.”⁴⁰¹ There is a self-delay of discourse, a diachrony of *Saying*. Our task is, Levinas says, “to establish [the] articulation and signifyingness [of saying] antecedent to ontology” (*AE*, 79/*OB*, 46). In his view, alternation, namely, the attempt to find the true meaning through speaking, must thus be considered an essential element of philosophical speech.⁴⁰²

The claim of alternation, a never-ending succession of saying and unsaying of the apophantic language, can be deemed threatening. It may indicate the limits of phenomenology or philosophy in general to deal with an excess or surplus of signification. But it precisely underscores Levinas’s general view of transcendence in immanence. That is to say, there is always a structure of transcendence in the manifestation of phenomena. The main problem here, as Edith Wyschogrod points out, pertains to the way of maintaining the transcendence of alterity while avoiding the pitfalls of noumenality.⁴⁰³ We have seen this problem when discussing the face of the Other, recalling Levinas’s claim, for example, that the face is invisible (cf. *TeI*, 211/*TaI*, 194). In this context the apophantic language (the *Said*), for Levinas, reveals the very transcendence of *Saying* by performing its “ancillary or angelic” function for the *Saying*

⁴⁰¹ Goud, “What one asks of oneself,” *Levinas Studies*, vol. 3, 5. See also the following note in *Otherwise than Being*: “Thus there is need to unsay (*dedire*) all that comes to alter the nakedness of signs, to set aside all that is said in the pure saying proper to proximity. One cannot unambiguously make signs in the night. One has to say something about it, say something, before saying only the saying itself, before making signs, before making oneself a sign” (*AE*, 224 n.2/*OB*, 198 n.7).

⁴⁰² For this reason Levinas, like Hegel, views skepticism as an internal moment of philosophical comprehension itself, rather than as a philosophical trend in the history of ideas. Skepticism cannot be eliminated because “language is already skepticism” (*AE*, 263/*OB*, 170). Any attempt to get rid of it, in Levinas’s reading, would eventually destroy transcendence itself. See Jean Greisch, “The Face and Reading: Immediacy and Mediation,” trans. Simon Critchley, *Re-Reading Levinas*, 78.

⁴⁰³ Edith Wyschogrod, “Corporeality and the Glory of the Infinite in the Philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas,” *Incarnation* (Milan: Cedam, 1999), 182.

(*AE*, 18/*OB*, 6). There is much more to philosophy, to what can be said in the apophantic language.

In a way we can find some correlation between Levinas's two sets of distinction: that between phenomenon and enigma, on the one hand, and that between the *Said* and *Saying*. Both phenomenon and the *Said* belong to the order of the world. One can articulate a phenomenon in the language of Being, or the *Said*. The *Saying*, however, is an enigma because it comes from beyond Being. In fact, it bears the trace of the Infinite. Of course, when speaking, one has to make use of a particular language with a system of known truths accessible to everyone. Speaking continues to bring forth new significations. But "behind this renewal, which constitutes cultural life, the saying, that is, the face, is the discretion of an unheard-of proposition, an insinuation, immediately reduced to nothing, breaking up like the 'bubbles of the earth,'" ⁴⁰⁴ This shows the necessary connection between the *Saying* and the *Said*: there is no *Saying* without the *Said* because the former is precisely to be manifested in the latter: "Significations which link up cover over the traces of the *saying* that left them, as the perfect crime artist inserts the traces of his violence in the natural folds of order." ⁴⁰⁵ But as enigma, the *Saying* remains ambiguous and leaves only its traces in the *Said*: "The enigma extends as far as the phenomenon that bears the trace of the *saying* which has already withdrawn from the *said*." ⁴⁰⁶ The *Saying* signifies transcendence, and transcendence "requires ambiguity, a blinking of meaning which is not only a chance certainty, but a frontier both ineffaceable

⁴⁰⁴ Levinas, "Phenomenon and Enigma," *EDE*, 296/*CPP*, 69-70.

⁴⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, *EDE*, 295/*CPP*, 69.

⁴⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, *EDE*, 295/*CPP*, 69.

and finer than the tracing of an ideal line” (*AE*, 238/*OB*, 152). In short, the *Saying* can never be reduced to the *Said*; the former, rather, always presupposes the latter. *Saying* is thus the ethical form of language that goes beyond any disclosure of Being. In it lies the primacy of the ethical, the height of the interhuman relationship. In *Saying*, for Levinas, is built “an irreducible structure upon which all the other structures rest” (*TeI*, 51/*TaI*, 79). The irreducibility of the *Saying* to the *Said* clearly causes what has been called an epistemic trauma for the cogito.⁴⁰⁷ This is because the *Saying* signifies transcendence that is not a matter of cognition. Discourse is an ethical relation; it is responsibility, and not representation. By bringing us back to the *Saying* and its ethical significance, Levinas can be said to be performing a Husserlian reduction in order to show us what makes the phenomenon of the *Said* possible.

Levinas’s distinction between *Saying* and *the Said* helps us better understand his thesis that the face speaks (*TeI*, 61/*TaI*, 66). The speaking of the face here does not mean that the face literally says something to me, given the fact that this is not a mediated communication. Rather, Levinas’s thesis suggests that the Other as the face is able to present itself *καθ’ αὐτό*, immediately, and in person. The face is revelation itself, and its revelation is speech [*parole*] (*TeI*, 211/*TaI*, 193). This is what *Saying* is all about: it points to the very manifestation of the face *beyond* the form in which it is manifested: “The other who manifests himself in the face as it were breaks through his own plastic essence, like someone who opens a window on which his figure is outlined. His presence consists in *divesting* himself of the form which, however, manifests him. His

⁴⁰⁷ Westphal, *Levinas and Kierkegaard in Dialogue*, 80-1.

manifestation is a surplus over the inevitable paralysis of manifestation. This is what the formula ‘the face speaks’ expresses. The manifestation of a face is the first discourse. To speak is before all this way of coming from behind one’s appearance, behind one’s form – an opening in the openness.”⁴⁰⁸ Here we find what can be called ‘the linguistic structure of the face’: the face of the Other is this very *Saying*. The responsibility for another, in other words, “is precisely a saying prior to anything said” (*AE*, 75/ *OB*, 43). It is where the revealer and the revealed coincide, which is the very essence of language (*TeI*, 62/*TaI*, 67). What the face primarily says, its *signifié*, is its saying. The speaking of the face, in this way, solicits a response from me. Before the face of the Other, I am not supposed to simply contemplate it, but rather to give a proper response to its solicitation. It can be done by as simply as greeting the Other: “The saying is a way of greeting the Other, but to greet the Other is already to answer for him” (*EI*, 88).

It is important to note here that the greeting of the Other, as ethical *Saying*, has the structure of one-for-the-other. What is left out here is the third party, which needs to be taken into consideration as well. Here the *Saying*, which is pre-originally “proximity, contact, duty without end,” requires “the signification of the thematizable, states the idealized said, weighs and judges in justice” (*AE*, 251/*OB*, 161). In this ambivalent situation, philosophy finds its calling as “the servant of the *Saying*” in articulating transcendence in the *Said*. Its role also includes “the wisdom of love at the service of love” (*AE*, 252-3/*OB*, 162) by making sure that the third party gets its due attention.

⁴⁰⁸ Levinas, “The Trace of the Other,” *EDE*, 271/*DC*, 351-52.

4.3.2. The Saying and the Said: The religious dimension

It is almost natural for Levinas to bring forth the religious dimension of language, as he always sees the interconnection between the ethical and the religious. The face of the Other, as we recall, is for him not only or simply an ethical manifestation but also a trace of the Infinite. A trace, he says, “is sketched out and effaced in a face in the equivocation of a saying. In this way it modulates the modality of the transcendent” (*AE*, 27/*OB*, 12). Likewise, we will see here that *Saying* is not simply my exposure to the Other that requires my response, hence the ethical. It is also “the verb form of the Infinite” (*AE*, 29/*OB*, 13). That is to say, *Saying* manifests the infinity or immeasurability of the Infinite that always escapes any intention to reduce it to verbal significance. My exposure to the Other, my “here I am” attitude, bears witness to the Infinite. This witnessing occurs even before anything is said: “As witnessing, *Saying* precedes every *Said*. Before uttering a *Said*, the *Saying* is already a bearing witness of responsibility (and even the *Saying* of a *Said* is a bearing witness, insofar as the approach of the other is responsibility for him). *Saying* is thus a way of signifying prior to any experience. It is a pure witnessing.”⁴⁰⁹ By placing myself at another’s disposal, I become a witness of the Infinite, “a witness that does not thematize what it bears witness of, and whose truth is not the truth of representation, is not evidence” (*AE*, 229/*OB*, 146).

More precisely, in my responsibility for the Other, according to Levinas, I bear witness to the glory of the Infinite (*la gloire de l’Infini*). Levinas often uses the word

⁴⁰⁹ Levinas, “God and Philosophy,” *DVI*, 122/*GCM*, 74.

‘glory,’ which clearly has a religious connotation, interchangeably with “the infinity of the Infinite” (cf. *AE*, 149/*OB*, 93; *AE*, 226/*OB*, 144). ‘Infinity’ here does not mean the ‘production’ of the Infinite, but rather the infinite increase of the Infinite as I respond more to the Other: “The debt increases in the measures that it is paid. This divergency perhaps deserves the name glory. The positivity of the Infinite is the conversion of the response to the Infinite into responsibility, in approach of the Other” (*AE*, 27/*OB*, 12). Glory here refers to the dazzling brilliance of God, the infinity of the Infinite that does not belong to Being or knowing (*AE*, 252/*OB*, 162). I belong to this glory insofar as I respond to the call of the Other through my voice (cf. *AE*, 229/*OB*, 146):

Glory is but the other face of the passivity of the subject. Substituting itself for the other, a responsibility ordered to the first one on the scene, a responsibility for the neighbor, inspired by the other, I, the same, am torn up from my beginning in myself, my equality with myself. The glory of the Infinite is glorified in this responsibility. It leaves to the subject no refuge in its secrecy that would protect it against being obsessed by the other, and cover over its evasion. Glory is glorified by the subject’s coming out of the dark corners of the “as-for-me”... The glory of the Infinite is the anarchic identity of the subject flushed out without being able to slip away. It is the ego led to sincerity, making signs to the other, for whom and before whom I am responsible, of this very giving of signs, that is, of this responsibility: “here I am.” The saying prior to anything said bears witness to glory (*AE*, 226/*OB*, 144-5).

The glory of the Infinite is thus manifested in my responsibility and substitution for the Other. It cannot be the result of my freedom because it is anarchically prior to the existence of my freedom. My inability to escape from such responsibility, or more positively, my placing myself at the disposal of the Other, paradoxically manifests such glory. This glory of the Infinite increases in the measure that I become more responsible for the Other.

The bearing-witness (*témoignage*) to the glory of the Infinite through the responsibility for the Other is thus of special kind. It does not thematize that of which it is the witness since it is a witnessing of the Infinite. In the witnessing, Levinas says, “the Infinite is revealed without appearing, without *showing* itself as Infinite.”⁴¹⁰ This is the way of manifestation that Levinas calls ‘enigma,’ as we have seen.⁴¹¹ In this structure of signification the elements enter into composition through otherwise than correlation because of the “disproportion between glory and the present,” that between “what is born witness to [*témoigné*] and the witness [*témoin*].”⁴¹² As a witness, I am the signifier (*signifiant*) or the speaker in the first person. The speaker is a face, the face that speaks. Even though a first person, I speak in the accusative mode, as a *me*, due to the passivity in my subjectivity that is more passive than any passivity. The *me voici* is thus the bearing-witness of the Infinite without indicating its presence: “‘Here I am, in the name of God,’ without referring myself directly to his presence. ‘Here I am,’ just that! The word God is still absent from the phrase in which God is for the first time involved in words. It does not at all state ‘I believe in God.’ To bear witness [to] God is precisely not to state this extraordinary word, as though glory would be lodged in a theme and be posited as a thesis, or become being’s essence” (*AE*, 233/*OB*, 149). This very absence of the Infinite is the reason why the Infinite comes as a third party, as Illeity. It indicates our non-presentable and non-thematizable relation with God.

⁴¹⁰ Levinas, “Glory of the Infinite,” *DMT*, 229/*GDT*, 197.

⁴¹¹ Levinas, “Phenomenon and Enigma,” *EDE*, 291/*CPP*, 66.

⁴¹² Levinas, “Glory of the Infinite,” *DMT*, 229/*GDT*, 197; Rolland, “‘He’ (II),” 263.

The correlation between the glory of the Infinite and the infinity of responsibility for the Other clearly reflects the intimate link between ethics and religion in Levinas. One cannot account for the kind of responsibility that Levinas describes, namely, as substitution for the Other, without appealing to some religious source. Here Levinas points out that the extent of one's responsibility for the Other corresponds to that of the glory of the Infinite, as if what we do to and for the Other *immediately* affected God's own glory. Of course, one may think that God's glory could not be contingent upon the exercise of human responsibility. In this sense Levinas's claim about such a correlation may perhaps be deemed a sheer redundancy. Yet, for our purpose it highlights the religious character of Levinas's ethics against the claim that his ethics is merely another kind of secular humanism.

In summary, we have seen in this chapter Levinas's concept of the face of the Other as the trace of the Infinite in which the obvious link between his ethics and religion can be found. The notion of trace suggests both Levinas's roots in phenomenology, as it deals with the manifestation of a phenomenon, and his departure from it, as it indicates the absence of that which leaves the trace. Unlike signs that belong to the order of the world, traces, in Levinas's view, belong to the beyond of the world, hence enigmas. In fact, they cause disturbance to such an order. What has passed in traces cannot be brought to the present, as it belongs to the immemorial past. To say that the face of the Other is the trace of the Infinite, therefore, is to claim that the human being is not merely a being in the world, but particularly that which bears within her a pre-original relation with God.

The level of responsibility that she exercises for the Other, that is, as hostage in substitution for the Other, can only be accounted for by appealing to the kind of subjectivity she has. In carrying out her responsibility for the Other, she becomes a witness to the glory of the Infinite.

Here in Levinas we are presented with a rather unique kind of ethics. First, his ethics has been called an “ethics of ethics” since it does not give us a moral theory but instead speaks of the meaning of ethics. Ethics finds its proper meaning in the responsibility for the Other. Second, the ethical relation for Levinas takes place not at the level of consciousness, but rather at the level of sensibility. It makes possible, I argue, the experience of the face of the Other as a trace of the Infinite, as it allows us to sense the irreducibility of the Other. Third, Levinas’s ethics needs to be considered a religious ethics insofar as it is an expression of the relation with the Infinite. While Levinas never claims that an ethics must be religious, he gives us reasons to believe that the ethics of radical responsibility he proposes cannot but be grounded in such a relation. Now we can turn to the next chapter for a more elaborate and comprehensive exposition of the relation between ethics and religion in Levinas’s philosophy.

CHAPTER FIVE

THE INTERTWINING BETWEEN ETHICS AND RELIGION

In the previous chapters we have seen Levinas's notion of ethics or the ethical as the calling into question of the *I* by the Other. This account has some metaphysical underpinnings such as the desire for the Infinite and the idea of the Infinite within us that lead us to the responsibility for the Other. All these constitutive elements of ethics can be easily identified as religious in nature insofar as they are intimately linked to the relation with God. The intertwining between ethics and religion in Levinas's thought is so deep and complex that it has become an disputable issue for some commentators. Dominique Janicaud sees Levinas's thought as an example of what he calls, as we already saw in the introductory chapter, "the theological turn of French phenomenology." Similar to thinkers such as Michel Henry and Jean-Luc Marion, according to Janicaud, Levinas starts off with phenomenology but uses it only as inspiration rather than as method. The abandonment of the phenomenological method, in Janicaud's view, yields some strange conception of characteristically Husserlian phenomenology such as intentionality. Ironically, after rejecting such method, Levinas reintroduces it in his project through the "overflowing phenomenology" expressed in the face of the Other.⁴¹³ For Janicaud, the obsession with the Other in Levinas's ethics is a "dogmatism," which "could only be

⁴¹³ *TeI*, 13/*TaI*, 17; Dominique Janicaud, "The Swerve," *Phenomenological and the "Theological Turn": The French Debate*, eds. Janicaud et al. (New York: Fordham University Press, 2000), 48.

religious.”⁴¹⁴ Alan Badiou goes even further in questioning the alliance between ethics and religion, arguing that there is no philosophy in Levinas’s thought, not even philosophy as the ‘servant’ of theology. It is rather philosophy already “*annulled by theology*” that cannot maintain itself even as theology.⁴¹⁵ The result is that ethics becomes a category of pious discourse.

One may wonder why there is so deep an interconnection between ethics and religion in Levinas’s thought. Is this because his main concern is, as Derrida tells us, “the holy, the holiness of the holy”?⁴¹⁶ Those who are not religious, and even those who are but consider religious experience as beyond the grasp of philosophical discourse, as David Boothroyd notes, may find such interlocking disconcerting. They may easily view Levinas’s project as having no place in philosophy because it is fundamentally theological, or simply dismiss it as a bad philosophy because it is based on theology.⁴¹⁷ His ethics is indeed religious one, and therefore, as Derrida points out, the line between the ethical and the religious becomes “more than problematic.”⁴¹⁸ Here we may want to ask this question: does all this become problematic or even more for Derrida because there is no place for religion or anything religious in philosophy? Would any discourse on the Infinite or God necessarily bring us out of the philosophical realm? In what sense is

⁴¹⁴ Janicaud, 45.

⁴¹⁵ Alan Badiou, *Ethics: An Essay on the Understanding of Evil*, trans. Peter Hallward (London and New York: Verso, 2001), 23.

⁴¹⁶ Jacques Derrida, *Adieu to Emmanuel Levinas*, trans. Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997), 4.

⁴¹⁷ David Boothroyd, “Responding to Levinas,” *The Provocation of Levinas: Rethinking the Other*, ed. Robert Bernasconi and David Wood (London and New York: Routledge, 1988), 15.

⁴¹⁸ Jacques Derrida, *The Gift of Death*, trans. David Wills (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1995), 84.

Levinas's ethics religious? I think it is important to bear these questions in mind, as we explore the relation between ethics and religion in Levinas's thought.

I will thus begin with Levinas's general account of religion that he describes, often briefly, in his philosophical works. My analysis is based mainly on these works because they give a more general and formal account of religion than his Talmudic writings do. In some important ways, his account of religion is very unique and should not be taken for granted. I will then discuss its relation with the concept of the ethical in two consecutive sections, that is, ethics as fundamentally religious and religion as fundamentally ethical, respectively. This way of framing their relation is an attempt to avoid collapsing them, as some commentators have done.

5.1. Levinas's General Concept of Religion

Religion has been defined in various ways, depending on the background and interest of the interpreters. It is often seen as a belief in God or the Transcendent, which is a recognition of a divine power working in this world and yet coming from outside the world. It then naturally includes some cultural or social aspects in the form of common worship as well as moral norms to adhere to in a society. Religious teaching or doctrine also forms the popular concept of religion, especially when one thinks of organized or institutional religions whose presence is still strongly felt in the so-called postmodern world. Scholars of religion, however, often view religion in a more abstract manner, as, for example, a set of ideas, values, or experiences that constitutes a societal life. Here

religion is understood as an organizing principle of life or a worldview that affects one's thoughts and actions, all developed on the basis of the belief in the Transcendent.

Levinas's concept of religion includes many of the elements mentioned above. It involves the belief in God, although not exactly the same as that which is commonly acknowledged in organized religions. Likewise, his notion of religion also entails, very strongly indeed, the social practices in the form of responsibility for the Other. Two preliminary notes of caution are important here. First, Levinas's first concern in his philosophical works, I argue, is not religion as such, but rather ethics. The issue of religion necessarily arises in his attempt to find the meaning of transcendence through the human relations. Indeed, no religion can appropriate transcendence. But he can still speak of religion in general in relation to his ethical concern. In doing so he moves carefully lest his works are interpreted as theology. Levinas's account of religion below is my own construction from his philosophical works and must not be deemed as his main concern.

Second, when Levinas says he would call this or that, 'religion', I do not think he is trying to establish a new kind of religion. In fact, his notion of religion is quite remote from a modern view of it as a particular system of belief embodied in a bounded community.⁴¹⁹ It is rather closer to a pre-modern and more fundamental conception that suggests a certain way of living the faith or a type of religiousness. Or, we can say that Levinas simply attempts to give a *formal* concept of religion, particularly in connection with the primary concern of his works. If there is to be a 'true religion,' he seems to say,

⁴¹⁹ Wilfred Cantwell Smith argues that this conception of religion is a modern invention of the West that began to take shape following the hot theological debates during and after the Reformation, particularly in the seventeenth century. Prior to the period, religion was thought of more in terms of faith, piety, worship, etc. and less in terms of doctrinal differences with other kinds of faith. See his work, *The Meaning and End of Religion* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991).

it must contain such and such element or fulfill a certain condition. We will see what the elements or conditions for such a religion are below. In this view, therefore, Augustine's work *De Vera Religione* is not to be translated as "On the True Religion," but as "On True Religiousness" or "True Piety." Religion, according to Levinas, does not pertain to lofty thoughts about God, but rather must become concrete as a force for action. Given its formal character, religion in Levinas's writings does not mean Christianity, Judaism, Islam, or Buddhism because these are organized or institutional religions that tend to be mutually exclusive. When he wants to allude to any organized religion, he either mentions explicitly the specific organized religion such as Christianity or Judaism, or uses the plural form 'religions.' In short, unless otherwise noted, Levinas's concept of religion, as explicated in this study, is to be regarded as formal without specific affinity to any organized religion, including Judaism, of a certain kind to be sure, which Levinas embraces. To be religious in the Levinasian sense, therefore, one does not need to abandon one's adherence to a particular organized religion and switch to another. In fact, his notion of religiousness means more like holiness, which is clearly beyond the boundaries of positive religions.

The five points below may summarize Levinas's concept of religion:

5.1.1. Religion as Relation with the Infinite

To many readers, the claim that religion for Levinas pertains to a relation with God or the Infinite might sound rather remote because it is most probably not the first

definition of the term that strikes their mind. Indeed, religion is often defined that way. But in Levinas, as they know well, religion tends to be more readily linked to the responsibility for the Other than to anything else. Without denying this immediate association, I think that it is important to point out the element of such a relation in Levinas's philosophy, no matter how distant and minimal the relation is in comparison with its counterpart in other accounts of religion. I call the relation *distant* and *minimal* because, as hopefully will become clearer later, it never takes place as a face-to-face or direct encounter. For Levinas the Infinite reveals itself not as presence, but always as absence, or as we have seen, as a trace. God is conceived of not as a 'You' but rather as an 'Il.' The illeity of God, in my opinion, brings forth a sense of remoteness and poverty, as one attempts to contemplate the quality of such a relation with God.

The importance of bringing forth the relational element in Levinas's concept of religion is intimately tied to his critique of it, which can already be seen in his early writings. In the 1951 essay, "Is Ontology Fundamental?," Levinas writes: "Religion is the relation with a being as a being. It does not consist in *conceiving* it as a being or as an act in which a *being* is already assimilated, even if this assimilation were to succeed in disengaging it as a being, in *letting it be*. Nor does religion consist in establishing who knows what *belonging*, nor in running up against the irrational in an effort to comprehend *beings*."⁴²⁰ In bringing forth such a definition, Levinas clearly does not mean to propose a

⁴²⁰ Levinas, "Is Ontology Fundamental?," *ENP*, 19/*ENT*, 7-8. Levinas's first usage of the word "being" here may be puzzling for the reader who is aware of Levinas's later concern with onto-theology that identifies God with Being. Here Levinas seems to make the very mistake of identifying the two. But I think in this early essay Levinas simply attempted to emphasize the relation with the Infinite over its conception. At the time of the writing of this essay the issue of onto-theology might not be as important for him as he showed in his later works. I will say more about the onto-theological conception of God below.

conception of God as Being. His notion of God, as he makes clear, always pertains to that which is beyond Being. The emphasis in this definition is rather given to *relation* instead of to any kind of *conception* about God. Religion for Levinas is not a matter of knowledge about God, no matter how comprehensive that knowledge may be. Neither is it a thought aiming at an object. It rather concerns a relationship with God, which remains irreducible to knowledge. It is an “invocation” or “prayer,” because the relation with God, like the relation with a person, is articulated in the vocative.⁴²¹ We call upon God or the person we are in relation with. Thus, comprehension and knowledge cannot be the basis of such a relation.

It is very important to note that what we have here is a very basic or minimal notion of religion from Levinas. In his later works he begins to give more nuance to the term, for example, by calling it “relation without relation” (*TeI*, 78-9/*TaI*, 80) or “a relationship without a simultaneity of terms.”⁴²² As we will see below, the qualifications of the term are given due to the irreducible difference of the Infinite, to the effect that the relation between the human being and the Infinite can never become a correlation. Now, this relation with the Infinite is for Levinas very unique because it does not require me to obey or surrender myself to God or God’s will, as one may find in many views of religion. In fact, as we will soon find out, Levinas would shun such a conception of religion because it would destroy the freedom of the human being. The relationship with the Infinite is rather enacted in the anarchic responsibility for the Other. It orders me to responsibility even prior to my very freedom:

⁴²¹ Levinas, “Is Ontology Fundamental?,” *ENP*, 19/*ENT*, 7-8.

⁴²² Levinas, “Hermeneutics and Beyond,” *DVI*, 169/*GCM*, 107-8.

The trace of saying, which has never been present, obliges me; the responsibility for the other, never assumed, binds me; a command never heard is obeyed. This trace does not belong to the assembling of essence. Philosophy underestimates the extent of the negation in this ‘not appearing,’ which exceeds the logical scope of negation and affirmation. It is the trace of a relationship with illeity that no unity of apperception grasps, ordering me to responsibility. This relationship is *religion*, exceeding the psychology of faith and of the loss of faith. It orders me in an anarchic way, without ever becoming or being made into a presence or a disclosure of a principle” (*AE*, 261/*OB*, 168, italics mine)

Thus, religion for Levinas never consists in a direct and intimate relation with God, first, because God reveals Godself only as a trace, and second, because God orders me to the neighbor. Thus, what defines my relation with the Infinite is not personal prayer or a visit to a place of worship, but rather the very responsibility for the Other (*Autrui*). We will see more below how this relation takes place.

5.1.2. It is A Relation Without Totalization

The relationship with the Infinite, which defines religion for Levinas, is manifested in a very unique way. It is to take place “without constituting a totality” (*TeI*, 30/*TaI*, 40). We recall from the previous chapters that totality occurs when there is a reduction of the otherness of the Other, namely, when the Other is not respected as such. For Levinas, totalization runs counter to the idea of religion because in religion the alterity of the Other is fully respected, as we will see below, whereas in totality it is suppressed (*TeI*, 107/*TaI*, 104; *TeI*, 79/*TaI*, 81). Levinas calls this ‘relation’ with the Infinite “a relation without relation” (*TeI*, 78-9/*TaI*, 80). He does so with extreme caution, however, because the word “relation” for him always indicates “a simultaneity

among its terms in a system... the synchronic representation of the world, society and its institutions, its equality and justice.”⁴²³ The word “relation,” as Levinas uses it, clearly does not mean the synchrony of the relation and of the system. While we may define religion as the ‘relation’ with the Infinite, at least tentatively, it is one in which the parties involved do not fall into a common sphere such that they become indistinguishable. In this sense they are “without relation.” When I reduce the otherness of the Other, a totality occurs because the Other is within me such that, in a way, the Other and I become one. Here I contain the Other through representation and thematization. To maintain the “relation without relation” here means to resist any form of totalization.

In Levinas’s view, totalization, which consists in the reduction of the otherness of the Other, occurs in several different ways. In the strictly ethical realm it is manifested in any kind of stereotype present in a society, when a person or members of a certain social group are viewed, often in a derogatory manner, in a particular way and associated with a certain psychological trait. Their alterity is not fully respected, but rather reduced to a level where society wants to treat them. Society ‘knows’ or ‘wants to know’ these people only in this particular way. In the religious realm, which is proper to the topic of this section, totalization can occur in an assured and comprehensive knowledge about God. Levinas often warns against the identification of the relation-(without relation)-with-the-Infinite with knowledge about such a relation or God. He also does so against the collapse of the distinction between religion and theology. Such a relation, or in fact, any relation, cannot be reduced to a matter of knowledge. As we attempt to grasp knowledge

⁴²³ Levinas, “On Jewish Philosophy,” *In The Time of the Nations*, hereafter *ITN*, trans. Michael B. Smith (London: The Athlone Press, 1994), 183.

about God, we can easily fall into the illusion that we know everything about God, or even worse, that we ‘own’ God. Theology, he says, “imprudently treats the idea of the relation between God and the creature in terms of ontology” (*TeI*, 325/*TaI*, 293). Thematization always serves to reduce God’s transcendence, capturing radical otherness in the webs of the familiar. It always leads to “the bankruptcy of transcendence,” as it “assigns a term to the passing of transcendence” (*AE*, 16/*OB*, 5). But religion, which is fundamentally a relation, is clearly not theology or the thinking about the Infinite. It can never be reduced to an intellectual exercise, no matter how lofty the thought is:

Would religion not be the original juncture of circumstances in which the infinite comes to the mind in its ambiguity of truth and mystery? But if that is the case, then can we be sure that the infinite’s coming to the mind is a matter of knowledge, a manifestation the essence of which would consist in establishing the order of immanence? And above all can we be sure – as a certain consensus and perhaps a venerable tradition tend to say – that immanence is the supreme grace of spiritual energy, that the revelation of a God completes itself in the adequacy of truth, in the hold exercised by *thought (la pensée)* over *that which is thought in thought (la pensée)* and thus, that meaning or intelligence is an economy in the etymological sense of the word, a house we live in, our home, a certain way of investing, grasping, owning, and enjoying?⁴²⁴

The identification of religion with theology is for Levinas nothing but a reduction of God to Being. This ‘known’ God is no longer God beyond Being, but rather the God of onto-theology, the problem of which Heidegger has brought up and criticized. Levinas thus takes up the task, particularly in *Otherwise than Being*, of letting God speak without the contamination of Being, which is “a human possibility no less important and no less precarious than to bring Being out of the oblivion in which it is said to have fallen in metaphysics and in onto-theology” (*AE*, 10/*OB*, xlviii). An onto-theological conception of God is problematic not only because it confuses God with Being by mistakenly

⁴²⁴ Levinas, “The Idea of the Infinite in Us,” *ENP*, 227/*ENT*, 219.

identifying God with “the highest being,” but also and more importantly, because it reduces God to Being and ends up denying God. Like any kind of totalization, it refuses to recognize the alterity of the Other, or in this case, God’s own alterity. It forgets that God signifies “the other of being” (*l’autre de l’être*).⁴²⁵ The onto-theological conception of God is oblivious to the fact that there is an asymmetrical relation between God and Being that is resistant to any form of synchronization: “The Other as Other has nothing in common with the Same; it is not thinkable in a synthesis; there is an impossibility here of making comparisons and synchronizations.”⁴²⁶ Such forgetfulness results in an intellectual totalization, even in a sublime discipline such as theology.

This issue of totalization in theology is intimately linked to the problem of the relation between philosophy and theology. Levinas often entertains the idea that the philosophical discourse of religious themes such as God and creation originally emerges from a religious discourse. But since the nature of philosophy consists in thematizing experiences, including religious ones, it always runs the risk of missing what is unthematizable or unrepresentable:

It is possible that the word ‘God’ may have come to philosophy from a religious discourse. But philosophy – even if it refuses it – understands this discourse as that of propositions bearing on a theme; that is, as having a meaning that refers to a disclosure, to a manifestation of presence. The messengers of the religious experience do not conceive another signification of meaning [*signification de sens*]. The religious ‘revelation’ is henceforth assimilated to philosophical discourse – an assimilation that even dialectical theology maintains. That a discourse might speak otherwise than to say what has been seen or heard outside, or felt internally, remains unsuspected. From the outset, then, the religious being interprets what he lived through as experience. In spite of

⁴²⁵ Levinas, “Beginning with Heidegger,” *DMT*, 141/*GDT*, 124. See Rudi Visker, “The Price of Being Dispossessed: Levinas’s God and Freud’s Trauma,” *The Face of the Other and the Trace of God*, 247.

⁴²⁶ Levinas, “Being and Meaning,” *DMT*, 144/*GDT*, 127.

himself, he already interprets God, of whom he claims to have an experience, in terms of being, presence, and immanence. From here comes our previous question: can discourse signify otherwise than by signifying a theme? Does God signify as a theme of the religious discourse that names God, or as a discourse that precisely, at least at first sight, does not name him, but says him in another way than by denomination or evocation?"⁴²⁷

Thus, the thematization of religious terms such as God is already problematic because there may be, as Levinas suggests, another discourse of God that does not consist in thematization. The root of this problem lies in the fact that rational theology accepts the demand of philosophy to justify itself before philosophy.⁴²⁸ This thematization becomes more problematic, as I have suggested earlier, when the distinction between religion, as the relation with the Infinite, and theology, as the rational attempt to understand God, collapses. Is Levinas suggesting that theology is a useless enterprise? I do not think so. Rather, he wants to remind us that theology is to be done with full respect for God as the Other. Anything less than that will bring us to totality or a self-assurance that we 'own' God. In fact, our admittance that theology will always fail to bring forth the real knowledge of God precisely shows the irreducible relation with the Infinite: "Theology is possible only as a contestation of the religious, which is nevertheless confirmed through the struggles or failures of theology."⁴²⁹ This is also the reason why Levinas likes of speak of 'to-God' (*à-Dieu*), rather than simply 'God.'⁴³⁰ While 'God' may tend to become the object of thought and thematization, 'to-God' signifies a movement toward God through the responsibility for the Other.

⁴²⁷ Levinas, "God and Philosophy," *DVI*, 103/*GCM*, 62.

⁴²⁸ *Ibid.*, *DVI*, 94/*GCM*, 55.

⁴²⁹ Levinas, "Substitution," n. 34, *BPW*, 182.

⁴³⁰ Levinas, "Hermeneutics and Beyond," *ENP*, 83/*ENT*, 73.

Another form of totalization in religious realm that Levinas avoids is “sacredness” (*le sacré*). By “sacredness” Levinas means the kind of mystical experience in which the identity of the human subject is lost in the Divine. As a result, the human and the Divine become indistinguishable. In such a mystical participation, in Levinas’s reading of Levy-Bruhl, “the identity of the terms is lost. They are divested of what constituted their very substantivity. The participation of one term in another does not consist in sharing an attribute; one term *is the other*. The *private* existence of each term, mastered by a subject that is, loses this private character and returns to an undifferentiated background; the existence of one submerges the other, and is thus no longer an existence of the one” (*EET*, 99/*EES*, 55-6).⁴³¹ For Levinas, transcendence must be distinguished from “a union with the transcendent by participation” (*TeI*, 75/*TaI*, 77). The loss of the identity of the human subject in the Divine is therefore a form of totalization: the subjectivity of the former, as a free being, is assimilated into the latter.

This type of totalization is clearly linked to a certain conception of the Divine as “the numinous” (*le numineux*) that is seen as all-encompassing and obliterating human freedom. In such a conception of the Divine, the Sacred is said to possess the human subject such that the subject is no longer free: “The numinous or the Sacred envelops and transports the human being beyond his powers and wishes, but a true liberty takes offence at this uncontrollable surplus. The numinous annuls the links between persons by making beings participate, albeit ecstatically, in a drama not brought about willingly by them...

⁴³¹ Levinas seems open to Durkheim’s notion of the sacred, in the experience of which the identity of the human subject “does not seem compromised” (*EeE*, 99/*EaE*, 55).

The Sacred that envelops and transports me is a form of violence.”⁴³² Totalization always entails violence, and here it is the violence of the Sacred that Levinas rejects, as he does that of the dominant tradition in Western philosophy. Levinas himself holds that the holiness of God is not “the numinous meaning of the term.”⁴³³ He even makes a broader claim that “monotheism marks a break with a certain conception of the Sacred. It neither unifies nor hierarchizes the numerous and the numinous gods; instead it denies them.”⁴³⁴

It is important to remember that what at issue here is how the human being is to relate to God. Such a relation, according to Levinas, must not close itself off in any totality: the human subject must not lose her identity; neither should the Sacred “consume” the subjectivity or “burn the eyes that are lifted unto him” (*TeI*, 75/*TaI*, 77). If it did, it would be nothing but violence. In both divine and human realms, Levinas holds, the relationship of the human being “with the Other is *better* as difference than as unity: sociality is better than fusion.”⁴³⁵ This is why, as we will see more below, Levinas insists on relating to the Infinite as an atheist, namely, as a separated being. To do so, he says, is “to welcome the absolute purified of the violence of the sacred” (*TeI*, 75/*TaI*, 77). Instead of sacredness that does not respect the independence of the human subject, Levinas would propose what he calls ‘holiness’ (*sainteté*) that fully takes into account the alterity of the Other. His second volume of Talmudic readings, *Du sacré au saint* (From the Sacred to the Holy) speaks it all, namely, that the human being must relate to God not by way of sacredness but rather of holiness, or as Derrida puts it, of “holiness without

⁴³² Levinas, “A Religion for Adults,” *DL*, 32/*DF*, 14.

⁴³³ *Ibid.*, *DL*, 31/*DF*, 14.

⁴³⁴ *Ibid.*, *DL*, 32-3/*DF*, 14-5.

⁴³⁵ Kearney, “Ethics of the Infinite,” *Debates*, 74.

sacredness.”⁴³⁶ Holiness requires that one not only respect the otherness of the Other, but also sacrifice for the Other; it is “the certitude that one must yield to the other the first place in everything, from the *après vous* before an open door right up to the disposition – hardly possible, but holiness demands it – to die for the other.”⁴³⁷ In other words, it is in the responsibility for the Other that religion, or the relation between the human being and God, finds its fullest expression.

Thus, Levinas’s account of religion is quite subtle. At its roots is his rejection of any form of totalization that may occur in religious realm, for example, in the theological claim of the absolute and comprehensive knowledge of God. As an objectifying and thematizing project, theology is always limited and therefore, cannot make such a claim. God can never be experienced as presence or tied to Being because God is not part of our world. This position does not immediately bring Levinas to the opposite pole of embracing the ineffable God or engaging in negative theology. He rejects a certain conception of God, the totalizing God in sacredness or the numinous, that destroys the human freedom and independent existence. Even God, in Levinas’s view, has to respect the alterity of the human subject, so to speak. Only then does the proper relation between the human subject and God become possible.

5.1.3. True Religion Requires A Separation From God (Atheism)

⁴³⁶ Jacques Derrida, “Faith and Knowledge,” *Acts of Religion*, ed. Gil Anidjar (New York and London: Routledge, 2002), 99.

⁴³⁷ Levinas, “Interview with François Poirié,” *IRB*, 47.

In Chapter One we saw the two essential components of the self, namely, separation and interiority. Separation, in Levinas's view, is required so that the relation between the subject and the Other does not collapse into a unity or totality. This principle applies not only to the relation with the human Other, but also to the Divine Other. The relation between the human being and God also requires separation. This may mean several things. First, as we have seen, such a relation is not a mystical union in which the human subject loses her identity in God. It never takes the form of totalization, even on God's part. Second, unlike the commonly held teaching in many religious traditions that the human beings originally belong to God but wander away, the separation principle suggests just the opposite, that the original relation between God and the human being is fundamentally atheistic. That is to say, the human being is originally separated from God, neither belonging to, nor united with, God before the Fall occurs. She lives her life as an I, separated from God: "To be I, atheist, at home with oneself, separated, happy, created – these are synonyms" (*TeI*, 158/*TaI*, 148). The separation is "so complete that the separated being maintains itself in existence all by itself, without participating in the Being from which it is separated – eventually capable of adhering to it by belief" (*TeI*, 52/ *TaI*, 58). The atheistic human being thus "lives outside of God," at home with herself; she is "an I, an egoism" (*TeI*, 52/ *TaI*, 58). This separation is, for Levinas, the condition for a true relationship with God: "Faith purged of myths, the monotheist faith, itself implies metaphysical atheism. Revelation is discourse; in order to welcome revelation a being apt for this role of interlocutor, a separated being, is required. Atheism conditions a

veritable relationship with a true God *καθ' αὐτό*" (*TeI*, 50/ *TaI*, 77).⁴³⁸ This is because the separated being would not find herself under the totalizing power of God or the violence of the Sacred. Levinas's concept of God with regard to this issue would thus look like this:

In the dimension of height in which his sanctity, that is, his separation, is presented, the infinite does not burn the eyes that are lifted unto him. He speaks; he does not have the mythical format that is impossible to confront and would hold the I in its invisible meshes. He is not numinous: the I who approaches him is neither annihilated on contact nor transported outside of itself, but remains separated and keeps its as-for-me. Only an atheist being can relate himself to the other and already *absolve* himself from this relation (*TeI*, 75/*TaI*, 77).

Thus, it is very important for Levinas to distinguish transcendence "from a union with the transcendent by participation" (*TeI*, 75/*TaI*, 77). True transcendence for him does not destroy the freedom of the subject.

At this point one may ask how absolute the separation and independence of the human being can be for Levinas. She may be originally a free and separate being, and her freedom cannot be destroyed by the Sacred. But is such freedom absolute enough for her to reject her eventual belongingness to God? Would she remain a separate being in all circumstances, including in the beyond of this earthly life? Levinas does not speak much about this matter. I suspect the reason for this silence is that he wants to emphasize the inherently social character of the relation with God, the topic of which we are about to see. The society that Levinas proposes consists in a multiplicity of separate beings that

⁴³⁸ See also the following: "The rigorous affirmation of human independence, of its intelligent presence to an intelligible reality, the destruction of the numinous concept of the Sacred, entail the risk of atheism. That risk must be run. Only through it can man be raised to the spiritual notion of the Transcendent" ("A Religion for Adults," *DL*, 34/*DF*, 15).

are responsible for one another. In this proposal it is not clear whether or not the human beings will maintain their separation from God.

5.1.4. Religion Is Fundamentally Social

What all religions have in common and bind them together, generally speaking, is the relation with the Infinite. In many religious traditions one's *personal* relation with God is usually situated within a community of believers. That is to say, the person does not stand alone in terms of her faith, but shares it with other members of the community. In this sense her personal relation with God is often considered a communal as well. Here we find the social dimension of religion, namely, that religion often entails the gathering and forming of individual members to pray and worship together. These members share a faith that is unique enough for the formation of the community. This community of faith becomes the place where they cultivate their relation with God.

In Levinas we find a deep social dimension of religion as well, but not in the sense that believers tend to form a community together to practice their faith. Rather, it refers to the anarchical bonding between each member of humanity such that each is responsible for everyone else. The responsibility for the Other is the expression of their relation with the Infinite; it is the order given to them even prior to their freedom. Thus, for Levinas, religion is fundamentally, or even better, anarchically *social*: it is to be enacted and expressed in the relationship with other people, namely, through

responsibility for them. At the roots of religion is “the social relation” (*TeI*, 111/*TaI*, 109); religion is “the excellence proper to sociality with the Absolute” (*ITN*, 171).

One of Levinas’s inspirational figures in this regard is Emile Durkheim who sees society as more than simply a multiplicity of the individuals and defines it in terms of religion: “To reach the Other through the social is to reach him through the religious” (*TeI*, 64/*TaI*, 68). Indeed, in Durkheim’s view, religion is a central force in society, as, among other factors, it exerts the strongest influence over people. Both society and religion are systems of symbols. Therefore, the study of religion requires a penetration into the social reality represented by the symbols. For Levinas, Durkheim’s notion of society contains some transcendental elements, as it moves beyond a sheer collection of individuals (cf. *EeI*, 17/*EaI*, 26).⁴³⁹ But his notion of the religious, to Levinas’s dissatisfaction, turns out to be merely a collective representation whose structure serves as the ultimate interpretation of the religious itself (*TeI*, 64/*TaI*, 68). The so-called religious in Durkheim is for Levinas not the transcendent, but only pointing to transcendence.

In any case, we see a very strong bonding between religion and sociality in Levinas’s thought. In this reading the so-called spiritual needs of the individual may simply be an escape from such responsibility for the Other, or a kind of egoism at work. Religion, Levinas wants to argue, does not begin with a personal relationship with God or a concern for personal salvation and *then* extends to a relationship with other human

⁴³⁹ Those ‘believers,’ both Catholic and Protestant, were understandably unhappy with Durkheim’s move. They criticized him for reducing religion to its social component and denying the existence of God. Also missing in Durkheim’s notion of religion, they argue, are precisely the most important factors such as the individuals and the spiritual elements.

beings. Instead, it is already social anarchically; we find ourselves already responsible for the Other. In other words, religion for Levinas is always about the Other (*Autrui*), and never about oneself. True transcendence is to be found in sociality, and not in individuality: “Interior piety is always subordinated to its social form. One is always three, never two as with Buber.”⁴⁴⁰ This is why in the idea of the face is embedded the “idea of gratuitous love, the commandment of a gratuitous act.”⁴⁴¹ For in order to respond to the face or to open oneself to transcendence, one needs to break away from nature, namely, the *conatus essendi*. For Levinas, to experience rupture with nature in this way is to have faith, that is, to believe that love without reward, responsibility without reciprocity is valuable.⁴⁴²

Levinas’s emphasis on the social character of religion helps us understand his remark that in choosing the term ‘religion’ he has initially in mind the meaning that Auguste Comte gives to the term in the beginning of the *Politique Positive*: “Nothing theological, nothing mystical, lies hidden behind the analysis that we have just given of the encounter with the other (*autrui*), an encounter whose formal structure it was important to underline: the object of the encounter is at once given to us and *in society* with us.”⁴⁴³ We understand that Comte has proposed the so-called “religion of humanity” shared by all human beings on earth: instead of the “fictitious gods” of antiquity, the human beings should worship the Great Being of Humanity and cooperate willingly in

⁴⁴⁰ Edith Wyschogrod, “Interview with Emmanuel Levinas: December 31st, 1982,” *Philosophy and Theology*, vol. IV, no. 2 (Winter, 1989), 110.

⁴⁴¹ Tamra Wright, et al., “The Paradox of Morality: An Interview with Emmanuel Levinas,” *The Provocation of Levinas: Rethinking the Other*, eds. Robert Bernasconi and David Wood (London and New York: Routledge, 1988), 176.

⁴⁴² Cf. *Ibid.*, 177.

⁴⁴³ Levinas, “Is Ontology Fundamental?,” *BPW*, 8.

perfecting the order of the world. Such religion should operate on Love as its principle, Order as its basis, and Progress as its end.⁴⁴⁴ In making the remark on Comte, I think, Levinas attempts to emphasize the main character of religion as the common enterprise of all humanity through responsibility for fellow human beings. Religion is not about the individual's relationship with God without involving her fellow human beings. Instead, the encounter with God should take place through the relation with other people.

It is important to note here that the character of givenness in the sociality of religion helps us understand Levinas's preference to use the term 'fraternity' to designate the bond among human beings. This is because fraternity, in Levinas's view, presupposes the absolute difference of human beings from one another: "Transcendence is only possible with the Other (*Autrui*), with respect to whom we are absolutely difference, without this difference depending on some quality."⁴⁴⁵ Similar terms such as human solidarity assume that human beings have things in common since they belong to the same genus, which Levinas rejects: "Have you ever seen individuals from a genus who enter into fraternity?"⁴⁴⁶ Fraternity, by contrast, is "the very relation with the face" (*TeI*, 312/*TaI*, 279) because it is founded on the *Is* that are unique and absolutely different from one another: "The human I is posited in fraternity: that all men are brothers is not added to man as a moral conquest, but constitutes his ipseity. Because my position as an I is effectuated already in fraternity the face can present itself to me as a face" (*TeI*, 312-

⁴⁴⁴ Auguste Comte, *System of Positive Polity*, vol. 1 (New York: Burt Franklin, 1875), 257.

⁴⁴⁵ Levinas, "Transcendence and Height," *BPW*, 27.

⁴⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, *BPW*, 27.

13/*TaI*, 279-80). The uniqueness of the *I* implies that no one else can substitute for its responsibilities.

5.1.5. Religion as Desire

We may be able to gather at this point that for Levinas religion has its own inherent dynamism. As a relation with the Infinite, it can never be enclosed in any kind of totalization. This is why Levinas claims that religion is fundamentally Desire, not for immortality or eternal happiness, but rather for the Other (cf. *TeI*, 58/*TaI*, 63). It does not find satisfaction in the sheer equality and happiness of the people that politics attempts to attain, but always goes beyond it: “The distance that separates happiness from desire separates politics from religion. Politics tends toward reciprocal recognition, that is, toward equality; it ensures happiness. And political law concludes and sanctions the struggle for recognition. Religion is Desire and not struggle for recognition. It is the surplus possible in a society of equals, that is of glorious humility, responsibility, and sacrifice, which are the condition for equality itself” (*TeI*, 58/ *TaI*, 64). The responsibility for the Other is infinite and therefore never reaches any limit or point at which one can say, “It is enough.” It is always “awakening [*éveil*]” or vigilance that we have never done enough for the Other.⁴⁴⁷

We see a shift here with regard to the primary concern of religion from personal and eternal salvation to the infinite and earthly responsibility for the Other. For Levinas,

⁴⁴⁷ Cf. Levinas, “God and Philosophy,” *DVI*, 113/*GCM*, 68.

it is only through the human situation of responsibility that religion or the discourse on God is possible.⁴⁴⁸ In many respects what Levinas says about religion, whose concept I have outlined above, can also be predicated of ethics. Both ethics and religion, for example, resist totalization or are fundamentally social in the sense of being directed toward the neighbor. In other instances, however, it is applicable primarily to religion, for example, that religion remains a relation, yet without relation, with the Infinite. Ethics as such is not such a relation; it is a passage through which one may encounter God. Likewise, a proper relation with the Infinite, in Levinas's view, requires atheism, namely, a separation from God. The term 'atheism' clearly has a religious connotation and therefore does not have a direct application to ethics. Nevertheless, we also find a similar requirement in his ethics, namely, the separation of the Other from the *I*, without which a totalization would occur. It is to the very topic of the relation between ethics and religion that we are turning in the next section.

5.2. The Intertwining between Ethics and Religion

Having discussed Levinas's account of religion, we are now ready to undertake the crucial part of this study, namely, to spell out the relation between ethics and religion in Levinas's thought. One simplest proposal that has been brought forth in this matter is that Levinas's ethics *is* religion.⁴⁴⁹ In this view no distinction can be made between the two; they simply collapse in Levinas's treatment of them. Is it that simple? I disagree

⁴⁴⁸ Levinas, "Transcendence and Height," *BPW*, 29.

⁴⁴⁹ See, for instance, Critchley, *The Ethics of Deconstruction*, 115.

with such a position. I would argue that Levinas's ethics and religion are still distinguishable for reasons I will elaborate in this section. If my argument stands, then the suggestion that the distinction between ethics and religion in Levinas's thought collapses is untenable. I will offer my argument in two sub-sections, namely, ethics as fundamentally religious and religion as fundamentally ethical. I hope that at the end of this section it will become clear how Levinas's ethics is not simply religion, and vice versa.

5.2.1. Ethics as fundamentally Religious

The argument that Levinas's ethics is deeply religious has several layers of meaning. To explicate this claim, I will begin with an account of his investigation into the meaning of ethics as a religious quest. Then, I will discuss his analysis of ethics as the realm in which the word 'God' becomes meaningful. The last part of this section will deal with the claim that ethics, as the responsibility for the Other, is the passage to God.

5.2.1.1. Ethics as A Religious Quest

There is no doubt that the Holocaust plays a crucial role in Levinas's analysis of the meaning of ethics. In his autobiographical essay, "Signature," Levinas speaks of the "presentiment and the memory of the Nazi horror" (*DL*, 434/*DF*, 291) that dominates his life and thought. Indeed, he dedicates *Otherwise than Being* to the victims of the

Holocaust (*AE*, 5/*OB*, v). The atrocities, done by civilized and educated people, clearly show the failure of human thinking, particularly in the area of ethics. The following questions are raised everywhere: “How and why did it happen? How could people do that?” Or, “How did human beings who had previously lived unexceptional and inoffensive lives end up watching, condoning, or inflicting continuous acts of intense cruelty and unprecedented genocidal destruction against the aged, women, children, and generally helpless people who engaged in no acts of provocation and committed no crimes, as *crime* is defined by advanced societies?”⁴⁵⁰ Even philosophy is forced to examine its own conception of the relationship between the true and the good, knowledge and ethics. This is why Levinas begins his preface to *Totality and Infinity* with the very call to self-examination: “Everyone will readily agree that it is of the utmost importance to know whether we are not duped by morality” (*TeI*, 5/*TaI*, 21). Morality itself is now put into question: “Can we speak of morality after the failure of morality?”⁴⁵¹ Thus, Levinas’s analysis into the meaning of ethics can be seen as a philosophical task in response to the Holocaust. Ethics is undoubtedly Levinas’s primary concern besides holiness or the meaning of transcendence, as we will see below. Contrary to Badiou’s criticism, it is a philosophy, as it attempts to address the failure of ethics and to find its more fundamental meaning and relevance to today’s world.

More importantly for our purpose here, however, the ethical inquiry arises as a religious quest as well after the end of theodicy. In the Holocaust, as in other atrocities in

⁴⁵⁰ John K. Roth, “Introduction: Ethics after Auschwitz,” *Ethics After the Holocaust: Perspectives, Critiques, and Responses*, eds. John K. Roth, et al. (St. Paul, Minnesota: Paragon House, 1999), xv.

⁴⁵¹ Levinas, “The Paradox of Morality,” *The Provocation of Levinas*, 176.

the twentieth-century such as Hiroshima and the Gulag, one sees “suffering and evil inflicted deliberately, but in a manner no reason set limits to.”⁴⁵² In Levinas’s view, there is no way in which the suffering of the people can be rendered adequate meaning. Even theodicy, as an attempt to explain the suffering and evil by a “grand design” that eventually makes God innocent, fails to do its task because they are unassumable (cf. *ENP*, 100, 106/*ENT*, 91, 96). The Holocaust renders “impossible and odious every proposal and every thought that would explain it by the sins of those who have suffered or are dead” (*ENP*, 109/*ENT*, 98). It also testifies to the death of the God of miracles who would intervene in human history as “a force, sovereign... invisible to the eye and undemonstrable by reason.”⁴⁵³ In fact, in one of his interviews Levinas refers to Auschwitz as the site where “God let the Nazis do what they wanted.”⁴⁵⁴ Such an idea of God, arising from the thinking of God in terms of Being, is no longer tenable because it betrays people’s experience of history.

Thus, Levinas’s account of ethics can be seen as the search for a new signification that both religiosity and the human morality of goodness may still have after the end of theodicy.⁴⁵⁵ It attempts to speak of “an absolute commandment after Auschwitz.”⁴⁵⁶ In addition, it seeks for a new meaning of God that would take into account God’s silence during the horrors of the Holocaust. “Must not humanity now,” he asks, “in a faith more difficult than before, in a faith without theodicy, continue to live out Sacred History; a

⁴⁵² Levinas, “Useless Suffering,” *ENP*, 107/*ENT*, 97.

⁴⁵³ Levinas, “Signification and Sense,” *HAH*, 38/*HO*, 24. See Manning, *Interpreting Otherwise than Heidegger*, 150.

⁴⁵⁴ Levinas, “Paradox of Morality,” *The Provocation of Levinas*, 175.

⁴⁵⁵ Levinas, “Useless Suffering,” *ENP*, 109/*ENT*, 99.

⁴⁵⁶ Levinas, “The Paradox of Morality,” *The Provocation of Levinas*, 176.

history that now demands even more from the resources of the *I* in each one of us, and from its suffering inspired by the other, from its compassion which is a non-useless suffering (or love), which is no longer suffering ‘for nothing,’ and immediately has meaning?”⁴⁵⁷ This faith is expressed in the radical responsibility for the Other, in a non-indifference of one to another. Or as he puts it in *Otherwise than Being*, the ethics of responsibility is a way of speaking of religion that survives ‘the death of God’ (*AE*, 196/*OB*, 123). It is only in ethics, Levinas claims, that the word ‘God’ will have meaning.

5.2.1.2. Ethics as the Realm Where the Word ‘God’ Has Meaning

As we have frequently seen, Levinas provides us with the concept of ethics as the opening of the self to the summon and demand of the Other (*Autrui*) to responsibility. To be able to respond to the face of the Other, one needs to deal with one’s natural tendency to persevere in one’s existence. The responsibility for the Other is only possible, in Levinas’s view, when there is rupture with the *conatus essendi*. For “it is the being that we are, being itself, which prevents us from recognizing our ethical duties.”⁴⁵⁸ But when the rupture occurs, that is the very moment of generosity and the gratuitous act toward the Other (*Autrui*). That is where ethics begins, and the path to transcendence is open. More importantly for our purpose here, the ethical relation is the site where the word ‘God’ may have meaning.

⁴⁵⁷ Levinas, “Useless Suffering,” *ENP*, 110/*ENT*, 100.

⁴⁵⁸ Levinas, “The Paradox of Morality,” *The Provocation of Levinas*, 177.

In his essay “God and Philosophy,” Levinas criticizes theology for bringing the word ‘God’ into “the course of being,” while the term actually signifies the beyond of Being, or transcendence (cf. *DVI*, 95/*GCM*, 56). In doing so theology only continues the “destruction of transcendence” that the history of Western philosophy has done. If the word ‘God’ is to have a meaning, Levinas claims, such meaning would have to cease to “express itself in terms of being,” (*DVI*, 96/*GCM*, 57). It is clear that Levinas’s main concern is not with the ontological questions regarding the existence or non-existence of God, but rather with the meaning and speaking of God. As Alphonso Lingis notes in the introduction to *Otherwise than Being*, in using religious language in his account of ethics, Levinas does not mean to exalt the human relations, but rather means “to locate the proper meaning of God – the one God – in the ethical bond” (*OB*, xxxix). In the preface to the collection of essays “Of God who Comes to Mind,” Levinas himself states that the volume represents “an investigation into the possibility – or even the fact – of understanding the word ‘God’ as a significant word” (*DVI*, 7/*GCM*, xi). Later, in his note on the claim that ethics is not a moment of being but otherwise and better than being, the very possibility of the beyond, he suggests that the meaning of the beyond is to be found in ethics (*DVI*, 114n.15/*GCM*, 69, 200n.23). With ethics as responsibility for the Other that always increases beyond any finality or self-preservation, one cannot but view it as the signification of the beyond Being, the mark of true transcendence. It is in ethics, Levinas concludes, that the word ‘God’ has meaning. In fact, as he puts it in his essay “Beyond Intentionality,” ethics is “the singular signification of God.”⁴⁵⁹ It means that the

⁴⁵⁹ Levinas, “Beyond Intentionality,” *Philosophy in France Today*, 114.

ethical relation is the only place where one can find the signification of the word 'God.' More concretely, as we will see below, one can only encounter God, as a trace, in the responsibility for the Other.

5.2.1.3. Ethics as the Passage to God

The religious character of Levinas's ethics can primarily be seen in the notion of responsibility for the Other as the site where one may encounter God. Or, to put it in more Levinasian terms, the face of the Other is the site where one may find the trace of the Infinite. We saw above that Levinas's notion of the ethical, that is, the responsibility for the Other, is not an ordinary ethics because it is through this encounter with the Other that the word 'God' may be meaningful, or that God may come to the mind. My relation with the neighbor in Levinas is not simply a natural bonding that occurs in any given society. Ethics, in the Levinasian sense, is not a moment of being but rather the signification of the beyond Being, or transcendence. It is this signification of transcendence that Levinas seeks for, which he finds in ethics. In making this claim, Levinas shows that his interest lies not only in ethics but also in the meaning of transcendence or holiness. In the end, it is the religious character of ethics that summarizes his thought, without turning ethics into a theology.⁴⁶⁰ The exposition of the ethical meaning of transcendence, and of the Infinite beyond Being, he says, can be

⁴⁶⁰ See Derrida, *Adieu to Emmanuel Levinas*, 4.

carried out “starting from the proximity of the neighbor and from my responsibility for the other.”⁴⁶¹

For Levinas, ethics or my relation with the Other is in most important ways the very locus in which I may encounter God, not directly, but rather as a trace. I respond to the call and appeal of the Other by substituting myself for the Other. The Other becomes my utmost responsibility, and this is what holiness for Levinas all about:

Humanity precisely as grace, in the passage from the one to the other: transcendence. Passage from the one to the other, without concern for reciprocity, pure gratuity, from the unique to the unique. That is also reason, or peace, or goodness. Reason as generosity above reason as calculation. This human generosity is certainly not a statistically given. All men are not saints, neither are saints always saints. But all men understand the value of holiness. Even when men contest holiness, it is already in the name of another, greater holiness. The fact of admitting that the death of the other is more important than mine, that it takes precedence over mine, is the very miracle of the human in being, the basis of all obligations.⁴⁶²

My responsibility for the Other is the way I am related to God. Here, as Derrida puts it, the ethical relation becomes “a religious relation.”⁴⁶³ Levinas does not start from a theology or an exposition about God. Instead, he begins from the event of our responsibility for the Other and finds the significance of the word ‘God’: “I do not want to define anything through God because it is the human that I know. It is God that I can define through human relations and not the inverse...The inadmissible abstraction is God; it is in terms of the relation with the Other (*Autrui*) that I speak of God.”⁴⁶⁴ It is clear that the religious character is not only a dimension of his ethics, but more importantly, it constitutes his ethics. The ethical relation is the relation with the Infinite, according to

⁴⁶¹ Levinas, “God and Philosophy,” *DVI*, 115/*GCM*, 70.

⁴⁶² Levinas, “The Vocation of the Other,” *IRB*, 111.

⁴⁶³ Derrida, “Violence and Metaphysics,” 96.

⁴⁶⁴ Levinas, “Transcendence and Height,” *BPW*, 29.

Levinas, because “it is not disclosure” (*EeI*, 102/*EaI*, 106). It is rather a “revelation which is not a knowledge,” which is an ethical testimony through the expression “here I am!” in the presence of the Other. This “here I am!,” Levinas says, is “the place through which the Infinite enters into language, but without giving itself to be seen” (*EeI*, 102/*EaI*, 106). The revelation of the Infinite occurs precisely through this testimony. It becomes the source of the ethical resistance against totality. This resistance is thus not a human effort to attain liberation, but a surplus or overflowing thanks to the very “presence of infinity.”⁴⁶⁵ Yet, the beyond of this totality does not lie in another world or beyond it; it is rather to be “reflected *within* the totality and history, *within* experience” (*TeI*, 7/*TaI*, 23). I take this ‘within’ to refer to the empirical character of such infinity: it belongs to the very human experience. The experience of infinity thus becomes concrete, and in this sense, transcendence becomes immanent.

It appears that Levinas’s recourse to experience for the reflection of the beyond of the totality or the ‘presence of infinity’ brings out Derrida’s charge of empiricism to Levinas’s philosophy. In his essay “Violence and Metaphysics” Derrida argues that by radicalizing the theme of the infinite exteriority of the Other and being faithful to the “immediate, but buried nudity of experience itself,” Levinas pretends to do philosophy, or even metaphysics, which turns out to be “*nonphilosophy*” (*ED*, 122/*WD*, 82-3; 226/152). Is not experience always, Derrida asks, “an encountering of an irreducible presence, the perception of a phenomenality?” (*ED*, 225/*WD*, 152). Here one may ask the following question: if the recourse to experience is empiricism, how about

⁴⁶⁵ Levinas, “Philosophy and the Idea of Infinity,” *CPP*, 55.

phenomenology? Does not phenomenology resemble empiricism in its return to experience? Indeed, the study of the relation between phenomenology and empiricism needs to be pursued. But I do not think Derrida can legitimately charge Levinas's thought with empiricism without at the same time questioning the method of phenomenology as such.

In any case, Levinas's claim that my responsibility for the Other is the way I encounter God is very intriguing. How does the encounter really work? In the last chapter we saw an example of a non-totalizing experience through Erich Maria Remarque's *All Quiet on the Western Front*. The story shows how the protagonist comes to the realization about his fraternal relationship with the dead enemy soldier. Does it mean that he already encounters God in such experience? As I have argued, it is not necessarily the case. The realization of his inadequate treatment of the enemy soldier is the beginning of the collapse of totality in his thinking about the Other. As it soon leads to the sense of fraternity with the soldier, the protagonist's responsibility for him also increases. All this, at least potentially, may lead the protagonist to the realization about God's trace in the experience of the face: that the presence of infinity is felt in the breakup of totality and in the emergence of the sense of fraternity with the enemy soldier. But God may have passed before he realizes it. Thus, if he is to find the meaning of the word 'God' in such circumstances, he can only do so through the encounter with the face of the enemy soldier. It is in the ethical opening of the subject to the Other that, as Levinas puts it, the glory of the Infinite shines forth. But the realization of God's trace in the face does not occur automatically. We may not necessarily have that kind of absolute experience each

time we meet with other people. The trace of the Other, Levinas reminds us, is an enigma that has ‘perhaps’ (*peut-être*) as its modality that is irreducible to the modalities of being and certainty.⁴⁶⁶ Only when we have a true encounter with the face of the Other does the absolute experience, including the realization of God’s trace in it, become possible.

In this sense the claim that in Levinas “all atheists are actually religious without knowing it” is not entirely correct, or at least, needs some qualifications.⁴⁶⁷ The encounter with the Other, or even the exercise of responsibility for the Other, does not necessarily bring one to the realization of God’s passing in a trace. One may completely miss it. But even if one does not recognize the trace, one is still on the right track of encountering the Infinite, that is, through the responsibility for the Other. If one is to encounter the Infinite, even as a trace, Levinas wants to say, the ethical encounter with the Other is its very site. It is true, however, that for Levinas the subjectivity of the subject, which is preeminently ethical in its responsibility for the Other, is in fact religious at its roots: “What is at stake for the self, in its being, is not to be. Beyond egoism and altruism it is the religiosity of the self (*AE*, 186/*OB*, 117). This is another religious aspect of Levinas’s ethics. We have, within our subjectivity, the idea of infinity that “has been *put* into us.”⁴⁶⁸ The ethical aspirations of such subjectivity do not arise from the determination of freedom, but rather from the anarchical, unquestioned commitment to the Other: “Self-consciousness inevitably surprises itself at the heart of a moral consciousness. The latter cannot be

⁴⁶⁶ Levinas, “Phenomenon and Enigma,” *EDE*, 298/*CPP*, 71. By claiming that enigma with its ‘perhaps’ modality is the way God’s manifestation occurs, Levinas shows that he is not trying to prove God’s existence, as often done in traditional philosophy of religion. It is the very modality that Richard Kearney focuses on in his interpretation of God as possibility. See his book *The God Who May Be: A Hermeneutics of Religion* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2001).

⁴⁶⁷ Hutchens, *Levinas: A Guide for the Perplexed*, 113.

⁴⁶⁸ Levinas, “Philosophy and the Idea of Infinity,” *CPP*, 54.

added to the former, but it provides its basic mode. To be oneself [*pour soi*] is already to know the fault I have committed with regard to the Other. But the fact that I do not quiz myself on the Other's rights paradoxically indicates that the Other is not a *new edition of myself*; in its Otherness it is situated in a dimension of height, in the ideal, the Divine, and through my relation to the Other, I am in touch with God."⁴⁶⁹ But this very religiosity of the self, I argue, is the condition of the possibility of the absolute experience. Without the self that is situated in the dimension of height, or that is religious, it would be impossible for the subject to experience the face of the Other as a trace of God. Here one can say that all atheists are ignorant of their own religiosity. That is to say, they are unaware of their capabilities of encountering God as a trace in the ethical encounter with the Other. This is indeed a bold claim on Levinas's part. But at the same time the position precisely shows the intricacy of the relation between ethics and religion in his philosophy.

In my opinion, this religious nature of Levinas's ethics is often overlooked or sidelined in many treatments of his thought, particularly his ethics. It happens almost in an unsuspected way. First of all, Levinas's ethics is treated merely as another ethical theory. Such a treatment is inadequate because his ethics is not a theory at all, as it does not give us any moral principle to live our lives, which we usually find in an ethical theory. Levinas's ethics is, as Derrida puts it, an ethics of ethics, the very foundation of any encounter with the Other. Levinas himself calls his ethics *prima philosophia* that is supposed to ground all kinds of morality in society.⁴⁷⁰ The identification of his ethical responsibility for the Other with another kind of moral theory is therefore completely

⁴⁶⁹ Levinas, "A Religion for Adults," *DL*, 37/DF, 17.

⁴⁷⁰ Kearney, "Ethics of the Infinite," *Debates*, 80.

mistaken. Second, even if Levinas shares some concern with other thinkers, one needs to be careful not to see him simply as a secular thinker. His ethical resistance against totality or systematic thought, for example, or his concern with human subjectivity, may look similar to the preoccupation of thinkers such as Adorno and Horkheimer. But Levinas's analysis has a much larger framework that is religious in nature. Other thinkers may not share such a framework in their analysis of the same concerns. For Levinas, the ethical relation is the scene, the clearing, the only horizon within which God is truly revealed: "It is in this ethical perspective that God must be thought, and not in the ontological perspective of our being-there or of some Supreme Being and Creator correlative to the world, as traditional metaphysics often held... it is only in the infinite relation with the other that God passes (*se passe*), that traces of God are to be found."⁴⁷¹

All this does not mean that Levinas himself likes to show the religious character of his ethics. In fact, he often tries to avoid using the term 'religious' unless it is necessary. The appeal to the religious character of his ethics is demanded because the kind of ethics he proposes would not make sense without such a presupposition. The face-to-face relation is just a religious situation:

I do not start from the existence of a very great and all-powerful being. Everything I wish to say comes from this situation of responsibility which is religious insofar as the I cannot elude it.... You find yourself before a responsibility from which you cannot escape... You are not at all in the situation of a reflective consciousness, which, in reflection, already withdraws and hides itself. It is the sense in which I would accept the word *religious*, a word I do not want to employ because it immediately becomes the source of misunderstanding. But it is this exceptional situation, where you are always in the face of the Other (*Autrui*), where there is no privacy, that I would call the religious situation.⁴⁷²

⁴⁷¹ Kearney, "Ethics of the Infinite," *Debates*, 72, 82.

⁴⁷² Levinas, "Transcendence and Height," *BPW*, 29.

We see that Levinas is very careful with the designation of religiosity to his ethics in order to avoid any misunderstanding. He wants this discourse to remain philosophical. His critique of Western philosophical tradition, together with his call for the ethical responsibility for the Other, is done within the same tradition. As Merold Westphal points out, it is an immanent critique, as it does not arise from an appeal to some religious text or tradition as normative.⁴⁷³ Yet, Levinas finds it impossible to escape the religious significance of the encounter with the Other.

The religious character of Levinas's ethics, I argue, can be seen from another point of view, namely, through the general relation between ethics and religion. The discussion of the topic are often centered around questions such as, does ethics presuppose religion? Does a person need to subscribe to religion, or at least believe in God's existence, in order to practice ethics? A reasonable answer to this question is negative. Many ethical theories do not have such a requirement, given the methodological distinction between philosophy and religion. That is precisely what makes these theories philosophical, namely, that they are accessible to everyone through reason. Levinas himself claims that ethics does not presuppose belief in God.⁴⁷⁴ On the contrary, belief in God, or religion in general, he claims, would presuppose ethics as the questioning of our own being and the opening to the Other, as we will see more below.

Now, is it true that Levinas's ethics as *prima philosophia* does not presuppose belief in God? Can one understand his ethics without the underpinning of religion? I do not think so. For such radical responsibility for the Other, the subject being taken as

⁴⁷³ Merold Westphal, *Transcendence and Self-Transcendence: On God and the Soul*, 191.

⁴⁷⁴ Kearney, "Ethics of the Infinite," *Debates*, 74.

hostage for the Other, would not make sense unless it is grounded in the Infinite that makes such a demand. As Levinas himself says, the ethical exigency to be responsible for the Other “undermines the ontological primacy of the meaning of Being.”⁴⁷⁵ His ethics no longer operates at the level of ontology, but rather finds its source in the beyond Being, as it puts the ontological right to existence into question. It is an ethics that, as he puts it himself, goes “against nature.”⁴⁷⁶ He also acknowledges that the humanistic concern for our fellow human beings is already religious in the sense that it speaks the voice of God. But, he continues, “the moral priority of the Other over myself could not come to be if it were not motivated by something beyond nature.”⁴⁷⁷ Holding such a position regarding his ethics, in my opinion, he cannot possibly still claim that ethics does not presuppose belief or religion. Of course, we need to be careful here with the identification something beyond nature with God. But how else are we going to understand the movement against nature or avoid such identification if he himself claims that “God is the Other who turns our nature inside out... God does indeed go against nature for He is not of this world. God is other than Being?”⁴⁷⁸ In other words, the radical responsibility for the Other that characterizes his ethics can only be attributed to God. This is another way of saying that Levinas’s ethics is fundamentally religious.

⁴⁷⁵ Kearney, “Ethics of the Infinite,” *Debates*, 74-5..

⁴⁷⁶ Kearney, “Ethics of the Infinite,” *Debates*, 75.

⁴⁷⁷ Kearney, “Ethics of the Infinite,” *Debates*, 76.

⁴⁷⁸ Kearney, “Ethics of the Infinite,” *Debates*, 76.

5.2.2. Religion as Ethical

Earlier in this chapter we discussed Levinas's general account of religion. For Levinas, religion consists in the relation with the Infinite without totality. This relation does not cause the human subject to lose her freedom and independence. The subject thus remains separate from the Infinite. In fact, in Levinas's account, the separation already takes place at the time of creation when God contracts itself in order to make room for the world to exist independently. Plurality in the world is therefore intended from the very beginning. For this reason religion is primarily social in structure, namely, that it maintains separateness and plurality among beings as well as between God and the human beings. In this section we will elaborate the thesis that religion is for Levinas fundamentally ethical, namely, that religion is religion only when it is ethical.

5.2.2.1. Religion of Responsibility

As I have mentioned above, religion is commonly viewed as a way to engage in a personal relationship with God. To embrace a religion, for many people, is to recognize their existential dependence on a Divine Being or the Creator. Such a recognition is necessary not only for their earthly existence, but also for the afterlife. I believe Levinas shares the basic understanding of religion. The question is, how is the relationship with God supposed to be expressed? Through prayer and obedience to God? Or, through service to other people? For Levinas it is the latter that should embody a religion or one's

relationship with God. Relationship with God alone, which characterizes modern religions, is not enough when it fails to help the believers “to achieve the Good,” namely, to be responsible for the Other.⁴⁷⁹ In fact, it can be a way to avoid the concrete responsibility for fellow human beings.

Religion, for Levinas, can function as a mask for many things, including our selfish needs. Even the longing for salvation, which many believers presumably share, is fundamentally a return to the self. It arises, using Levinas’s own terminology, from a Need to secure one’s place in the afterlife, rather than from a metaphysical Desire for the Other. It is thus merely a “nostalgia, homesickness,” since it seeks for “a world that is for-me.”⁴⁸⁰ Pursuing the need for salvation through prayer and offering, in Levinas’s view, would only serve the *conatus essendi* of the self. If the believer is truly concerned with offering and sacrifice to God, he or she may do the best by offering his or herself to the Other. Organized religion, in Levinas’s view, attains its *raison d’être* only when it directs its adherents to the responsibility for the Other. Religion as such is not about returning to one’s origin, namely, the Creator, but rather about concrete responsibility for fellow human beings. Levinas is indeed not Kierkegaard, as he does not envision a direct relationship between the human being and God. One’s relationship with God, for Levinas, must be mediated through the neighbor. As Merold Westphal puts it, the fundamental difference between Levinas and Kierkegaard is that while Kierkegaard holds that God should remain the middle term between me and my neighbor, Levinas insists

⁴⁷⁹ Levinas, “The Ego and the Totality,” *CPP*, 30.

⁴⁸⁰ Levinas, “The Trace of the Other,” *EDE*, 268/*DC*, 350.

that it is the neighbor who is always the middle term between me and God.⁴⁸¹ Using Kierkegaardian language, Westphal argues that the ethical for Levinas is the teleological suspension of the religious. In this suspension the latter is relativized in order to be “affirmed in relation to that which is higher.”⁴⁸² God’s commands cannot possibly invalidate my ethical relation with, and anarchical commitment to, the Other. Thus, in Levinas’s view, God cannot put me on trial, as Abraham experiences, in which I would have to choose between obeying God’s order and betraying my commitment to humanity.

Levinas’s disregard of personal and eternal happiness in his account of religion is quite similar to Kant’s position on the primacy of moral duty. Both philosophers hold that the pursuit of happiness cannot serve as the motive of moral action because it arises from self-love. Kant himself thinks that happiness always hinges on an uncertain content that is unique to every person and therefore cannot guarantee the promotion of the universal moral law. In Levinas the critique of the search for personal happiness in religion is based not so much on the empirical character of happiness as on the indifference to the well-being of the Other. In his view it is the care of the interests of the Other that marks religion as religion because it best expresses the holiness of the Holy. This is not to say that Levinas rejects human desire for happiness. In *Totality and Infinity* he shows how we live on so many things and enjoy them. The living and enjoying of the earthly things mark the first emergence of the ego from the grip of the *il y a*. But the encounter with the fragility of the face of the Other would call all this enjoyment into question and even suspend it. It contests the subject’s right to existence and enjoyment. The suspension of

⁴⁸¹ Westphal, *Levinas and Kierkegaard in Dialogue*, 5.

⁴⁸² *Ibid.*, 47.

the subject's happiness in Levinas lasts indefinitely because unlike Kant, he does not think that the responsibility for the Other, as virtue in Kant's view, will one day be united with happiness. The hope of eternal happiness in Kant's religion does not exist in Levinas's.

Levinas's emphasis on the primacy of the ethical in religion, in my opinion, may have its own weakness. He does not seem concerned with the fact that the responsibility and even substitution for the Other may be tainted by selfish needs. If he criticizes the quest for salvation in religion as a sheer return to the self, how can he be sure that my acts of responsibility for my neighbor do not arise from some ulterior motives that ultimately serve my own needs? I may commit myself to the cause of my neighbor, and I feel good about doing that, even though I know it is never sufficient. Isn't such an attitude already a reward for me? Kant's example on this issue may be helpful: "When an upright man is in the greatest distress, which he could have avoided if he could only have disregarded duty, is he not sustained by the consciousness that he has maintained humanity in its proper dignity in his own person and honored it, that he has no cause to shame himself in his own eyes and to dread the inward view of self-examination?"⁴⁸³ I can indeed feel righteous about I am doing morally. If this is the case, then my responsibility for the Other may not be need-free, either. In this case the problem remains the same as his reservation about the human longing for salvation.

Still in comparison with Kant's ethics, one clearly does not find in Levinas the search for universal moral principles. The emphasis here is placed on the individual

⁴⁸³ Immanuel Kant, *The Critique of Practical Reason*, in *Practical Philosophy*, trans. Ed. Mary J. Gregor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 210-11.

responsibility for the Other, which is irreplaceable due to the election of the Good. It may appear that Levinas's ethics poses a threat to one of the pillars of ethics for humanity, namely, universality, because it does not give us any standard as to how to act morally. Now, should the lack of universality in ethics be worrisome? Can ethics that emphasizes individual responsibilities survive the arbitrariness of moral actions? I think so. First of all, we need to recall that one of the reasons why Levinas turns to such ethics precisely because of the failure of the so-called universal ethics to prevent various atrocities that occurred in the twentieth-century, including the Holocaust. In fact, people may hide behind such universal principles so that they do not need to respond critically to the ethical situation. Moreover, with the Levinasian type of ethics that demands a substitution for the Other and responsibility even for the crimes that the Other has done, one need not worry that it will bring about big problems in the intersubjective relation. What may cause our concern is the excessive responsibility that the human subject carries to the detriment of his or her own well-being. Even in this situation I think we need to remember that the individual responsibility for the Other, which is inexhaustible, is the basic standard for the ethical relation. It serves as the basis for justice with the realization that such responsibility needs to be carried out to more than one person. Thus, even though Levinas's ethics never prescribes a universal applicability, it nonetheless attempts to reach out to as many people as possible through the search for a more just society.

It is also important to remember here, however, that what Levinas proposes in his ethics is not simply a secular humanism for the Other. As I have emphasized above, his ethics is fundamentally religious: the face-to-face relation with the Other is also an

encounter with God, if only through a trace. The neighbor is thus not simply a rational human being with whom I share common properties of humanity, but rather that through whose face the revelation from the height becomes possible. Neither is the human relation an ontology because it is not based on the representation of the Other, but rather on the *invocation*. In the relation I am addressed by the Other, and at the same time, I am called to respond to the call from the Other: “What is named is at the same time that which is called.”⁴⁸⁴ It is the invocation, rather than the representation, of the Other that forms the basis of the human relation. This is what makes the relation religious: “The essence of discourse is prayer.”⁴⁸⁵

The path that Levinas chooses regarding the expression of the God-human relation can be partly attributed to his tacit apophatic theology. He says he does not want to begin his ethics from the existence of the highest and most powerful being nor to define anything through God because he only knows the human being.⁴⁸⁶ One can have a direct experience with the human being, while it is impossible to do so with God because God is marked with “the inadmissible abstraction” and “the infinity of his absence.”⁴⁸⁷ Thus, he can only speak or define God through the human relations. These relations, which are the encounter with the face of the Other, are the positive sense given to the negative notion of a non-thematizable God. The word ‘God’ comes to mind “when I am turned toward the other man and when I am called not to leave him alone. It is a turning contrary to my perseverance in being. This is the circumstance in which God has

⁴⁸⁴ Levinas, “Is Ontology Fundamental?,” *BPW*, 7-8.

⁴⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, *BPW*, 7-8.

⁴⁸⁶ Levinas, “Transcendence and Height,” *BPW*, 29.

⁴⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, *BPW*, 29; “The Trace of the Other,” *EDE*, 282/DC, 359.

spoken.”⁴⁸⁸ Religious transcendence, in Levinas’s view, has meaning only in ethics. The human relations through the face are religious situations because the face is the very trace of God. To encounter God means not “to follow this trace which is not a sign; it is to go toward the others who stand in the trace of illeity.”⁴⁸⁹ The proper encounter with God is therefore done through the face of the Other that bears the trace of God. We may say that for Levinas religion should be action-oriented; it is a response to a call: “To know God is to know what must be done.”⁴⁹⁰ It is religion that is primarily associated not with piety commonly viewed, but rather with the responsibility for the Other. “Knowledge” of God, Levinas holds, cannot be separated from my relationship with other people because they are the very locus of metaphysical truth and the manifestation of the height through the face.

One crucial question at this point regarding the relation between ethics and religion in Levinas’s thought is whether religion for him is nothing but ethics, or whether it consists only in the responsibility for the Other. Many Levinas’s commentators, including Hent de Vries, have expressed their opinion in the affirmative: “What remains of religion in Levinas’s formula is just another word for a fundamentally ethical relationship to the other (*autrui*).”⁴⁹¹ Is it true that prayer and worship do not have a place in Levinas’s religion? I do not think so. I argue that while his concept of religion finds the meaning of transcendence in ethics, it does not necessarily exclude the ordinary forms of piety commonly associated with it. His emphasis on the primacy of ethics may indeed

⁴⁸⁸ Levinas, “Interview with Salomon Malka,” *IRB*, 101.

⁴⁸⁹ Levinas, “The Trace of the Other,” *EDE*, 282/*DC*, 359.

⁴⁹⁰ Levinas, “A Religion for Adults,” *DL*, 37/*DF*, 17.

⁴⁹¹ Hent de Vries, *Philosophy and the Turn to Religion*, 5.

have cast a shadow on the relevance of prayer and worship in religion. He may rarely speak of ‘strictly non-ethical’ forms of the relation with God. But his writings, even philosophical ones, allow some room for the traditional ways of relating with God, for instance, when he speaks of the God of prayer that needs to guide theology: “This is also very important for the orientation of theology: the God of prayer, of invocation, would be more ancient than the God deduced from the world or from some sort of *a priori* radiance and stated in an indicative proposition.”⁴⁹² For prayer is fundamentally a form of dialogue in which God is invoked, and not thematized. The invocation of God is clearly not an act of representing God, but rather of letting God be an interlocutor. This is what ethics as a philosophy of dialogue is all about. Thus, I do not think Levinas intends to deny the necessity or importance of prayer in his emphasis on the ethical character of religion. What he wants to argue, I think, is that since religion cannot but be ethical, the ordinary forms of piety such as prayer and offering would be meaningless unless they are also ethical: “The Justice rendered to the Other, my neighbor, gives me an unsurpassable proximity to God. It is *as intimate as the prayer and the liturgy which, without justice, are nothing*.”⁴⁹³ Those who think that prayer, both personal and common, is sufficient for a relationship with God are completely misguided, as they ignore the primacy of ethics in religion. Levinas thus claims that he does not put forward either “a religion without God” or “God without religion.” All of this, he says, “is too quickly said.”⁴⁹⁴

⁴⁹² Levinas, “Dialogue: Self-Consciousness and The Proximity of the Neighbor,” *DVI*, 227/*GCM*, 148.

⁴⁹³ Levinas, “A Religion for Adults,” *DL*, 38/*DF*, 18; emphasis added.

⁴⁹⁴ Levinas, “Interview with Salomon Malka,” *IRB*, 101.

The claim about the non-exclusion of the ordinary forms of piety in Levinas's concept of religion, however, will work only if a personal God is acknowledged. For prayer, for instance, presupposes a non-thematized God who is an interlocutor, who is quite different from a God as Illeity, which we find in Levinas. The latter fits very well with Levinas's emphasis on ethics as the singular manifestation of God. That is to say, God is encountered not as a presence, but rather as a trace, and this encounter occurs through the responsibility for the Other. This is why Levinas claims in *Totality and Infinity* that the Other (*Autrui*) is not the incarnation of God (*TeI*, 77/*TaI*, 78-9); neither is God "in front of me."⁴⁹⁵ Otherwise, it would be a direct encounter with God. Prayer, however, requires a personal relationship with God, which means that God must also be personal, a 'Thou' whom the human being can address and invoke. The concept of a God as 'Il' who cannot be an interlocutor is clearly inadequate for a religion that requires a personal relationship with God.

Here we find that Levinas's concept of God in his philosophical works may differ from that in his Talmudic writings. In the latter one can find many references to a personal God including those from the Bible. In the essay "A Religion for Adults" (1957), for example, God is viewed as the Creator who demands justice and who alone can judge.⁴⁹⁶ In "Prayer Without Demand" (1984), God is placed at the top of the hierarchy of multiple worlds, which are God's own emanations. As the highest point of this structure, God functions as the soul for the worlds, "to sanctify them, illumine them,

⁴⁹⁵ Levinas, "God and Philosophy," *DVI*, 123/*GCM*, 75.

⁴⁹⁶ Levinas, "A Religion for Adults," *DL*, 33, 38, 46/*DF*, 15, 18, 23.

and thereby bring them into existence."⁴⁹⁷ For this purpose God needs the fidelity of human beings to the Torah as well as their prayers (*LR*, 233). This concept of God is quite different from its counterpart in philosophy where God is thought of only as Illeity, not a personal God who can reward goodness and inflict punishment. This difference is often overlooked, for instance, in the following statement: "As free obedience, religion is an ethical relationship. The personal relationship to a personal God coincides with the ethical relationship to other human persons."⁴⁹⁸ The assumption here is that Levinas has the same concept of God in both philosophical and Talmudic writings, while in fact, they are not the same. The closest notion of God in Levinas's Talmudic writings to its counterpart in philosophy is the idea of God who hides God's face from human beings and leaves all responsibilities to them in the Torah. Their relationship is not a emotional communion in love, but rather a spiritual or intellectual through the education of the Torah.⁴⁹⁹ This idea of God and of God's relation with human beings clearly belongs to a certain kind of Judaism to which Levinas may have embraced. But it does not, at any rate, coincide with the notion of God he paints in his philosophical writings.

Now, one may wonder whether or not this is the consequence of Levinas's own attempt to speak of God in a non-ontological manner. That is to say, the concept of God as Illeity may have been the result of his effort to find the significance of God that is not contaminated by Being. Since God cannot be conceived of as presence, the idea of a personal God does not find its proper place, either. This issue is intimately linked to a

⁴⁹⁷ Levinas, "A Prayer without Demand," *LR*, 230-31.

⁴⁹⁸ Adriaan Theodoor Peperzak, *Beyond: The Philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas*, 22.

⁴⁹⁹ Levinas, "Loving the Torah more than God," *DL*, 219-223/*DF*, 143-45.

larger one regarding the relation between religion and philosophy, to which we are about to turn in the next section.

5.2.2.2. Religion as Adrift

The relation between ethics and religion in Levinas's thought, to which this study is devoted, is clearly connected to his view of the relation between religion and philosophy. For Levinas, philosophy is always about the determination of Being, about the Said (*le Dit*) that conveys meaning and intelligibility. As such, it has its own limitations because not everything can be thematized or represented. The history of Western philosophy, in Levinas's view, has not been aware of these limitations, as it seeks an ultimate comprehension of reality and thus tends to subject everything to a totalizing thought. This is why Levinas accuses this history of destroying transcendence.⁵⁰⁰

According to Levinas, philosophy, as an attempt to proclaim the meaning of Being, comes from religion: "Philosophy, for me, derives from religion. It is called into being by a religion adrift, and probably religion is always adrift."⁵⁰¹ Here philosophy is portrayed as the effort to identify the intelligibility and meaning of Being through its kerygmatic proclamation. Thus it names things and make them objects of consciousness. Intentionality is the operation in which the objects of our consciousness are brought to the

⁵⁰⁰ Levinas, "God and Philosophy," *DVI*, 95/*GCM*, 56.

⁵⁰¹ *NTR*, 182. In the original French version we may notice the play on words between *dériver* (to derive) and *être à la dérive* (to be adrift). "La philosophie *dérive* pour moi de la religion *en dérive* et toujours probablement la religion est *en dérive*."

horizon. All this, whatever philosophy tries to enunciate, in Levinas's view, comes from religion. Religion, he claims, knows much more than what philosophy can ever determine (cf. *DVI*, 137/*GCM*, 86).⁵⁰² It encompasses both Being and the beyond Being. But unlike philosophy, it does not have the determination of philosophy. In other words, it is always adrift. Thus, while religion may claim a larger area of operation, so to speak, it does not have the ability of philosophy to identify and name things in an adequate manner. For this reason religion needs philosophy for clarity and understanding. Such a relation between religion and philosophy, in Levinas's view, does not indicate any "servility on the part of philosophy, nor any lack of understanding on the part of religion" (*ITN*, 174). They are "two distinct but linked moments" in the "unique spiritual process that constitutes the *approach* to transcendence" (*ITN*, 174). It is important to note that philosophy is seen as a spiritual activity that attempts to approach transcendence, and not a sheer attempt to make meaning of Being. Given the nature of philosophy, Levinas quickly reminds us that an approach is not an objectification; otherwise, transcendence would be denied. Objectification, he adds, is necessary to the approach, but it cannot replace it (cf. *ITN*, 174).

It is no surprise, then, that philosophy has imported a lot of notions from religion. Levinas himself suggests, as we have seen above, that even the word 'God' comes to philosophy from the religious realm (cf. *DMT*, 248/*GDT*, 214-15; *DVI*, 103/*GCM*, 62). But given its thematizing nature, philosophy always places this term within "the gesture

⁵⁰² This is probably the reason why Levinas claims, presumably alluding to Boethius's work, that it is religion, not philosophy, that can bring consolations (cf. *EeI*, 117/*EaI*, 118; *DVI*, 137/*GCM*, 86). But if religion simply means the responsibility for the Other without reward, one may wonder what kind of consolations religion may bring.

of being” (*DVI*, 95/*GCM*, 56). The meaning of the term ‘God’ is now reduced to a manifestation of presence, thus rejecting God’s transcendence. The God of philosophy turns out to be different from the God of religion. This is because God, in Levinas’s view, is “the name outside of essence or beyond essence, the individual prior to individuality... It precedes all divinity, that is, the divine essence which the false gods, individuals sheltered in their concept, lay claim to” (*AE*, 89n.1/*OB*, 190n.38) Even in Levinas’s own philosophical writings, as I have suggested, the notion of God does not coincide with that found in the revealed religions, of course for a different reason. In any case, he sees religion as having the ultimate structure of reality: “Totality and the embrace of being, or ontology, do not contain the final secret of being. Religion, where relationships subsists between the same and the other despite the impossibility of the Whole – the idea of infinity – is the ultimate structure” (*TeI*, 79/*TaI*, 80). Philosophy can only see or name some part of it.

Seen from this perspective, what Levinas is doing is not a reduction of religion to ethics or even a withdrawal of ethics into the domain of religion.⁵⁰³ Rather, it is an attempt of think of religion more seriously, to make it less adrift, in response to the Holocaust: “Before the twentieth century, all religion begins with the promise. It begins with the ‘Happy End.’ It is the promise of heaven. Well then, doesn’t a phenomenon like Auschwitz invite you, on the contrary, to think the moral law independently of the Happy End? That is the question.”⁵⁰⁴ The responsibility for the Other is unmistakably more

⁵⁰³ See Jeffrey Bloechl, *Liturgy of the Neighbor: Emmanuel Levinas and the Religion of Responsibility* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 2000), 222.

⁵⁰⁴ Levinas, “The Paradox of Morality,” *The Provocation of Levinas*, 176.

concrete and less contaminated with personal interest. The result of this kind of thinking, to Levinas's own admission, is a religion that is difficult to preach: "To be sure, this religion is impossible to propose to others, and consequently is impossible to preach. Contrary to a religion that feeds on representations, it does not begin in promise."⁵⁰⁵ This religion is difficult, if not impossible, to preach because it is a "piety without reward," namely, that I can demand of myself what I cannot demand of the Other.⁵⁰⁶ It goes against the natural disposition of human nature or the *conatus essendi*. But when I respond to the face of the Other, that is the moment when the rupture with nature occurs. It is also the moment when religion begins to find its meaning.

In summary, we have seen in this chapter the complex relation between ethics and religion in Levinas's thought. Ethics is clearly Levinas's primary interest, and this is why his philosophy is a search for the meaning of ethics in response to the Holocaust. But in the final analysis, it is also religious in nature because it is where the word 'God' signifies and where one may encounter the trace of God. Here we see Levinas's other major interest, namely, holiness or the meaning of transcendence, which is in turn expressed in the name of religion. Thus, Levinas claims that religion is religion only when it is concerned with the responsibility for the Other. Personal pieties such as prayer and worship are rendered useless without the commitment to the care for the Other. Levinas's notion of God as Illeity clearly does not coincide with that in most organized religions. This is because, I suggest, he attempts in his philosophy to find the meaning of transcendence through the human relations and not the other way around. One can say

⁵⁰⁵ Levinas, "Diachrony and Representation," *ENP*, 183/*ENT*, 177.

⁵⁰⁶ Levinas, "The Paradox of Morality," *The Provocation of Levinas*, 176.

that through ethics Levinas finds religion in the sense of the meaning of the word 'God' or transcendence. This is how ethics and religion are deeply intertwined in his philosophy.

CHAPTER SIX

CONCLUSION

Philosophy is often seen as a difficult discipline that is inaccessible to ordinary people. It is perceived as concerned with lofty thoughts about realities that are far removed from their daily concerns. It is no surprise that philosophers are often viewed as those who live in their head and are out of touch with reality. What makes this matter worse is that philosophy itself tends to use highly abstruse and confusing language. All this lends itself to the diminution of the attraction of philosophy, if not to the fear of it.

While philosophers may continue to use a difficult language to express their thoughts, they certainly do not always deal with realities that are distant from people's lives. This is at least true in the case of Levinas. From the very beginning he has sided with what has been called, following Jean Wahl, 'philosophy of the concrete.' As I pointed out in Chapter Two, in this type of philosophy the focus is on the concreteness of life with emphasis placed on the categories of feeling rather than those of consciousness. Instead of the faculty of consciousness, the faculty of feeling (*le sentir*) with the feelings (*le sentiment*) it produces is seen as the door to reality. Moreover, this philosophy gives prominence to the concrete manifestation of the exterior. Concreteness here thus pertains to the experience of immediacy that allows the exterior to express itself fully without the intervention of the constituting project of consciousness for the production of meaning.

I think this orientation of Levinas's philosophy should help us understand his notion of ethics. As we saw in Chapter One, Levinas's ethics is not primarily concerned

with a rational attempt to find the best way to live our lives or with a search for moral principles that distinguish good actions from bad ones. All this is secondary to, or derivative from, a primordial event, namely, the encounter with the face of the Other. For Levinas, ethics is concerned with the encounter in which the Other calls the subject or the *I* into question: she contests the right of the *I* to exercise its power over her and to impose meaning on her. The Other even questions the right of the subject to exist: Is it righteous for me to be? Can I justify my own existence? She eventually calls the subject to infinite responsibility for her. All moral theories, in Levinas's view, presuppose the ethical event in which the Other demands responsibility from the subject. The pursuit of justice, which entails the presence of a third person, must be done on the basis of the face-to-face encounter with the Other.

Given the peculiarity of this notion of ethics, it is no surprise that Levinas paints a different kind of an ethical subject. As we saw in Chapter Two, the ethical subject is for Levinas not a thinking being, but rather a sensible being. The sensibility of the subject makes possible its experience of being questioned, challenged, and even made hostage by the Other, something of which a thinking subject is incapable. The same sensibility enables the subject to enjoy the things of the world and to live from them. For Levinas, the ethical subject is a concrete being with flesh and blood, a being that lives a concrete life. A living subject, with whom his ethics is concerned, is clearly more than simply a conscious subject. Such a claim arises from the conviction that sensibility tells us much more about reality than does consciousness. This is Levinas's wager, so to speak.

I find Levinas has a very solid notion of human subjectivity that underlies his notion of ethics. We do often use our sensibility to assess a particular situation, including our encounter with another human person. What we feel speaks more about the situation than what we see or hear. In many cases, to respond to the other person on the basis of abstract moral principles would be to betray our feelings. The immediate problem here is how to account for what we sense and feel. If our sensibility tells us about something that cannot be represented, then we may have a problem of objectivity. There is thus a tension between what can and cannot be thematized and represented. I think this is the basic issue that underlies the difference between an ordinary conception of ethics and a Levinasian one as well as the distinction between the *Said* (*le Dit*) and the *Saying* (*le Dire*).

In any case, Levinas's emphasis on the notion of the human being as a living and sensible subject, as opposed to a thinking and conscious subject, allows him to embark on the project to bring out the hidden origin of all that shows itself or that is given. As far as the search for the sources of all phenomena is concerned, Levinas is very Husserlian because like his mentor, he is interested not so much in the phenomena themselves as in their origin and meaning. To do phenomenology, he says, is especially to bring out the elements of pre-philosophical experience, "to research and recall, within the horizons that open up around the first 'intentions' of the abstracted datum, the 'human' (or interhuman) 'plot' that is the concreteness of its unthought, which is the necessary 'setting,' the abstractions of which have broken off into the said of words and propositions."⁵⁰⁷ Now, the main phenomenon he is interested in, as we have seen, is the very encounter with the

⁵⁰⁷ Levinas, "The Idea of the Infinite in Us," *ENP*, 229/*ENT*, 221.

Other. What is happening in the encounter? What am I doing to or with the person I meet with? Am I mastering her through objectifying knowledge so that her strangeness is eliminated? Is the person actually doing something to me, too? How does the presence of the person affect me? What does my sensibility tell me about it? Does not the encounter with the person, Levinas asks, awaken in me the ethical responsibility for her? If this is the case, what is the source of such responsibility? Did I ever choose to be responsible for her? Levinas later finds that it is the proximity of the Other that underlies ethics: the Other is much closer to me than I think. The anarchic responsibility for the Other, which ethics for Levinas signifies, is precisely founded upon such proximity.

Levinas's interest in going back to the sources of phenomena is also evident in his analysis of language. While other philosophers tend to focus their attention on language as a system of signs, Levinas attends to the speech (*langage*) that precedes the constitution of the language system. The distinction between the *Saying* and the *Said* is drawn precisely to distinguish what is original from what is secondary. The *Saying* is the very exposure and proximity of the subject to the Other before any conversation may take place; it is the "here I am" attitude toward the Other. Its originality thus lies in the opening of the subject to the Other before a thematic discourse undermines the sincerity of the encounter. It is this *Saying* that Levinas is interested in, and not the thematized language in the *Said*. The prominence given to the ontological language in the history of Western philosophy is for Levinas a reduction, if not a betrayal, of *Saying*.

Thus, insofar as Levinas attempts to return to the sources of phenomena in order to uncover their meaning, his works are inherently phenomenological, as he himself often

claims. In his view phenomenology is fundamentally the search for staging (*mise en scène*) in a concrete dimension so that all the horizons and meaning of an intention may be revealed. The result of his analysis may differ from that of other phenomenologists, including Husserl. Among other reasons, this is because Levinas himself brings something new to phenomenology, for example, the notion of inverse intentionality (*TeI*, 63, 136/*TaI*, 67, 129). The intentional arrows no longer emanate from me to the object, as previously conceived, but rather originate in the ‘object’ and are directed toward me. This change of intentional course allows Levinas to make the case for ethical transcendence in which I am challenged and put into question by the Other. Thus, the phenomenological character of his works, in my opinion, is undeniable. This is why Richard Cohen argues that Levinas is “faithful in his own way to the phenomenological movement.”⁵⁰⁸ Leslie MacAvoy finds Levinas’s works as representing more of a radicalization of phenomenology than a destruction of it.⁵⁰⁹ Yet, from another point of view, precisely by going back to the origin and source of the phenomena, thus following the phenomenological method, Levinas exposes the limits of phenomenology. Phenomenology turns out to be incapable, through the intending consciousness, of capturing or representing all aspects of the phenomena that are encountered, particularly those which are prior to our conscious activity. This is especially true of everything related to the Other whom the subject encounters. The habit of thematizing and representing everything other breaks down in this encounter. What Levinas calls ‘the face

⁵⁰⁸ Richard Cohen, “Introduction,” *DEH*, xi. See *TeI*, 14/*TaI*, 28-9.

⁵⁰⁹ Leslie MacAvoy, “The Other Side of Intentionality,” in *Addressing Levinas*, eds. Eric Sean Nelson et al., 109.

of the Other' resists the attempt of the subject to reduce her alterity. The rupture of this totalizing tendency signifies for Levinas an opening to transcendence. For him, to attend to what the intending consciousness cannot capture is to enter into the realm of the beyond Being.

Here we find that Levinas's ethics is not an ordinary ethics, as it does not propose moral principles that can guide people to a good and proper life as human beings. It is rather the very 'foundation' of ethics, or the condition for the possibility of ethics. This is because ethics here is conceived as the encounter with the Other in which the Other concerns us. All moral theories presuppose the idea that other people are of interest or importance to us. We thus establish moral principles that may guide and protect their basic needs as human beings on the basis of justice and equality. We have seen that in Levinas's ethics the concern for the Other is made so radical that the relation between the *I* and the Other becomes asymmetrical: the *I* is all for the Other, even to the point of substituting itself for the Other. In taking its responsibility for the Other, the *I* does not ask for a reciprocal treatment; that is not its concern. In fact, the Other here is supposed to be ungrateful, in defiance of the principle of equality that commonly defines modern ethics.

Insofar as Levinas attempts to analyze the meaning of ethics or the ethical, I think his notion of the asymmetrical relation makes good sense. This is because what primarily matters in the ethical is the response of the subject to the Other, which, as I mentioned in Chapter One, can be seen as a basic unit of the ethical. In this view, ethics does not need to address the issue of how the Other would treat the subject, unless we want to have a

universal perspective of the whole relation. Since universality is not a primary concern in Levinas's ethics, the asymmetrical relation that places the whole responsibility on the subject is sufficient. What I find rather excessive is the notion of the substitution of the subject for the Other. I do not think the responsibility for the Other needs to be conceived to such an extreme degree. Perhaps for Levinas, the basic unit of the ethical is ideal in that ethics as the encounter with the Other needs to be open to the possibility of an absolute responsibility for the Other. Thus, the subject's question of its right to existence, before the face of the Other, leads to its substitution for the Other.

It is not without good reasons, as I mentioned in the Introduction, that Levinas's ethics has been characterized as 'postmodern.' It no longer carries the modern trait of seeking for a *universal* moral principle because it ceases to assume that members of the moral community are of equal standing. The responsibility uniquely belongs to each *I* and cannot be made universal. Indeed, ethical universality is not only elusive in this kind of ethics, as Zygmunt Bauman says in his book *Postmodern Ethics*, but it is also unable to find its proper place. This does not mean that Levinas's ethics does not concern the interests of all human beings. His notion of justice is precisely an attempt to address this universal concern. But justice, in his view, must be founded upon the face-to-face encounter with the Other who commands me to responsibility. Ethics eventually concerns all moral beings, not merely the singular Other in front of me.

What is also *not* modern in Levinas's ethics is its heteronomous character. The responsibility that each moral subject carries does not come from the guidance and direction of reason, but rather from the beyond Being. It is assigned to the subject prior to

its having freedom to choose whether or not to be responsible for the Other. The role of reason is diminished not only in this regard, but also in the concept of the human subject. The human subject is no longer viewed as a thinking and conscious being, as we have seen, but rather a sensible being. This sensibility makes it possible for the subject to be touched and affected by the Other, even to the point of experiencing some sort of trauma as a hostage for the Other. It also allows Levinas to describe the responsibility as passivity more than any passivity, as a radical openness to the Other.

Indeed, his ethical language often sounds harsh and excessive. He employs terms such as hostage and trauma in order to show how much the Other concerns us and how impossible it is for us to refuse such responsibility. Does he need to use such excessive language? I do not think so. Its employment may only suggest the unfreedom and servitude of the *I* to the Other, which Levinas denies. The reality is that those who carry out such responsibility and do a simple act for the Other such as opening the door often do not *feel* themselves to be hostages to the Other. They are more than happy to do it. Thus, there is a gap between the actual affective state of the ethical encounter and its description. I think the use of a more positive language for the ethical relation would better serve Levinas's purpose.

In any case, Levinas's ideas in his ethics are indeed of great interest to the so-called postmodern thinkers or those who find that the modern assumptions of reason, ethics, religion, and the human subject are no longer tenable or at least about to break down. We have seen in the Introduction that while a philosopher such as Simon Critchley sees in Levinas's works a support for his ethical interpretation of deconstruction,

psychologists such as David Ross Fryer view Levinas's account of human subjectivity, together with Lacan's, as an example of the antihumanistic critique of the self. What is missing in such interpretations is an account of the inherently religious character of Levinas's ethics. They generally focus on the ethics of responsibility for the Other as a secular humanism and give a pragmatic interpretation of it. As a result, they fail to take the whole of Levinas's ethics into account.

The inadequacy of these interpretations lies in the fact that they fail to see ethics as an event of transcendence. There are several layers of the movement of transcendence here. The subject realizes, first of all, that it is incapable of thematizing and representing the whole of the Other. There are certain aspects of the Other that are always beyond the grasp of the comprehending act of consciousness. Second, and more importantly, the subject finds itself being questioned by the Other: Who gives you the right to represent me? Where does your usurping power come from? The subject's very right to existence is now being challenged and put into question. As if responding to the questions of the Other, the subject finds itself responsible for the conditions of the Other. It breaks away from its *conatus essendi* or self-preoccupation, hence a rupture with nature. This is the first gesture of transcendence, or more precisely, self-transcendence. Further, the subject places itself at the disposal of the Other, announcing its availability for her by saying "here I am." It sees the Other as its master, as somebody to serve. This relation is possible, according to Levinas, because there is the desire for the Infinite within the subject. Unlike Need that always finds satisfaction with its object, this metaphysical desire cannot reach its object, much less possess it. The Infinite, by its nature, does not

allow the finite to come too close to it; otherwise, their separation would collapse. In this way the Infinite remains the Desirable for the subject. All this is possible, according to Levinas, because the Infinite orders the subject to the responsibility for the Other. Thus, the subject's availability response to the Other is the result of its own Desire for the Infinite. All this happens prior to the subject's freedom. The subject finds itself anarchically responsible for the Other; it is elected to this responsibility.

Here the relation between ethics and religion in Levinas, to the study of which this dissertation is devoted, becomes more evident. As we discussed in the last three chapters, in ethics as the infinite responsibility for the Other he finds the proper meaning of religion. By its nature religion always enunciates God. But where is this God to be found, Levinas asks? It is in the ethical encounter with the Other. Ethics is no longer considered a precursor or an approach to religion, but rather a necessary component of it. Religion ceases to stand over ethics, as it must be scrutinized by ethics as well. In fact, ethics or the ethical is the spiritual itself because it is where one can encounter God. This God, however, is not revealed as presence, but rather as a trace. It is thus not a direct encounter with God, as if God were right in front of us. God is experienced as already departing from our presence, not in the sense that God was there before we realized it. Rather, the encounter with the Other contains within itself the trace of God, which is accessible through our sensibility. We may not always find the trace of God in every encounter with the Other, however. As I said in the last chapter, the trace of God is for Levinas an enigma that has the modality of 'perhaps' (*peut-être*) and not a phenomenon that is certainly and readily discernible. On the other hand, the more I show responsibility

for the Other, the more I express the very trace of God. It is as if we were those beings who could make God's trace more apparent and discernible through our responsibility for the Other. In doing so, as Levinas puts it in religious language, we bear witness to the glory of the Infinite.

The link between ethics and religion in Levinas's thought is also manifest in his conception of human subjectivity. In his view the human being has a religious subjectivity in that she is anarchically oriented toward the Other by the order of the Good through her Desire for the Infinite. That is to say, what brings all human beings together is more than a simple realization that they all biologically share the properties of humanity, so to speak, or that they are all rational beings. They are tied to one another beyond freedom. This is why Levinas likes to describe this sociality, particularly in *Totality and Infinity*, using terms such as 'kinship' and 'fraternity' because they suggest an affinity that is deeper than that which is ever created by human beings themselves. I think this is one of Levinas's major contributions to philosophy, which we need to take more seriously because it bears extensive consequences upon how we think about how we organize our lives and relate to one another. Ethical norms are sought for not because we want to live happily together in society, much less because we fear one another, as Hobbes imagines it. Rather, they are expressions of our responsibility for the multiple Others. Our pursuit of justice must also be founded upon responsibility for the singular Other, which goes beyond all legality and contract. A mere search for moral principles without such a view would look rather superficial. But Levinas can make this claim precisely because his concept of the ethical is religious in that the human sociality is

formed beyond any rational discourse or beyond Being. The so-called secular ethics would not make the claim of such anarchical affinity. I think the reason why Levinas often uses religious terms such as creation in his description of this affinity is precisely to show the religious nature of his ethics.

One important question here is whether or not Levinas's account of ethics, with the use of religious language, can be considered a theology. There is no doubt that Levinas offers us a certain view of God and uses religious terms such as 'glory' and 'creation' in the description of his ethics. All this leads commentators such as Janicaud to think of Levinas's ethics as phenomenology that turns into theology, instead of pure phenomenology. I argue, however, that what Levinas offers us in his philosophical works is very minimal theology. Of course, one can surmise a theology from Levinas's philosophical account. But such theology will be so minimal that it is insufficient to form a body of a systematic theology. Indeed, the use of religious or theological language in a particular writing does not make it a theological work.

One major factor that lends itself to this minimal theology is Levinas's loose usage of theological terms. For example, he calls humanity in which one is responsible for the Other 'grace' or 'holiness.'⁵¹⁰ Holiness requires that one not only respect the otherness of the Other, but also sacrifice oneself for the Other.⁵¹¹ My responsibility for the Other is therefore "goodness, mercy, or charity."⁵¹² Levinas even identifies the humanness of a human being (*l'humanité de l'homme*) with theology in the sense that it

⁵¹⁰ Levinas, "The Vocation of the Other," *IRB*, 111.

⁵¹¹ Levinas, "Interview with François Poirié," *IRB*, 47.

⁵¹² Levinas, "Being-for-the-Other," *IRB*, 115.

bears within it the divine presence that not even human thinking can ever fully comprehend.⁵¹³ Lacking the rigor of a theological discourse, Levinas's account of ethics can hardly count as a full-blown theology. Indeed, despite the use of religious language, Levinas himself never intends to make his philosophical writings theological works. The practical problem here is that he can quickly switch from a philosophical discourse to a theological one, if only to illustrate the philosophical point he is making. Such ease certainly makes the reader or the audience wonder about the nature of his writing or speech.

Observing Levinas's usage of religious language, one may note his exclusive attention to Abrahamic world religions such as Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. The terms that Levinas often uses in his works such as creation, transcendence, and glory, may not be found in non-Abrahamic world religions such as Buddhism and Hinduism. Even the notion of a monotheistic God does not exist in Hinduism. In one of his interviews Levinas admits his total ignorance of Buddhism.⁵¹⁴ In an important way Levinas's total neglect of certain world religions impairs the universal applicability of his phenomenology of ethics and religion. How can one encounter the trace of God, for example, if the concept of God itself doesn't exist in one's belief? Without the notion of God, personal or otherwise, the claim that the face of the Other is the trace of such a God would not make sense. What may reduce this limitation is the more simple suggestion that the ethical is the spiritual itself, thus without specifying the kind of divinity that is encountered. On a rare occasion, I believe, Levinas makes this general claim when he

⁵¹³ Levinas, "The Idea of the Infinite in Us," *ENP*, 230/*ENT*, 222.

⁵¹⁴ Levinas, "Reality Has Weight," *IRB*, 164.

emphasizes the necessity for religion to avoid the scrutiny of the ethical.⁵¹⁵ In my opinion, such a suggestion sufficiently captures his main argument about the ethical, namely, that it is religious in nature. The responsibility for the Other is not simply a dynamism of secular humanism, but rather the realm in which God may be encountered. On the other hand, it may betray Levinas's own intention to speak of God without the contamination of Being. This God is not any kind of Divinity, but rather the One who continues to be interpreted in the Western world. Thus, even though Levinas offers us an idea of God that is rather different from the way God is commonly viewed in the Western world, it nonetheless cannot be separated from that from which it departs.

For philosophy of religion, and even for theology, I think it is possible to apply Levinas's notion of the asymmetrical relation between the *I* and the human Other (*Autrui*) to the relation between the human being and God. In the intersubjective relation it is the human Other that is first. She gets all the priority and takes charge, putting into question and teaching the *I*. I think it is more than conceivable to think of the Divine Other as first, challenging and teaching the human being. In many religious traditions such a conception is seen as an acknowledgment and realization of our finitude as God's creation. Of course, Levinas does not entertain this thought. But for such a conception to work, I think he may need to alter his notion of God. In order to put into question and teach the human being, I think it would require the kind of God that is not an Illeity that stands back and orders the desiring human being to her neighbor. This God would have to be a personal one who can have a direct relationship with the human being. This is precisely what

⁵¹⁵ Levinas, "Being-Toward-Death and 'Thou Shalt Not Kill'," *IRB*, 131.

Levinas's notion of God as Illeity does not allow. Moreover, the responsibility for the Other, in this context, may appear to mean that it is the human being who is in charge, carrying the responsibility for her fellow human beings, while God stands in the background as the One who anarchically orders her to her neighbor. This God, for Levinas, can only be known through the ethical command.

It may be true that Levinas does not attempt to exalt the human relations, but rather to find the meaning of the word 'God' in the ethical relations. The unintended result of his analysis, perhaps, is that he offers us a minimal conception of God who is also minimally related to the human being. This God is not only absolutely unknowable, but also cannot have a direct relationship with the human being. The only 'relation' that exists is God's anarchical command to the human being to be responsible for the Other. It is no longer a God of history who shows so much concern for humanity, as Abrahamic religions would hold. Can we pray to this God? Maybe not, as neither can we to the God of onto-theology. If this is the case, I wonder whether Levinas has not reduced God's role in his conception of religion. In fact, one can even argue here that Levinas offers us not only a minimal theology and conception of God, but also a minimal religion. Although he speaks of religion in his discussion of ethics, his conception of religion turns out to be rather poor in content. With all this reduction, it may indeed appear that the burden of responsibility for humanity lies on the shoulder of human beings alone, even if it means the infinitude of the glory of God. Does not it go against the religious instinct about God's ownership and ultimate role in the world?

In any case, it is clear that Levinas's ethics is not simply another ethical theory, as it invites us to look more deeply into the meaning of the ethical. It reminds us about the responsibility for the Other that is presupposed in all our concerns for fellow human beings. Insofar as it demands selfless response and infinite responsibility, I think it cannot but be religious in nature. That is to say, it must come from the beyond Being. Ordinary ethics, which usually relies on the principles of equality and universality, would not be able to make such a demand. Ethics now has a much deeper affinity with religion. Religion itself, on the other hand, cannot but place itself under the scrutiny of the ethical. If ethics is for Levinas first philosophy, it may also be first religion in the sense that it is a *sine qua non* of the relation with God. This claim may serve as a call for organized religions to pay a closer attention to the ethical dimension in their structures, teaching, and living practice.

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