

Decreative Phenomenology

Levinas, Weil, and the Vulnerability of Ethics

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Abstract

The dissertation addresses two interrelated questions through a reading of works by Emmanuel Levinas and Simone Weil: (1) what justification is there for the reality of ethics since the Shoah, and (2) what does the vulnerability of the person and of ethics imply about the nature of human subjectivity and its witness to atrocity? The thesis argued is that vulnerability is the one quality that best defines human existence at every level of experience, hence that ethics requires constant active preservation. After introducing Levinas and Weil through their ideas of *substitution* and *decreation*, respectively, we consider how their tolerance of contradiction defines a decreative hermeneutics, or self-abdicative interpretation of the world. Further preliminaries justify Levinas's use of value judgments in philosophical arguments and review the relation of his and Weil's thought to Heidegger's philosophy, to Nelson Goodman's notion of worldmaking, and to the problem of evil. Through Levinas's controversial notion of *persecution*, the method of decreative phenomenology is developed as an approach to ethical problems that explicitly seeks to preserve the alterity of the other person. Applications include Levinas's idea of subjectivity as expiation, the status of testimonial literature on atrocity, and the present-day totalizing legacy of the concentration camps.

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To
Barbara

and to my parents

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ABBREVIATIONS

For complete publication details see the Bibliography at the end of this work.

Works by Emmanuel Levinas

(chronologically by date of original publication)

- OE *On Escape*. Translation of *De l'évasion* [1935].
- EE *Existence and Existents*. Translation of *De l'existence à l'existant* [1947].
- TO *Time and the Other*. Translation of *Le Temps et l'Autre* [1947].
- Tel *Totalité et Infini: Essai sur l'Extériorité* [1961].
- TI *Totality and Infinity*. Translation of Tel.
- EDE *En découvrant l'existence avec Husserl et Heidegger* [1967].
- DEH *Discovering Existence with Husserl*. Translation of EDE.
- AE *Autrement qu'être ou au-delà de l'essence* [1974].
- OB *Otherwise Than Being, or Beyond Essence*. Translation of AE.
- NP *Noms propres* [1976].
- PN *Proper Names*. Translation of NP.
- GDT *God, Death, and Time*. Translation of *Dieu, la mort et le temps* [1976].

- DF *Difficult Freedom*. Translation of *Difficile liberté* [1976].
- EI *Ethics and Infinity*. Translation of *Ethique et infini* [1982].
- DQVI *De Dieu Qui Vient a L’Idée* [1982].
- GWCM *Of God Who Comes To Mind*. Translation of DQVI.
- OS *Outside the Subject*. Translation of *Hors sujet* [1987].
- AT *Alterity and Transcendence*. Translation of *Altérité et transcendance* [1989].
- EN *Entre Nous: On Thinking-of-the-Other*. Translation of *Entre nous* [1991].
- BPW *Basic Philosophical Writings*. 1996.
- CP *Collected Philosophical Papers*. 1998.
- IR *Is It Righteous To Be?: Interviews with Emmanuel Levinas*. 2001.
- O *Oeuvres*. Vols. I-III. 2009.

Works by Simone Weil

(alphabetically by abbreviation)

- C *Cahiers*. Vols. I-III. 1970.
- FLN *First and Last Notebooks*. 1970.
- FW *Formative Writings, 1929-1941*. 1987.
- GG *Gravity and Grace*. 2002.
- IC *Intimations of Christianity Among the Ancient Greeks*. 1957.
- LP *Lectures on Philosophy*. 1978.
- LPW *Late Philosophical Writings*. 2015.

- N *The Notebooks of Simone Weil*. 1956.
- NR *The Need for Roots*. 2002 [originally published 1949].
- OL *Oppression and Liberty*. 2001.
- SE *Selected Essays, 1934-1943*. 1962.
- SL *Seventy Letters*. 1965.
- SNL *On Science, Necessity, and the Love of God*. 1968.
- SWA *Simone Weil: An Anthology*. 1986.
- SWR *The Simone Weil Reader*. 1977.
- WG *Waiting for God*. 2009.

Works by Martin Heidegger

(chronologically by date of original publication)

- GA *Gesamtausgabe*. Vols. 1-90+ [1975-].
- HCT *History of the Concept of Time: Prolegomena*. Translation of *Prolegomena zur Geschichte des Zeitbegriffs* (GA 20) [1925].
- LQT *Logic: The Question of Truth*. Translation of *Logik: Die Frage nach der Wahrheit* (GA 21) [1925/26].
- SZ *Sein und Zeit* (GA 2) [1927].
- BT *Being and Time*. Translation of SZ.
- BP *The Basic Problems of Phenomenology*. Translation of *Grundprobleme der Phänomenologie* (GA 24) [1927].

- PIK *Phenomenological Investigation of Kant's Critique of Pure Reason*. Translation of *Phänomenologische Interpretation von Kants Kritik der reinen Vernunft* (GA 25) [1927/28].
- KPM *Kant and the Problem of Metaphysics*. Translation of *Kant und das Problem der Metaphysik* (GA 3) [1929].
- FCM *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics: World, Finitude, Solitude*. Translation of *Die Grundbegriffe der Metaphysik: Welt—Endlichkeit—Einsamkeit* (GA 29/30) [1929/30].
- BWP *The Beginning of Western Philosophy: Interpretation of Anaximander and Parmenides*. Translation of *Anfang der abendländischen Philosophie* (GA 35) [1932].
- HB *The History of Beyng*. Translation of *Geschichte des Seyns* [1938-40].
- BFL *Bremen and Freiburg Lectures*. Translation of *Bremer und Freiburger Vorträge* (GA 79) [1949, 1957].
- QCT *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*. Translations of three essays from *Vorträge und Aufsätze* (GA 7) [1954].
- WCT *What Is Called Thinking?* Translation of *Was heißt Denken?* (GA 8) [1954].
- OWL *On the Way to Language*. Translation of *Unterwegs zur Sprache* (GA 12) [1959].
- TB *On Time and Being*. Translation of *Zur Sache des Denkens* (GA 14) [1969].
- CPE *Contributions to Philosophy (Of the Event)*. Translation (2012) of *Beiträge zur Philosophie (Vom Ereignis)* (GA 65) [1989 (1936-38)].
- CPE99 *Contributions to Philosophy (Of Enowning)*. Translation (1999) of *Beiträge zur Philosophie (Vom Ereignis)* (GA 65) [1989 (1936-38)].
- BW *Basic Writings*. 1993.

M *Mindfulness*. Translation of *Besinnung* (GA 66) [1997 (1938/39)].

INTRODUCTION

Weil and Levinas might seem unlikely candidates for a philosophical collaboration: Weil a Jew who repudiated her Jewishness to the extent of claiming late in life that she had always been a Christian at heart, who filled every moment of her short life with writing, teaching, and political activism; Levinas a Lithuanian Jew who became a French citizen, lost most of his family in the Shoah and spent the majority of his ninety years in academia. They had at least one thing in common, however, setting them apart from most other philosophers, and that was a personal acquaintance with suffering severe enough to threaten their ability to believe in the reality of the good. In the case of Levinas, this was not only the loss of his family but his internment for five years in a Nazi prison camp, while for Weil it was a lifetime of suffering from debilitating illness and a nearly soul-destroying spell of factory work. Such experiences led them both to make the problem of suffering and evil a central concern of their philosophical thinking. The ultimate goal of the present work is therefore to demonstrate how reading Levinas and Weil together suggests a possible approach to that problem, and specifically the problem of how to remember the victims of atrocity in a way that does justice both to the dehumanizing severity of their suffering and to whatever we should want to call the integrity and enduring value of their humanity.

The present author, by contrast, having no acquaintance with any form of extreme, much less soul-destroying suffering, can only identify himself with the blind man about whom Jean Améry

writes in his memoir of the Shoah, *At the Mind's Limits*, speaking from the point of view of those who, like Améry himself, more or less¹ survived Auschwitz:

Let others not be prevented from empathizing. Let them contemplate a fate that yesterday could have been and tomorrow can be theirs. Their intellectual efforts will meet with our respect, but it will be a skeptical one, and in conversation with them we will soon grow silent and say to ourselves: go ahead, good people, trouble your heads as much as you want; you sound like a blind man talking about color.²

Améry is undoubtedly right, but those who are blind to the *experience* of soul-destroying suffering—the suffering to which Weil gives the name “affliction” and which might be defined as suffering so great that it has the potential to destroy one’s capacity to believe in the reality of anything good—may nonetheless appreciate the danger it poses to the individual and wonder what the apparent ease with which it can occur says about what is essential to human life.

It is the contention of the present work that vulnerability to extreme affliction may be the one quality that more than any other defines one as a human being—that there is a sense in which vulnerability to affliction is characteristic of the human condition at its deepest, most basic levels of experience. This would have profound implications for how we might understand the nature and meaning of the Shoah and of the experience of atrocity in general.

In the paragraphs below I outline the itinerary of the argument. Then, after some biographical background, I give the reader an introduction to Levinas and Weil by summarizing their thinking

¹ Améry took his own life in 1978. Several prominent writers who were Holocaust survivors are known to have committed suicide, including Paul Celan, Jerzy Kosinski, Piotr Rawicz, Tadeusz Borowski, and probably Primo Levi. “[Elie] Wiesel, reflecting on the probable suicide of Levi in 1987, remarked that he died at Auschwitz forty years later” (Michael Doblowski, in Sarah K. Pinnock, ed., *Facing Death: Confronting Mortality in the Holocaust and Ourselves*, Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2017, 74). See Barak, et. al, “Increased risk of attempted suicide among aging holocaust survivors,” *American Journal of Geriatric Psychiatry*, 13(8) (August, 2005), 701-4, cited in Alford 2013, 191n7.

² J. Améry 1980, 93.

on three general issues that are of fundamental relevance to everything that follows: Levinas's controversial notion of the ethical, Weil's unorthodox theology of God, and the views of both on the passion for truth traditionally supposed to motivate all philosophical endeavors.

The Principal Themes

"Everyone will readily agree that it is of the highest importance to know whether we are not duped by morality" (TI 21). Thus Levinas opens his first major work, *Totality and Infinity* (1961), having in mind the threat to morality represented by the "permanent possibility" of war. By war Levinas means not only warfare in the narrow sense, but more generally any human conflict, the Hobbesian war of all against all, for example, or that between opinions or ways of life when it is waged in such a way as to threaten respect for the individualities of the persons involved. Given Levinas's and Weil's experiences in the 1930s and 1940s, however, it is certainly appropriate, at least for the moment, that we concentrate on war in the narrower sense.

The very real danger of modern warfare consists not only in its physical toll on incalculable numbers of individuals, but also—and perhaps more alarmingly in some ways—in its "interrupting their continuity, making them play roles in which they no longer recognize themselves, making them betray not only commitments but their own substance, making them carry out actions that will destroy every possibility for action" (TI 21)—threatening their very souls, to employ a somewhat archaic expression—endangering their humanity and destroying their basic "trust in the world" (*Weltvertrauen*).³ This describes the dehumanization not only of combatants on both sides of any such conflict—a phenomenon Simone Weil inimitably analyzed

³ See Imre Kertész, *The Holocaust as Culture*, translated by Thomas Cooper (London: Seagull Books, 2011).

in her famous essay on the *Iliad* (1940)⁴—but also, for both Levinas and Weil, civilian casualties of all kinds, the victims of the death camps, the refugees and outcasts, and all those who find themselves treated as politically or socially expendable.

The Shoah represents a special case, with which nothing before or since compares in terms of the attempted destruction, *systematically and deliberately*, of the “trust in the world” of millions of people for no other reason than that they happened to have belonged to a certain racial subset of humanity. The fact that the Shoah continues to have a fascination for the reading and viewing public, if not always for the best reasons,⁵ is easily explained by its unmitigated horror and the unique place it will always hold in history. The uniqueness of the Shoah *as an example of atrocity* has, of course, long been a matter of debate. My own position is that in any case it presents humankind with an obligation unprecedented either before or since. It is like a ‘black hole’ in history: within it one can find absolutely nothing that one would dare say without hesitation is edifying. The obligation it presents is that of facing the question of how such a singularity could arise and what it means for our self-understanding—a question that no event before the Shoah raised and no event since has raised without reminding us that we have yet to fully face this one, as former victims such as Primo Levi and Jean Améry have repeatedly reminded us. They warn us that we have not even *begun* to address this question, and that there is a very real danger that we will eventually forget not only the whole episode but the big question it raises, to the detriment of the survival of our very humanity. Unless, as some in fact have claimed, it is not already too late.⁶

It is tempting to conjecture that interest in the Shoah might also be motivated by a conscious or unconscious anxiety about one’s own vulnerability, the precariousness of one’s own world,

⁴ “The *Iliad*, Poem of Might” in SWR 153-83 = SWA 162-195.

⁵ Lawrence Langer, *Using and Abusing the Holocaust* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2006).

⁶ Some locate the tipping point in the years immediately following the tumultuous Sixties, which happened to coincide with the breaking of silence about the Shoah. By the 1970s, on this reading of history, the testimony of the survivors, along with everything else creative and challenging about the Sixties, had been almost totally co-opted by the corporate media.

however one experiences its vulnerability in today's violent and uncertain world. Most of us cannot help speculating how we ourselves would have faced the dehumanizing horrors of Auschwitz—and a few will wonder what the answer to that question might imply about the substance or even the reality of human personhood in general. This is the background worry that might be said to motivate the present work. It crystallizes in the question: What does it mean to lose one's "trust in the world" and what implications does this possibility have for the ethical life of human beings? Might the constant threat of world loss even be an *intrinsic quality* of the mode of being called *human*?

Levinas characterizes war in breathtakingly general terms as one of the more violent impositions of what he calls *totalization*. For Levinas, a *totality* is any all-encompassing system, doctrine, or 'story' that would reduce individuals merely "to being bearers of forces that command them unbeknown to themselves" (TI 21). While totalizing is unavoidable—it is what consciousness does, hence all of us do it all of the time, where historical, political, and scientific theories are just more advanced and systematic examples of it—every totality does violence to the individual. As an object of totalizing, the individual "vanishes" (TI 26) almost by definition—hence there can never be a science, a politics, or a history of the individual *as an individual*. We therefore need art, literature, philosophy, religion—although these, too, employ totalization, as does everything human—to serve as reminders of the significance that belongs to each human being apart from the roles marked out for him or her by the totalizations of science, politics, history.

Against the human susceptibility to being totalized, Levinas opposes what he calls *eschatology*, by which he means "a relation with being *beyond the totality*," a relation beyond relation, immune to totalization, a relation which is therefore not a relation between *beings*. This "relationship with a surplus always exterior to the totality" Levinas calls *infinity*, or the *beyond being* (TI 22, 80). In an entirely original move, Levinas proposes that infinity, the beyond being,

is ultimately found nowhere else but in the experience of encountering *the other person*. The *ethical*, as Levinas defines the term, is the ability to respond to what is beyond or on the hither side of every totality. It is a manner of seeing, an “optics” that preserves the alterity of the Other against his or her becoming submerged in a totalizing Same (TI 23). Infinity for Levinas is not a being or even a mode of being, but instead an *event*: the overwhelming of a consciousness by what is other than itself in the form of the neighbor, even as (or rather, *because*) one becomes entangled in the other’s affairs or, conversely, finds in the other a source of comfort or security. Infinity is therefore “produced” originally and repeatedly in an individual consciousness, “in the relationship of the same and the other” (TI 26)—always for the first time, as it were, for that is what it must mean to experience the other as *other*—simply in the course of encountering another vulnerable human consciousness. To experience the infinite is not to make contact with some absolute entity, but to become aware of an ability one has—or better, a compulsion—to respond to every other person. This is what Levinas means by *responsibility*, lending to that word his own special sense. For Levinas, this awareness of one’s response-ability to all others is ultimately the only answer one can give to the question of the resilience of morality, or of the human person, to totalization—the only rejoinder possible to the uncertainty of ethics in a brutally uncertain age. One’s singular response-ability to the neighbor, one’s *in*-ability to slip away from or evade the neighbor without responding to him or her in some way,⁷ is not only in itself one’s response; it becomes one’s very subjectivity. An answer in terms of the passionate action, or conversely, in terms of the active passivity⁸ of a subject singularized by its ability to respond to the other, is for Levinas the only just and effective answer to the question of whether we are duped by morality.

⁷ See, among many other places, GWCM 92 and OB 112-13 / AE 142-44 (*l'impossibilité de se dérober*).

⁸ The Levinasian paradox of active passivity, and Weil’s concomitant notion of non-active action, are discussed in later chapters.

Simone Weil's essay on the *Iliad* has been called "an astonishing contemplation of the historical crisis situation brought on by Hitler,"⁹ and yet, it makes no mention of current events. On the surface, it seems to be solely a scholarly commentary on Homer's poem, albeit a remarkably brilliant one. But what Weil calls *might* or *force* could serve as a trope for the worst forms of totality:

Might is that which makes a thing of anybody who comes under its sway. ... From the power to transform him into a thing by killing him there proceeds another power, and much more prodigious, that which makes a thing of him while he still lives. ... The soul was not made to dwell in a thing; and when forced to it, there is no part of that soul but suffers violence. ...

This is ... a life that death has frozen long before extinguishing it. (SWR 153-54, 158)

Almost unique among commentators on the *Iliad*, Weil shows how Homer depicts the totalizing and dehumanizing effects of war on everyone involved, without exception and without the slightest mitigating reminder of a "consoling immortality" or the "faint echo of patriotic glory" (SWR 154). "The veritable object of the art of war," Weil observes, "is no less than the souls of the combatants" (SWR 174). Later, Weil will analyze what she calls *affliction*,¹⁰ which in more general terms might be characterized as extreme suffering capable of destroying a person's 'soul'—that is, of annihilating their trust in the world, their belief in the existence of anything that could be called good. As Weil cites example after graphic example from the *Iliad*, the reader has the impression that she is struggling with the problem of what constitutes the human soul in the face of such extreme violence—of whether the "undefinable influence of the human presence," which causes us to behave differently around others than we do when alone (SWR 157), has any enduring substance—given that, in circumstances such as war, it is so easy for those involved to

⁹ George A. Panichas, introduction to Weil's essay in SWR 153.

¹⁰ In "The Love of God and Affliction" (1942), SWR 439-468.

forget or disregard it. Forgetting it, however, does nothing to exempt one from what Weil calls Necessity, by which she means not fate as something directed against human beings individually or as a whole, but simply the way the world is, with all of its forces and laws absolutely indifferent to human concerns. Weil explains that Necessity represents a “retribution, of a geometric strictness, which punishes automatically the abuse of strength,” and then adds a characteristically Platonic observation: “We are only geometricians in regard to matter; the Greeks were first of all geometricians in the apprenticeship of virtue” (SWR 164). If the idea of Necessity implies for Weil a mathematical severity, even determinism, that leaves us free only to give or withhold our consent to Necessity itself, it is nonetheless on these initially unpromising foundations that she proceeds to build a religious ethics that has striking affinities with Levinas’s “ethical metaphysics” of the Other.

Both Levinas and Weil address the uncertainty of ethics in light of the suffering of the victims of modern atrocity. For Levinas, this is a matter of preserving the ethical. Thus, when he states that “I am responsible for a total responsibility, which answers for all the others and for all in the others, even for their responsibility” (EI 99), he is not in the business of quantifying moral responsibility to an exorbitant degree, as though it were all a matter of increasing its scope to include more people—in fact everyone and everything about them—although he is often read that way. By “total responsibility” he means ethics itself, as something that is always in danger: as vulnerable as the human other for whom it is concerned. The present work will argue that the two vulnerabilities, that of ethics and that of the human person, are for all practical purposes the same.

The obligation to preserve the ethical (as Levinas means the word), or equivalently (as I will show) to consent to what Weil calls decreation, is consequently both an immediate and an absolute obligation—more fundamental than consciousness or being, which depend on it; higher in priority than any ontological project. This obligation is what Levinas means by

responsibility—or *response-ability* as I will occasionally write it in order to emphasize that it is the other who originally gives one the ability, or the gift, of response to the other. Levinas argues that we cannot help but respond to every person as other. This response, it should be noted, need not be conscious, for it is the very origin of consciousness. Nor can it be abrogated by circumstances, such as those that might lead us to think that the person before us is no longer human but has become a mere thing. The encounter with the neighbor, even in this extreme case, is always a self-abdication. In Chapter 7, I argue for this claim on behalf, as it were, of the so-called *Muselmänner*, the walking dead of the concentration camps.

From Weil, I take the notion that we can cultivate a more deliberate and genuine *conscious* response to the other by consenting to what she calls our *decreation*, the conversion of one's self-autonomy into pure consent to the Good. Decreation is the voluntary "destruction" of the will that removes the barrier of the self, which opposes the Good, from between the Good and the rest of creation. "If only I go away," Weil writes, "the creation and Creator will be able to exchange their secrets" (N 422). The obvious parallel in Levinas would be the idea that the slightest everyday act that makes either neighbor or stranger invisible is a denial of the other as other, an affront to the Good, and therefore to some degree evil. Only when the 'I' "goes away"—that is, plays as small a role as possible—does the other have a chance to appear, if not exactly to reveal his or her secrets (since these may in fact be forever closed to us).

One aim of the present work is therefore to show that the problem of the vulnerability of ethics and the problem of the vulnerability of the human person are fundamentally the same. Preserving the ethical requires that one minimize the self or 'I' in order to open up the conceptual space that permits the other to become visible. Weil calls this decreative process *attention*, a selfless waiting for the other to appear. Only attention allows for the real possibility of suffering for or along with

the other's suffering.¹¹ To return to the theme with which we began, the second aim of this work will be to apply Weil's notion of attention to showing how one can do justice to the victims of dehumanizing atrocity in a way that achieves the paradoxical result of acknowledging their humanity without denying the reality of their dehumanization. Can the victim have a "face" in Levinas's sense of the word—for the moment we define this important term as a metaphor for the other's basic human vulnerability and inscrutability—even for the one who learns about their suffering second- or third-hand? Can one respond to another person's story in something like the same way that one responds to the other? I will suggest an answer that characterizes Levinas's notion of the face as the enigmatic signification of an *event* in which, to employ Weil's language, the other person's simple desire that *good and not evil be done to him or her* breaks into one's totalizing (Weil would say imaginary) view of the world. I will argue that any encounter which breaks the boundaries of the self in this way is essentially an encounter with the face, and that one can have such an encounter reading or hearing a story of human suffering—for example, in literature—provided that one approaches it in the decreative spirit. Here, by the way, Weil will serve to widen Levinas's horizons. Something of a stranger seeking hospitality herself, we can imagine her entering Levinas's study and proceeding to throw open the doors and windows to a whole new crowd of strangers and their stories, in many cases representatives of non-Western traditions to which Levinas unfortunately paid little attention.

Along the way, the primary concerns of the present work will generate a number of peripheral ideas. For example, the question of the viability of ethics generalizes to the question of whether there might be a purely ethical role in human affairs for a new philosophical notion of transcendence. This is essentially the question with which Levinas opens his second magnum opus, *Otherwise Than Being*: "If transcendence has meaning, it can only signify the fact that the *event of being* ... passes over to what is other than being. But what is *Being's other*?" (OB 3)—to

¹¹ Weil's classic essay on attention is "Reflections on the Right Use of School Studies with a View to the Love of God" (WG 57-66 = SWR 44-52).

which Levinas answers, in effect, that “Being’s other” is the ethical, the neighbor. Levinas’s redefinition of transcendence as always essentially ethical places transcendence, along with the good/evil dichotomy, at the very heart of the origin of meaning itself: we construct a meaningful world in an effort to maintain stability in the face of the intrusion of everything that transcends our ability to cope, whether it is the stranger seeking hospitality, the threat of what we call evil, or the everyday assault of the world on our senses. Despite dangers, real and imagined, we continually find ourselves, in some sense, *desiring* the other’s intrusion, if only to keep transcendence and meaning viable—to keep things from congealing into sameness, as it were—although not solely for that reason. We welcome the other even in the very act of resisting his or her intrusion—the resistance of consciousness (sameness and stability) against the otherness and disruption we cannot live without—resisting in welcoming, welcoming in resisting. An antipathetic sympathy or sympathetic antipathy with regard to everything *other*, the ethical is thereby not just *conscience*-forming but *consciousness*-forming. This is also essentially Levinas’s theory of time consciousness, inasmuch as the same desire for the intrusion of alterity, which Levinas calls *metaphysical desire*, is the impulse that keeps time moving by allowing the other to encroach again and again upon the same. For Weil, as for Levinas, time-consciousness is ethical because it is both an obstacle to awareness of the Other and a necessity impossible without the Other. When combined with Weil’s paraconsistent logic of contradiction, metaphysical desire enables an enhancement of Levinas’s phenomenological method that I call *decreative phenomenology*. Owing a great deal to Weil’s notion of attention, the practice of decreative phenomenology is the methodological key to revealing the fact of the other person’s ethical claim upon us and to ensuring the viability of ethics even in the face of Auschwitz.

Summary and Itinerary

Rather than defining human being in terms of attributes such as *rational* or *social* or even *biological*, I argue for defining it in terms of the capability of gaining or losing what might be called *trust in its world*—that is, confidence that one has a workable understanding of things and a feeling that life is worthwhile. What makes one a human being is one's fundamental vulnerability to losing everything that makes one human. It is not accidental or unimportant that this 'definition' of human being is circular. Any attempt to 'define' the human must take into account the fact that human being, as ethical, is fundamentally enigmatic.

The principal enemy of human existence is what we call evil, here defined as anything that can erode one's trust in the world (ordinary evil) or even destroy it (radical evil). Evil is 'normal' in the sense that it takes a form—totalization, or the conversion of the other into the same—which essentially is that of ordinary human consciousness. Here Weil, more explicitly than Levinas—who prefers to emphasize the bare encounter with the other in this role—concedes that art, literature, philosophy, and religion, even though employing totalization as does everything human, ideally serve as reminders that there is something beyond totalized being, something infinitely more valuable than what one can bring under the command of one's understanding. Weil calls contact with that 'something' one's pure desire that good and not evil be done to one, or the love of the Good. I will argue that it is congruent to what Levinas calls metaphysical desire: the desire to respond to the *other* which is the essence of response-ability. The response is not voluntary, for it is the origin of subjectivity, the basis for voluntary action, consciousness, and even being-in-the-world. In this Levinas is absolutely original. What it means is that the human being is *fundamentally ethical* before it is ontological, biological, or anything else. It also means that the problem of human vulnerability coincides with the problem of the vulnerability of ethics.

To show that we are not “duped by morality” after Auschwitz, it suffices that the individual preserve the ethical in his or her action. Weil shows us, however, that the action required is paradoxical, an *action* characterized as *passive* because it involves a form of kenosis or self-abdication. For this reason, preserving the ethical from the threat of concentrationary violence amounts to giving one’s consent to what Weil calls decreation, which I will show in Chapter 1 closely resembles Levinas’s central idea of *substitution* in many of its most important respects.

Chapter 2 outlines Levinas’s and Weil’s respective versions of what I call the paraconsistent logic of the other, leading to a *decreative hermeneutics* which can serve as an ethical answer (in Levinas’s sense of ethical) to Heidegger’s ontological hermeneutics. In Chapter 3, I explicitly address how Weil’s and Levinas’s approaches differ, in similar ways, from Heidegger’s. Here we also take up Levinas’s unphilosophical habit of making apparently unsupported value judgments, such as that the ethical is “better” than being—that is, more closely ‘related to’ the Good. Chapter 4 then will outline the idea behind *decreative phenomenology* and propose some details of methodology. We will then be ready to begin the main task of the work, which is to show how decreative phenomenology responds to the problem of the vulnerability of ethics. Chapter 5 uses Nelson Goodman’s notion of worldmaking to give more substance to the idea that human existence is fundamentally characterized by the vulnerability of one’s being-in-the-world, establishing its ethical significance in terms of the ever-present possibility of losing the world I make. This loss, or threat of loss or erosion, we tend to equate with evil. This will lead to a discussion in Chapter 6 of Levinas’s and Weil’s respective notions of both persecution and expiation, culminating in Chapter 7 with some applications of these ideas to ‘interpreting’ the Shoah. The final chapter then reconsiders the ground we have covered in light of the dangers of drawing conclusions about either the other or the concentrationary universe (see p. 492, note 625 below).

Levinas and Weil: Notes Biographical and Bibliographical

One can trace Levinas's ethical thought through a more or less connected body of over two dozen works, starting from *Existence and Existents* (1947)—which he calls his “first book” in spite of its following his groundbreaking commentary, *The Theory of Intuition in Husserl's Phenomenology* (1930), by seventeen years (IR 46)—and ending in *Entre Nous* (1991). In Weil we have only one book, *The Need for Roots*, which Weil was in the process of writing as a project for the French Resistance in London when she died in 1943. First published, unfinished, in 1949, it addresses the political and social challenges that would face postwar France.¹² Most of the essays and articles Weil published during her lifetime relate to her political activism, although there are scattered pieces on philosophy of science, ethics, and Greek philosophy. Her religious thought, for which she is now perhaps best known, during her lifetime was confined almost entirely to notebook entries, private correspondence, and a few unpublished essays dating from the last two or three years of her life. Weil's most original ideas—attention, affliction, decreation, impersonality, necessity, perspective, waiting—are almost all derived from these religious writings. In order to identify the general themes that motivated her philosophical and religious thinking, one must therefore cover a fairly wide range of disparate and often fragmentary material. Rarely, after her dissertation on Descartes,¹³ is she explicit that she is considering one or another classic philosophical question such as the problem of determinism and free will, for example, or Spinoza's theory of knowledge. While this is not at all a criticism—part of her originality lies in how she ‘does’ philosophy—nevertheless the lack of anything that might be called a unified philosophical program or project has unfortunately contributed to a reluctance among present-day philosophers, outside the philosophy of religion, to take Weil seriously as a

¹² It is worth noting parenthetically, in light of Levinas's emphasis on responsibility, that this work begins with a list of values Weil considered indispensable for a truly human existence, with first place assigned to *obligation*. For Weil, obligation is fundamental. She uses the word *responsibility*, on the other hand, in a sense closer to the meaning Levinas gives to *justice*. See NR 3-7, 15-16.

¹³ “Science and Perception in Descartes” in FW 31-88.

philosopher. One of the goals of the present work is to develop some of Weil's ideas in a setting that allows her philosophical thinking to shine through independently of the biographical details of her life which tend to distract even scholarly interest.¹⁴

Was there any direct influence of Levinas on Weil or vice versa? In 1943, the year Weil died, Levinas was still five years from the highly original phenomenology of *Existence and Existents*, and eighteen years from his first major treatise, *Totality and Infinity*. Occasionally in her writings Weil does mention Husserl, whom Levinas was instrumental in introducing to France through his part in the translation of *Cartesian Meditations* and the commentary mentioned above. It is hard to believe that in France at that time she would not have had some contact with Heidegger's ideas, although to my knowledge she never mentions him, except obliquely if she includes him in the phrase "philosophers of existence." Weil might possibly have encountered Levinas's important early essay, "Reflections on the Philosophy of Hitlerism," which appeared in 1934 in the avant-garde Catholic journal *Esprit*.¹⁵ There is no evidence, however, that she ever read anything of his.¹⁶ Weil was, however, personally acquainted with Levinas's close friend, the philosopher Jean Wahl, with whom she had a lengthy conversation on literary and religious subjects in 1938 or 1939. She later wrote Wahl a long letter justifying her political and philosophical views against certain of her detractors, which I understand he subsequently published.¹⁷

¹⁴ Few works on Weil emphasize her thought over her personal history. The exceptions in English or English translation that I am aware of are Miklos Vetö's *The Religious Metaphysics of Simone Weil* (1994) and Lissa McCullough's *The Religious Philosophy of Simone Weil* (2014), both of which I can recommend as introductions to her thought. For the biographical details, there are many works available, the classic biography being Simone Pétrement's *Simone Weil*. Thomas R. Nevin's *Simone Weil: Portrait of a Self-Exiled Jew* (1991) is the standard intellectual biography in English.

¹⁵ E. Levinas, "Quelques Réflexions sur la Philosophie de L'Hitlérisme," *Esprit* (1932-1939), 3(26) (1 November 1934), 199-208. While Weil was still a few years away from the religious experiences that would turn her toward Catholicism without leading her to join the Church, *Esprit* was sufficiently political in tone that she could very well have been a reader even in 1934. An article by Marcel Moré in a 1936 issue mentions her in a footnote: "La Pensée de Marx et Nous," 4(40) (January 1936), 552-568: 562.

¹⁶ At least as far as I know.

¹⁷ I have not yet located the reference.

Levinas, on the other hand, had some acquaintance with Weil's writings and is highly critical of her in two essays: "Simone Weil Against the Bible" (1952) and "Loving the Torah More Than God" (1955).¹⁸ His most vehement criticism is directed against her anti-Judaism, which is indeed undeniable, and when directed against the Hebrew Bible often distressingly tendentious. Levinas condemned her inability, as he saw it, to understand the Judaism into which she was born (but not formally raised)¹⁹ and which she seemed evidently determined to reject. He was dismissive of her "hatred" of the Old Testament Jehovah who could order the extermination of entire peoples, pointing out that she herself—all too true, unfortunately—had strangely little to say about the crimes committed in her own era against Jews, often in the name of Christianity.²⁰

In addition, Levinas is critical of Weil's alleged desire for mystical union with God, which he views, together with all mysticism, as a self-absorbed distraction from one's ethical responsibility to the other person present here and now. This criticism is less well aimed than the first, since it somewhat awkwardly interprets Weil's spirituality. If anything, the union Weil desired with God took the form of sharing in the suffering of her neighbor. From an early age she aspired to join the working poor in the factories and the fields, making every effort to take on their occupations herself whenever opportunity allowed, despite her extreme physical awkwardness and the danger this involved to her personal safety. She never took the step of joining the Church in part because she preferred to remain with those on the 'outside' both religiously and socially.²¹ For a so-called mystic, she appears to have experienced an unusually deep love of the world and of the people she found in it—in this respect not unlike the very non-mystical Levinas. His criticisms of her

¹⁸ Both are reprinted in DF.

¹⁹ She had "a completely secular upbringing" (Jane Doering, *Simone Weil and the Specter of Self-perpetuating Force*, Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2010, 70).

²⁰ Her anti-Judaism is hardly disputable. Fair assessments can be found in Richard H. Bell, *Simone Weil: The Way of Justice as Compassion* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 1998), 165-189; and Nevin 1991, Ch. 9.

²¹ Characteristic is the story that while vacationing with her parents in Portugal in 1935 after a year of factory work that almost ruined her physical and emotional health, Weil witnessed a religious procession in a poor fishing village about which she later wrote: "There the conviction was suddenly borne upon me that Christianity is pre-eminently the religion of slaves, that slaves cannot help belonging to it, and I among others" (Pétrement 1976, 249).

thoughts on redemption therefore tend toward the polemical and are frequently inaccurate, suggesting a reciprocal inability to comprehend her admittedly unorthodox Christianity. It would be interesting to know what exactly of hers he read.

These disagreements, serious though they are, nonetheless conceal a deeper resonance. A third of the way through *Otherwise Than Being*, Levinas states that a purpose of that work is to reveal “significations that link up and implicate one another in such a way as to lead to extreme and irreducible conceptual possibilities Such conceptual possibilities are *substitution of one for another, the immeasurable past that has not crossed the present, the positing of the self as a deposing of the ego, less than nothing as uniqueness, difference with respect to the other as non-indifference*” (OB 58, emphasis in original). This précis of his principal themes might, with appropriate translation into her own language, serve as a summary of Weil’s own philosophical emphasis. Substitution turns out to have a close affinity with Weil’s central idea of *decreation* (Chapter 1), certainly characterizable as the “deposing” of the sovereign ego. And for Weil, the “uniqueness” of the self derives solely from the infinitesimal fragment of divine love which according to her is the “difference” that makes each person worthy of love—that is, “non-indifference”—without exception, and indeed seems like “less than nothing” when compared to everything the self tends to think of as uniquely its own. Linking Levinas’s concept of “the immeasurable past that has not crossed the present” with Weil’s theory of time (such as we have one from her) may prove more of a challenge.

More problematic than their disagreements might be the similarities in the critiques often leveled at Levinas’s and Weil’s understandings of ethical agency and selfhood. Each has been faulted for proposing an ethical passivity that makes responsible action by a free moral agent impossible. Here it is important to realize, however, that Levinas is not primarily interested in offering moral guidance, but in attempting to ground normativity—in fact, the very meaning of human existence—in the face-to-face encounter. What is new in Levinas is not a new ethics, but

the idea that subjectivity itself is “ethical” in a foundational sense we normally do not notice. Hence one goal of the present work is, not to prove that Simone Weil’s is a “Levinasian” ethics, but to show how Levinas’s fundamental approach to human existence clarifies certain aspects of her thought which many have considered problematic or extreme—such as Weil’s claim that we should desire “non-being” precisely in order to confirm our neighbor’s being. In turning to Levinas, we should not make the mistake of assuming that we are confronting essentially the same paradox again when he proposes that we are fundamentally *passive* before we are free moral agents—for, as we are about to see, Levinas is making a different sort of claim altogether: a *phenomenological* claim about the nature of human agency rather than an *ethical* claim (in the usual sense) about how we would best orient or structure our lives. Since this issue is central to Levinas’s work, we devote the following section to it as an introduction to his thought.

What Does Levinas Mean by the Ethical?

Levinas is notorious for using ordinary words in unconventional ways. If one is to believe Simone Weil, however, that is just what all philosophical reflection does:

Language isn’t made to express philosophical reflection. Reflection can only use language by an adaptation of words that transforms their sense, without their new signification itself being able to be defined by words. This signification only appears by looking at the ensemble of formulas by which an author expresses his thought. It is therefore necessary not only to know all these formulas but to have a sense of them as whole, and to consider them from the same

point of view as the author—to be able to place oneself at the center of the thought of the author.²²

Philosophy impossibly reflects on what cannot be reduced to language—and then proceeds to try to reduce it to language, leaving it to the reader patiently to retrieve from the imperfect expression, together with the “ensemble” of its companions in the philosopher’s work, something that will pass for the time being as the philosopher’s intended meaning. The situation is not unlike that of Levinas’s notion of the *saying*, its betrayal by the *said*, and the retrieval of the saying by means of the *reduction*. But if Levinas’s unconventional use of language provokes inordinate criticism, it is perhaps because he is using ordinary words to denote ideas that overturn traditional assumptions about the meanings of those very words.

Levinas’s use of the word *ethics*, or more precisely, *the ethical*, is perhaps the prime example. The meaning Levinas gives the word does not coincide with any of its usual senses. He reserves the word *justice* for what the rest of us, philosophers or laymen, generally mean by ethics, however one defines it: whether as rules for behavior, as the best way to live a human life, as desiring the good, or as some combination of these.²³ The meaning of Levinas’s *ethical* goes much deeper than ethics as prescription, rule, or way of life. Failing to keep this difference in mind can lead one to attribute to Levinas assumptions that appear impossible to justify, if not absurd. We address a few of these explicitly at the end of the present section.

Levinas’s relation to Heidegger is central here. The shift in Levinas’s emphasis from Husserlian phenomenology to ethics roughly coincides with the revelation of Heidegger’s involvement with National Socialism in the 1930s. This suggests that much of Levinas’s subsequent work is a response to what he then begins to see as Heidegger’s lack of sensitivity (putting it mildly) to the significance of ethics. It is no secret, of course, that Levinas’s reading of

²² Weil, “Some Reflections on the Concept of Value,” LPW 34.

²³ Paul Ricoeur’s *Oneself as Another* is an ambitious recent attempt to define ethics along such lines.

Heidegger was often skewed, notwithstanding his indebtedness to him and the enormous respect he had for Heidegger's achievement as a whole, especially in *Being and Time*. Levinas indeed often seems to dismiss the later Heidegger for reasons that apply only to the earlier, leading Elliot Wolfson to accuse him of a "hermeneutical partiality that borders on deliberate obscuration."²⁴ And yet, whether or not this particular accusation is true, could not Levinas have had an accurate sense that Heidegger's later thought was simply not fertile ground for ethical thinking, whatever similarities it might have had with some of his own ideas according to Wolfson and others? For the most part, these similarities bear only tangentially on ethics. Whatever the parallels between Levinas's later work and Heidegger's, there is no denying that the latter never addressed any of the issues that mattered most to Levinas: the ethical significance of the other, responsibility, the need to preserve the ethical, and the problem of evil and the "useless suffering" of affliction. Surely, to ignore this great difference is at least as culpable as any reluctance on Levinas's part (if it indeed existed) to take the *Ereignis* and the fourfold more seriously.

Against Heidegger, Levinas does not believe that ethics needs to be founded on a perspective that gives priority to the fact that human beings are *beings*, however basic a fact that indeed is. For Levinas, the appropriate perspective on human existence is not one that emphasizes the *existence* of the existent but one that does justice to her as an *ethical* being by renouncing any attempt to *com-prehend* her—which means, both etymologically and, for Levinas, essentially, to *grasp* the other, as though she were another ready-to-hand entity in one's world, a *being* waiting to be brought within one's totalizing worldview and incorporated into whatever discursive account one wishes to give of oneself in terms of one's projects as being-in-the-world. The ethical relation, for Levinas, is the unique relation that "overflows comprehension," a relation instigated not by the subject but *by the other* who calls into question one's conscious perspective on the world and on all Others. Conversely, every relation that undermines com-prehension is ethical

²⁴ Wolfson 2014, 126. Recently available material from Levinas's unpublished writings, however, suggests that he did give the later Heidegger considerably more study than might otherwise have been apparent. For a sympathetic interpretation of Levinas's often-alleged 'misreading' of Heidegger, see Zarader 2006.

because it calls into question one's right to go on reading the world, hence the other, in the way one has been in the habit of doing. Since ontology, too, is obviously a fundamental way of reading the world, if not the very basis for every conscious reading, one needs to insist on the priority of ethics not as a fact about *what is*, which would again bring it within the domain of ontology, but as a perspective intended to preserve the ethical from all forms of totalizing thought. Thus, to preserve the ethical one must bring ontology under its authority by resisting the natural tendency to "possess" or "consume" beings. "It is," Levinas writes, "above all a matter of finding a place where the human no longer concerns us from the perspective of the horizon of being, that is to say, *no longer offers itself to our powers*."²⁵ Deliberately employing an evaluative term, Levinas insists that one must seek the perspective that gives the ethical priority over ontology because it is the "better" one (OB 19, 92-93).²⁶

This is not to say that Levinas fails to argue that it is the *authentic* or *true* one, the one most faithful to the human condition. His entire body of work starting from *Existence and Existents* constitutes that argument. The ethical perspective is "better," Levinas will argue, because phrasing one's questions in ontological terms is already to endorse a perspective that closes off the other as transcendent, as truly *other*. The suggestion is that the transcendent reveals itself not to a cognitive understanding of being, but indirectly as an "implication of a meaning" that comes to mind in the non-cognitive act of approaching the other and speaking to him, a meaning that has a greater affinity with poetry, perhaps, than with discursive thought (OB 169-70). No one denies that Being is involved in the *ethical* as Levinas understands the word. Rather, his point is that in order for the ethical even to "come to mind," one might need to suspend all *thought* of Being. To

²⁵ "Is Ontology Fundamental?", BPW 6, 8, emphasis added. Jacques Derrida objects that "Being is neither ontology, nor first philosophy, nor a philosophy of power" ("Violence and Metaphysics: An Essay on the Thought of Emmanuel Levinas," Derrida 1978, 137). But the problem Levinas has is not with Being *per se* (whatever Heidegger meant by the word), but with the implications for understanding the suffering of the other, and awareness of the ethical in general, of giving priority to *thinking* about Being. On the difficulty of deciding what the word Being meant for Heidegger, see the first chapter of Sheehan 2015.

²⁶ Levinas resorts to evaluative language in part to signal a connection to desire, specifically *metaphysical desire*. See below, section 1.2. I will analyze Levinas's use of "better" in Chapter 3.

paraphrase Weil, there are things we cannot understand, that we find unintelligible, unless we *do* certain things.²⁷ In this context, absolutely fundamental for Levinas, *doing* means approaching, speaking to, opening oneself to the other—normally anything but thinking philosophically about Being—provided that the decisive element in this approach is not assumed to be intentional but might instead be something the act conveys in spite of one’s intent, as Levinas will in fact claim is the case. This ‘something’ is the ‘sign’ or *trace* of the infinite that he associates with what he calls the *Face*, to which we turn in a moment (OB 116-17).

As I will argue in Chapter 3, Levinas’s procedure here, evidently unique to him, is a kind of transcendental argument which I denote by the ungainly term *transcendental axiological* because it makes deliberate use of a certain value judgment in favor of the Other and the Good, a gesture toward something too basic to be conscious. Undeniably, Levinas *argues* for the subordination of ontology to ethics over the course of his two major works,²⁸ but I maintain that he starts from a tacit evaluative judgment or gesture which for him is absolute, namely that the terms of any such argument are meaningless unless we assume that *awareness of the other can have a practical immediacy over awareness of beings*. On one level, this is obvious: it would simply be unacceptable to retire to one’s study to think about Being, for example, fully aware that someone right outside one’s door is starving and begging for something to eat.²⁹ But beyond this, Levinas’s point is a matter of philosophical method, namely that one will never succeed in demonstrating the meaningfulness of ethics if one does not take the immediacy of the other in this basic

²⁷ See p. 49 below for the exact quote and its context. In Weil’s case, the activity was harvesting grapes. Knowing Weil, the understanding she gained could have been of any number of things seemingly unrelated to this labor—such as an insight into the Trinity, to choose an example at random that would be plausible for her at the time.

²⁸ In *Totality and Infinity*, for example, the argument is first sketched out on TI 42-48.

²⁹ The point of this example need not go so far (but why not?) as to assume a position perhaps reminiscent of Peter Singer’s, that one’s starving neighbor is literally every destitute person anywhere in the world. It suffices for the present purpose to concede that there are at least occasions when everyone normally gives the exigency of one’s neighbor priority over everything else. Even the SS officer in Auschwitz would concede as much; he simply would not include camp inmates as neighbors. For him, they were indeed *things*, “*figuren*.” What he overlooks (as do we all!) is that others can have a “form” (that of ‘figures’ for example) only to a consciousness that universally and as a matter of course turns every disturbing *other* into the safe and *same*.

everyday sense, its capacity to interrupt any act or experience one calls one's own, *explicitly* into account. Thus when Derrida criticizes Levinas for reversing beforehand the subordination of "the ethical relation to the ontological relation,"³⁰ thus allegedly begging the question of this reversal by writing as though the "principle" of Being were a "faceless tyrant" one had to exclude from the discussion right from the beginning, he misses the more profound reversal Levinas is in fact proposing, a reversal that takes into account (for the first time in philosophy?) an exigency of the other we so readily assume that we normally do not think about it at all, even when undertaking a philosophical investigation into the meaning of ethics.³¹ And yet it must be evident that this very assumption is crucial if, with Levinas, we are to confront the non-ethical thrust of Heidegger's philosophy as well as the legacy of the concentration camps.

What Levinas must argue for, on the other hand, and not assume, is not this basic immediacy but something deeper that he calls the *ethical*: the other's (largely unspoken) *demand* for precedence which continually disrupts one's world on a level below that of consciousness. For the ethical Levinas uses the metaphor of the *Face* (*visage* in French),³² which earlier we defined provisionally as the enigmatic signification or 'sign' of the other's basic human vulnerability and inscrutability. 'Sign' is a misleading term, however, since this 'sign' has no referent, nothing of which it can be the sign, other than the Face itself as pure vulnerability, defined by its very resistance to being the referent of anything. The Face is vulnerability signifying vulnerability

³⁰ Derrida 1978, 136.

³¹ Similarly Derrida writes: "It is difficult to see how the notion of violence (for example, as the dissimulation or oppression of the other by the same, a notion which Levinas employs as self-evident, and which, however, already signifies alteration of the same, of the other as what it is) could be determined rigorously on a purely ethical level, without prior eidetic-transcendental analysis of the relations between ego and alter-ego in general, between several origins of the world in general" (Derrida 1978, 129). On the contrary, what Levinas takes to be "self-evident" is not a philosophical "determination" of the notion of violence against the other, but every other's existence in the world as *vulnerable*. On this perfectly reasonable assumption, "violence" is an appropriate word for what ethics must resist, however selective we may be in recognizing violence in everyday life. An assumption this basic should not need "prior eidetic-transcendental analysis."

³² Where Levinas introduces this concept in *Totality and Infinity*, he sometimes capitalizes the word. He is not consistent about this, however, and I will not be consistent about it either. For the moment I capitalize Face in order to distinguish it from what we usually mean by the word, the physical part of the body. That we have a face as a body-part is crucial to having a Face, but they are not the same thing (see below).

itself, *καθ' αὐτό* (TI 50-51, 65, 74), absenting itself from any meaning that needs to be “disclosed” in the way that, for Heidegger, characterizes Being in general.

The *other* fundamentally resists my every attempt to turn him into what Levinas denotes by the *same*—that is, part of the totality I call *the world* which is largely a product of my own consciousness. Equivalently, the other frustrates my every attempt to ‘understand’ him (or anything else), however necessary it may be for me to try. It is the other’s frailty and vulnerability—not his power, which in any case is as illusory as my own—that calls into question my pretense to knowledge, abilities, and powers, my “spontaneity” Levinas calls it. The vulnerable other is always more than anything I can comprehend, always beyond my grasp (“infinite,” as Levinas will say), resistant to my finding a place for him in my world, but also for that very reason a compelling (“commanding”: TI 178-79, 213) presence: for he *calls* me to take responsibility for his vulnerability—that is to say, for his very existence—in that I am obligated to make room for him in the world if only as an enigma. This pre-conscious obligation to give place to the other, beyond anything I can thematize about him—this “way in which the other presents himself, exceeding *the idea of the other in me*”—Levinas represents by his trope of encountering the Face (TI 50).

Although it is not a being, the “signifyingness” of the Face is verifiable phenomenologically. We find ourselves behaving or feeling differently when someone enters a room in which we had previously been alone. In the other’s company, I am no longer quite the same sovereign self as before. What Levinas means by the Face is this unlimited capacity the other has for calling my self-sovereignty into question. It is no accident, therefore, that we often experience the other’s alterity as thrusting itself upon us unpredictably, whether we welcome it, regret it, or treat it as something of no account. Levinas contends that it is characteristic of my subjectivity that nothing of which I am conscious, nothing I think I know about the world or about myself, is immune to being called into question in the other’s presence. This may happen in many ways, great or small,

but always to some extent in a way I am incapable of effecting on my own. Again, such is precisely what it means for the other to be *other*, the underlying idea behind what Levinas calls *the ethical*: “A calling into question of the same—which cannot occur within the egoist spontaneity of the same. We name this calling into question of my spontaneity by the presence of the Other ethics” (TI 43).³³

All of this implies—need it be said?—that what Levinas means by the Face cannot simply be equated with the carnal human face per se, the face as part of the body. And yet the latter must not be separated from Levinas’s trope of the Face if only because we *are*, after all and perhaps *above* all, embodied. For Levinas, embodiment is essential to the ethical: without bodies we could not be responsible for one another as being-in-the-world. Thus it even might be said—not altogether whimsically, since creation from nothing is Levinas’s expression for the fact that our human subjectivity has no history or origin of which we can be conscious—that we were *created* with bodies for the express purpose, above all else, of being able to relieve one another’s earthly sufferings. Thus, for Levinas, “subjectivity is sensibility” in the very tangible sense of our physical presence before others. Even our sensibility to physical bodies in general is a product of our sensitivity to others. Against the Cartesian reduction of subjectivity to the *cogito*, the Levinasian subject is therefore as much body as spirit, body *and* spirit *because* it is ethical:

It is because subjectivity is sensibility—an exposure to others, a vulnerability and a responsibility in the proximity of others, the-one-for-the-other, that is, signification—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, the linguistic system, that a subject is of

³³ Thus I do not need a prior “identity” as a self in order to have an experience of another self, so as to find in her an alter ego; all that is necessary is an “egoist spontaneity”—that is, a pretense to powers and the enjoyment of them. The other becomes *other* for me in her *ethical* challenge to my spontaneity, not in an ontological contrast brought about by her presence. Only with this challenge and no sooner, so Levinas will argue, do I acquire anything we would want to call an “identity.” (In this passage, as elsewhere occasionally, Levinas deviates somewhat from his own terminology, referring to the ethical as *ethics*.)

flesh and blood, a man that is hungry and eats, entrails in a skin, and thus capable of giving the bread out of his mouth, or giving his skin. (OB 77)

The peculiar order of the argument here—not arguing, as one might expect, that we are responsible because we have bodies, but instead that we have bodies (that is, are conscious of having bodies) because we are responsible—is the hyperbole Levinas employs in order to drive home the point that ethics comes before ontology: one’s incarnation is proof of the priority of the ethical—concrete evidence of one’s vulnerability and of one’s availability to mitigate the vulnerability of the other. Simply in having a body, I convey involuntarily to every person I meet the announcement ‘Here I am (*hineni*, in Hebrew), at your service’. Thus I might be said, equivalently, to be “commanded” by the other, although without awareness of any explicit directive or obligation towards him.³⁴ Obviously human beings are conscious of having bodies they can use to help others. Levinas’s surprising claim is that this is *because* we are already *responsible* for those others, in a primordial sense going beyond, or deeper than, the common ethical meaning of the word *responsibility*.

In introducing the trope of the Face, therefore, Levinas does not so much rely on an unconventional use of *language* to express an idea, according to Weil’s characterization of philosophical reflection, as he introduces an unconventional reference to a universal pre-linguistic *experience*: the fact that people have *faces* and that faces can be ‘read’. Indeed, perhaps more can be read (or misread) in a human face than in anything else in the world. But whatever we might read in the face, and however we might understand ‘reading’ in this context, what we always

³⁴ Thus Levinas’s argument for the reality of the command does not *rely on* empirical or phenomenological evidence (although both forms of such evidence do exist). It is the non-phenomenal *face* that commands (TI 201). ‘Face’ and ‘command’ are *metaphors*. This fact is frequently overlooked by Levinas’s critics.

‘read’ first of all, Levinas claims, is the other’s vulnerability and inscrutability, of which we have a deep intimation even prior to being consciousness of it.³⁵

Signification, a key term here, does not refer exclusively to the work of spoken and written language. For Levinas the word designates *meaning produced as vulnerability itself*, generated in every encounter with the alterity or Face of the other person, an originary meaning that precedes and *produces* meaningful language as spoken, and thereby (as I argue in Chapter 3) even Being. Hence Levinas will often speak of “the *signification* of the Face,” a phrase which designates not *what* the Face signifies but the fact that *the Face itself* is pure signification, originary language. Against Heidegger, therefore, Levinas claims that beings first acquire meaning not through Dasein’s bringing about their “unconcealment,” but through a pre-conscious disturbance the other produces in the elemental enjoyment of one’s world, compelling one to *identify* beings (including oneself)—to give them names—in order to admit the other, as alter ego or neighbor, into a conscious *world* that, through the collective use of language, can supersede the uncertainty of the purely elemental (TI 38). The alter ego, however, remains only one’s *consciousness* of the human other. The Other is *not* the alter ego (TI 67).

While the ethical, for Levinas, motivates language, this calling into question is far from always explicit. It is not that the other makes critical remarks or even looks at me in a judgmental way, but that, quite apart from whatever he might express to me in ordinary terms, I find myself and my world exposed to him, subject to his judgment, the moment *I myself* speak to him—or simply find myself in his presence, insofar as I realize that I *can* speak to him, or not, as I choose. The other human being “is the sole being which I am unable to encounter without expressing this very encounter with him,” even if only by the tacit expression of saying nothing at all. “In every attitude in regard to the human there is a greeting—if only in the refusal of greeting” (BPW 7).

³⁵ Any notion of ‘reading’ the Face is, of course, fraught with pitfalls, since reading is a conscious activity and the Face is encountered in a different way. Rather than taking back the metaphor, however, I refer the reader to Chapter 7, in which we will explicitly consider the possibility that a text may have a ‘face’.

This greeting is my involuntary response to the other whose mere *being* places not just my worldview, but my very autonomy as a *being* into question. As a consciousness, I take my world to be *the* world, my personal experience of time to be the one and only time itself. Hence my speaking to the other person, to another consciousness having his own world and his own time apart from mine, can only be, whether I intend it or not, an “apology” (TI 252) for the encroachment of my world upon his. However I intentionally use language, I involuntarily offer up my world to the other as something contingent, as subject to the other’s correction or protest, in every word I speak. I do so in obedience to a command that comes to mind (if it does at all) only in my obeying it,³⁶ the command to *approach* or *go towards* the other, as Levinas says—that is, merely *speak* to him or her. Everything I say to the other is an apology, in effect, for my “egoity,” for the “complacency of subjectivity” which my version of the world represents in spite of myself (OB 64).

The Face therefore signifies an inescapable non-indifference to the neighbor, not in the form of an explicit normative rule (‘Yield to the other one’s own place in the sun’ or ‘Give to the other the bread from out of one’s own mouth’) but as a *trace* of a basic normativity that itself makes us human, a sign given without the intention of being a sign, a sign indicating “the withdrawal of the indicated” (CP 65), signifying solely by creating in us an otherwise inexplicable disturbance. Every human subject is drawn to every other human subject by the other’s unspoken demand for respect. This happens prior to awareness, hence it is easy enough for one to cover it over. Without prescribing rules for deciding what to do in a given situation, the ethical is that which commands and characterizes a human subject as the sort of being who cannot turn away from her neighbor without denying her own humanity. The Face is Levinas’s novel trope for both this inability to turn away and its object. The seeming inability to turn away without an at least partially soul-

³⁶ Which, again, is not to say that Levinas thinks he need not argue for it. The command is not part of the ethical or spiritual experience of a self; it *constitutes* the self, in the sense that one is a self (able to speak to the other, for example) only because one is always already “commanded” or compelled to do so simply by the other’s presence as *other*. Levinas *argues* for this difficult thesis throughout TI and OB.

destroying or soul-transforming effort (as Weil would say)—one’s involuntary sensitivity to the disturbance the other causes in one’s world, but a sensitivity to an other whose non-signifying *significance* is more basic than consciousness—is for Levinas radically definitive for subjectivity. In *Otherwise Than Being*, Levinas writes: “The uniqueness of this ego, this I, is not due to a unique trait of its nature or its character; nothing is unique, that is, refractory to concepts, except the I involved in responsibility” (OB 139). In other words, everything ‘unique’ to oneself can be reduced to concepts, can be represented by thought and consequently is not definitive for one’s singularity as a unique self, since it can be incorporated into a totality—everything, that is, *except* my responsibility for the other person, my inability to slip away without somehow responding to the other’s vulnerability. This elicitation from the other is what Levinas means by the ethical. Its resistance to totalizing thought, which is precisely what enables it to produce subjectivity, contributes to making the ethical largely invisible to everyday cognition, not to mention to Western philosophy.

Allowing an exception to his own insistence on the non-prescriptive nature of the ethical—an exception, however, whose generality proves the rule—Levinas continually lays stress on a single absolute directive that issues from within oneself, involuntary and prior to consciousness, as a result simply of one’s being in the presence of another person, which Levinas states in the words of the biblical commandment: “Thou shalt not kill.” By this he means not simply the prohibition against murder, but the obligation to leave intact the other’s ability to make sense of things, her “trust in the world,” her belief in the existence of good. Levinas argues that the other is therefore “the sole being I can wish to kill” (TI 198 = BPW 9), the sole threat to my powers,³⁷ and at the same time the only being I *cannot* kill, since the ability the other has to call me into question is beyond my power to destroy, for it is not an object of my consciousness. The other represents another world altogether apart from my own, a world which even after her death has the ability to

³⁷ “I can wish to kill only an existent absolutely independent, which exceeds my powers infinitely, and therefore does not oppose them but paralyzes the very power of power” (TI 198).

call mine into question.³⁸ Resisting thematization as a nominative, the other presents herself to me as an *imperative*. My subjectivity is the result of what I cannot help doing in the other's presence, what I find myself compelled or "commanded" to do, beginning fundamentally with the simple act of speaking to her or consciously refraining from speaking. Levinas gives the name *psychism* to the "event in being" in which the other confronts me with her "resistance to the totality" of my world-constituting consciousness (TI 54), and hence "inspires" me with responsibility for her and for all others. That is to say, her presence breathes into me an "alterity within identity," introducing into me something foreign to my world that in effect makes me an other to myself, commanding me out of my own mouth (BPW 102) through my expressing a concern for the other I did not think I had.

Since meaning-giving, my reading of appearances, is instigated by the encounter with the Face of the other, my ethical responsibility for the other is neither inscribed in, nor prescribed by, her appearance. I cannot possibly *read* my elemental responsibility in the other's physiognomy as its "meaning." Older than appearances, the ethical is the pre-originary significance of my encounter with the other, "a notion of meaning prior to my *Sinngebung* and therefore independent of my initiative and my power." The other's alterity is an "exteriority" which, beyond every expectation of either the I or of Western philosophy, "maintains the I who welcomes it" (TI 51), rather than the opposite, in which I "maintain" the other, as part of my world, as one might think. I am dependent on the other's alterity for my identity; the other's alterity is not dependent on *me* for recognition as *other*. Specifically, this means for Levinas that the other, as "exterior" to my private "interior" life, is the support from outside myself I need in order that my making sense of the world remain *objective* and not simply a product of my imagination. The Face, the encounter here and now with the other's alterity as "infinitely surpassing its own idea" in me, is thus the

³⁸ More than calling me into question, the other's face is pure expression "undoing the form" in which I would try to thematize her as a being in my world. "The face speaks. The manifestation of the face is already discourse" (TI 66), already commanding me, 'Do not harm me! Do not reduce me to part of your world!' This command can 'haunt' us long after she has departed from our scene.

very revelation of transcendence.³⁹ Its interruption of my world, its invasion of my cognitive and emotional space, is all that saves my consciousness from being nothing more than a violent reaction against what is foreign. For, this disruption, in its difference from my world, is all that prevents me from turning everything into the same. Not prescriptive in itself—in fact, the Face interrupts prescription as it does everything else of which we can be conscious—the encounter with the other is the very foundation of what Levinas calls justice, that is to say, of *taking the other truly into account*, which is prescriptive ethics in the everyday sense we usually give the word.

In *Otherwise Than Being or Beyond Essence*, moving away from the trope of the Face but not abandoning it, Levinas attempts to describe the encounter with alterity in less ontologically oriented terms by making a distinction between what he calls the *saying* (*le Dire*) and the *said* (*le Dit*). The saying represents—perhaps we could even say *is*—the other’s vulnerability *as itself* an expression or *expressing* that is prior to language. It is the “very signifyingness of signification [*la signifiance même de la signification*]” (OB 5) which earlier Levinas identified with the Face. Levinas’s notion of the saying is a more refined attempt at capturing the idea that there is something about the human other which in itself *says vulnerability* and thereby calls me to be responsible for him or her. “My responsibility for the other is ... the very signifyingness of signification, which signifies in saying before showing itself in the said” (OB 100). As soon as the saying is made the object of thought or expression, as soon as it is ‘said’, the content of the said betrays the saying by obscuring and distancing the imperative which, in the saying, constitutes my ethical self as responsible.⁴⁰ My constituted world, through the said, becomes an

³⁹ And not intentionality, as Husserl thought: “*Intentionality is, for Husserl, a genuine act of transcendence and the very prototype of any transcendence*” (Levinas, *The Theory of Intuition in Husserl’s Phenomenology*, 2nd ed., Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973, 40, emphasis in original).

⁴⁰ The saying might perhaps be compared to the hole or gap in the Lacanian network of signifiers, an object of desire outside of all language. For Levinas, too, the saying has a connection with desire, which we consider in the next chapter.

obstacle between me and the other as other.⁴¹ Merely to *think* of the other is already to be “too late” to do justice to their alterity, however little this absolves me of concrete responsibility for them.

In an essay written at about the same time as *Otherwise Than Being*,⁴² Levinas introduces another important image of the ethical, expressed in terms of what allegedly happens when one makes the discovery that there are *others*.⁴³ At first all one notices is one’s “interchangeability” with the other in terms of the anonymity of physical space. I realize that there is a sense in which I am physically substitutable for the other person: I could be where he is, seeing things from the point of view he presently has—or, vice versa, he could be where I am. This realization effects in me a slight erosion of my autonomy. My ego “becomes *secondary*, sees itself as other, exposes itself to the other, already has to give an account of itself” (DEH 164).⁴⁴ Levinas calls this the ego’s “antecedent and forgotten secondariness,” suggesting that it is a subordination of oneself to the other which is prior even to consciousness itself: “The secondariness in which, beneath the look of the other, the primordial sphere loses its priority, its privileges and its smugness is an awakening in which the egological—egoism and egotism—flee like dreams” (DEH 164-65). This subordination to the other is what Levinas in *Otherwise Than Being* will call *substitution*, probably the most important idea in his later work. We consider it in some depth in Chapter 1. Since it represents a diminishment of the ego’s “power and prestige” before the Face of the other to whom one owes one’s very self, substitution will be compared to Weil’s notion of decreation.

Central to ethics, however one defines it, is the problem of human freedom. But for Levinas, one would not have the freedom to make ethical decisions of any kind were one not already

⁴¹ A little later we will compare this to Weil’s notion of the self becoming an obstacle between the world as I see it and God.

⁴² “From Consciousness to Wakefulness” (1974).

⁴³ It is necessary to emphasize that what follows is a phenomenological, not a psychological description.

⁴⁴ Could some connection be made here with Lacan’s mirror stage?

constrained to make a response to the other's saying, in some pre-conscious way, before it congeals into the said. When Levinas speaks of one's being "obsessed by" or "hostage to" the other person, he is certainly not describing an experience that would overwhelm free decision, but rather "the necessity that the Good choose me first before I can be in a position to choose, that is, welcome its choice" (OB 122). "The Good," in the unique form of a responsibility that is solely mine and no one else's, "chooses me" in the face of the other—that is, presents me with the option of offering myself to the other's service,⁴⁵ an option I cannot forgo, whether or not I act upon it, without betraying my humanity. Levinas does not feel he needs to define what he means by "the Good" or "goodness". Prior to anything we would be inclined to call a moral rule or decision, prior to our very consciousness of individual others, we are called by something outside of the self and Being. Hence self and Being become identifiable with "evil" and we are called by "the Good" to response-ability to and for the good *and* evil of every person we meet. This idea, the idea that subjectivity as response-ability is the foundation of consciousness, will lead Levinas to make the controversial claim that the persecuted are responsible even for their persecutors.

If Levinas is correct that it is precisely the ethical call to responsibility, as the Good, that *produces* the freedom to respond actively to the other—to respond, for example, out of concern that justice be done to her—then it cannot be true that for Levinas we are ethical (in the ordinary sense) "despite ourselves"—that is, passively, without choice or intent—as some critics read him as saying.⁴⁶ *Prior to ethical choice* (in the ordinary sense), we are subject to the passivity of our being chosen by goodness: "Chosen without assuming the choice! If this passivity ... can be conceived to be on the hither side of freedom and non-freedom"—that is, more intimately and originally oneself than one's freedom of choice—then "it must have the meaning of a '*goodness despite itself*,' a goodness always older than the choice" (OB 56-57). The self is made an ethical

⁴⁵ This need not mean doing him a good deed, unless it is clear that his situation calls me to it. It can mean, simply, acknowledging him as other, as not an object in one's world—although Levinas will contend that to acknowledge the other as other always amounts to giving the other priority over oneself.

⁴⁶ Critchley 2015, 87.

self by having been chosen uniquely by the Good—that is, created to respond to the other’s vulnerability, *every* other’s.⁴⁷ Hence one is not so much *ethical* in spite of oneself, as one is a *self* in spite of oneself, invested with selfhood *by the other* for whom one is henceforth response-able. This is our original acquaintance with the Good, insofar as we ‘read’ in all others the desire that good and not evil be done to them, and the sole reason Levinas calls the self a radical “passivity”: “As chosen without choosing its election, absent from the investiture received”—if only because in the investiture it is only *becoming* and not *yet* a self—the unique self “is a passivity more passive still than all the passivity of undergoing” (OB 57). There is indeed a passivity in being called to responsibility by the other, but it is the passivity that makes a self with choice possible, not a passivity that abolishes choice.

Levinas’s phenomenology of the ethical has been said to suffer from (1) a confusion between description and prescription; (2) a lack of “approval” to go with the extraordinary “demand” of the ethical; (3) a masochism in making the persecuted responsible even for their persecutors; and (4) the lack of any “dimension of aesthetic sublimation.”⁴⁸ This last criticism might be glossed as Levinas’s uncompromising refusal to subordinate the ethical to any representation by means of the arts, a refusal that leads him to be suspicious of art in general. These are common complaints. None of them, however, addresses the difference between the ethical as first philosophy—that is, as prior to being and therefore to ontology—and what we normally call ethics, which Levinas refers to as *justice*.⁴⁹ Hence Levinas can answer these criticisms as follows: (1) Critics are not justified in claiming that he conflates description with prescription. If there is a conflation, it is the critics’ in confusing Levinasian ethics, which is not prescriptive, with Levinasian justice, which must be. Goodness, which is the basis, not the domain, of prescriptive ethics in the usual

⁴⁷ In this context, creation, for Levinas, means to have no origin or explanation, to be beyond one’s ability to fit the event into one’s understanding of history.

⁴⁸ Critchley 2015, 87-91.

⁴⁹ This is true also of Agamben’s summary dismissal of Levinas in *Remnants of Auschwitz* (Agamben 1999, 22). Agamben limits responsibility to legal culpability, which is not at all what Levinas means by the word.

sense, is prior to the prescription/description distinction:⁵⁰ older than moral command and phenomenological description, “the Good has always already chosen and required the unique one”—that is, has chosen oneself as ethical subject, to be responsible for all others. This is what Levinas means by the *ethical*; he does not mean a guide for moral behavior. (2) Simply because it is *good*, it should be sufficient to will *the Good* without thought of reward or approval. But more fundamentally, the demand that Levinas speaks of is prior to consciousness—hence any question of one’s needing conscious approval is out of place. The demand is what makes one a *self* capable of seeking approval—or foregoing it. Finally, (3) if there is nothing concerning the Other about which I can be indifferent (BPW 18), and if it is true, as someone has said, that there is always one more thing one can learn about a person that would make a material difference in how one would treat him, then one’s “non-indifference” or responsibility for the other would indeed seem to be potentially and in a practical sense, *without bound*, as the notion of *substitutability* for the other already implies. Hence there can be no limit to what one owes the other, and no exceptions. One is responsible for *everyone*, including one’s persecutor, simply because all human others are unfathomable and vulnerable. *Prior to* one’s suffering from persecution, the infinitude of the ethical is what makes one, in the first place, a unique individual able to suffer—and, if one can, to go on loving the Good notwithstanding. This controversial point lies at the heart of what Levinas means by the ethical. Its importance for thinking about the victims of atrocity is obvious. As this is the main theme of the present work, we consider it at some length in Chapters 6 and 7.

As for (4), the question of the role of art, if Levinas is indeed deficient here—which I am not at all conceding—then we may have a chance to show in the course of this work that Weil supplies a remedy in what she calls “the forms of the implicit love of God,” one of which is the love of the beautiful. This will not be the only issue, of course, on which Weil and Levinas are mutually reinforcing, but at this point it may serve to introduce a question that needs to be

⁵⁰ “Levinas does not use [the descriptive/prescriptive or fact/value] distinction in any explicit way; it is not a feature of his philosophical vocabulary” (Morgan 2011, 83).

addressed early on, namely that of whether Weil's distinctly Christian thinking results in major incompatibilities with Levinas's thought. As a way of confronting that problem and introducing the reader to Weil, we take up a related question central to any consideration of her philosophy:

What Does Weil Mean by God?

Levinas does not often mention God in his earlier philosophical works, and it is probably safe to say that the explicit use of the word is not essential to his philosophical discourse.⁵¹ With Weil the case is otherwise, tempting some readers to judge that she is better classified as a religious writer than as a philosopher. Before reading Levinas and Weil together, we should make clear the purposes that Weil's use of God-language serve in addition to the obvious one of expressing her religious convictions. She is indeed a *religious* writer, specifically a Christian one, as well as a philosopher. But her notion of God, and hence of Christianity, is highly original and challenges many central ideas common to Western philosophy and religion.

A few months before her death in 1943, as a preface to a "Draft for a Statement of Human Obligations" she hoped would be adopted by resistance groups in France,⁵² Weil wrote the following "Profession of Faith":

There is a reality outside the world, that is to say, outside space and time, outside man's mental universe, outside any sphere whatsoever that is accessible to human faculties.

⁵¹ Although in that case, similar words would serve the same purpose, notably *the Good*.

⁵² Speculates Weil's biographer Simone Pétrement regarding her work for the Resistance in London: "one of the commissions set up by General de Gaulle, called the State Reform Commission, was [at that same time] drafting a new Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen, and turning for inspiration to the Declarations of 1789 and 1793, but modifying them. Simone certainly knew about this work, and doubtless it was because she considered the changes they had made in these Declarations not radical enough that she wrote this draft for a Statement of Obligations. For her it is the very idea of rights that should be replaced by something else, since this idea is so weak and diffuse that it cannot possibly fulfill the function one wants to assign to it; it must be replaced by the concepts of justice and obligation" (Pétrement 1976, 500).

Corresponding to this reality, at the center of the human heart, is the longing for an absolute good, a longing which is always there and is never appeased in this world (SWA 201-2).

Simone Pétrement is undoubtedly right that both the “reality” and the “longing” to which Weil refers here are God.⁵³ Thus God is absent from this world, except as an “unquenchable desire for good” in the human heart which, though infinitesimal, is the one thing of eternal value in every person without exception (SE 220). Pétrement sees this idea as the foundation, for Weil, of respect for every human being as essentially existing on the same level as oneself.⁵⁴

Critics have objected that so unconventional a notion of God appears to leave no room in all of creation for the individual human soul, since the unquenchable desire for good, the only thing eternal that might be identified with the soul, is for Weil wholly indistinguishable from God. But as we shall see in Chapter 1, the nothingness of the human soul apart from God is not a problem for Weil—nor indeed would it be for Levinas.

Central to Weil’s theology is her idea that the creation, the very existence of the universe, required that God, the absolute Good, *abdicate* his power and withdraw his will in order to allow something other than God—that is, other than the perfect good—to *be*.⁵⁵ This something which is infinitely far from the Good is what Weil calls Necessity, the world as we know it. “Pitiless, ... harder than any diamond” (NR 284), Necessity is most evident to us in the laws of nature whose effects on human and non-human beings alike are unyielding and inexorable—in the case of natural disasters, heartbreakingly so. “Providence, for Weil, is simply everything that happens”—

⁵³ In a separate note, Weil explains why she does not use the word ‘God’ in this Profession: “To gather people behind Christian aspirations ... [i]t is necessary to try to define them in terms that an atheist might adhere to completely, and to do this without depriving these aspirations of what is specific to them. ... Even a professed Christian needs this sort of translation ...” (quoted in Pétrement 1976, 493).

⁵⁴ Pétrement 1976, 493-95, 500.

⁵⁵ This is clearly reminiscent of the Kabbalistic idea of *tzim-tsum*, but Weil nowhere makes the connection herself, if she was aware of it. She may have derived the idea from Gnostic sources (Pétrement 1976, 497).

everything in the world without exception, including all of its suffering and evil.⁵⁶ There can be, therefore, no divine interventions contrary to the laws of nature in Weil's theology.⁵⁷ The general absence of God in this world is for Weil the strongest possible proof of God's love for the Creation, since if God were everywhere present, nothing other than God could exist. In a deep sense, God's absence is, paradoxically, God's presence (WG 89), insofar as Necessity is but one of the two faces God reveals to us, the other being Love.

One consequence of God's abdication is that evil becomes a necessary part of Creation from the very beginning—and since God is Love, it follows that God must suffer from this evil. Suffering and evil are suffering and evil for God just as much as for human beings. This for Weil is the whole point of the Incarnation and Crucifixion, the reason she identifies the Creation with the Passion.⁵⁸ Love would not create a universe of suffering without taking that very suffering upon itself in the same form as it is experienced by creatures in the world. Hence there is no divine plan according to which suffering turns out to be just punishment for sin incurred since the Creation, for example, or the means to an unimaginably greater good that will justify, say, the deaths of thousands of children every day from lack of food⁵⁹—no plan other than the plan of divine Passion which created the world in the first place and then suffers in it. Because it is a creation of Love, “the universe is beautiful, even including evil, which, as part of the order of the world, has a sort of terrible beauty” (FLN 329). All of the world is therefore to be loved. Part of its beauty lies in the fact that everything in creation obeys the laws of Necessity, including what we call evil; we can love the forces that produce evil for their obedience, if for nothing else (SWR

⁵⁶ McCullough 2014, 128. The present section is indebted to the summary of Weil's unorthodox theology to be found in Lissa McCullough's *The Religious Philosophy of Simone Weil*, which the present author highly recommends to readers desiring a more thorough introduction to Weil's thought.

⁵⁷ One exception for Weil, given her incipient Catholicism, might seem to have been the Eucharist, but as we will see below, her notion of the Eucharist is just as far from being ontological as is her idea of God. In both cases, it is a personal *relation* that is important above all, not facts about existence.

⁵⁸ McCullough 2014, 101. “The absolute domination throughout the whole universe of mechanical, mathematical, absolutely deaf and blind necessity is unintelligible, unless one believes that the whole universe, in the totality of space and of time, has been created as the Cross of Christ” (IC 198).

⁵⁹ The World Health Organization currently estimates this to be about 7,000 per day from hunger-related diseases. This is a conservative estimate. Some go as high as 13,000.

447). But we can also love all things insofar as their mere existence is proof that the love of God is infinite: it includes even that which is infinitely *other* than God, infinitely far from the Good.⁶⁰

For Weil, Love *is* the relation which allows room even for the existence of what is infinitely other than itself,⁶¹ hence perfect love generously welcomes the being of all beings without exception, even those which seem to endanger love by removing evidence of love on earth. If evil is to be explained as that which exists *because* God is Love, then the believer must relinquish any notion of God as a *being* in favor of God as pure *relation*:

Those who ask why God permits affliction might as well ask why God created. And that, indeed, is a question one may well ask. Why did God create? It seems so obvious that God is greater than God and the creation together. At least, it seems obvious so long as one thinks of God as Being. But that is not how one ought to think of him. So soon as one thinks of God as Love one senses that marvel of love by which the Father and the Son are united both in the eternal unity of the one God and also across the separating distance of space and time and the Cross. (SWR 463)

The equation of God with Love makes sense only if God is understood as the relation of Love raised to the highest degree of perfection in the Trinity.⁶² Hence God is *eternally* the relation between Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Having done *one* thing only—“abandoned” himself, “emptied himself” (FLN 120) in creating the universe and suffering from his own creation—God

⁶⁰ The proof, of course, is only a ‘proof’ for faith. We note parenthetically that God’s love for the infinitely other may show that Weil’s theology of *tsum-tsum* agrees, at least in this respect, with the high value Levinas places on what he calls *non-participation*, the respect for alterity that Levinas opposes to what would be its nullification with the complete merging of creature and creator. While eventual union with God is, for Weil, a desirable end, we will see that her idea of union is so dialectical that it remains doubtful whether it amounts to anything like participation in Levinas’s sense. See McCullough 2014, 91. In fact, if God is a relation (see next paragraph), then union with God would seem to mean sharing in that relation, and for Weil, as we shall see, this will mainly if not solely take the form of love of neighbor.

⁶¹ “Every attempt to justify evil by something else than by: *That is*, is an offence committed against this truth” (N 363).

⁶² McCullough 2014, 104.

is his abdication for all eternity, this one act of “voluntary passion” in which the Creation, Incarnation, and Crucifixion are essentially identical.⁶³ “God not incarnate is not really God” (N 222), and similarly, we must add, God not crucified is not really God.⁶⁴ “God is not perfect except as Trinity, and the love which constitutes the Trinity finds its perfection only in the Cross” (IC 170), a perfection expressed as a “harmony in which is found the maximum distance and the maximum unity between the contraries” which are Father and Son (IC 169). As perfect Love, God as Father and Son is in one sense a unity, in another an infinite separation (SWR 446). The latter accounts for Christ’s cry of despair on the Cross (Matt. 27:46, cf. Psalm 22). In this way, the infinite separation already noted between Good and Necessity is “recapitulated” in the “rending of God” by the infinite distance separating Father and Son, a separation so great that it can only be bridged by perfect love. As distinctive of perfect love, separation is eternal along with unity.⁶⁵

Weil accordingly deemphasizes the Resurrection: we are redeemed not by Christ’s glory but by our sharing in Christ’s suffering. Surprisingly, she sees this as a “mutual redemption”: “God’s great crime against us is to have created us, is the fact of our existence. And our existence is our great crime against God. When we forgive God for our existence, he forgives us for existing” (FLN 263).⁶⁶ By “our existence” Weil means existence as willful creatures who think they have autonomy. To place one’s hope in the Resurrection is to ignore the eternal implications of the distance between the Son and the Father, reflected in our own infinite distance from God, whereas our single task is continually to acknowledge that distance in all its infinitude (WG 74)

⁶³ McCullough 2014, 110, 113.

⁶⁴ “God has emptied himself. This means that both the Creation and the Incarnation are included within the Passion” (FLN 120). Weil takes literally the assertion in Revelations 13:8 that Christ was crucified “from the foundation of the world.”

⁶⁵ McCullough 2014, 90.

⁶⁶ “Mutual redemption” is McCullough’s term (McCullough 2014, 99).

since it is the very “soul of love.”⁶⁷ We do this by imploring God to take back the gift of our existence, the illusion of having a will, for this is the cause of our separation. “The Incarnation is simply a figure of the Creation. God abdicated by giving us existence. By refusing it we abdicate and become, in that way, similar to God” (FLN 298).⁶⁸ The paradigm for such a refusal is always the Cross. Given all that she sees the Cross as inviting us to do, thinking about the Resurrection must, for Weil, be little more than a distraction.

Compared to popular ideas about divine power, Weil’s God is, and eternally remains, remarkably weak by human standards. He wills nothing but abdication, a paradoxically *passive* will. God destroys evil by suffering it even unto despair (FLN 154) because that is just what love does. Thus love has no use for power or control, but as love simply lets creation *be* and absorbs into itself the evil that creation is created free to do. In a sense, Weil’s God both is and is not powerful: on the one hand, the deliberate powerlessness of Love leaves God “trapped by evil” (FLN 329), but on the other, God’s powerlessness “is voluntary. He knows its effects, and wills them” (FLN 120).⁶⁹ Out of love for the world, God wills *to have no will in this world*, leaving everything up to Necessity—the face of God’s absence. Likewise, our imitating God’s self-abdication means giving up all claim to power and prestige, to having any will of our own in this world, in order to share with God in the suffering that destroys evil, thus sharing in the Crucifixion (N 234)—with the important difference that we have an enormous advantage over God inasmuch as we can give bread to the hungry and relief to the afflicted. God, perfect Love, cannot do this, except through us by proxy (FLN 312).⁷⁰

⁶⁷ “If the love that bridges is in proportion to the distance (N 616), then distance is the soul of love, and infinite distance is the soul of infinite love” (McCullough 2014, 122).

⁶⁸ “God permits me to exist while being other than He. It is up to me to refuse this permission. ... Humility consists in the refusal to exist. It is the queen of the virtues” (N 485).

⁶⁹ McCullough 2014, 111.

⁷⁰ The resemblance here to Levinas’s “religion for adults” must be evident. See “A Religion for Adults” in DF 11-23, and also “Useless Suffering” in EN, especially 99-101.

Weil attaches great importance to making “contact” with God, a notion that would seem quite foreign to Levinas. But what exactly does Weil mean by “contact”? Often it is simply “contact with reality”—that is, with Necessity—and therefore, paradoxically, contact with God’s *absence*: “Contact with human creatures is given to us through the sense of presence. Contact with God is given to us through the sense of absence. Compared with this absence, presence becomes more absent than absence” (N 239-40). This does not imply, however, that contact with God can ever leave us absent from the awareness of our neighbor, even for a moment. Far from it:

The thought of God must not interpose itself between us and other creatures. It must not make the contact between us and them less direct. On the contrary, through it the contact must be made more direct. The real aim is not to see God in all things; it is that God through us should see the things that we see. (N 358)

The emphasis is on one’s relationship of responsibility to the other, not on achieving a ‘spiritual’ experience or any other kind of special relationship with God if that would prevent one, even for a moment, from serving as an intermediary between God and Creation. “We should be a means of contact between our neighbor and God, as the pen is between me and the paper” (N 360). We are such a means of contact only through self-effacement: “I have got to withdraw in order that God may be able to enter into contact with the human beings whom chance places in my path and whom he loves. My presence shows a want of tact, as if I were to find myself between two lovers or two friends” (N 364). In Weil’s view, love of neighbor even seems to have a certain priority over love of God, since it is less likely to rely on self-interested imagination, especially when the other’s suffering is graphically present before us. Because of the dangers of imagination, it is better not to think of God at all than to ignore one’s neighbor. Nothing is lost: “Whosoever loves his neighbor as himself, even if he denies the existence of God, loves God” (N 280).

For Weil, contact with God is not so much something one seeks as it is the unanticipated consequence of a certain way of life—a life guided by what she calls *attention* to reality, first of all,⁷¹ but Weil also outlines a number of “implicit forms of the love of God” that sharpen attention and are strengthened by it: love of the beauty and order of the world, love of neighbor, and love of religious practices. These are *implicit* forms because the contact with God is only indirect, as it must be when contact involves anything of this world, since nothing in Creation is pure enough to be in direct contact with the Good—with the sole exception, according to Weil, of the Eucharist (see below). There is indeed a potential in us for something Weil calls direct contact with God, the only thing capable of drawing forth “explicit love.” Contact is direct when “God has come in person, not only to visit the soul as he does for a long time beforehand, but to possess it and to transport its center near to his very heart” (WG 138). Weil has little to say about what this means; she is almost certainly thinking of her own mystical experiences, and these would likely resist description. But she does say that the implicit forms of the love of God truly “become real” only “after the soul has had direct contact with God. ... Previously they had no reality” (WG 142).

From what she says about the Eucharist, Weil’s notion of contact with God appears to be highly dialectical. Contact with God must be “real” in the sense that the contact comprises a real relation between the celebrant and God. This does not happen, Weil thinks, if the sacrament is seen as “only a symbol”: “The dogma [that the Eucharist is the real body of Christ] merely signifies that this morsel of bread is a medium for effecting a *real contact* with God. If it were only a symbol, it would simply constitute a medium between us and *our idea* of God” (N 400, emphasis added). To the extent that one takes the Eucharist to be a symbol, one relies on “imagination”: one must form a conscious idea of what the symbol symbolizes.⁷² But for Weil the

⁷¹ *Attention* means something specific for Weil, which we take up in the next section.

⁷² Cf. Levinas: “A symbol still brings the symbolized back to the world in which it appears”—that is, back to the world as constituted by consciousness—“What then can be this relationship with an absence radically withdrawn from disclosure and dissimulation? And what is this absence that makes visitation possible, but which is not reducible to concealment, since this absence involves signifyingness, a signifyingness in which, however, the other is not convertible into the same?” (“Meaning and Sense,” CP 102). The absence

imagination—essentially her term for consciousness constituting its world—is always an obstacle between oneself and God, the very opposite of contact with the real. The power of consciousness or “imagination” to determine how one experiences the world means that one must learn detachment in order to make contact with anything that transcends that world: “Experience of the transcendent: this seems a contradiction in terms, and yet the transcendent can only be known through contact, since our faculties are unable to construct it” (N 242). This implies that contact and consciousness are distinct forms of access, and that the first requires that one give up one’s attachment to whatever one appears to have gained from the second. Not an intentional act on our part, contact is made possible by detachment and *waiting*. One need not concern oneself over God’s existence. Provided one empties oneself of self-concern, one has only to *wait*—and, as Weil puts it, God will be in touch. “You need only persist in rejecting the false divinity, and you may be quite sure that, one day, you will receive a touch on the part of the true one” (N 437). For Weil, what is sometimes called spiritual dryness is not brought about by the failure of religious practices to produce a hoped-for result, but is the human condition itself, in the face of which “there is no attitude of greater humility than to wait in silence and patience” (FLN 101).

On the other hand, Weil neither denies nor deplores the fact that it is always possible to question the reality of one’s contact with the transcendent, however direct an experience it might seem to be. Most of the time the appropriate attitude may even be one of doubt or skepticism. By contrast, “what amounts to criminal treason,” perhaps the sole crime against God, “is to question the fact that God is the only thing worthy of love” (WG 140), for this means doubting the reality of Love and thus foreclosing one’s serving as a “transparent” medium between God and Creation. One should never do anything, Weil says, *for* God—“God must not be put in the dative” (N 358)

Levinas means here is that of the other from one’s constituted world, insofar as they are *other*, but the absence of Weil’s God might be a trope for it and the Eucharist its “visitation.” Weil is not opposed to symbol and metaphor, any more than is Levinas. She is only worried that symbols can become convenient dissimulations when they are products of the human imagination: “The story of Christ is a symbol, a metaphor. But it used to be believed that metaphors *produce themselves* as events in the world. God is the supreme poet” (N 194, emphasis added). An observation worthy of William Blake!

—but only place oneself in a position that allows God—that is, the Good—to act *by* or *through* oneself.⁷³

Weil frequently uses the term *supernatural*, a word Levinas goes out of his way to avoid. In Weil's writings it does not refer to the occult, the miraculous (N 277), or to another world beyond or behind this one. Instead, she calls everything *good* supernatural simply because its goodness is beyond explanation or verification by the senses, being the perfectly gratuitous gift of divine love. Thus she says that “supernatural good is not a sort of supplement to natural good In all the crucial problems of human existence the only choice is between supernatural good on the one hand and evil on the other” (SWR 327 = SWA 66). Weil does say, however, that the good is “beyond being,” inasmuch as one encounters the good only in confronting the real emptiness of this world: “Man escapes from the laws of this world but the space of a flash of lightning. Moments of pause, of contemplation, of pure intuition, of mental void, of acceptance of the moral void. It is through such moments that he is able to approach the supernatural” (N 156). Siding with the minority view, Weil renders *epiousios* in the Lord's Prayer as “supernatural”—“our supernatural bread” rather than “our bread for today.” A teacher of Greek, Weil would surely have noticed that this word, found nowhere else in either ancient or biblical Greek, is a compound that can be read literally as “beyond being.”

As a postscript to this section, we note a potential misconception: that for Weil, Necessity, a face of God and therefore fundamental to whatever she considers to be the ethical, means something like *fate*. Were that true, it would decisively contradict Levinas's philosophy, which insists that fate “has no place in life.” Fate is always discovered after the fact, since only “when action is already sinking into the past, man discovers the motifs that necessitated it,”⁷⁴ whereas in the moment of action it is ethics, not fate, that is decisive. When we turn to Weil's interpretations

⁷³ McCullough 2014, 204, 195; N 193.

⁷⁴ “Reality and Its Shadow,” CP 9-10.

of Antigone, Electra, and Oedipus, however, we find that Necessity plays an entirely different role from fate. These figures of Greek tragedy do indeed exemplify the idea that one can be tied to fate, but for Weil it is the ‘fate’ of loving God, the Good: in their situation, “one doesn’t enter into an agreement to love God; one has to consent to the agreement that has been drawn up in oneself without one’s assistance” (N 402). Typically defying convention, Weil compares Antigone to Christ (N 517-18, SWR 325) and Electra to Mary (N 402). Antigone is not forced to do what she does by fate in the usual classical sense, but solely by Love, feeling the heavy weight of an absent God’s hand, “the same love, extreme and absurd, which led Christ to the Cross” (SWR 325). And just as when Mary recognizes Jesus by the tomb (John 20:11-18), Electra’s recognition of her brother in Sophocles’ play is preceded not by hope but by despair, even the desire *no longer to be*. Electra’s and Mary’s eyes are opened only *after* they have fully experienced God’s absence and the severe sentence of impersonal Necessity that can then empty life of all meaning. To Weil’s mind, Oedipus illustrates these ideas negatively, since “Oedipus is a victim, but an impure one ... the son of disobedience” (N 561), guilty even though he did what he did without knowledge. In his guilt he is indeed at the mercy of Necessity, or as Weil sometimes describes it, the “law of gravity” (WG 75), according to which those who do not will the good are inexorably drawn toward evil, whether or not they deliberately choose it.

Weil’s attempt to read Christianity into Greek culture is admittedly eccentric,⁷⁵ but at least it seems to prove that Necessity as Weil understands it is not to be identified with fate in the classical sense. Her unorthodox reading of Greek tragedy is more positive than Levinas’s, for Levinas sees in tragedy’s themes the usurpation of the protagonist’s other-relation by his or her destiny, an outcome altogether alien to the ethical, notwithstanding its greater literary or dramatic value. In Greek tragedy, the Other is often only an obstacle to the protagonist’s personal aggrandizement, not the source of responsibility. As a rule, the guilt or remorse that “results from

⁷⁵ See her *Intimations of Christianity Among the Ancient Greeks* for many other examples.

the alienation of liberty and not from the unscrupulousness of its very exercise ... has tragic and not ethical overtones” (BPW 18).

Weil would seem to be on the same page as Levinas, however, in her opinion of literary depictions of evil in general. “Imaginary evil is romantic and varied,” she declares, “real evil dreary, monotonous, barren and tedious. On the other hand, imaginary good is tedious” (N 140-41)—and real good is frequently interesting, as essentially supernatural (in Weil’s sense). Similarly, Levinas finds something diabolical in our fascination with fictional evil: “There is something wicked and egoist and cowardly in artistic enjoyment. There are times when one can be ashamed of it, as of feasting during a plague” (“Reality and its Shadow,” CP 12). In art, therefore, one rarely sees life depicted truly, in all its sublime moral reality. When that does happen, it is only in the works of artists of the very highest order, this being precisely their inimitable genius.

An Uncommon Passion for Truth

“Every philosophy seeks truth” (CP 47)—or, from a more skeptical point of view, endeavors to determine what ‘truth’ means. Albert Camus, who famously described Weil as “the only great spirit of our time,” characterized her as having a “madness for truth.” Was this a madness for *seeking* the truth, or a worry about what truth *means*, the question of its very existence? Perhaps both, but “madness” suggests an emphasis on the first, since it is the more personal: her constant worry, in the background of whatever that she wrote, was that in her thinking she might be deceiving herself. Levinas, on the other hand, in his writings at least, seems more concerned as a philosopher about the second. Many pages of *Totality and Infinity* are devoted to proving, for example, that the meaning of truth is truth’s foundation on *justice*. This idea is not so far from Weil’s as it might at first seem, since for Levinas as well as for Weil, doing justice to the other is

a matter of giving the real its due, so as to prevent one's worldview from obscuring the ability to see what the other person is "going through."

At one point in her notebooks, Weil argues that truth is a *relation*: "Truth manifests itself as a result of the contact made between two propositions, neither of which is true; it is their relation which is true" (N 406). In Chapter 2, we shall see that one way in which she understands this is in terms of *contradiction* as a source of truth—namely, the truth of a certain relation between two contradictory propositions, one the negation of the other—but here she illustrates it by the less controversial example of a statement of the form 'If *P*, then *Q*.' The truth of this compound statement, she implies, depends solely on the *relation* between the truth-values of its component propositions, *P* and *Q*, either of which could be true or false, or even contradictory.⁷⁶ Surely Weil's point here is not a lesson in elementary logic, but the idea that truth *manifests itself*, that there is an important sense in which truth is not something one seeks or produces but something that unintentionally *results* or presents itself to one when the conditions are right. The goal would then be to create in oneself the right conditions. The absolutely indispensable tool for bringing this about, Weil insists, is what she calls *attention*: removing oneself as an obstacle to seeing other people and things as they are. In Chapter 4 we will consider the ways in which this use of attention does and does not reflect principles of Husserlian phenomenology. For now, the important point is that attention sets up a certain *relation* with things and with the other. Attention is a manner of *regard* or respectful looking—even a manner of being-in-the-world, to borrow Heidegger's terminology—that willingly accepts reality in whatever form one encounters it, where reality for Weil is whatever forces itself upon the mind, often what the ego finds itself resisting. Some degree of attention is required for learning the truth about anything, but in Weil the term refers to an on-going process of self-minimization. Alternatively, she says that attention

⁷⁶ "“If it is true that ..., it is true that ...”: each of these propositions is dependent on *if*; but not so the relation between the two” (N 405). Presumably what she means is that the truth of the entire statement is determined by the relation of truth for material implication: the proposition is true *if P* is false or *if Q* is true, and in no other case. Weil seems to have in mind the great Stoic discovery that the truth of a compound statement is a fixed *function* (or “relation”) of the (arbitrary) truth values of its components.

allows God to see things through oneself *as they are*, insofar as one makes oneself *transparent*, as it were—that is, without an ‘I’ (N 328). Absent the discipline of attention, we tend to form a personal view of the world which is largely a product of the imagination. Attention as a willingness to accept reality therefore requires the discipline of self-emptying in the form of a dismissal or suspension of the egocentric perspective that tends to obscure things as they are, through imagination substituting what one wishes them to be.⁷⁷ Thus attention is opposed to the universal habit, characteristic of consciousness itself, of rejecting whatever is inconvenient or unsettling.

Because pain and suffering overcome perspective more readily than almost anything else, they are for Weil the surest teachers of the truth.⁷⁸ Hence she placed great value on exhausting manual labor as one means of acquiring a clear and unprejudiced acquaintance with reality as it is.⁷⁹ The world looked very different to her under these conditions, hence she valued them for what they taught her. When Weil, harvesting grapes one season near Marseilles in 1942, was asked, “‘But after all, Simone, why do you do this, with what you bear within you and what you have to say?’” she would say in reply, ‘There are things that I would not be able to say if I had not done these things.’”⁸⁰

Attention, as Weil understands it, is therefore a form of love that amounts to *doing justice* to the world, including especially other people, without regard for one’s own advantage. “The pure and authentic values—truth, beauty and goodness—in a human being’s activity are the result of one single and self-same act, a certain application of the attention at its fullest to the object” (N 449). One should “love the truth more than life itself,” she writes, because human self-interest naturally fears death and hence fears the truth which inevitably “kills everything within us that

⁷⁷ In this it bears a resemblance to the Husserlian suspension of the (invariably egocentric) natural attitude. Vetö calls the opposite of attention “seeking within perspective” (Vetö 1994, 18).

⁷⁸ This must be qualified, since extreme pain can easily distort one’s perspective.

⁷⁹ But not excessively exhausting (see previous note), as Weil’s own factory journals attest.

⁸⁰ Pétrement 1976, 441.

constitutes our ego” (WG 139). Since truth is the essence of alterity—or should we say that alterity is the essence of truth?—it thereby acts as a catalyst for what Weil calls *decreation*, the self-abdication of one’s personal sovereignty (Chapter 1) which for Weil is both the condition and the effect of facing the real. Hence truth is not a conscious *aim* so much as the *consequence* of a certain discipline or attitude of humble acceptance, namely that of attention and most of all love, the sole purpose of which is to seek the good in all things. “Truth is sought not in so far as it is truth, but in so far as it is Good. ... It is only Good which is sought for itself” (N 527). Acquiring the truth is solely a *result* of loving the Good.

Although at first it may seem narrower in scope than Weil’s, we find that Levinas’s understanding of truth is not all that different from hers in the end, in spite of its much greater emphasis on the relation with the other. For Levinas, coming face to face with the other person is the quintessential act of facing the real. Hence, all love of the truth is based on the desire to approach the other with the fully unguarded awareness of his or her otherness. This for Levinas is the only way to love the Good, consequently the only way to do justice to the neighbor. For the truth to be validated in anything at all, there must first be a relationship with the other, “with a face which can guarantee itself, whose epiphany itself is somehow a word of honor” (TI 202), an imprimatur. But “to welcome the Other is to put in question my freedom” (TI 85), especially my freedom to read the world in whatever way I currently want to read it. Only through experiencing alterity in the form of the other *person* does one learn respect for all other forms of alterity, which is to say, for all of reality as a whole. Desire for the other, insofar as it produces a self that is response-able to all others and to the world it shares with them, evolves automatically into love of the truth as love of justice. For Levinas as for Weil, truth is not something one seeks so much as something that is revealed, almost necessarily unintentionally, whenever the conditions are right. In Weil’s case, the conditions are whatever allows the real to reveal itself—namely, whatever

removes the 'I'. In Levinas, they are whatever allows the other to be other to oneself—that is, the other's continually calling one into question. The two sets of conditions are closely related: they both have to do with seeing reality as it is, a reality that frequently contradicts one's reading of the world, and in both cases this requires an abdication of the self. But Levinas's analysis of how truth happens, because it bases the recognition of truth on the formation of one's own subjectivity, is deeper than Weil's.

For Levinas, the relation to truth is a dimension of the relation to the other, hence a byproduct of becoming a subject. In *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas outlines what might at first seem to be a progression of stages in the development of subjectivity, starting from a primitive state of having no sense of self, identifying entirely with family, village, or tribe (*participation*), then moving on to *enjoyment* and finally to (*self*-)*consciousness*. A literal 'history' of the human self is certainly not Levinas's goal here. These are not three *stages* but three *dimensions* of human subjectivity in general. While there is certainly a latent temporal progression from participation to enjoyment to consciousness, all three will be present to some degree in almost all individuals most of the time. *Participation*, for example, might be compared in some respects to Heideggerian everydayness, or exemplified in situations in which one is totally absorbed in some activity. Levinas sees reflections of participation in mystical frenzy and even in the more ordinary religious desire to become united with one's god. Selfhood requires a further state he calls *separation*, in which a human being discovers himself to be segregated, conceptually if not physically, from the group in which he participates, as a result of his *enjoyment* (*jouissance*) of personal happiness and potential autonomy—an "economic"⁸¹ happiness characterized by the satisfaction of basic physical needs.⁸² But this eventually leads to one's experiencing one's own vulnerability through

⁸¹ That is, "solitary" (TI 50), private, as in having to do only with one's own household.

⁸² In Levinas, the term *separation* refers to the 'relation' one has to 'others' as an autonomous individual prior to becoming an ethical subject. The scare quotes are necessary, since a relation with the other only truly comes about as the *ethical* relation, with (self-)consciousness. *Jouissance* is another term Levinas uses in an unorthodox fashion: it refers not, as in everyday discourse, to sexual pleasure, at least not exclusively, but more generally to self-centered activity (in the broadest, not necessarily derogatory sense) of 'living

the “insecurity that troubles” one’s enjoyment of life (TI 149) and the revelation of the other’s absolute otherness impossible to master by one’s own powers. The result is an involuntary “defecting” (OB 90) from the initially idyllic state of enjoyment to the act of approaching the other (TI 60). In this act which is really a passivity, the self for the first time develops an inner life, a *consciousness*. A conscious self is therefore one that has given up its “economic” independence in order to live in a world it shares with others, a world it helps *create* by means of language. Thus Levinas opposes to the inner life, or the separated interiority or “psychism of enjoyment,” the desire for the alterity of the other, a desire for what he calls *exteriority*. It is the desire for exteriority that Levinas believes initiates the pursuit of truth, motivated by the need not only for unprejudiced knowledge about the world, but also for *justice*—without which, to put it somewhat banally, we simply could not get along with one another. In fact, he will argue that the need for knowledge about the world derives from the need for justice, since the latter requires comparison, judgment, and rational decisions about everyday matters.

Levinas claims that “the idea of exteriority which guides the quest for truth is possible only as the idea of Infinity” (TI 61). The unknown and to some extent unknowable other is equated with the Infinite, “the desirable, that which arouses Desire, that is, that which is approachable by a thought that at each instant *thinks more than it thinks*” (TI 62).⁸³ In associating the desirable with the Infinite, Levinas sharply distinguishes desire from need.⁸⁴ Whereas need develops in a subject as a result of a feeling of lack—necessarily the lack of something finite since the subject herself is

on’, ‘living from’ or ‘living off of’ the goods of the earth that provide nourishment to body and soul: good food, clean air to breathe, a warm and dry place to call home, etc.—all the things one can enjoy prior to or apart from conscious concern about other people. (Right here we already see how impossible it is in a developed society to separate these dimensions, since almost every aspect of one’s enjoyment depends on the sacrifices made by other people.)

⁸³ Here Levinas adopts Descartes’ well-known formula from the Third Meditation for the idea of infinity. Weil uses the word ‘infinite’ much more loosely. She writes, for example, that those human relations “which have something infinite about them are unjust” (N 34), meaning relations (such as greed) that give the illusion of not being subject to limits (since whatever one has, one can always want more).

⁸⁴ Weil does not make this distinction. She does however make a distinction between *desiring the good*—where ‘good’ means, tautologically, whatever object one desires in this world—and *desiring the Good*, where the Good exists “beyond the world.” The latter is close to what Levinas means by Desire.

finite—desire does not correspond to a lack but to an *excess*, the excess of *exteriority*, the “inordinateness” of the other’s otherness apart from oneself, of which one learns only through the “revelation” of what Levinas calls the Face, “the way in which the other presents himself, exceeding *the idea of the other in me*” (TI 50). This is the meaning of the word Infinity in the title of Levinas’s first major work, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*. The Face is a metaphor for the vulnerability of the other, but also for the other’s infinitude.

Thus the quest for truth is initiated by Desire, signifying the paradoxical impulse to bridge the unbridgeable gap between oneself and the other, between interiority and exteriority. Approaching the other takes one out of separation and self-satisfied enjoyment, out into the openness to the other which enables meaning and truth. This is accomplished most of the time through the mundane act of speech (but is it not really a miracle?) which continually holds open the promise of a conversation with the other that will nonetheless call one into question:

Truth is sought in the other, but by him who lacks nothing. The distance is untraversable, and at the same time traversed. The separated being is satisfied, autonomous, and nonetheless searches after the other with a search that is not incited by the lack proper to need nor by the memory of a lost good. Such a situation is language. Truth arises where a being who is separated from the other is not engulfed in him, but speaks to him. ... Separation and interiority, truth and language constitute the categories of the idea of infinity or metaphysics. (TI 62, translation slightly altered)

Metaphysics, which Levinas equates here with the idea of infinity, is yet another term to which he assigns his own special meaning. Earlier in *Totality and Infinity* he defines it as “a relation with the other that does not result in a divine or human totality, that is not a totalization of history but the idea of infinity” (TI 52). In other words, metaphysics is a relation, or that within any relation,

which cannot be incorporated into an all-encompassing view taken by a consciousness from some ‘outside’ perspective.⁸⁵ Hence “the other remains transcendent with respect to me” and “absolute with regard to history,” essentially immune to being incorporated into a totality, whether historical, theological, or scientific (TI 52, CP 47-48). Merely to speak to the other person is to insure not only that one is on the way toward the truth oneself; reciprocally, it is also to “uproot” the person to whom one speaks, at least temporarily, from the fate of totalization which would fasten the other down as a mere part of ‘nature’, ‘history’, or simply one’s own worldview. Levinas calls the desire to speak to or approach (“go toward”) the other *metaphysical desire*. His non-traditional use of the word *metaphysics* appears to be motivated by an ambition to refute the subordination of the individual to the totalization of history and the subordination of truth to the Concept, which Hegel claimed was to mark the end of traditional metaphysics. Metaphysical desire is the desire for a truth which is not the impossible incorporation (that is, transformation) of *alterity* into one’s own worldview. It is the desire for a truth which is itself truly *other*. As Levinas endeavors to show throughout both of his major works, such a truth can be grounded only in the experience of encountering another *person*. Not in any other way.

Truth for Levinas is therefore, as for Weil, a *relation*, but in Levinas’s case it is a “relation with exteriority” (TI 61) motivated by a desire for the infinite, possible only in a subject that has encountered the other as other. That truth is indeed a relation with the other is demonstrated by the common experience that learning the truth about oneself chiefly happens through other people: “The first consciousness of my immorality is not my subordination to facts, but to the Other, to the Infinite. ... The freedom that can be ashamed of itself founds truth” (TI 83). Truth is therefore an *ethical* relation, as any relation with exteriority, the other, must be. When Levinas says that “the absolutely foreign alone can instruct us” (TI 73), he is identifying truth as the relation to what is absolutely other. Hence, truth is also a *social* relation in which we discover

⁸⁵ The ‘view from nowhere.’ See also TI 29. This phrase, of course, is Thomas Nagel’s.

ourselves to be instructed by “the Other our master,” that is to say by one’s neighbor at the moment, since in speaking to anyone, one submits one’s version of the world to his or her judgment. This makes truth a matter of *justice*, for “justice consists in recognizing in the Other my master” (TI 72), my critic, the one who keeps me and my world honest in the sense of true to what is other than myself and not simply to what I wish. But if truth is a matter of justice, then desire can also be characterized as the troubling of one’s happiness by the awareness of the Other, a disturbance born in the realization that one can sacrifice one’s happiness for the other’s happiness—that is, once again, for justice.

Levinas considers the question of truth from a different angle in *Otherwise Than Being*, where he is interested mainly in how truth has traditionally been associated with *being* and how philosophy as the search for truth has consequently missed the *beyond being*. Here he directs his critique more explicitly against Heidegger, who represents for Levinas the culmination of the Western ontological tradition in its inability to transcend itself, to venture outside of “the adventure of consciousness” that “remains founded on the presence of being” (DEH 165). Truth, according to the latter tradition, is based entirely on appearance to a consciousness. While this does not do justice to Heidegger’s much more complex notion of truth, Levinas does show, as Heidegger does not, that if truth is indeed intersubjective, it cannot be only “a passage from knowledge to a better knowledge” within a consciousness, as Husserl thought, but depends more deeply on the *ethical*. This gives truth a significance beyond consciousness since consciousness is itself founded on the ethical. Truth for Levinas is the *testimony* one gives of an inspiration that reveals itself in the words one speaks to the other—not in their content, but in the fact that the other inspires me or disturbs me into the act of addressing her, an act that reveals my responsibility for her in spite of my intent. Truth, again much as in Weil, is therefore a matter of dispelling the shadows that obscure the other, rather than a matter of revealing things in the light of Being. We return to these ideas with a closer reading of *Otherwise Than Being* in Chapters 2

and 3, as well as to other issues Levinas addresses in that work which are relevant to the methodology that Levinas, and by extension Weil, employs in the phenomenological service of truth.

1.0 Decreation, Substitution, Nothingness

*The self is a substitution for the other, subjectivity as a subjection to everything,
as a supporting everything and supporting the whole. — Emmanuel Levinas*⁸⁶

*To be pushed by God towards one's neighbor as this pencil
is pushed by me on the paper. — Simone Weil*⁸⁷

In this chapter I lay the groundwork for the chapters that follow in two ways. First, through a comparison of Weil's *decreation* and Levinas's *substitution*, I introduce some of the major parallels in their thought, arguing in particular that decreation closely resembles in many important respects Levinas's notion of *substitution*, the key idea behind his major work, *Otherwise Than Being, or Beyond Essence*. This argument will serve as foundation for what follows in a second way by establishing how both Levinas and Weil base their thinking on the assumption of the essential nullity of the human self, an idea that goes against the grain of a Western philosophical tradition since Descartes which has referred problems of human knowledge and human being almost exclusively to selfhood and self-consciousness. An understanding of Levinas and Weil on affliction and human vulnerability is therefore impossible without taking into account their similar positions on the priority of the other over the self, a

⁸⁶ OB 164.

⁸⁷ FLN, 72.

priority in which the self seems by contrast to become nothing. Of the two, it is perhaps Weil's discussion of decreation that is most explicit about the nullity of the self.

1.1 Oneself as Always Already Decreated⁸⁸

Weil does not always refer to decreation by name. In the New York notebook (1942), for example, there are many passages such as the following in which the word never occurs:

Every man, seeing himself from the point of view of God the creator, should regard his own existence as a sacrifice made by God. I am God's abdication. The more I exist, the more God abdicates. So if I take God's side rather than my own I ought to regard my existence as a diminution, a decrease.

When anyone succeeds in doing this, Christ comes to dwell in his soul.

As regards myself, I ought to repeat in the opposite sense the abdication of God, I ought to refuse the existence that has been given me, to refuse it because God is good. As regards other people, I ought to imitate God's abdication itself, to consent not to be in order that they may be; and this in spite of the fact that they are evil [*et cela quoqu'ils soient mauvais*].⁸⁹

However straightforward this may be as Weil's references to decreation tend to go, it inevitably raises a great many questions. What can it mean to "refuse one's existence," to consent to one's own nonexistence as a present fact? How does my "consent not to be" enable others to be, and why is my responsibility for those others evidently so extreme and indiscriminate that in effect it eclipses any concern on my part for the responsibility they might have either for me or for their

⁸⁸ These first two sections are closely based on my "Decreation as Substitution: Reading Simone Weil Through Levinas," *The Journal of Religion*, 93(1) (January 2013), 25-40.

⁸⁹ FLN 213, translation slightly altered.

own actions, even when evil? This last question clearly has a bearing on the problem of accounting for human moral sense: “exactly what is it in us that consents to good, what chooses evil?”⁹⁰ Weil’s short answer would be, *almost nothing* and *nothing at all*, respectively. That is, what Weil, following Eckhart (FLN 136), calls the infinitesimal, “uncreated” part of the soul, which is nothing in terms of ontological significance but everything in terms of spiritual, is the only part that wholly belongs to God (or the Good) and consents to good.⁹¹

God abandons our whole being—flesh, blood, sensibility, intelligence, love—to the pitiless necessity of matter and the cruelty of the devil, except for the eternal and supernatural part of the soul.

The Creation is an abandonment. In creating what is other than Himself, God necessarily abandoned it. He only keeps under his care the part of Creation which is Himself—the uncreated part of every creature. That is the life, the Light, the Word; it is the presence here below of God’s only Son.

It is sufficient if we consent to this ordering of things. (FLN 103)

By contrast, the created, autonomous part, ontologically something and yet, or therefore, essentially nothing at all, chooses what is always mixed with evil. Decreation is the conversion, in terms of one’s consent, of the second into the first, the acceptance of the ultimate unreality of the created part as opposed to the profound reality of the uncreated part, nothingness in a deeper sense.⁹² Weil calls it “moral death” (FLN 328).⁹³

⁹⁰ Vetö 1994, 37.

⁹¹ Nevertheless, even the uncreated part is not invulnerable (Vetö 1994, 117). This idea, that human vulnerability is absolute, is of the highest significance in connection with interpreting the affliction of the Shoah (see Chapters 6 and 7).

⁹² That is, not illusion but the real nothingness of God, an absolute nothingness comparable to Meister Eckhart’s notion of the *godhead*. Eckhart flees God for the sake of the godhead, and begs the godhead to rid him of God: “I flee from God for the sake of God. I beg of God that he make me rid of God” (quoted in Nishitani 1982, 64; see 60-68 on Eckhart and absolute nothingness). Weil admired Eckhart, and she

Really to die, in the moral sense, means consenting to submit to everything whatsoever that chance may bring. Because chance can deprive me of everything that I call 'I'. To consent to being a creature and nothing else. It is like consenting to lose one's whole existence. (FLN 217)

In a similar vein, Weil often characterizes decreation as submission to the face God shows us as Necessity, "the necessity which is the substance of the universe but which, as such, only manifests itself to us by the blows it deals" (WG 108). Our decreation affirms the laws that govern the universe in their independence from our projects and concerns, as laws that painfully force themselves upon us rather than as the laws a disinterested science formulates in constructing its theories.

Decreation is therefore the act or attitude of giving priority to the reality of other people and things over one's own reality. It is consenting to the truth of one's present non-existence or nothingness, so that by that very acceptance, all others may simply *be*. The subject would "cease the apology for itself," as Levinas expresses it in his definition of love (TI 253).

If decreation is the reflection of God's abdication in one's own abdication of existence so that others "may be," then it must qualify as the most complete affirmation one could give of the other

occasionally sounds like him: "A method of purification: to pray to God, not only in secret as far as men are concerned, but with the thought that God does not exist" (GG, 20). Her notion of the nothingness of God differs from Eckhart's, however, in that for Weil, one relates to nothingness strictly through the crucifixion (God's nothingness insofar as God becomes the object of persecution), not through a notion of God as a power prior to and beyond the world. See McCullough 2014, 187.

⁹³ "We cannot wrest from Weil's fragments the 'exact' sense of the continuity between the uncreated and God. It is very clear, though, that the uncreated is the opposite of the created, that is, of autonomy, and so the best definition one can give to decreation is to say that one is decreed 'by making the created pass over into the uncreated' [N 247]" (Vetö 1994, 36). Vetö thinks that "the internal logic of Weil's thought seems to suggest that for her 'creation' is only the creation of autonomous beings, and that only those invested with free will are creatures" (Vetö 1994, 16). Weil writes: "*Genesis* separates creation and original sin because of the requirements of a narration made in human language. But the creature in being created preferred itself to God. Otherwise would there have been creation? God created because he was good, but the creature let itself be created because it was evil. It redeems itself by persuading God through endless entreaties to destroy it" (FLN 123).

as other—the very thing Levinas calls *substitution* for the other. For Levinas, complete affirmation of the other means experiencing “the passivity of being persecuted,” a passivity which “deserves the epithet of complete or absolute only if the persecuted one is liable to answer for the persecutor” (OB 110). We will consider Levinas’s hyperbolic use of the term “persecution” later. For the moment, it suffices to point out that this language is intended to indicate the limitless scope of one’s responsibility—one’s response-ability or ability to “answer for.” “Answering for” means substituting for the other, not simply in the usual sense of imagining oneself in the other’s place, but in a more profoundly ethical sense (‘ethical’ as Levinas means the word), in that one’s responsibilities include everything within the scope of the other’s responsibilities, *ad infinitum*. One’s responsibilities extend every bit as far as every other’s—a responsibility without limit that makes no attempt to leave any part of its task to the other’s responsibility. Hence, as Levinas says, the more one does for the other, the more one’s duty to them, and to all others, increases.

For Weil, the complete affirmation of the other which is decreation means, in Miklos Vetö’s words, a self-effacing “acknowledgment, in the universe, of relationships that are independent of us—the acknowledgment, that is, of reality as such.”⁹⁴ Genuine love for reality would be, as Weil frequently expresses it, “impersonal,” the opposite of self-affirming. A perfect relation with the Other, and hence with reality as a whole, would carry no trace of the self. Thus Weil writes that God loves “not as I love, but as an emerald is green. ... And I too, if I were in the state of perfection, would love as an emerald is green. I would become an impersonal person” (FLN 129). Only impersonal love signifies true recognition of the other *as other*—impersonal because unobstructed by any interference of the ego.

Decreation is not simply accepting the truth that we are utterly defenseless and vulnerable as human beings, a vulnerability often enough acknowledged by conventional wisdom. It is realizing, and living by, the superficially obvious but in reality all too easily overlooked *ethical*

⁹⁴ Vetö 1994, 22.

truth that there is something—more important, *someone*—in the world *besides oneself*. For when Weil writes, “It is given to very few minds to discover that things and beings exist,”⁹⁵ could she not mean that we have great difficulty in recognizing, in our day-to-day relations with other people, the *reality* of the other person truly *as other*, as *other than* whatever consciousness constitutes in order to fit things into its worldview? An ethics of decreation would at a minimum involve cultivating the purest down-to-earth appreciation one can have of the fact that one shares this moment of grace called life *with neighbors*—an awareness of how charged with responsibility the mere fact of the presence of others is at every moment, as though encountering the other were exposing oneself to an ethical force field.

But the gravity of responsibility weighs heavily on whatever is left of the decrelated ego. How can so extreme a “passivity of the self become a ‘hold on oneself’” (OB 113), except in the form of nihilism or quietism? It is tempting to conclude that, once decrelated, nothing at all would remain of the self as an ethical agent in even the most attenuated sense, thus making the notion of an ‘ethics’ of decreation self-contradictory. If such a conclusion is plainly incompatible with the ideal of activism and practical love Weil lived by, it nonetheless suggests the difficulty in reconciling decreation with traditional philosophical views of the self.

On almost all such views, however, the other exists for the subject primarily as an intentional object of consciousness. It is therefore against an entire philosophical tradition that Levinas insists that what he calls the ethical—something which, as prior to human consciousness, must be ethical in a sense very different from the usual sense of the word—is incommensurable with any conscious perspective a subject may claim vis-à-vis others. For Levinas, all conscious understanding of the other person is little more than a reinforcement of, or re-encounter with, one’s own self. In the end, it is from within oneself that one draws all the knowledge one applies

⁹⁵ Letter to Bousquet, quoted in Vetö, 1994, 171n60: “And she confesses to him: ‘From my childhood I have desired only to receive this revelation ... evil actions are those that hide the reality of things and beings, or those that it would be impossible to do if one truly knew that things and beings existed’”

to the persons one encounters, and it is into oneself again that one reintegrates whatever one thinks one has learned about them and about humanity in general. Levinas sees all conscious efforts to understand the other as necessarily intentional in Husserl's sense of the word—that is, *willful* in the sense that all of my intentional acts, however innocent or impartial they may appear to be, “affirm” the will, broadly interpreted to be the *conatus* or simple will to live. Thus the ego, having “the liveliest feeling of freedom,”⁹⁶ is imprisoned⁹⁷—“in the end affected only by itself. Subjectivity taken as intentionality is founded on auto-affection as an auto-revelation” (OB 111). Conscious understanding of another, insofar as any such understanding is possible and one can personally claim it, automatically precludes establishing the genuine relations with the other *as other* to which Levinas applies the term *ethical*. Thus he often refers to ethics as a “communion” or “communication” in order to emphasize that it is strictly other- as opposed to self-affirming.⁹⁸

It is from subjectivity understood as a self, from the *excidence* and dispossession of contraction, whereby the Ego does not appear but immolates itself, that the relationship with the other is possible as communication and transcendence. ... As an adventure of subjectivity which is not governed by the concern to rediscover oneself, an adventure other than the coinciding of consciousness, communication rests on incertitude ... and is possible only as deliberately sacrificed. Communication with the other can be transcendence only as a dangerous life, as a fine risk to be run.⁹⁹

⁹⁶ The phrase is from Schelling's *Philosophical Investigations*.

⁹⁷ See SWA 69-70, and Chapter 8 below.

⁹⁸ OB 118-121. In fact, ethics (in Levinas sense of the word) does even more than this: it is a “communication” that brings the very world we share into being. See TI 73, 252.

⁹⁹ Levinas, “Substitution,” BPW 92; cf. OB 118, 120. See also Robert Bernasconi, “What is the question to which ‘substitution’ is the answer?” in Critchley and Robert Bernasconi 2002, 236: “Communication with the other is transcendence only in so far as the sovereignty of consciousness is displaced.” The “unusual” word *excidence* translates the French *l'excidence*, “extirpation, destruction” (BPW 183n38). As for *contraction*, Levinas writes: it is “an incredible withdrawal into fullness, without any detachment from self, ... an impossibility of slipping away, a responsibility anterior to any free commitment” (BPW 87). One's world, once filled wide with future prospects, shrinks to a narrow exigency in which the other requires one's sole attention and responsibility right now. On contraction, see below, section 1.3.

But if the ethical subject is not fundamentally a consciousness vis-à-vis the other, then what is it? Levinas's surprising answer is that subjectivity itself is *responsibility*.

Levinas's ethical metaphysics of responsibility provides a foundation for Weil's controversial and ambiguous notion by giving us a way to see decreation—in its primordial form, so to speak—as the condition for ordinary human ethical subjectivity. The argument will be that decreation is essentially equivalent to what Levinas calls *substitution*.¹⁰⁰ Substitution is not an *act*, something one does, but a trope for the *fact*, as Levinas claims, that the self is *created* already responsible to every other person—responsible even for the other's responsibility. Levinas continually emphasizes creation *ex nihilo* as the best description of how we come to be the ethical subjects we are, because no consciousness of the 'how' is in fact possible. Nothing more can be said about it than that we just happen to come into the world 'that way'. Subjectivity does not 'happen' to a pre-existing subject. One is instead *produced* as a subject in the encounter with the other. Simply to be a subject is, for Levinas, to be *already* substituted for every other, already responding, answering for him or her in everything. Substitution thus serves as the context within which decreation, in some inchoate form, becomes a truly plausible basis for all of human subjective experience. Conversely, as the basis of subjectivity, decreation cannot be quite so strange a concept as one imagines on first hearing. In the course of elucidating substitution as the primordial condition for human selfhood, Levinas therefore provides something like a phenomenology of the decreative state.

In many of Levinas's later works one can find passages that seem to justify viewing substitution from a decreative perspective, even giving it a religious inflection reminiscent of Weil's, although not of course an explicitly Christian one: "As a responsible I, I never finish

¹⁰⁰ Levinas discusses substitution at length in two places: Chapter 4 of *Otherwise than Being, or Beyond Essence* (1974), and in the somewhat earlier essay, "Substitution" (1968), on which the chapter in *Otherwise Than Being* is based (BPW 79-95).

emptying myself of myself. ... The religious discourse prior to all religious discourse ... is the 'here I am,' said to my neighbor to whom I am given over" (GWCM 73, 75). "The problem of transcendence and of God and the problem of subjectivity ... go together" (OB 17). "The deposition [or *abdication*] by the I of its sovereignty as an I ... signifies the ethical, but probably also the very spirituality of the soul."¹⁰¹ "What is at stake for the self, in its being, is not to be" (OB 117). And finally, as early as *Totality and Infinity*, we find Levinas writing that subjectivity is to be defined by its ability to "renounce itself by itself, renounce itself without violence, cease the apology for itself." He then assures us, much as Weil does in contrasting decreation with destruction, that this "would not be a suicide nor a resignation, but would be love" (TI 253).

Comparing decreation with substitution requires that we see human relations in a very different light than we are accustomed to, as when Weil implies that one's very *existence* as a human individual depends on one's relations with others in a deeply radical way:

He who treats as equals those who are far below him in strength really makes them a gift of *the quality of human beings*, of which fate has deprived them. As far as it is possible for a creature, he reproduces the original generosity of the Creator with regard to them. ... He who, being reduced by affliction to the state of an inert and passive thing, returns, at least for a time, to the state of a human being through the generosity of others; such a one, if he knows how to accept and feel the true essence of this generosity, *receives at the very instant a soul begotten exclusively of charity*. ... To treat our neighbor who is in affliction with love is something like baptizing him.¹⁰²

¹⁰¹ "The Bad Conscience and the Inexorable" in GWCM 177, my gloss.

¹⁰² WG 88, 89-90, emphasis added. Another example: "Through compassion we can put the created, temporal part of a creature in communication with God. It is a marvel analogous to the act of creation itself" (FLN 103).

For Levinas, too, I become an individual, a “subject,” only in relation to other people, but he goes further than Weil in detailing a mechanism—more accurately, a phenomenology—that makes responsibility toward others the basis of subjectivity. Essentially, Levinas reverses the orientation of Weil’s example: with regard to what I owe the other, I am *never* in a position of strength; the other is *always* “stronger” than I am in the sense that she unrelentingly places me in her debt. My becoming a subject coincides with my being *subjected* to the other from the very beginning. Levinas calls this “persecution,” in something like the ordinary sense of submitting to a greater power, except that the power is solely that which others have of continually forcing me back to my responsibility, my ability to respond, a responsibility that thus remains mine and mine alone. Inexplicably, because prior to anything I can remember—from a “time before time,” is how Levinas phrases it—I am already substituted for my neighbor without ever having chosen it, quite apart from whatever the laws of necessity or social convention may dictate.¹⁰³

At no time, then, can I ever honestly go back to the same self after encountering the other, to rest at home with myself, comfortable in the familiar consciousness of knowing who I am—for always I find the other already there, challenging my very existence as a self from within my own walls, through the medium of my own world, forcing me to redefine myself once again vis-à-vis my response to her. The other, apart from any move she makes to communicate to me explicitly, or any feeling of obligation on my part, imposes on me a response-ability to all of her misfortunes and faults. According to Levinas, this pre-conscious obligation defines me as a subject by assigning to me a perspective and a duty that is unique to me and nontransferable. I am *identified*

¹⁰³ Since we are called by the other as ethical subjects “prior” to being selves with memories of a past, we cannot recall ever having chosen to be responsible. The priority mentioned here is not to be understood as temporal. Levinas’s main point is a transcendental one: the other’s call to respond is the basic condition for one’s being a self, in the sense that the life of the human subject derives its whole meaning from the ethical encounter with the other. Thus while I am obviously unaware of having committed myself in responsibility to every other, I can look back on a past occasion when I felt obligated to help a complete stranger and ask myself if my doing so had any ultimate meaning, a question that need have nothing to do with the psychological, sociological, or historical origins of my act. It is the ultimate *meaning* of the acts we call ethical (in the *ordinary* sense) that Levinas addresses through his own very different notion of *the ethical* as something “prior” to time itself.

as the person in *this* place at *this* instant in time confronted by *this* person in need, to whom I am obligated at the very least to *pay attention*. My true identity is a “non-identity”¹⁰⁴ imposed on me without my conscious consent, for if it is true (to the Good) it is *impersonal* in Weil’s sense of the word: I am a neighbor indifferently to every person I meet with the same indifference or lack of discrimination as an emerald is green. The other assigns to me the unique and unavoidable task of acknowledging her as literally no one else can, simply because no one else has exactly the same relation to her in her suffering, in this particular time and place, as I do. No one else can substitute *for me* as the person uniquely able to substitute *for her* by recognizing her here and now as another mortal like herself, someone with whose sufferings I am at least always *capable* of identifying here and now, no matter who she is. This capacity for identifying with the other—this source of my ‘identity’ in my ‘identifying-with’—is, for Levinas, what it means to be a human subject.

Subjectivity in itself is being thrown back on oneself. This means concretely: accused of what the others do or suffer, or responsible for what they do or suffer. The uniqueness of the self is the very fact of bearing the fault of another. ... I am one and irreplaceable, one inasmuch as irreplaceable in responsibility. (OB 102, 103)

Accordingly, one might say that there is nothing more nor less to our subjectivity than our *bearing one another’s burdens*, even to the extent of taking responsibility for one another’s faults, simply insofar as they are human faults. Hence subjectivity has a purely ethical foundation: the subject results from one’s being called *by* every other to be responsible *for* every other, an idea Levinas often expresses in the words of Dostoyevsky’s character Father Zosima (who is quoting his own brother) from *The Brothers Karamazov*: “Each of us is responsible before everyone, for everyone and for everything, and I more than the others.” Or, in Levinas’s hyperbolic language,

¹⁰⁴ See Levinas’s essay, “No Identity” in CP 141-51.

“under accusation by everyone, the responsibility for everyone goes to the point of substitution. A subject is a hostage” (OB 112).

Substitution means that ethically the boundary between myself and the other dissolves, if only to be formed again, in a continual recurring, so that however unique we are as two different perspectives on the world, however unequal we may be in terms of worldly advantages or powers, preconsciously I find it impossible to distinguish her wellbeing from mine. If one makes this a conscious realization vis-à-vis the other, then it is clearly a form of self-denial comparable to the annihilation-of-self Weil associates with decreation.¹⁰⁵ The resemblance to Levinas is most striking in passages such as the following, in which Weil writes that the person “from whom the act of generosity proceeds can only behave as he does if his thought *transports him into the other*. ... [He] accepts to be diminished by concentrating on an expenditure of energy, which will not extend his own power but will only *give existence to* a being other than himself, who will exist independently of him” (WG 90, emphasis added). Weil goes so far as to express the process described here as “consenting” to one’s own “destruction” (WG 91) in favor of the other’s “creation.”¹⁰⁶ Without the emphasis on “destruction,” the image of being “transported into the other” could easily be dismissed as hyperbolic sentimentality. Decreation is something the other *calls* me to—a call integral to the ordinary course of life, although no less “supernatural” for all

¹⁰⁵ For Simone Weil, one’s kenotic self-denial is meant to be a very general *intentional* response (or *semi-intentional*, since one cannot consciously *will* it) to an absent God’s love, whereas for Levinas, self-denial as substitution is a non-relational (because prior to consciousness) response to an ethical “command” represented by the face of the neighbor before me. Levinas does sometimes use religious language to describe the moral force of the face, calling it the “trace” of the God who has “passed by”: “The revealed God of our Judeo-Christian spirituality maintains all the infinity of his absence, which is in the personal ‘order’ itself. He shows himself only by his trace, as is said in Exodus 33. To go toward Him is not to follow this trace which is not a sign; it is to go toward the others who stand in the trace of illeity” (CP 107). Levinas’s term “illeity” is discussed in “Phenomenon and Enigma” (CP 69-72) and later herein (Chapter 4).

¹⁰⁶ “Whatever a man may want, in cases of crime as in those of the highest virtue, in the minutest preoccupations as in the greatest designs, the essence of his desire always consists in this, that he wants above all things to be able to exercise his will freely. To wish for the existence of this free consent in another, deprived of it by affliction, is to transport oneself into him; it is to consent to affliction oneself, that is to say to the destruction of oneself” (WG 91).

that.¹⁰⁷ While it is not yet clear what the call calls me to do in practice, or even where it comes from,¹⁰⁸ it should be evident that decreation, like substitution, amounts to an ethical relation to the other which, far from privileging my being over against the other's, deliberately reverses the priority I naturally give to self-preservation. But how does such a reversal become concrete? Must one literally make a physical sacrifice of oneself? Weil is not saying any such thing. For good reason she is reluctant to give us an explicit formula for this reversal of priorities, although she thereby leaves us somewhat in the dark as to its nature.

Levinas's answer might be that, on one level, there is no need for us actually to *do* anything: the reversal is already the essence of what it means to be a self. Subjectivity is already to be substituted for the other. Whatever it may subsequently entail in terms of action, substitution is not something one wills or even does; it is the very essence of human selfhood. In Levinas, therefore, we find not merely striking parallels with Simone Weil's thought, but a way of understanding decreation as in some sense the basic ingredient or fulfilment of ethical subjectivity.

For Levinas the other *as other* is beyond the reach of consciousness. One cannot be *conscious* of the other as truly other, since to be conscious of anything is to give it at least a minimal *meaning*—if nothing else, the meaning of its being 'something in the world besides oneself'—and this is already to transform it into what Levinas calls the *same*, however 'other' than oneself one may take it to be. Consciousness by definition makes the other a part of oneself,¹⁰⁹ and thereby "the

¹⁰⁷ Weil's use of the word "supernatural" to refer to human virtues such as compassion or patience goes beyond usual Christian practice. See for example FLN 89, 91, 210, 264, 323, 335. It is not synonymous with 'miraculous' (N 277). Levinas deliberately avoids such language.

¹⁰⁸ Perhaps to speak of it as calling me *to* something *in practice* is already to betray the idea behind the calling, which is that it is preconscious and therefore cannot call me to any particular thing prior to my heeding the call. Only in my response to the call do I discover what it is I am called to do.

¹⁰⁹ Both in the sense that this is how Levinas defines consciousness, and in the sense that what consciousness does is define things as 'this rather than that', turning them into parts of one's world.

negation of the other.”¹¹⁰ On the other hand, I am already substituted or *assigned*, prior to any conscious commitment, to an other who, in his or her *otherness*, is “incommensurable” with my consciousness—for this assignment is the very foundation of commitment, of ethics, even of consciousness in general (OB 100-101). In no other way could we know anything about an other *as* other except through being assigned to them as responsible for them. It is not possible to *become* conscious of alterity, since once one is conscious of anything it is no longer strictly *other*. Thus responsibility is the origin of subjectivity as a relation to others: prior to all human ethics in the usual sense, prior even to consciousness itself, one is *already assigned* as responsible for the other to whom one is to relate oneself. It is the other who “assigns the self to be a self” by assigning the self *to* the other, and the self comes into being only through its being assigned, substitutable for every other without exception. This self is what Levinas refers to as the *oneself* (OB 106). It cannot be emphasized enough that the oneself ‘happens’ *otherwise than* as act of consciousness. It is *prior to* consciousness, if by ‘prior to’ we mean *an-archically*, without beginning or principle. We cannot understand substitution as a willful temporal act on the part of a conscious subject, since it is what makes subjectivity possible in the first place, prior to all conscious action.¹¹¹ Hence it is not something of which in general I am even aware.

Opposed to substitution, although obviously necessary, is our freedom to give our own meaning to things, to turn the unfamiliar and strange into the familiar and same, a freedom Levinas calls *spontaneity*. Thus the “strangeness of the Other, his irreducibility to the I, to my thoughts and my possessions, is precisely accomplished as a *calling into question* of my spontaneity, as ethics” (TI 43). In other words, ethics is the expression of the vulnerability of every aspect of my world to being called into question by the other at any moment, since all of it,

¹¹⁰ Vetö 1994, 21: “an imaginary act is sinful because in being unaware of them, one violates the boundaries of another being. We have finally reached the point where personal and autonomous existence, that is to say, the self, appears in its true sense: the negation of the other.”

¹¹¹ As mentioned earlier, the priority indicated here is not necessarily temporal—in fact, *cannot* be so, if we mean by temporal that it can be assimilated into a time-consciousness, made part of the ‘same’ time-world. The point is that consciousness depends on the encounter with alterity, not the other way around.

as ‘my world,’ is a product of my spontaneity. When Simone Weil claims that “chance can deprive me of everything that I call ‘I,’” she is acknowledging the same vulnerability to being called into question, a vulnerability which, in her essay “The Love of God and Affliction” (SWR 439-468),¹¹² she connects with the ever-present possibility of undergoing the experience of extreme suffering. Affliction always has three indispensable components: physical pain, mental or spiritual suffering, and social “degradation” such as that experienced by the persecuted and the outcast (SWR 440-41, 454). The role of suffering in Weil’s thought is therefore hardly gratuitous. Its philosophical importance as the principal concrete evidence of the immeasurable depth of human vulnerability becomes even clearer in Levinas than in Weil, with his claim that my vulnerability, my susceptibility to being called into question even to a point threatening the existence of my world, is the source of my responsibility and of my very self as assigned. Aside from its responsibility for others, according to Levinas, the self possesses nothing it can call its own, not even its own *being* as a self, much less its *well-being*. As responsible but without being, the self *is not*. Nothing teaches this more forcefully than pain. Weil considered most if not all of our suffering to be the form Necessity takes when we desire anything other than the Good, including existence, hence it is our “punishment” for desiring to *be*, since the Good *is not*: “Our sin consists in wanting to be, and our punishment is that we believe we possess being. Expiation consists in desiring to cease to be; and salvation consists for us in perceiving that we are not” (FLN 218). But only to the extent that we perceive ourselves as pure responsibility for the other and as nothing else, as having no other being, do we achieve as much right to exist as we can possess in this life. Levinas expresses this as the willingness to take on a “‘pure born,’ for nothing” suffering for the other’s suffering. Utterly gratuitous, its justification “stops at me” (OB 196n21), even while it threatens to turn me “into a thing” (TI 238), as Weil similarly expresses it

¹¹² Abridged in *Waiting for God* (WG 67-82 = SWR 439-453).

in a number of passages from her essay on the *Iliad*.¹¹³ For Levinas, as well as for Weil, suffering is ambiguous: both a “dead end” and an opening to self-overcoming in the form of “*patience*—the passivity of undergoing” (TI 238).¹¹⁴

1.2 Decreation and Desire

If anything is destroyed in decreation it is the will, and yet it might seem that “*desiring to cease to be*” remains a willful act. But as Weil sees it, “desire is always suffering,” and suffering, as she usually applies the word, is not willful. Desire is suffering because it is of the essence of desire that “it is unsatisfied” (FLN 284). It is not hard to believe that desiring to *cease to be* could be a form of suffering: as long as one still *is*, one suffers from continuing to be what one longs not to be. I want to compare this desire for a moment to the extreme form of suffering Weil calls *affliction*, without implying that the experiences are in any way equivalent.

[Affliction] is quite a different thing from simple suffering. It takes possession of the soul and marks it through and through with its own particular mark, the mark of slavery. ... Affliction is an uprooting of life, a more or less attenuated equivalent of death, made irresistibly present to the soul by the attack or immediate apprehension of physical pain.¹¹⁵

¹¹³ “He is living, he has a soul, yet he is a thing. A strange being is that thing which has a soul, and strange the state of that soul. Who knows how often during each instant it must torture and destroy itself in order to conform? The soul was not made to dwell in a thing; and when forced to it, there is no part of that soul but suffers violence” (“*The Iliad*, Poem of Might,” SWR 155, SWA 165, IC 25-26).

¹¹⁴ For Levinas on suffering, see also the important essay “Useless Suffering” in *Entre Nous*, to which we will return in subsequent chapters.

¹¹⁵ “The Love of God and Affliction,” SWR, 439-440.

In affliction only a very small part of the soul, the infinitesimal uncreated or “supernatural” part, mentioned earlier,¹¹⁶ has the ability to consent that the experience continue if such be God’s will. Here *consent* refers to acceptance of the nothingness of the created self, as noted above. Aside from that tiny ember of pure love of God¹¹⁷—or, we might say, of the Good, since affliction endangers nothing if not one’s belief that there is something good anywhere in the world or out of it—one cannot find within oneself the strength to consent to affliction. The overwhelming desire that one’s affliction come to an end is the reason affliction turns one into “stone,” so focused on that single longing that one is insensitive to one’s own integrity as a self, to the presence of others, to the entire world outside of one’s pain. Very few of us ever experience anything so extreme. Why then does Weil place so much emphasis on it? It is because for Weil affliction is the surest sign that redemption, if anything deserving the name exists, lies in the only part of the soul that can survive affliction, if anything does—the infinitesimal “uncreated” part of the soul that passively consents to the truth that apart from God one is nothing. Acceptance of affliction is, as it were, the extreme limit of decreation, the furthest one can go in self-abnegation before the soul is utterly destroyed. If the nullity of all that one calls one’s own is the more obvious in affliction, nevertheless in all forms of decreative suffering we do not so much give up our will as realize that the will *is not*—and therefore that we cannot fail to ‘give it up’ unless we *choose* to fail. Repeatedly Weil insists that the will has no real existence; we must actively *imagine* that we have such a thing before we can even be in the (spiritually unenviable) position of having to give it up. But giving it up is merely acknowledging that it is only the product of our imagination.

If decreation is consenting to the fact that the will is nothing, then once again this is evidence that one cannot possibly *will* decreation. Decreation is a passive consent that might be described as a form of *waiting*—for if it cannot be willed, then the ability to give one’s consent must come as an unexpected gift. From where does the gift come? Without hesitation Weil would say that it

¹¹⁶ See p. 59 above.

¹¹⁷ In both senses of the genitive, objective and possessive.

comes from God. Weil's answer might satisfy a Christian believer, but it leaves open the question of the relation such a gift has to the self. What is the 'self' that receives this gift? Might this self be just as illusory as the free will that seems to be part of God's gift of creation?¹¹⁸ Subjectivity (which is not the same thing as selfhood¹¹⁹) would then be the product of one's consent to nullity. This is essentially Levinas's answer—one becomes a *subject* by allowing the Other momentarily to eclipse the *self* that one previously took oneself to be—although radically Levinas refers the source of this subjectivity not to God but to *every other person we meet*. Nevertheless, it is the same gift: the gift of “non-being” or “non-identity” one receives through the act of giving priority to the Other—that is, *consenting* to the other person's greater right to a place in the sun, greater than one's own not on some objective scale of values, but in the sense that one's own responsibility to them cancels every consideration (on one's own part) of the other's responsibilities. In the encounter with the other, one becomes a “hostage” to them, consenting non-reciprocally to “a passivity no ‘healthy’ will can will.”¹²⁰ The idea would seem to be that, in spite of oneself, purely as a result of one's encounter with the other, one experiences a self-emptying which is both gratuitous and beneficial, *like* a gift. It is so gratuitous that the other gives the ‘gift’ unknowingly. It is beneficial in that, from the point of view of decreation, one always needs desperately to rid oneself of the self, whether one knows it or not.

Decreative consent is nothing if not the purified desire for this gift, the gift of the Good. This means, not desire for particular good things we might have a chance of acquiring for ourselves or

¹¹⁸ “‘Give me my portion,’ that is the original sin. Give me free will, the choice between good and evil. Is not this gift of free will the creation itself? What is creation from the point of view of God is sin from the point of view of the creature” (FLN 211).

¹¹⁹ The main difference would seem to be that subjectivity is impersonal, while selfhood is not. The subject is passively created by response-ability to the other, whereas the self derives from the pre-ethical activity of enjoyment (see Introduction above, p. 51).

¹²⁰ “No Identity,” in *Collected Philosophical Papers* (CP 149). ‘Healthy’ therefore seems to be meant ironically here.

for others, in that way ‘satisfying’ our ‘desires,’ as we tend to say, but desire for a good “*outside the world*” that one can desire only by renouncing everything else as an object of desire.¹²¹

There is a reality outside the world, that is to say, outside space and time, outside man’s mental universe, outside any sphere whatsoever that is accessible to human faculties. Corresponding to this reality, at the center of the human heart, is the longing for an absolute good, a longing which is always there and is never appeased by any object in this world. (“Draft for a Statement of Human Obligations,” SWA, 201-2)

This absolute good is beyond anything we can imagine, whether in this world or out, either for ourselves or for others.¹²² To try to imagine it is idolatry, for this good outside the world *is* God, *the Good* itself: “God is the Good. He is neither a thing nor a person nor a thought. But in order to grasp him we have to conceive him as a thing, a person, and a thought” (*FLN* 300). From a philosophical standpoint, some have found the notion of a desire for a good “outside the world” problematic. Peter Winch, for example, asks, “How could there be anything analogous to a desire the object of which cannot intelligibly be said to be attained or possessed by anybody, as is the case with the good?”¹²³ Not knowing what else to do with it, critics have been tempted to relegate it to Weil’s “mystical” side and leave it at that. But let us see how Levinas lends a philosophical understanding to this very idea. It turns out that the desire or “longing” Weil speaks of here is quite close to what Levinas means by “metaphysical desire.”

¹²¹ In this respect, it might be compared to Kierkegaard’s “purity of heart is to will one thing,” which might safely be construed as “to *desire* one thing.”

¹²² “We must consent to Good, not to some particular good that we can grasp, that is representable, nor to something that we represent to ourselves as being Good, but by giving our unconditional consent to absolute Good” (N 404).

¹²³ Winch, 1989, 125. More emphatically: “since the whole point of her conception of a ‘negative sovereign good’ is that it will make no sense to speak of an agent as gaining possession of it, it cannot be a possible object of desire” (Winch 1989, 127).

Metaphysical desire might be identified as the idea in *Totality and Infinity* (1961) that comes closest to anticipating Levinas's formative concept of substitution, first introduced in an essay of that name (1968) which became the substance of the central chapter of his second major work, *Otherwise Than Being* (1974). In *Totality and Infinity*, metaphysical desire is essentially defined as the desire to be in relation to the neighbor, an *always unsatisfied* longing to bridge a distance between oneself and the other that can never actually be bridged. "Distance" in this context is for Levinas a metaphor for the otherness of the other. While one can have a relation with the other as an object of one's consciousness, this can never be a relation with the *otherness* of the other, with the other *as other*. Metaphysical desire is for all practical purposes analogous to what Weil means by the impossible love one has for a Good beyond the world, a desire she implies can never be satisfied.

Weil's claim that one should love nothing in this world so much as one would love the Good were the Good to exist, means that the Good we should love must be something other than an existent. Thus if the Good "exists" anywhere, it is *necessarily* "outside the world"—that is, not in *another* world, but 'worldlessly.' The Good is *beyond being*, in the sense that it is neither itself a being, nor something found within beings. Nor is it the 'work' of Being. To discover the Good—which means simply to believe in it—one must think, or rather *live*, against the grain of ontological thinking. In practice this means giving up attachment to 'things' in order to love, or live for, only the Good itself, at which point questions about existence simply do not "matter." They become irrelevant to what now has sole *meaning*, the unattainable Good itself.

So I relinquish the totality of worldly things for the sake of the good. ... But—it will be asked—does the good exist? What does it matter? the things of this world exist, but they are not the good. Whether the good exists or not, there is no other good than the good. And what is this good? I have no idea—but what does it matter? It is that whose name alone, if I attach my

thought to it, gives me the certainty that the things of this world are not goods. If I know nothing more than that name I have no need to know any more, provided only that I know how to use it in this way. (FLN 315-16)

If things in general do not matter, it is solely because only the Good matters. The Good is not a thing. It is more like the ideal object of the pure desire for *meaning* in the sense that, for example, one desires *nothing but meaning* when trauma substitutes a void for a once-meaningful world.¹²⁴

It is precisely in its this-world unattainability that the Good is desirable. It is something whose essence is, simply, that of *the desirable* apart from any object *of* desire. To desire the Good is nonetheless to be assured of possessing, in some sense, the object desired, for “the desire for good is itself a good” (FLN 317). “If the desire for good equals the possession of good, the desire for good is the producer of good, that is to say it produces the desire for good” (FLN 310).¹²⁵ In *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas suggests virtually the same idea when he contrasts ordinary *needs*, which are capable of being satisfied, with *desires*, which are not: “metaphysical desire ... cannot be satisfied. ... It is like goodness—the Desired does not fulfill it, but deepens it. ... a generosity nourished by the Desired ... for it nourishes itself, one might say, with its hunger” (TI 34).¹²⁶ The Desired nourishes desire by feeding one’s very desire for it. Similarly, Weil sees the desire for good as equivalent to “acquiring” the very thing desired, namely the Good. She, no more than Levinas, means that one actually possesses the Good, except in the form of one’s *desire* for the Good.

¹²⁴ On the void, see below, p. 122.

¹²⁵ There is a striking similarity here to Levinas’s claim that welcoming the other (that is, desiring the other) *produces* what Levinas calls Infinity, which is his word for what makes the Other an *other* to me by disrupting my Same (TI 26-27).

¹²⁶ For Levinas’s important distinction between *desire* and *need* see the Introduction above, pp. 52-53.

All I can do is to desire the good. But whereas all other desires are sometimes effective and sometimes not, according to circumstances, this one desire is always effective. The reason is that, whereas the desire for gold is not the same thing as gold, the desire for good is itself a good. If the day comes when all the desire in my soul is detached from the things of this world and directed wholly and exclusively towards the good, then on that day I shall possess the sovereign good. Will it be said that I shall be left without an object of desire? No, because desiring in itself will be my good. Then will it be said that I shall still have something left to desire? No, because I shall possess the object of my desire. Desire itself will be my treasure. (FLN 316).

The “sovereign good” Simone Weil says she would possess were all her desires directed only to the good without remainder, is itself the pure desire for the good. Paradoxically, to “possess” the good is exactly the same thing as to *desire* it with all of one’s soul. This state of affairs is clearly not the same as satisfaction of a need in the ordinary sense. In fact, as we noted earlier, Weil would insist that a perfect relation to the good must be an impersonal relation in which the self with all of its needs would play no part. One would love the Good with the same unconscious abandon with which an emerald simply *is* green or the sun indiscriminately shines “on good and evil alike.” Such a relation would maintain itself solely by its insatiable desire for the good and nothing else.

With Descartes’ Third Meditation in mind, Levinas calls desire “a thought destined to think more than it can think.”¹²⁷ The equation of desire with a *thought* should perhaps not be taken too literally. Desire is much more than “a thought,” perhaps closer to what Levinas elsewhere calls the “event.”¹²⁸ He might have written, with approximately the same meaning, that *desire desires more than it desires*—that, is, more than it can be aware of desiring. Levinas then continues: “The

¹²⁷ “God and Philosophy,” GWCM 67.

¹²⁸ As in TI 21 and OB 3.

infinite in the finite, the more in the less, which is accomplished by the idea of Infinity, is produced as Desire—not a Desire that the possession of the Desirable slakes, but the Desire for the Infinite which the desirable arouses rather than satisfies” (TI 50).¹²⁹ Levinas does more here than give us an echo of Weil’s notion that the desire for the good is satisfied by producing the good which is desire itself. His more nuanced analysis of desire suggests a way in which to understand Weil’s Platonic idea that we *naturally* desire the Good: it is the result of our being already *created* to desire the *neighbor’s* good. As we noted earlier (p. 64), Levinas would be as insistent as Weil, if for different reasons, on the use of the word “created.” For Levinas, this desire just *is*, from the very inception of the subject, what it means to be a subject. In particular, it is what it means to be a subject *with a body*. “[The] oneself is ... incarnated in order to offer itself, to suffer and to give” (OB 105). To offer itself to what? To the Good? Yes, but in the person of the neighbor. We are incarnated as ethically *exposed* in the sense of available for service on behalf of each and every other. This is not an attempt to explain why we have bodies. Levinas’s point is rather about meaning: the ethical is what *gives meaning to* the concrete fact of our incarnation, and conversely, having a body that can serve others *gives meaning to* the ethical. Neither incarnation nor ethics would be meaningful without this relationship between them.¹³⁰ This contrasts with theodicies that explain the existence of evil in a world created by a good God through the expedient of explaining away the body—for example by declaring everything physical to be an illusion.

To be a subject with a body is to be exposed to the *accusation* of the other, “exposed as oneself in the accusative” before one ever acquires an identity in the nominative (OB 106). In other words, the self is not *identified*, given its “identity,” by name or by personal history, or even by its unique perspective on the world, but *comes to be* what it is solely through the very fact that

¹²⁹ In later works, Levinas speaks less of “desire” in favor of an unusual notion of “obsession.”

¹³⁰ As we explore in greater depth in Chapter 3, this ‘transcendental argument’ is a key to Levinas’s phenomenological approach.

it can say to the neighbor, “Here I am.”¹³¹ The expression is much more incisive in the French, which keeps the accusative case of the personal pronoun: “*Me voici*.”¹³² For Levinas, this is the very definition of subjectivity: “The word *I* means *here I am*, answering for everything and everyone” (OB 114). Against Hobbesian “state of nature” arguments, Levinas makes a reference in this context to non-being that is reminiscent of Weil: “All the transfers of sentiment which theorists of original war and egoism use to explain the birth of generosity ... could not take root in the ego were it not, in its entire being, *or rather its entire nonbeing*, subjected not to a category, as in the case of matter, but to an unlimited *accusative*, that is to say, persecution, self, hostage, already substituted for others.”¹³³ We are generous because subjectivity is responsibility for the other.

Levinas’s contention that the original unity of the embodied self, prior to the ego that names and identifies itself or can tell a story about itself, is a unity produced by the call to responsibility, helps ground Weil’s frequently misunderstood notion of “Christian materialism.” The original unity of the self, claims Levinas, is “a passivity more passive than the passivity of matter” (OB 113). He means that the self, unlike passive matter, is *vulnerable* to the other to its very foundations, simply in its capacity for *action*, through having a body that can answer for the other’s actions by responding with its own. Its greater “passivity” or vulnerability as compared to matter is paradoxically the result of its greater ability to act, at least insofar as it can act for the other. Because this vulnerability is not a contingent loss of control but constitutes the very selfhood of the self, the self finds itself to be *other* even to itself (but with an otherness subordinate to the alterity of the other person). Incarnated from the very beginning, and for that reason capable of action out in a world with others, one finds oneself called *outside* of oneself, held to account even before one has had a chance to commit oneself consciously, much less feel

¹³¹ And only *thus* by its character and its ability to keep a promise. Cf. Paul Ricoeur, *Oneself As Another*, Fifth Study, especially Ricoeur 1992, 118-25.

¹³² The Hebrew, *hineni*, usually translated imperfectly as “Here I am,” is unequivocally in the *accusative*.

¹³³ Levinas, “Substitution” (BPW, 91), emphasis added. Cf. OB 118.

‘at home’ with such a commitment. The ability to be called outside of oneself seems to be unique to human being. For Levinas, our bodies are material proof of an infinite ethical debt we incur simply in having been born, since embodiment proves that we are created (with the ability) to be responsible to one another. Or perhaps it would be more accurate to say that for Levinas, our material incarnation provides not so much *proof* but all the *meaning* we could possibly desire in order to justify the meaningfulness of ethics. This way of putting it, if Weil were to adopt it, might help clear her of the charge of nihilism or lack of ethical freedom often leveled at her because of her constant emphasis on inflexible material necessity. On Levinas’s view, necessity in fact becomes the very basis for the responsibility that makes us ethical subjects.

One becomes a self precisely by passing, as Levinas expresses it, from suffering to *expiation*—that is, by taking responsibility even for the other’s responsibility. This “passing” does not occur once and for all, but is a continual *re-currence*. Levinas also calls it *obsession* or *persecution*: “Persecution is not something added to the subjectivity of the subject and his vulnerability; it is the very movement of recurrence. The subjectivity of *the other in the same*, as an inspiration, is the putting into question of all affirmation for-oneself, all egoism born again in this very recurrence” (OB 111). Egoism is continually reborn as the rebirth of the *same*. It is our way of maintaining the sense of the world, our attempt to keep it safe and familiar. But this necessary activity of self-preservation is not what makes one a subject. Rather, subjectivity results from the recurring invasion of our always unfolding self *by the other*, so that we never have a chance to acquire anything we could call our own private space. What makes one a self is the “infinite passion” of responsibility returning again and again, but never allowing the self to come to rest in itself, for the self *is defined* by this recurrence. Recurrence “breaks open the limits of identity,”¹³⁴ and thus one finds one’s “identity” only by allowing the whole notion of identity to be called into question, broken into from outside by a “call” so fundamental that it determines

¹³⁴ “Substitution,” BPW 89. “Recurrence” is defined in the next section and analyzed in detail in Chapter 8.

one's uniqueness entirely without recourse either to one's conscious self or to anything independent of others: "The identity of the same in the 'I' comes to it despite itself from the outside, as an election or inspiration, in the form of the uniqueness of someone assigned" (OB 52).¹³⁵ With this idea, the "core self" with which, according to popular wisdom, one is supposed to "get it touch," evaporates; one cannot "go home" to the "self" without finding the other already there—which is to say that *there is no going home* at all, if this means reclaiming anything one can call one's own. As Hugh Miller expresses it: the other "ceaselessly returns me to myself in recurrence and yet never lets me dwell there as in my domicile ... but sends me instantly back out in service. My home, as it turns out, is already occupied, by the homeless, by the Guatemalan refugee, by the Jewish refugee."¹³⁶

This, for Levinas, is what it means to be fully a self. It is to possess nothing for one's self, absolutely nothing at all, that is not already claimed by the other. To be conscious of being such a self would mean refusing to call anything one's own, refusing all that the world offers in order to love only the Good. In acknowledging that one is fully subject to the other, one would, as Weil says, refuse one's existence, as something having no substance, something behind which there is *nothing*, much less anything to claim as one's own. To say, as Levinas often does, that one's existence belongs primordially to a transcendent good, is another way of saying, as Weil might be more inclined to put it, that it belongs to God. Since behind the transcendent Good there is, literally, *nothing*—for, anything behind the Good, in the sense of grounding it, would thereby transcend the Good—the self is groundless, founded on nothing at all (OB 110).

¹³⁵ However, writes Robert Bernasconi, "[Levinas] would think it a mistake to characterize my being elected as what defines me. The identity of ipseity as recurrence 'breaks open the limits of identity' ["Substitution," BPW 89]. It is the breaking open *of* identity that makes possible sacrifice and responsibility for all, even for my persecutor. 'Uniqueness is without identity' (OB 57). But my lack of identity is not what makes possible substitution: 'it is already a substitution for the other' (OB 57)" (Critchley and Bernasconi 2002, 244). Hence I am 'identified' by my lack of identity, by what disrupts my 'identity'. *Iipseity* is Levinas's term for the self as called by the other, displaced from its resting in the same and familiar.

¹³⁶ Hugh Miller, "Reply to Bernhard Waldenfels, 'Response and Responsibility in Levinas,'" in Peperzak 1995, 57.

1.3 The Subject of No Identity: Beyond Ontology to Decreation

Nothingness has defied Western thought. — Levinas ¹³⁷

For Levinas, the oneself has no identity apart from the other. It does not identify itself by a “coinciding of consciousness” with itself (BPW 92), for the other “alienates” this coinciding continually (CP 145) without thereby alienating me from the other. Instead, “the oneself has to be conceived outside of all substantial coinciding of self with self” (OB 114). The oneself must also be conceived outside of any “dialectic of the self and the other than self” which would allegedly contribute to a hermeneutics of the self as the “character-narrator of its own history.”¹³⁸ In no way a dialectic *of* the self, the relation to the other *makes* one a self in the first place, a self “whose existing consists in identifying itself, in recovering its identity throughout all that happens to it” vis-à-vis the other. The other makes the oneself “the primordial work of identification” (TI 36).

Thus the self is a constant “recurrence” to a position of passivity in the “face” of the other, a passivity Levinas calls the “hither side” (*en-deça*),¹³⁹ his trope for the position prior to consciousness that makes one a subject. Through encountering the other whose mere presence calls for a response, the self is ‘identified’ solely by what Levinas calls *responsibility*, the ability to respond and be available—*response-availability*, if you like¹⁴⁰—an ability that will avoid begging the question of the self as already an agent because it is really a passivity. Explaining how an ability can be a passivity is one purpose of the present section.

It should always be stressed that the responsibility (singular) produced in the encounter with the other person does not result in one’s suddenly deciding to become more things to more peo-

¹³⁷ *God, Death, and Time* (GDT 70).

¹³⁸ Paul Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another* (Ricoeur 1992, 291).

¹³⁹ One could explore possible echoes of this idea in Eastern thought. See, for example, Nishitani’s notion of the “near side” in *Religion and Nothingness* (Nishitani 1982, 70-71).

¹⁴⁰ The term, and to some extent the idea, can be found in Gabriel Marcel, *Being and Having*.

ple. There is no *will* involved in response-availability—for much the same reason as there is no will in decreation. Responsibility (in Levinas’s sense), concerns the primordial relation to *one* other, the Other, who makes one a self. What Levinas calls *justice* (ethics in the usual sense) is concerned with all the other others, hence with responsibilities (plural). “Justice” is the field in which one finds the hard ethical questions philosophers have debated since time immemorial. By contrast, the ethical (in Levinas’s sense)—responsibility (singular)—is intended to be an answer to a single question, totally new to history: in light of Auschwitz, is there any basis for believing that justice has a point, or are we instead “duped by morality” (TI 21)? To constitute an answer to this question, responsibility must signify the contraction of the entire field of justice down to the singular (and therefore hypothetical) situation in which one is face to face only with The Neighbor. Levinas’s claim is that ethics/justice is possible only because something like this contraction takes place at every moment of every conscious individual’s life. In this moment or “instant,”¹⁴¹ one’s wide world of possibilities, largely the work of the imagination, contracts down to a ‘this here, now’ that owes its exigency to the ethical *situation* in which one finds oneself confronted with the pure need to respond to the Other.

Let us note in passing how sharply this contrasts with Heidegger’s notion of *situation* (*Situation*, SZ 232 and §63)—a contrast in which we perhaps see the full extent of his failure to allow room for ethics in any form. In keeping with the Western philosophical tradition, Dasein’s situation belongs solely to *Dasein*. For Levinas, however, ‘my’ situation, the situation that defines me, is the *other’s* situation. It is ‘mine’ only in being the particular situation here and now that I, and no one else, find myself faced with. The situation that the *other* sees as my situation, or the ‘situation’ I imagine myself part of as seen from ‘outside’ in the so-called “view from nowhere,” become relevant only with the considerations of justice. It is beyond or on the hither side of

¹⁴¹ To borrow Kierkegaard’s term. See Kangas 2007, 136-40, for the connection with Levinas.

justice that we must seek the primordial human relation that ultimately gives justice its point, the ethical relation in which *the* single other here before me right now calls me to be a self.

Since Levinas's attempt to *describe* this relation must use ethical vocabulary if he is to avoid inventing his own specialized language, it is inevitable that the description will sometimes sound like ethics in the usual sense—prescriptive rather than descriptive. The reader must always resist the temptation to read it that way. Otherwise the description Levinas is attempting, which I will outline below, simply will not be in accord with either the phenomenological facts or everyday common sense. To anticipate somewhat, it is obvious, for example, that we do not *always* experience a falling away of our expectations and plans—the kind of thing that can happen, for example, when we find ourselves in the midst of a sudden emergency—on *every* occasion in which we encounter another person. And yet, *on the level of the ethical*, prior to conscious experience, this is indeed what must happen in order that there can be ethics in the usual sense—that is, justice—according to Levinas. In every instant, an actual or 'proxy' encounter with the Other effects a momentary displacement of one's world to which it is necessary to make an 'emergency' response in the root sense of *emergency*: relating to that which has just now *emerged*.

What do I mean by a *proxy* encounter with the Other? Every encounter with alterity, even if it consists of the minutest change in what presents itself, calls for a response. In most instances the response is spontaneous and automatic: the minimum adjustment to one's conscious understanding of the world that will maintain the world's familiar coherence. This adjustment is the main work of totalization, and Husserl is historically the innovator in its description. Going far beyond Husserl, however, Levinas not only characterizes every response to alterity as an adjustment to an "excess," to a disturbance of one's world; he claims that the encounter with the Other is defining for it. *Every* experience of alterity is, in some primordial sense, a response to the Other as *person*. Levinas thinks of this as a "metaphysical" claim, not a speculation about the

genesis of human experience. He never suggests, for example, that the experience of alterity ‘begins’ in the encounter with the mother. Since he provides no proof for it, his claim might appear to be based on a value judgment or at best serve as a premise for a transcendental argument: if the Other did not ‘come first’, such an argument might go, then it would be impossible to experience the other at all, much less justify the meaningfulness of ethics. I do not ask the reader to accept this claim at the outset. We consider its plausibility in Chapter 3, after having established a logical basis for Levinas’s axiological-transcendental method as well as laying some additional groundwork in Chapter 2.

For now, the important point is that narrowing the focus to the essence of the ethical in the instant when I encounter alterity makes the ethical inescapable, quite apart from any consciousness of there being a moral problem in the encounter. In Levinas’s words, introducing another value-laden term we will also deal with later, the ethical is “the impossibility of taking any distance and of slipping away from the Good” (OB 112). Normally, one’s totalization of the world creates a distance between oneself and the other. As a result, consciousness necessarily excludes alterity. Hence if all I did was totalize, I would never really meet the other; I would never become a subject. On the other hand, more positively expressed, the totality (the ‘same’) is the medium that alterity requires in order to make its re-entrance every instant.¹⁴² This continual resurgence of disturbance by the other does not produce a dialectic of self and other; *the resurgence is itself the self*. What it produces is *time*. “This recurrence,” writes Levinas, “which one can, to be sure, call negativity (but a negativity antecedent to discourse, the unexceptionable homeland of dialectical negativity), this recurrence by contraction, is the self” (OB 108). Thus the self is a *negation* insofar as the Other causes one’s totalized world to contract, bringing one into proximity with one’s nothingness (Weil) or groundlessness (Levinas) in comparison to the totality in which one continually, but always only momentarily, finds one’s place. But more *positively*,

¹⁴² Could death, then, be the end of all totalizing in an unmitigated and irreversible invasion of alterity?

contraction is responsible for the continual need to reconfigure one's story that gives the self a history.

Short of the effects of extreme trauma, the self normally always finds its way 'home' again: it remembers having been A before it became B, and no matter what happens in between, it always finds a way to connect up A with B again so as to preserve the continuity of history that seems to give the self its substance.¹⁴³ Levinas contests the idea that this is the whole picture, not only as it is inapplicable to extreme cases of trauma or affliction, but as it misrepresents the phenomenon of ordinary time-consciousness.¹⁴⁴ There are everyday, in fact *every-moment* events—"interruptions" or "disturbances"—from which the subject is unable to recover as the same—events that force the subject back, not to what it was before that moment, situated in the supposedly linear timeline of its history, but to the hither side of that history, to what it 'was before' it so much as had a history, *before* or *outside of being*. In effect, the oneself reconstitutes its identity and therefore *its entire history* moment by moment, rather than simply carrying its 'identity' through the course of a continuous flow of history. This is what Levinas means when he writes that "the recurrence to oneself cannot stop at oneself, but goes back to the hither side of oneself A does not, as in identity, return to A, but retreats to the hither side of its point of departure" (OB 114). One is continually forced to remake oneself, in normally miniscule and therefore barely conscious ways, at every instant. The remaking of one's *entire* history is not, of course, consciously experienced (except perhaps at death?). But what is recalled in memory now will not only *not* be identical to what is recalled a moment later; it will be recalled as part of a *different past* in which *everything* has the same potential of being again readjusted. To one's coarse view of time, however, the two 'pasts' will look exactly the same except for one's recent

¹⁴³ "Western thought" characteristically "unites subjectivity and substantiality" (OB 114).

¹⁴⁴ On the effects of affliction on time consciousness and the integrity of the self, specifically in the concentration camps, see Elisabeth Weber, "The Notion of Persecution in Levinas's *Otherwise Than Being or Beyond Essence*," in Peperzak 1995, 69-76.

adjustment, creating the illusion that one carries the same past through time, simply adding on to it at one end.

With only this ever-changing identity to come home to, one is inevitably hostage to whatever seems the least bit foreign (in any sense of the word). It therefore becomes difficult or even impossible to say where the familiar self ends (indeed, what it *is*) and where the not-self begins, the boundary between being and nothingness looms up too close, too soon—at every instant, on one’s very hither side. One is outside of one’s ‘stomping grounds’, one’s territory, before one knows it—each time one even so much as *intends* to communicate with another person, even if only by proxy in adjusting the worldview one thinks of as sharing with him or her.¹⁴⁵ The identifiable self contracts to a point that leaves no room for itself—at least as the same self it was. To *contract*, however, not only means to shrink but also to make an *agreement*. One remains *under contract* with the other who has been the occasion, either immediately or by proxy, for this contraction. The self is responsible not only *to* the other but also *for* the other, answering “for everything and for everyone”—responsible, Levinas says, even for the entirety of creation (OB 125). From being displaced from one’s home identity, one goes to the extreme of having as the identifiable object of one’s responsibility the entire universe. The ethical subject is indeed free—that is, free to accept a responsibility having no discernible limits. Despite its impressive scope, this freedom and its corresponding responsibility are nonetheless incompatible with any feeling of power. Quite the opposite.¹⁴⁶ The idea that one’s freedom is a powerless freedom for responsibility, that the oneself seems to do *nothing but contract*, that there is never any compensating expansion—hence evidently that one might even contract to nothing—is a major problem many readers have with Levinas. Weil might provide some clarity here, even if her view is no easier to accept in light of its unorthodoxy.

¹⁴⁵ “The subject in saying approaches a neighbor in expressing itself, in being expelled [thrust, driven], in the literal sense of the term, out of any locus, no longer *dwelling*, not stomping any ground” (OB 48-49).

¹⁴⁶ For that reason, it is not the freedom of Bergson’s *elan vital*. See Levinas, *On Escape* (OE 53-54).

Against the popular notion that divine omnipotence is omnipresent control, Weil insists that the creation could not have happened at all had not God withdrawn his divine power and presence in order to allow something other than Godself to be: “God does not exercise his all-powerfulness; if he did so, we should not exist, nor would anything else” (N 191). From this it follows, she says, that only by renouncing all claim to power do we imitate Christ. Of course, unlike God on Weil’s view, we do not possess any real power of our own to begin with. While she approved of Francis Bacon’s rule that “knowledge is power,” she understood this as knowledge of Necessity, which to her mind was impossible without the humbling experience of one’s absolute vulnerability to the very object of one’s knowledge. For Weil, true knowledge of Necessity comes only with the realization that as a creature of Necessity one is nothing. Hence one imitates God by renouncing every self-aggrandizing desire for power. This allows what is other than oneself to *be*—to be even in *the very world we construct*, a world God loves as much as we do and in fact more perfectly than we will ever be able to. To imitate God is to beg permission to remove ourselves from his creation so that creation and Creator, even that part of creation which is most intimately our own, will be able to “exchange their secrets” without our interference (N 422). “God renounces—in a sense—being everything. . . . We have got to renounce being something. Herein lies our only good” (N 193).

Specifically, this means restraining the imagination. “Men owe us what we imagine they will give us. We should remit them this debt. To accept that they should be other than the creatures of our imagination is to imitate the renunciation of God; to accept simply that they should *be*. . . . Passion, renunciation of creation transposed on to the human scale” (N 200). By refusing to indulge our imagination in refashioning the neighbor to fit our world, we duplicate, on a comparatively infinitesimal scale, Christ’s Passion within us. “Creation as the production of an appearance which we have got to undo (or is it sin? but can the two be separated?). The

appearance that there is something other than God” (N 228). These appearances are not the appearing *of* anything, since there is nothing ‘behind’ the appearance but the Good that has absented itself in order to allow what appears to appear. To “undo” the appearance is to see the Good, the Love that allowed it to be, *through* the appearance rather than equating the appearance with what we call ‘good’. Our tendency is to see ‘good’ in whatever we happen to desire at the moment, rather than desiring the Good for itself in spite of the appearances. Admittedly the latter is difficult, for if we are paying attention, the appearances, which are not themselves the Good, will more often than not suggest the opposite. Desiring the Good through the appearance, however things appear, amounts to reducing one’s will to the pure desire simply for the Good without associating it with any object—that is, appearance—in this world. It is letting things *be* without our interference.

The subject is given a role in the creation by its unique perspective on the universe, but “preferring itself,” it muddies that perspective by reimagining it as something it can seize for its own ‘good’—that is, comprehend and use for its own purposes. “God loves the perspective of creation which can be seen only from where I stand, and I obscure it” (FLN 72). But to be created simply *is* to know only one’s own perspective, and inevitably one comes to favor it. One must constantly resist this temptation. In the following notebook entry, Weil’s idea seems to become a reflection of Levinas’s notion of *recurrence*. For Weil, Christ’s Passion is not an event that occurred in Palestine at the time of the Roman occupation, but the meaning of an act of Creation that recurs in every instant:

God undoes the harmony of which He is constituted in creating man—a creature which prefers itself to God.

Creation itself is already a Passion.

God is an eternal act which is ever unmaking and remaking itself at the same time. In God, there are eternally and simultaneously perfect and infinite suffering and perfect and infinite joy. (N 560)

What the last line suggests is that even in time consciousness, as Levinas describes it, simply in existing, we imitate God without knowing it. All the more reason to believe that we desire decreation without knowing it. The creature that becomes truly aware of its usurpation *as* usurpation, its appropriation of a world all for itself, automatically desires non-existence. In Levinas this desire is expressed in his trope that we become “hostage” to the other, giving up claim to their space, their time, or anything else that might interfere with their freedom to be. All we can lay claim to, according to Levinas, is responsibility; according Weil, consent. Levinas, too, writes of consenting to one’s vulnerability before the other, a consent to being under accusation (OB 116) which results in the self essentially giving up its “continuity with itself” (CP 147). Compare Weil:

It is wrong to say that God gives gratuitously and that he owes nothing to men. Having created us, he owes us everything.¹⁴⁷ And in fact he gives us everything. But he does not compel us to receive. He asks us to consent to his paying his debt; and we refuse, or we only half consent. Since the creation is an act of love, it is the creation of a faculty of free consent.

What he owes us is to keep us in slavery. What we have to consent to is to be slaves.

If he offered us joy, power, and glory, it would not be in our power to refuse his gifts. He chooses his gifts in such a way that we are free to refuse them.

It is within our power, it is easy, to refuse the cross. (FLN 177-78)

¹⁴⁷ This need not contradict the saying attributed to Pascal, “God owes us nothing,” which only denies that we can demand the good from God *as our right*. For it ought to be sufficient simply to *love* the Good.

What the Good owes us is to keep us enslaved to the Good—that is, to Necessity—which we are quite apart from whatever we will. The sole power we possess is that of giving our consent to this enslavement. Weil does not express her notion of consent in explicitly ethical terms, but to consent to be the slave of the Good is clearly to take *responsibility* for the creation.

To be the slave or hostage of another person is to “substitute” the other’s freedom for one’s own as preferable, thereby leaving the other free for their own responsibilities. It is obvious that one cannot actually take the *place* of the other, so that one’s own substance becomes the other’s substance and one’s entire history is synchronized with theirs. On the other hand, for ethics to settle for less than putting oneself literally in the place of (or on the “site” of) the other’s responsibilities—making them one’s own and *acting* on them in the only way one can, by leaving the other free for them—would be to reduce substitution to a mode of consciousness, merely a way of *thinking about* oneself and one’s place vis-à-vis the other. A third alternative is that substitution might be a relation I have to the other prior to action and passion. Then the self would *be*—that is, would *have its meaning in*—the ethical relation in the same way that Dasein is its being-in-the-world. And this is precisely what Levinas says: “the word *I* signifies *here I am*, answering for everything and for everyone” (OB 114), and again, “the self is the very fact of being exposed under the accusation that cannot be assumed, where the ego supports the others” (OB 118). Such a self is nothing more than “dis-inter-estedness”,¹⁴⁸ not-among-being-ness. Its *being* among beings would make it a nominative if, Levinas claims, the self were not *constituted* from the beginning *in the accusative*, *accused* by the other. To be a subject, it is neither enough nor our fate simply *to be*. One must *be accused*. But to be an accusative rather than a nominative is to be nothing—that is, no thing, not a substantive.

¹⁴⁸ “The disinterestedness [*désintéressement*] suspends essence [that is, Being]” (OB 14).

One might say that putting oneself in the other's place is not an ordinary possibility, but the *impossible* possibility that makes possible the actuality of the subject. For if one knows that one can always go toward the other in anticipation of taking up their suffering—and it is important always to remember that at least initially this means simply acknowledging their vulnerability—one also knows that one will never entirely succeed in reaching them, notwithstanding that it is one's duty nonetheless. One goes toward the other not by conscious will or because it is ontologically necessary but because it is *subjectively* necessary: this is how one becomes a subject, and although we are not conscious of it, we *desire* to become subjects. Undertaking a 'going towards' that always fails is paradoxically the only way in which a human subject can acquire a *meaningful* existence. Subjectivity is the product of a continual attempt and an attendant failure to put oneself in the place of the other. But the Good must be unattainable in order to remain the Good, and in order that the self, as the desire for the unattainable Good, maintain its integrity as a self. "Goodness is ... the sole attribute which does not introduce multiplicity into the One that a subject is, for it [the Good] is distinct from the One. If it showed itself to the one, it would no longer be a goodness in it. Goodness invests me in my obedience to the hidden Good" (OB 118). The Good does not show itself, it *invests* me, it commands me, from outside. 'Do not call anyone good,' Weil, paraphrasing Jesus, might have said. 'Only the Good is good.'¹⁴⁹ This is the sense in which one is good "despite oneself" (OB 56-57), a sense that gives one one's very being. "I *am* by regard for all that is" means: only to the extent that I regard the other as other, I am. I have *being* only in being accused. "The self is the very fact of being exposed under the accusation that cannot be assumed, where the ego supports the others" (OB 118). The "margins of being-in-the-world" (Lacoste) are therefore not simply open terrain waiting to be claimed by the right kind of religious faith.¹⁵⁰ We are not free to put anything we want there—we are not free to

¹⁴⁹ "Why do you call me good? None is good, save one, that is, God" (Mark 10:18, Luke 18:19).

¹⁵⁰ See Jean-Yves Lacoste, *Experience and the Absolute: Disputed Questions on the Humanity of Man*, trans. M. Raftery-Skehan (New York, 2004: Fordham University Press), and R. Reed, "Experience and the

put anything there at all—for the other already occupies those margins. That is what makes them *margins of being*. Beyond being-in-the-world there is only being-a-subject, a “self, a hostage, ... already substituted for the others” (OB 118)—but therefore, at the same time, a nullity in itself. Before the other, one has nowhere else to go—“nowhere to lay one’s head”—except right where one is. Unable to escape, one is hostage—a victim, as we shall now see, of *remorse*.

1.4 Decreation as ‘Remorse’

“Remorse is the trope of the ‘literal sense’ of the sensibility. ...” (OB 125 / AE 161)

If one truly desires non-existence in the way Simone Weil recommends, then one is likely to feel something like *remorse* at the fact that one continues to exist. But Weil, ever mindful of humanity’s tendency to fool itself, is skeptical of the idea of remorse. Here we return to her idea that one should rid oneself of what she calls one’s “personality,” or of what Levinas calls egology.¹⁵¹

To see one’s own misery as something impersonal. To take the ‘I’ out of sin is to uproot it, to take away its vital nourishment. That is why excessive scrupulosity, remorse, a too-detailed examination of conscience, etc., are bad things. The only misery that is really mine is to be nothing; it is the feeling of nothingness. It is the feeling of a negative being. It is affliction which gives the feeling of nothingness, and then only in so far as it is felt neither as an expiation nor as a test. (N 272)

Absolute Other: Why Lacoste Should Look Again at Levinas,” *Journal of Religious Ethics*, 44(3) (September, 2016), 472-494.

¹⁵¹ Mainly in *Entre Nous*. See EN 112, 159-163.

We must not feel remorse on account of bad actions or self-satisfaction on account of good ones: we must look upon that in the same light as insensibility in the face of physical pain. It is a fine thing to overcome physical pain by concentrating the mind; but it is a finer thing still, as in the case of Christ, to keep the supernatural part of the soul outside of the reach of suffering and just leave the sensibility to suffer. Likewise, it is only a minute part of the soul that must look on good and bad actions indifferently. (N 316)

By the “supernatural part of the soul” Weil means the part that is able to consent to its own suffering. An infinitesimal part of the soul must be capable of viewing the rest of the soul from apart, as it were, with a love of the Good strong enough to be indifferent even to its own pain. Even this part of the soul, however, is vulnerable to extreme affliction.

Weil’s negative reference to remorse, understood narrowly as a too self-interested regret over one’s own actions, nonetheless suggest an approach to Levinas’s more positive understanding of remorse, perhaps helping to clarify the unusual meaning he gives the word. As the previous section argued, the self *is* its recurrence as response-availability. In *Otherwise Than Being*, Levinas defines *recurrence* as “the contracting of an ego, going to the hither side of identity, gnawing away at this very identity—identity gnawing away at itself—in a remorse.”¹⁵² What does Levinas mean by *remorse*, contracting, and the striking phrase “identity gnawing away at itself”?

The ordinary sense of remorse might be described as the temporary failure or “break-up” of one’s conscious *self*-understanding as a result of one’s inability to reconnect with or even acknowledge a past self that seems to have done the other an injustice. As Levinas means the word, however, remorse is a trope for the general failure of consciousness to account for the unanticipated intrusion into its world of alterity in any form. The intrusion of alterity cannot be

¹⁵² *La responsabilité pour l’autre ... suggère la passivité absolue d’un soi ... dont la récurrence est ma contraction, une allée en deçà de l’identité, rongant cette identité même—identité se rongant—dans un remords*” (OB 114 / AE 145). Recurrence will be treated in greater detail later, especially in Chapter 8.

anticipated, for consciousness anticipates only what is already familiar and same. Remorse is the difficulty—indeed, impossibility—of ‘coming home to’ what consciousness had constituted as its world before the disruptive intrusion. This failure of consciousness to coincide with itself (OB 115) is a blessing in disguise, however, for the failure just *is* the recognition of alterity, the encounter with the other person as *other*. Only through failure—that is, an inability to integrate the other into the same—is it *possible* for consciousness to recognize something as *other than* itself. Without the ‘remorse’ that goes along with this failure, one would never know that there was anything outside one’s own worldview. The self develops precisely from this failure, hence *the self develops for the very purpose of dealing with alterity*. We do not first have a self and only then subsequently encounter others; we develop a self *in response to* an encounter with what refuses assimilation and yet will not let consciousness go. Thus a kind of “persecution” by the other leads to a “contraction” of the sphere of consciousness, a shrinking or calling into question of present self-reality, which produces a feeling, barely conscious if conscious at all, that one has missed a connection with something having a significance beyond what previously counted as one’s own experience. This affective reaction to alterity, an encounter with the unfamiliar and unsettling accompanied by a kind of homesickness for stability, is what Levinas means by his mildly hyperbolic term *remorse*.

In Weil’s terms, this implies that one’s identity becomes something “impersonal,” something one should *deliberately* “gnaw away at” as though it were nothing important. Remorse in Weil’s sense is the “uprooting” of the I from the positive self-image, now turned bitter, from which it had derived its “vital nourishment” (N 272). For Levinas, this continual uprooting becomes an image of persecution, the very process that makes one a subject.

Consciousness cannot respond to alterity by integrating it seamlessly into its world, for then the experience would not be that of alterity. It can only address it radically, re-creating itself vis-à-vis the other in an unremitting process of decreation (disengagement from its world instigated

by the invasion of the foreign) followed by re-creation (restoration of its world with minimal adjustments). Levinas first explains this process in terms of remorse in *Otherwise Than Being*:

Subjectivity ... is both the relation and the term of the relation. But it is as subject to an irreversible relation that the term of the relation becomes a subject. This relation is not a return to oneself: as an incessant exigency, an incessant contraction, a recurrence of remorse, it disengages the *one* as a term, which nothing could rejoin and cover over. Subjectivity is not antecedent to proximity, in which it would later commit itself. On the contrary, it is in proximity, which is a relationship and a term, that every commitment is made. (OB 85-86)

We discuss “proximity” in more detail at the end of the chapter, but for the time being it can be understood as Levinas’s term for the inescapable immediacy of the other, as though every other were too close to allow one to remain indifferent. The “irreversible relation” is that of responsibility for the other, which is *asymmetric* in the sense that it is prior to questions of justice—in particular the question of reciprocity: the other’s responsibilities, as opposed to my own, have no bearing on the exigency of the vulnerable other’s invasion of my world. It is solely the recognition of the other’s vulnerability that makes me a subject, entirely apart from (because, as prior to consciousness, wholly prior to) anything I am aware of the other owing me. Until I become a subject, there is no ‘me’ to be *owed* anything, and I first become a subject only in being subjected to my own and the other’s vulnerability. The relation that makes one a self is therefore not a *return*, a finding oneself at home with oneself. But rather than saying ambiguously that “subjectivity ... is both the relation and the term of the relation”—that is, that the self is *both* the relation that relates itself to itself *and also* the term of this relation—we could say, much as Kierkegaard does in *The Sickness Unto Death*, that subjectivity, indeed the *subject*, is the *relating* (verb) of this relation. The subject is (that which posits itself as) *a relating that relates itself to itself*. As relating, the subject does not return (or go) anywhere, but remains where it is, the

passive subject of vulnerability (its own and the other's) which leaves it feeling remorse for its nothingness, its inability to make all the loose ends meet. It is the "recurrence of remorse" that produces the "recurrence by contraction"—that is, the primordial decreation—which is the self (OB 85, 108). Remorse in any form, not just Levinas's, can therefore signify one's availability for decreation.

Freedom to be *for*-the-other is freedom as a relation *to* the other, an irreversible relation that is prior to consciousness and intentionality. It enables subjectivity. Because freedom-for-the-other is a relation to the vulnerable neighbor, and vulnerability produces remorse, it is remorse that prevents one from re-identifying oneself as *independent of* the other. Freedom is not the freedom of a self that always succeeds in finding itself again, adept at resolving every crisis of self-identity as it comes along, like any other accidental interruption of normal life. Remorse is the acknowledgment that one is in debt to every other, that one is nothing without them. One is only free insofar as one is free *for* (not *of*) remorse. Hence Levinas claims that the subject has "no identity"—that is, no identity apart from the other who gives it reason for being. The self finds itself not in itself—in some private "core self," for example—but paradoxically only *in the other*. This is another way of saying that in itself the self is nothing—as in fact it discovers about itself in the ordinary experience of remorse.

The self-negation of remorse, the deliberate cultivation of one's nothingness (as opposed to the self-involved varieties of which Weil was so skeptical), is therefore not a contingent emotion but the mechanism of consciousness vis-à-vis the other. This is the point of Levinas's striking image of identity "gnawing away at itself": human consciousness is self-devouring. "The self-accusation of remorse gnaws away at the closed and firm core of consciousness, opening it, fissioning it" (OB 125) to the in-spiration of the other,¹⁵³ as though only the other could breathe life into one's ailing self. But the encounter with the other is also the possibility of remorse increasing

¹⁵³ "... *l'auto-accusation du remords rongerait—mais jusque'à l'ouverture, jusqu'à la fission—le noyau fermé et ferme de la conscience ...*" (AE 160).

“infinitely” without limit, for only now is it possible to see not only the other’s suffering as (similar to) one’s own, but the suffering of all the other others who look at one through the eyes of this one other. In the break-up of egological consciousness that results—and all consciousness is egological—one paradoxically identifies oneself as the unique one suffering from (and ideally, with) this other’s suffering here and now, and therefore the unique one charged with responsibility.

In remorse, the other therefore continually displaces one from oneself. The word Levinas uses for this dephasing of the self from itself is *diastasis*.¹⁵⁴ Trying to avoid ontological language, Levinas attempts to convey its meaning in a series of descriptive phrases:

Identity *in diastasis*, a coinciding failing of itself in the occurring, Oneself in the identificatory recurrence in which I find myself thrown back to the hither side of my point of departure! Self out of phase with itself, forgetful of itself, forgetful in biting in upon itself, in the reference to itself through the *gnawing away at itself* of remorse.¹⁵⁵

In the “recurrence to oneself” characteristic of ontological thought, the self allegedly always succeeds in finding itself again in an ever-renewed coinciding with itself (OB 113-14).

Coinciding with itself is characteristic of *essence*, or *Being*. To disclose Being (“unconceal” it, in Heidegger’s terminology) is to find it always again comprehensible. For a human being as Dasein, to *be* is to find oneself always the same *being* through the passage of time—hence the Heideggerian virtue of resoluteness would come down to recurrence of the known. In the non-coinciding recurrence of the ethical, on the other hand, the self “retreats to the hither side of its point of departure,” back to where it cannot recognize itself as the same old self. How far back

¹⁵⁴ See OB 29-30, 33-34, 36, 42, 115 (connection with substitution), and 162. These seem to be all the references in *Otherwise Than Being*. Neither diastasis nor remorse are mentioned in *Totality and Infinity*.

¹⁵⁵ *Identité en diastase, la coïncidence en venant à faillir à elle-même, Soi dans la récurrence identificatrice où je me trouve rejeté en deçà de mon point départ! Soi déphasé par soi, oubli de soi, oubli dans la morsure sur soi, dans la référence à soi par le se ronger du remords* (OB 115, translation altered / AE 147).

must that be? It is tempting to surmise that it must be very far back indeed, perhaps to the Creation, if Being is to be utterly left behind. Back before Being means ‘before’ time. The contradiction of a time prior to time ought to alert us that something is amiss in this image. Might the hither side not only be less far back than that, but in fact far closer than any proximity, whether imaginable or actually experienced? The “hither side of oneself” (OB 114) need only be ‘far’ enough—that is, radically *other* enough—to make one temporarily unrecognizable to oneself—*precisely the experience of remorse*.¹⁵⁶ In this situation, one could neither act nor remain indifferent. Intentionality would be placed on hold, but not *concern*—or, as Levinas might prefer, *obsession*. This is a passivity “obsessed,” responsible with a responsibility that has always already entered the scene and has no intention of leaving one alone. As “an absolute passivity of a self that has never been able to diverge from itself,” one would be ‘at a loss’, the temporary loss of one’s old self. The self would be prevented from leaving itself and coming back to itself, “to then enter into its precincts, and identify itself by recognizing itself in its past” (OB 114). This would be but a manifestation in everyday life of the passivity of time-consciousness.¹⁵⁷

The hither side is therefore something the subject confronts every instant. To reach the hither side, one does not traverse a distance or expand one’s horizons. Instead, as described in the previous section, one *contracts* as a result of encountering alterity. Since one acts only from the standpoint of one’s Being-in-the-world, and since it is not possible to abandon *intentionally* what lies at the basis of all one’s intentional actions, one could only be *forced* to do so. It is the other who provides the force, and remorse is the evidence for it. Reminiscent of Weil’s desire no longer to be, remorse might be described as shame over the naked fact of one’s *being*, insofar as *to be* is to be a burden to others.¹⁵⁸ Remorse, however, is not invoked by the mere fact that one exists, by

¹⁵⁶ In Levinas’s sense. Should we remind the reader that all of this is a metaphor for what is pre-conscious?

¹⁵⁷ OB 114, translating *limites* as ‘precincts’.

¹⁵⁸ See Levinas, *On Escape*: “Yet shame’s whole intensity, everything it contains that stings us, consists precisely in our inability not to identify with this being who is already foreign to us and whose motives for acting we can no longer comprehend” (OE 63).

the weight or *gravity* of Being, as Levinas suggests in his very early work, *On Escape*.¹⁵⁹ What is required, as though in the role of catalyst, is the encounter with another *person*.

Is not the signification of responsibility for another, which cannot be assumed by any freedom, stated in this trope [of going back to the hither side]? Far from being recognized in the freedom of consciousness, which loses itself and finds itself again, ... [the self's] recurrence is the contracting of an ego, going to the hither side of identity, gnawing away at this very identity—identity gnawing away at itself—in a remorse. ... Responsibility for the others has not been a return to oneself, but an exasperated contracting. (OB 114)

Contraction and breakup ... the relation in which a subject is immolated without fleeing itself ... without taking a distance from itself ... pursued into itself, to the hither side of rest in itself, of coincidence with itself ... this recurrence by contraction, is the self. (OB 108)

In light of the recurrence that achieves “identity in breaking up the limits of identity,” we can say that “the self is on the hither side of rest” (OB 114)—that is, not at rest in itself, but not elsewhere either, if that means elsewhere than right here, where the neighbor is. Since the other is also within,¹⁶⁰ to be on the hither side of rest is not simply to be ‘outside’ oneself, floating free. The hither side is the unbearable *gravity* of being, the fact that one cannot escape the demands one’s body makes on one—and in particular, the fact that one might have a body for the sole reason that the body makes it possible for the self tied to that body to dedicate itself to service to the neighbor.

The contraction that accompanies breakup is indeed extreme. One shrinks to a point:

¹⁵⁹ “Being is, at bottom, a weight for itself” (OE 65).

¹⁶⁰ See above, p. 66, and section 3.1.

All the suffering and cruelty of essence weighs on a point that supports and expiates for it. ... In expiation, on a point of the essence there weighs the rest of the essence, to the extent of expelling it. The self, the subjection or subjectivity of the subject, is the very weight of a responsibility for creation. (OB 125)

The contracted self is the decrelated self. Fueled by remorse, decreation enables responsibility for all of creation. We return to this idea in Chapter 6.

Why does Levinas use the metaphor “remorse? In part, no doubt, because remorse in the ordinary sense is usually instigated by the other, generated by the feeling that one has caused *affliction* to others. It is worth noting that both the English word *remorse* and the French *remords* are related to the obsolete verb *remord*, which originally meant *to afflict with remorse*, but sometimes simply *to afflict*. Chaucer uses it in the latter, rarer sense in his translation of Boethius’ *De consolacione philosophiae*: “God remords some folk by adversities.” Therefore it is not a violation of the historical meaning of the word—only of its contemporary usage—to suggest that one might suffer remorse for an adversity that was not one’s fault if it involved witnessing the suffering of others—an idea that finds support in the case of trauma, where it is not uncommon to feel guilt at having survived what caused the demise of other, perhaps better people than oneself. While there is no evidence that Levinas had so obscure a meaning in mind, I will take advantage of this accident to make the final connection between Levinasian remorse and decreation.

The relevance of affliction to decreation was earlier seen to be its supreme lesson of the nullity of the will.¹⁶¹ Consent to extreme affliction is the utmost limit of decreation, the furthest one can go in self-abdication before the soul is utterly destroyed. Weil assures us, however, that one will survive even this if with the smallest part of one’s soul one consents to the truth that apart from God one is nothing. In this state of consent, one no longer recognizes oneself, for there is nothing

¹⁶¹ See above, pp. 72-73.

to recognize. What then is there? Not nothing at all, but the Good. Hence, Levinasian remorse is the detachment from self that enables desire (the sole object of which is the Good), hence substitution for the other, otherwise known as *decreation*.

1.5 Simone Weil's 'Insane Prayer'

The self is weighed down by essence, by existence, but not only that: it is *held* down by responsibility, which gives it its ethical weight. The real weight of the world, for the individual who feels its gravity, is *ethical*, not ontological. It is not only being that weighs heavily upon us (or *not*, depending on which metaphor you find most appropriate for Heidegger's verdict against the modern forgetfulness of Being), but alterity. One is a hostage to the other, elected to bear the other's burden, elected by God or by the Good. The extent to which Weil is willing to take this idea is epitomized in the following notorious passage from one of her late notebooks, in which ontology is so entirely subordinated to the ethical that the ethical constitutes, in the end, a desire to escape from being altogether:

Example of prayer.

Say to God:

Father, in the name of Christ grant me this.

That I may be unable to will any bodily movement, or even any attempt at movement, like a total paralytic. That I may be incapable of receiving any sensation, like someone who is completely blind, deaf and deprived of all the senses. That I may be unable to make the slightest connection between two thoughts, even the simplest, like one of those total idiots who not only cannot count or read but have never even learnt to speak. That I may be

insensible to every kind of grief and joy, and incapable of any love for any being or thing, and not even for myself, like old people in the last stage of decrepitude.

Father, in the name of Christ grant me all this in reality.

May this body move or be still, with perfect suppleness or rigidity, in continuous conformity to thy will. May these faculties of hearing, sight, taste, smell and touch register the perfectly accurate impress of thy creation.¹⁶² May this mind, in fullest lucidity, connect all ideas in perfect conformity with thy truth. May this sensibility experience, in their greatest possible intensity and in all their purity, all the nuances of grief and joy. May this love be an absolutely devouring flame of love of God for God. May all this be stripped away from me, devoured by God, transformed into Christ's substance, and given for food to afflicted men whose body and soul lack every kind of nourishment. And let me be a paralytic—blind, deaf, witless and utterly decrepit.

Father, effect this transformation now, in the name of Christ; and although I ask it with imperfect faith, grant this request as if it were made with perfect faith.

Father, since thou art the Good and I am mediocrity, rend this body and soul away from me to make them into things for your use, and let nothing remain of me, for ever, except this rending itself, or else nothingness. (FLN 243-44, translation slightly altered)

The two requests—first for decrepitude, then for perfection—seem contradictory, but it is a contradiction of the kind Weil considers it important to let stand. The key—not to their reconciliation, which would destroy the point, but to their meaning—is contained in the final request that “nothing remain *of me* except this rending.” This is a description of decreation: the tearing out, or pulling up by the roots, of the *self*, in order that one become, if not nothing, at least (or at most) this pure tearing up. But in order that there be a tearing up, there must first of all be something to be torn up: in this case, a body and a mind, thought of as possessions and personal

¹⁶² “*Que cette ouïe, cette vue, ce gout, cet odorat, ce toucher, ...*” Rees has “my” rather than “these”.

capacities. In her prayer, Weil asks for the full scope of these things presumably because in themselves they are *good*, but she asks for them only in order that they might be taken from the domination of her ego so that the ego, or what is left of it, can then become nothing other than this sacrifice itself. Hence the prayer need not be understood as describing a hypothetical sequence of events, as though Weil wished to be given everything in one moment and deprived of it all in the next. The point she is making is not about the ontological status of certain personal goods in relation to other things in the world, but about their *meaning*, a meaning which in effect she claims is purely ethical. Capabilities and powers have no enduring meaning as personal possessions, since at any moment one could lose them all. They have meaning only as loans from, or debts to, one's neighbor—or perhaps as simply parts of the universe, no more one's own than anyone else's. Only affliction can really teach us this, according to Weil. It is a lesson of “the reality of affliction” that human understanding normally does everything to avoid.

To acknowledge the reality of affliction means saying to oneself: ‘I may lose at any moment, through the play of circumstances over which I have no control, anything whatsoever that I possess, including those things which are so intimately mine that I consider them as being myself. There is nothing that I might not lose. It could happen at any moment that what I am might be abolished and replaced by anything whatsoever of the filthiest and most contemptible sort. To be aware of this in the depth of one's soul is to experience non-being. It is the state of extreme and total humiliation which is also the condition for passing over into truth. (SWA 70)

The result of the rending of body and soul is a radical self-emptying, a form of interiority otherwise than what we tend to think of as a private inner life: one is hollowed out, becomes “pure witness to the inordinateness which already commands” one—that is, a sign signifying that

the love of God has entirely replaced the old self, revealing it to be, by comparison, nothing. One becomes utterly transparent to the universe—and only thus, fully capable of pure response to every other person in need, “all the gravity of the body extirpated from its *conatus essendi* in the possibility of giving.” The quoted phrases are from Levinas (OB 138, 142), whose contradictory or paraconsistent logic of substitution resonates with that of decreation: pure passivity in action, the weight of a responsibility that makes one infinitely light, interiority as exteriority—that is, as service to others—and especially, the gravity of the work of justice, which he calls “supporting the universe” (OB 116, 197n22, 122) and the “glory of the infinite” (OB 144-45, 148), the necessity of which Weil would say is a sign God’s grace.

Levinas may or may not have been acquainted with the entirety of Weil’s ‘prayer’, but he does paraphrase the last line in a footnote to a passage from *Otherwise Than Being* (OB 198n3) where he is defining the nature of “the *I* [or ego] approached in responsibility.” Here is the passage:

What verbs like “to deliver itself,” “consume itself,” “exile itself,” suggest by their pronominal form is not an act of reflection on oneself, of concern for oneself: it is not an act at all, but a modality of passivity which in substitution is beyond even passivity. To be oneself as in the trace of one’s exile is to be as a pure withdrawal from oneself.¹⁶³

The footnote then reads, in its entirety: “Simone Weil wrote: Father take from me this body and this soul and make them into your things, and let there subsist of me eternally only this taking itself” (OB 198n3).

To be “oneself as in the trace of one’s exile ... as a pure withdrawal from oneself” is a description of what Levinas calls “the-one-for-the-other characteristic of proximity, which

¹⁶³ OB 138. The passive forms of the verbs are obviously meant in the first line: “be delivered,” “be consumed,” “be exiled,” as may be more obvious in the French than in English.

justifies all commitment.”¹⁶⁴ It is not commitment to the other that brings one close to the neighbor. Instead it is the “irreversibility” of affection by the other, to the extent that the other becomes what Levinas calls an obsession (if pre-conscious), that makes commitment possible. More generally, it is not consciousness of the other that leads one to realize that he or she is *near* in the ethical sense Levinas gives the word *proximity*, but rather the other’s proximity, a presence that “obsesses,” which makes *consciousness* possible:

Humanity, to which proximity properly so called refers, must then not be first understood as consciousness, that is, as the identity of the ego endowed with knowledge or (what amounts to the same thing) with powers. ... Obsession, in which difference shudders [*frémit*] as non-indifference, does not simply figure as a relation among all the reciprocal or at least reversible relations that form the system of the intelligibility of being (OB 83 / AE 104-5)

In other words, to be human is to be subject to the proximity of the other, in the sense that the other becomes an obsession or exigency superseding self-interest even before one has the ability to classify him or her according to the categories consciousness sets up for including others in its world, much less the categories of need. An obsession typically goes only one way—*my* obsession, not the other’s, is the only obsession that matters to me—unlike the reciprocal ‘I-thou’ relation Martin Buber made famous. The other calls one’s self and one’s world into question, even to the extent of challenging one’s very right to exist, one’s right to capabilities and powers as opposed to his or her right to those things. Thus Levinas states that proximity represents “the preoriginary hither side of abnegation” (OB 84). On the near side of consciousness, nearer to oneself than anything else, proximity is the origin of decreation.

¹⁶⁴ OB 138. See OB 8 for the connection between proximity and “the extraordinary recurrence of the pronominal or the reflexive” noted here.

To be obsessed by the other is to find that all one's capabilities and powers have their ultimate meaning only with reference to the other's vulnerability and needs. The other's difference from oneself is the difference of a stranger, a difference that does not simply prevent one, in a negative sense, from being indifferent to them (as one would perhaps like to be). Much less is it a difference that simply provides the necessary distance between subject and object that enables consciousness. It is a difference that summons one to the positive task of what Levinas calls *non-indifference*. For Levinas, proximity is the non-indifference to the other's difference that makes consciousness and ethics possible. Indeed, it makes consciousness itself *ethical* in Levinas's sense of the word—for thought, will, perception are all *already* elements of "the non-indifference to another" which is "exposure" to the other (OB 48), already reflecting the "impossibility of moving away" which respects the other's otherness by letting it speak for itself, at least in the instant before one invariably translates it into *the same*. The non-indifference of proximity is the door that opens momentarily every instant, revealing one's neighbor as purely *other* in the split second before consciousness closes it again.

In the phrase quoted above, "to be oneself as in the trace of one's exile is to be as a pure withdrawal from oneself" (OB 138), the word translated as "withdrawal" [*arrachement*] in fact means tearing out or tearing up, as in pulling up by the roots (cf. OB 142). The roots from which one would be torn up are the world as one's home, one's personal world as constituted by consciousness. Hence one is made an exile from oneself—and yet, paradoxically, that is how one *comes to be* a self.¹⁶⁵ What leads one to this extreme? Levinas's surprising answer is *persecution*, but it is an answer no more surprising than Weil's, which seems to be: *decrepitude*. In Levinas's

¹⁶⁵ These lines are perhaps reminiscent of a passage from Weil's notebooks quoted earlier as a description of decreation: "Really to die, in the moral sense, means consenting to submit to everything whatsoever that chance may bring. Because chance can deprive me of everything that I call 'I'. To consent to being a creature and nothing else. It is like consenting to lose one's whole existence" (FLN 217). They also suggest Weil's notion of non-active action, of passivity as the only efficacious action—an idea that has led some of Weil's critics to accuse her of quietism.

case, it is ultimately only the disruptive interruption, the “irreducible disturbance,”¹⁶⁶ the *recurrence* of the Other, that forces one, like persecution, to give up one’s safe haven (OB 112). The four walls of home are but the external reflection of the ego’s attempt to maintain its sovereignty over something safe. Just as I identify myself with the place on earth I call home, in the same way what I consider to be my identity is a sanctuary or refuge, the self-image with which I feel most at home.¹⁶⁷ Weil’s prayer is nothing less than the denial of any such tranquil personal reality, which Levinas would say is less real than the overwhelming and “obsessive” reality of the other person. In Weil’s prayer, all the references to “me” and “mine” occur in the paragraph in which she describes the self’s decrepitude, while the descriptions of fullness never identify attributes or powers with those of one’s person but continually refer to *this* body, *this* mind, *this* love, as if to something impersonal, belonging not to me but solely to the Good.

Weil’s solution to the problem of identity resembles Levinas’s in appearing to contradict the natural desire one has that one feel empowered and at home with oneself. Normally I identify myself as someone able to do, know, and feel things. But face to face with the neighbor whose destitution or “decrepitude” I find myself unable to ignore, I temporarily fail to recognize myself in terms of at least certain of those powers. Writes Levinas, “my exposure to [the neighbor] ... my delay behind him”—always “accused of having delayed”—“undo the core of what is identity to me” (OB 89). Momentarily, the various abilities, knowledge, and sentiments I had relied on seem nowhere to be found.

Feeling at home with oneself amounts to identifying oneself with a particular version of the world—the world as it looks from one’s own perspective. Weil advises instead that one learn to identify oneself with *everything*, quite apart from a personal worldview: “One should identify

¹⁶⁶ “Phenomenon and Enigma,” CP 63.

¹⁶⁷ Perhaps the real suffering of homelessness is not only the cold and hunger, the boredom of having nothing worthwhile to do or the pain of illness, but most of all the feeling of having no self, because one has forgotten what it *feels like* concretely to be at home in any sense of the word, and therefore even what it is like to be at home with oneself. Cf. Levinas on “dwelling” in *Totality and Infinity* (TI 152-74).

oneself with the universe itself. Everything that is less than the universe is subjected to suffering (being partial and consequently exposed to outside forces).”¹⁶⁸ The continuation of the passage gives us another clue to the meaning of the paralytic prayer:

Even though I die, the universe continues. That does not console me if I am anything other than the universe. If, however, the universe is, as it were, another body to my soul, my death ceases to have any more importance for me than that of a stranger. The same is true of my sufferings.

Let the whole universe be for me, in relation to my body, what the stick of a blind man is in relation to his hand. His sensibility really no longer resides in his hand, but at the end of the stick. (N 19)

The blind man is without sight of his own, but he still ‘sees’ through the medium of the universe. Weil suggests that this is the ideal we should pray for. The paralytic prayer is simply an extension of this idea to include one’s entire body, mind, and heart.

By identifying oneself with the universe, one identifies oneself with the Necessity that dictates not only one’s own actions but those of everyone else. Thus when one is harmed by another, one should understand the actual cause of harm not to be the will of the person who seems to inflict it, but the universe acting through that person. Does Necessity therefore absolve one from responsibility for one’s actions? Such is the claim of a popular argument for free will—an argument, however, that Levinas would characterize as ontological, since it attempts to establish the *existence* of a certain freedom.¹⁶⁹ The issue, however, is not existence but *necessity*: responsibility for the other’s existence is *necessary*, prior to any question of will, because will,

¹⁶⁸ The flavor this sentiment has of Eastern philosophy is quite intentional on Weil’s part. The passage occurs in a discussion of the *Upanishads*: “The Ātman—let the soul of a man take the whole universe for its body. ... The soul transports itself outside the actual body into something else. Let it therefore transport itself into the whole universe” (N 19).

¹⁶⁹ For Levinas and Weil on free will and determinism, see Chapter 6.

consciousness, language, all depend on responsibility for their meaning. Thus Levinas interprets the Hebrew word *hineni*, ‘here I am’ or ‘*me voici*’, as testifying to one’s unique responsibility on literally every occasion that one happens to say ‘I’. In saying ‘I’, one submits to the other without having chosen it, just as in having a body with powers one cannot help but submit to the law of gravity—or having eyes, to the laws of optics. To this Weil would add that the “Here I am” addressed to God and neighbor should also be addressed to the universe—saying to it, in effect, “Here I am. Do with me what you will,” or perhaps, “Here ‘I’ am not. Do what you will.” For the ‘I’ is nothing.

Is this not the substance of Weil’s paralytic prayer? The self is originally and inescapably in the accusative, under obligation to, that is, *accused* by the other—an “indeclinable” accusative because it does not originate from a prior nominative (OB 124).¹⁷⁰ In order to make itself a familiar *object* to itself, to *nominalize* itself, the ego needs to borrow from others the substance of its perspective on what it then takes to be its powers and possessions, in fact its very world.¹⁷¹ Thus Weil’s prayer suggests that whatever powers one has, one owes them not only to God but also to the other person. The other has as much right to them as I do, if not more. Weil’s radical way of making the point—desiring to become nothing in order that another person might be everything—is perhaps the exaggeration necessary to counteract the natural tendency to think in terms of the human will to self-empowerment that Spinoza called *conatus essendi*. One must be willing to give up (or to imagine oneself giving up) everything, leaving one with nothing at all, in order to become (or to see oneself as) what one truly is, utterly at the mercy of Necessity, which is free to use one in whatever way it likes. Weil’s prayer is therefore a radical statement of the

¹⁷⁰ Lingis has “undeclinable” for the French *indéclinable*, which surely must mean ‘cannot be declined into parts of speech.’ But perhaps there is an intended ambiguity, since one cannot refuse (decline) it either.

¹⁷¹ One’s dependence on others for one’s self-image is especially noticeable when one experiences pain severe enough that one’s suffering body becomes the only thing one can identify with. In such a case, where one’s self-image is overrun by suffering, the other is not only a source of possible help and sympathy, but also of another perspective from which one is something more than just a body in pain (Derwin 2012, 7).

actual state of affairs. The reason we find it offensive is that, given our natural outlook on life, we continually work to hide from ourselves the essential nothingness of the self it entails.

Weil asks for decrepitude not out of a perverse desire for self-destruction or out of self-hatred, but simply because there are *others*. The allegedly sovereign ego knows little or nothing about the debt it owes to these others because the ego is precisely where the self goes in order to forget the fact that it is under this infinite obligation. One prefers to think ‘nominatively’ rather than ‘accusatively’, accused by the exigencies of the other, because the latter makes demands. For one to learn of one’s dependence on the other for one’s very identity, and to submit to it with gratitude—that is, with grace—amounts to the ego’s dying to itself. One then becomes *all* accusation, egoless, *nothing*—an egoless ego. This in effect is decreation. If Weil often speaks of submitting to Necessity, the paralytic prayer demonstrates that for her as for Levinas, one also, perhaps primarily, submits to the neighbor by submitting one’s *self*, with all of its capabilities and powers, to his or her service. In the end, whether we speak of submitting to the neighbor or to Necessity, there is really very little difference. For the ego, submission is submission, though it takes different forms. What Weil writes applies to every form: “For things outside our power, ‘Thy will, not mine, be done’ is clear. But for things within our power? Not to regard them as such. To read the obligation as a necessity” (N 40-41). Our “powers” have meaning only in their availability to fulfill our obligations to the Other and to Necessity.

Here Levinas gives us an answer to a question that perennially arises concerning Weil’s notion of decreation: how does decreation *come about*? Weil herself does not say that it is the alterity of other *people* (or God through other people) that motivates decreation, as far as I know, but as we have seen, Levinas describes a similar process of self-abdication in those terms. It is other people who initially and continually teach us about otherness, by interrupting our world and, for an instant at least, wrenching us from ourselves. This could motivate the move to consent to one’s

nullity as an I-saying self, and instead to confess, as we should learn to do according to Weil, “I am God’s abdication” (FLN 213).

Earlier in *Otherwise Than Being*, Levinas writes: “The self, a hostage, is already substituted for the others. ... I am outside of any place, in myself, on the hither side of the autonomy of auto-affection and identity resting on the self.” The contradictions here (“substituted for the others ... outside of any place ... in myself”) intentionally point out the unavoidably paradoxical nature of the self—as does, I claim, Weil’s abrupt contrast between decrepitude and perfection.¹⁷² Thus Levinas’s contradictions help clarify the point of Weil’s. When Levinas writes that “the ego is not an entity ‘capable’ of expiating for the others: it is this original expiation” (OB 118), the word ‘capable’ in scare quotes is intended to call to mind *all* human capabilities, since all of them are made hostage to the other. Substitution for the other means that my capabilities are not so much nonexistent as without *meaning* except insofar as they belong equally to my neighbor in need. The faculties, the mental lucidity, the experiences Weil disavows in her prayer are meaningless as qualities if they belong only to me. One might as well not have them. In fact, it would be *better* not to have them than to imagine them as one’s own. Levinas’s claim is that there is no sense in which such things can intelligibly be said to belong to me other than as effectively belonging to the other. This paradox lies behind what he writes next: “It is as though the unity and uniqueness of the ego were already the hold on itself of the gravity of the other. In this sense the self is goodness, or under the exigency for an abandon of all having, of all *one’s own* and all *for oneself*, to the point of substitution” (OB 118). There then follows a sentence that could well call to mind Kierkegaard’s “purity of heart is to will one thing”: “Goodness is, as we have said, the sole attribute which does not introduce multiplicity into the One that a subject is, for it is distinct from the One.” All of the good things Weil mentions in her prayer “introduce multiplicity” by tending to produce what Kierkegaard calls, quoting James, “double-mindedness”: the prospect of using

¹⁷² The self as a perfect decrepitude, a decrepit perfection.

them for oneself as opposed to giving them up to the Good. Even in using one's gifts for the other, there is a deceitful satisfaction in believing that they are one's own to use. But as soon as one entertains this idea, one has distanced oneself from goodness, the idea of which, Levinas says, cannot be entertained: "If [goodness] showed itself to the one, it would no longer be a goodness in it. Goodness invests me in my obedience to the hidden Good [*au Bien caché*]" (OB 118). The hint of the "hidden God" can hardly be fortuitous.

Weil writes that the perfectly just person would be the person who could suffer any injustice and not be harmed by it (N 627). Similarly, we might say, the perfectly good person would be the person who could suffer the loss of any good thing and yet would not be any the less good as a result. The difference between suffering the loss and remaining good is the difference between *being* and *otherwise than being*. Ontology concerns itself with good things, while the ethical is concerned solely about the Good. The decreed person is the person whose being has been entirely turned over to the service of the Good, substituted for every other. But the human subject is *already* substituted for the other. This, then, is the definition of subjectivity: to be always already essentially decreed.

Substitution and decreation are by no means identical concepts. It is a major difference between Weil and Levinas that, whatever their points of agreement, only Levinas relates his ideas directly to the problem of explicating the ethical subject, while Weil considers hers as mainly a prologue to working out the practice of a Christian life as she views it. Substitution is for Levinas just what human subjectivity is: the formation of the subject in its response-ability to the other, 'substituting' their being for one's own in terms of priority. Decreation for Weil is nothing less than life in obedience to Christ: offering back one's creation so that the rest of Creation may *be* without one's interference. Despite this great difference, I hope to have shown in the present chapter that the two ideas are mutually reinforcing in ways that are suggestive and unexpectedly

clarifying. Among the points of convergence, we noted similar conceptions of *desire* as satisfied only in the desiring itself (however different the language Weil and Levinas use in gesturing toward the object of that desire), a basic agreement on *the nothingness of the self* (here Levinas might learn something from Weil's reliance on Eastern thought), and a skepticism regarding the priority of Being, notwithstanding the total lack in Weil of a response to Heidegger, which of course pervades the entirety of Levinas's mature work if often only implicitly. These ideas will be treated in greater depth in subsequent chapters—for example, Weil's agreement with much of Heidegger's thought in Chapter 3.

A major purpose of this study as a whole, however, is to develop a decreative phenomenology. In order to do this, we need to begin with a consideration of a topic that might seem an unlikely one in a discussion of either Levinas or Weil, namely logic.

2.0 From Paraconsistent Logic to Decreative Hermeneutics

It is not in the least true that good is without its contradictory side, that evil alone is contradictory. Virtue might well be, perhaps, less logical than sin. — Simone Weil¹⁷³

The whole of this work aims to show a relation with the other not only cutting across the logic of contradiction, where the other of A is the non-A, the negation of A, but also across dialectical logic, where the same dialectically participates in and is reconciled with the other in the Unity of the system. — Emmanuel Levinas¹⁷⁴

Levinas's right to the title of phenomenologist is not generally disputed, however non-traditional his phenomenology might be. In the case of Simone Weil, on the other hand, connections with phenomenology are more difficult to establish, notwithstanding scattered references to Husserl in her notebooks. If her knowledge of phenomenology's methods was perhaps slight, she was at least marginally aware of the nature of the movement, and Husserl's Cartesianism would have held some attraction for her in any case. There is evidence in occasional passages in her writings that had World War II not intervened, or had she outlived that event, Weil might well have taken up phenomenology with the same dedication she typically brought to learning anything new.

¹⁷³ *Notebooks*, N 4.

¹⁷⁴ *Totality and Infinity*, TI 150.

Weil's factory journals contain many passages that come close to phenomenological description.¹⁷⁵ In one of them, she describes how the worker's sense of time is affected by unpredictable changes in the work routine, an experience characterized by the humiliation of being treated as though one can be switched abruptly like a machine from one task to another:

[S]ince orders are now the sole factor making for variety, to eliminate them in thought is to condemn oneself to imagining an unbroken succession of ever-identical movements, to visualizing monotonous desert regions of experience that thought has no way of exploring. It is true that a thousand petty incidents may people this desert, but no matter how interesting one may suppose them to be at the moment they occur, they cannot form part of a mental representation of the future. If thought seeks to sidestep that monotony by imagining a change—namely, an unexpected order—it can effect its passage from present time to futurity only by way of a new humiliation. Thus, thought draws back from the future. This perpetual recoil upon the present produces a kind of brutish stupor. (SWR 57)

Throughout her life Weil often disciplined herself to practices that bear a strong resemblance to phenomenological intuition. In a later notebook entry, she writes: “When I was ‘en Khâgne’,¹⁷⁶ my ‘ultra-Spinozist form of meditation’ consisted of contemplating an object fixedly with the mind, asking myself: What is it?, without thinking of any other object or relating it with anything else, for hours together. This was a koan” (N 446).¹⁷⁷ After giving several examples of riddles from myth or folklore which she thought were “no doubt koans,” Weil comments:

¹⁷⁵ Another very early example is her dissertation, *Science and Perception in Descartes* (1931). See Peter Winch's remarks on this “immature” work's interesting attempt at phenomenology in his introduction to Weil's *Lectures on Philosophy* (LP 4).

¹⁷⁶ A “class in a French lycée where pupils are prepared for entrance examination to the École Normale Supérieure (Section Lettres)” (N 446, translator's note).

¹⁷⁷ Weil gives the following whimsical example of a koan, outside of its normal domain of Zen Buddhism: “My idea of contemplating fixedly the absurdity contained in the joke: ‘Didn't I meet you in Vienna?—I've

To solve them means to understand that there is nothing to be solved, that existence possesses no significance for the discursive faculties, and that the latter must not be allowed to wander outside their role as mere exploratory instrument [sic] of the intelligence with a view to making contact with brute reality. Having solved the riddle, you marry the princess, you inherit the kingdom. (N 446)

“Making contact with brute reality,” a reality that is not fully real unless it is experienced as *other* than oneself, is Weil’s idea of living the truth in general.¹⁷⁸ The ultimate purpose of the “discursive faculties” is not to acquire an intellectual understanding of that reality—often amounting, Weil thought, to reducing it to how one *wishes* to see it—but to place one into contact with *something*, whatever it might be, as free as possible from the effects of one’s totalizing.

When Weil writes that the “object of Zen Buddhism [is] to discover how much the essence of existence differs from that of the intelligible” (N 446), she is making what is first of all a Kierkegaardian point. Solving the riddle (the intelligible) merely *opens the door to* contact with reality. Marrying the princess *is* the reality (existence). But Weil’s point is also that insight into the reality of things is not so much a matter of discovering what one can say about them in terms of what one already knows, fitting them into one’s world (making them intelligible)—for after all, one can always reasonably ask, how real is one’s *personal* world?—as it is a matter of letting things speak for themselves notwithstanding what one knows, perhaps by seeing them as much as possible as foreign to one’s world. One must *surrender oneself* to their foreignness, allowing them to appear unreal, in order to discover their reality apart from one’s interpretations. But this requires that one give up something of oneself. ‘To the things themselves’ can only mean *away from the self* and its familiar world. The personal ‘reality’ Weil says the mind (“imagination”)

never been to Vienna—Neither have I; it must have been two other people’ (six or seven years ago I can remember putting this up to my pupils). It was a koan ...” (N 446).

¹⁷⁸ See Introduction above, pp. 47-50.

systematically constructs for itself appears real because, largely being the product of our own reason, it normally comes out predictable, systematic, and *logical*. Hence whatever is real apart from this ‘reality’ will likely force itself on the mind in a way that seems *against* logic. A rational mind will tend to resist contact with the real. One overcomes this resistance, according to Weil, not by greater intellectual effort but by attentive self-emptying and patient *waiting* for whatever then chooses to make its appearance. I will argue in Chapter 4 that this approach to the real suggests a phenomenological practice based on a very different orientation from that of traditional Husserlian phenomenology. It will be a practice that is perhaps more suited to exploring the phenomenology of the ethical and the neighbor.

Experiencing the reality of the neighbor is not, in fact, so much a matter of acquiring a systematic knowledge of the neighbor’s attributes, his or her differences from oneself in terms of what can be observed and classified vis-à-vis one’s natural attitude, as it is a matter of acquiring a certain *orientation* in some respect *unnatural*. As Levinas insists in *Totality and Infinity*, the differences that matter if I am to see the neighbor as truly *other* are not cognitively representable:

These differences between the Other and me do not depend on different “properties” that would be inherent in the “I,” on the one hand, and on the other hand, in the Other, nor on different psychological dispositions which their minds would take on from the encounter. They are due to the I-Other conjuncture, to the inevitable *orientation* of being “starting from oneself” toward “the Other.” The priority of this orientation over the terms that are placed in it (and which cannot arise without this orientation) summarizes the theses of the present work. (TI 215)

The orientation in question—an orientation *of being*, and therefore an orientation that produces meaning—is not something one develops all by oneself, for then how could it but fail to make

contact with what is other than the self? It is the orientation of responsibility toward the ethical. One is ‘called’ to this orientation by the enigmatic other—that is, finds oneself so oriented whenever one is in the presence of the other as though one were a compass in the neighborhood of a magnetic field.

The principal difference between Husserl’s approach to reality and Levinas’s is an explicit distinction between the reality or otherness of a person (“ethical alterity,” one might call it), and the reality or otherness of *beings* in general, which Levinas in fact calls “logical alterity” (EN 166, 169; OB 18) or “formal” alterity (TI 38). If phenomenology can be characterized as the attempt to circumvent one’s cognitive prejudices in order to make contact with *reality as it is* (a redundancy) and if reality as it is often turns out to be *other than* the conceptions one normally has of it, phenomenology becomes the systematic attempt to surmount one’s preconceptions in order to make genuine contact not so much with so-called being or reality as with *alterity*. This suggests a phenomenology that must go beyond the field of cognitive representation simply in order to *see* the very different *ethical* being of the other, a phenomenology “inspired” by the other (OB 114).

In “The Ruin of Representation” (1959), Levinas characterizes Husserl’s phenomenology as “an analysis of intention capable of teaching us more about being” (DEH 113). More about the real *otherness* of being, that is, than we can learn by contemplating only the end result of an intentional act—say, that of perceiving a box, which ends in a representation of ‘the box’—as opposed to breaking down the intention itself—for example, into a perception of several planes of different colors meeting at different angles which *suggest themselves* in some way when the phenomenologist brackets her preconceptions about boxes. Instead of the intention serving only as an unconscious bridge between mind and act (or representation), heavily predetermined by what one thinks one knows about such objects, phenomenology analyzes the *intention itself*, looking for what the object imposes directly on the mind. Levinas extends this idea to the

encounter with the other person in an entirely unexpected and original manner: the intentional act of encountering my neighbor is, before all else, invaded or “invested” by my non-intentional *responsibility* for him or her (OB 18). The only way that an encounter can be an encounter with what is truly other than myself is if it *requires something of me*, a bit of a sacrifice—a response to a little shock or “trauma”, as Levinas often describes it hyperbolically. It is as though I were the one ‘intended’ rather than the one doing the intending. Thus Levinas characterizes the difference between the two cases—viewing a physical object and encountering another person—as the fact that while in the first case one encounters a being or an entity, in the second what one encounters primarily, prior to a being, is a *relation*—a relation in which the intentional roles are reversed. This difference Levinas calls the difference of a “non-indifference”: if one cannot encounter any being without its potentially making a difference in one’s perspective on the world at least to some minimal degree, then only in encountering another person can this difference force a revised view of the *other’s importance vis-à-vis one’s own*—a change in one’s ethical relation to the other. The revision works both ways: not only does one’s idea of the other change, but also one’s view of oneself.

For Weil too, one does not really encounter what is *other* in others—or, more generally, let beings *be*—without remaining open to a self-abdication that allows them to have a new significance in which one’s self plays little or no role at all. Similarly Levinas writes of a reversal of intentional roles in which “identity is inverted” (OB 115), in which one has “no identity” in comparison to the other who “alienates my identity” (CP 145). This is essentially what Weil means by decreation. Now decreation is supposed to make a difference at *every* moment in life. One does not at certain special or ritual moments ask God, however sincerely, to take back one’s creation. Instead, one seeks in everything one does to remove one’s self as a barrier between the creation and the Creator. In effect, as we saw in Chapter 1, decreation is what Levinas means by substitution: substitution for the other does not mean taking the other’s place, but on the contrary,

resigning one's place in order to make space for the other. Eventually we will see how the idea behind substitution leads to what I call *decreative phenomenology*.

While we do not find Weil discussing phenomenology per se in any of her writings, she does have a lot to say about logic.¹⁷⁹ Weil envisioned what she called a new “logic of the absurd” which would “define so far as possible the criterion of truth and falsehood in the transcendent sphere, where contradiction is not out of place, the domain of mystery” (FLN 182). This would seem to make it a variety of what are now known as *paraconsistent* logics.¹⁸⁰ The domain of mystery hardly sounds like one in which Levinas would feel at home—he was suspicious of anything suggesting the mystical—but Weil only means to demarcate a field in which thought experiences a temporary loss of meaning, an inability to fit things intelligibly into its world that Weil calls *encountering the void*. If the void is the domain of “irreducible absurdities,” it is not, for all that, simply the illogical or irrational.¹⁸¹ Quite the contrary:

In this domain greater rigor is required than in mathematics. A new rigor, of which people nowadays have no idea. The criterion is that a true absurdity is a reflection, a transposition, a translation of one of the irreducible absurdities of the human condition. So there is a need for an investigation of these irreducible absurdities. (FLN 182)

Weil offers, without elaborating, two examples of “irreducible absurdities”: “Two things irreducible to any rationalism: time and beauty. One must start from there” (FLN 183). Neither time nor beauty lend themselves to rational explanation. They seem absolutely enigmatic. The

¹⁷⁹ As did Husserl, of course. Neither Weil's nor Levinas's logic has received much attention in the literature. A notable exception is Jean-François Lyotard's essay “Levinas's Logic,” which can be found, among other places, in *The Lyotard Reader*, ed. A. Benjamin (Oxford: Blackwell, 1989), 275-313.

¹⁸⁰ The reader interested in formal details may consult M. Bremer, *An Introduction to Paraconsistent Logics* (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 2005).

¹⁸¹ More about the void below, in the section “Towards a Decreative Hermeneutics of the Void.”

goal of any investigation into time or beauty would be, not to try to moderate their resistance to the rules of traditional formal logic, hoping to eliminate the contradictions or subsume them Hegelian fashion in some higher unity, but to move beyond that logic in order to acquire an appreciation for the “irrationality,” the “absurdity” that cannot be dissociated from time and beauty without detriment to meaning.¹⁸² Before we speculate on what Weil’s logic of the absurd might have been like, however, it is natural, if not mandatory in the present context, to consider first of all another candidate for an irreducible absurdity she does not mention. That, of course, is the other person, the Other who for Levinas is, in this life, first among the absolute and enigmatic.

2.1 Levinas’s Logic of Ethical Alterity

Levinas rarely mentions logic. When he does, it is usually in order to contest its alleged fundamentality. More basic than logic, Levinas claims, more essential to the intellect than “the work of deduction” (*la déduction logique*) or “the rational necessity that coherent discourse transforms into sciences” (OB 160), is one’s *responsibility* to the other. In an interview in 1986, Levinas expresses surprise that we are not more appreciative of the fact that the alterity of the other person is evidently not merely a logical or formal alterity:

[It is] an alterity that cannot be summarized in the fact that the other who resembles me has, in his characteristics, another attribute. . . . It is not because your hair is unlike mine or because you occupy another place than me—this would only be a difference of properties or of dispositions in space, a difference of attributes. But before any attribute, you are other than I, other otherwise, absolutely other! And it is this alterity, different from the one which is linked to attributes, that is

¹⁸² Of beauty, for example, Weil says that it is the object of an “insatiable” desire (N 60), the infinite in the finite (N 100), a “union of contraries” (GG 152). Perhaps its “absurdity” for Weil is this offense to reason. Although it makes use of logic, there is no logic *of* the beautiful—not because it is illogical, but because it is beyond logic. Hence there can very well be, to a logician at least, a transcendent beauty *in* logic.

your alterity. *This alterity is not justifiable logically; it is logically indiscernible.* The identity of the I is not the result of any knowledge whatsoever: I find myself without looking for myself. You are you and I am I. This cannot be reduced to the fact that we differ because of our bodies or because of the color of our hair, or by the place we occupy in space. Don't you think that one is not surprised enough by this identity distinct from *a* is *a*? (IR 49-50, emphasis added).

If Husserl thinks we are not surprised enough by beings, and Heidegger that we are not surprised enough by Being, Levinas believes we are not surprised enough by the otherness of those beings who can sometimes seem so distressingly other, yet whom we immediately and effortlessly identify as beings like ourselves. Of course, Levinas goes considerably beyond a simple appreciation of this fact. The other, he maintains, is not just another being; she "is other than being." And conversely, "being excludes all alterity" (CP 70). Levinas, one thinks at first, must mean *ethical* and not logical alterity—until one discovers (as we will) that he really only admits one kind of alterity. Logical alterity, while not the same thing as ethical alterity, is but a species of the latter. All that is other is ultimately other with the (as it were) borrowed alterity of a *person*.

The *other*-ness of the other person is discovered only where the logic of being and conscious thought is "exceeded" in the disruptive encounter that makes one a subject. "Subjectivity ... is the breaking point where essence¹⁸³ is exceeded by the infinite" (OB 12). The subject is nothing more nor less than this breaking point "beyond being." The importance of the idea of *excess* for Levinas will become increasingly evident in the chapters that follow.¹⁸⁴ In the present context, subjectivity just *is* the preconscious recognition of the alterity of the other person who shows herself as other by means of this very excess, disrupting every principle (*archē*) of logic or ontology that would reduce her to an object of representation. Thus Levinas describes the event of

¹⁸³ Recall that "essence" is Levinas's designation for *being* as a verb, Heidegger's *Sein*. In some works, Levinas spells it *essance*: for example, in "Hermeneutics and Beyond" (1977), EN 65-75.

¹⁸⁴ See, for example, the discussion on evil in Chapter 5 below.

encountering the other as without beginning or principle, *an-archical*, a word he routinely uses as the privative form of the Greek *archē* meaning beginning or rule. Perhaps, then, we should say that the other is not so much illogical (for often the other is) as *a-logical* (always).

One might object: do we not *think* of the other, and cannot our thoughts, insofar as they are expressible in propositions, be analyzed and evaluated for logical correctness? Levinas does concede that “when stated in propositions, the unsayable (or the an-archical) espouses the forms of formal logic” (OB 7). Given the a-logicity of the other, however, it should come as no surprise that, if there is anything about the other that is not representable, it would likely reveal itself as a violation of logic. In a significant footnote, one of the few places where Levinas mentions logic, he hints at how this failure of logic can tell us something about what is unsayable:

The significations [of alterity] that go beyond [*dépassent*] formal logic show themselves in formal logic, if only by the precise indication of the sense in which they *break with* formal logic. The indication is the more precise in the measure that this reference is conceived with a more rigorous logic. (OB 187n5 / AE 8n4, emphasis added)¹⁸⁵

Since Levinas does not elaborate on the nature of the logical break and how one interprets it, we are left to fill in the details. Later we will enlist Weil’s help in this, through what I will call her *decreative hermeneutics*. For the moment, Levinas suggests in passing that the tenacity with which logic continually attends its own excess—the effort consciousness makes to rationalize a world vulnerable to ambiguity and even (from the standpoint of the human mind) contradiction—is the principal reason for ontology’s privilege in Western philosophy. Thus the logic of being, traditional formal logic, is delegated the role of foundation of thought. As a result, ethics

¹⁸⁵ The same idea is expressed in the essay “From Consciousness to Wakefulness” (1974), where “lucidity” stands for logic and “wakefulness” or “vigilance” is the disturbance of the same by the other (DEH 167).

(morality) is henceforth expected to be logical. For Levinas, however, ontology's privilege is only a "myth." The *ethical* (in his sense) always returns to have the last word:

The myth of the subordination of all thought to the comprehension of being is probably due to this revealing function of coherence, whose lawlike character formal logic sets forth, and in which the divergency between signification and being is *measured*, in which the metaphysical *hither side* itself, contradictorily enough, appears. But logic interrupted by the structures of what is *beyond being* which show themselves in it does not confer a dialectical structure to philosophical propositions. It is the superlative, more than the negation of categories[,] which interrupts systems, as though the logical order and the being it succeeds in espousing retained the superlative which exceeds them. (OB 187n5 / AE 8n4)¹⁸⁶

The "superlative" [*superlatif*] is the *ethical*. The ethical "outbids" ontology and its logic by subverting both from within, as it were. Hence there can be no dialectical resolution of the opposition between the ethical and being, since any such resolution, by cancelling the subversion, would sever the relation to the other and thereby short-circuit one's subjectivity. It is the other that, *continually* exceeding the bounds of logic, breaches the defenses of one's rational world at their most interior, most vulnerable point—the "hither side" we discuss next—thereby making one a subject.

For Levinas, conscious thought itself, and therefore logic, "presupposes a *hither side* [*un en-deçà*]"—a proximity of the other closer than anything whose closeness could be measured by conscious thought, a proximity that survives every attempt by consciousness to place it at a

¹⁸⁶ The footnote quoted here (OB 187n5) does not end in a full stop, but continues: "... which exceeds them: in subjectivity the superlative is the exorbitance of a no-place [*non-lieu*], in caresses and in sexuality the 'outbidding' [*surenchère*] of tangency—as though tangency admitted a gradation—up to contact with the entrails, a skin going under another skin" (translation altered). With this unexpectedly graphic reference to the sexual act, Levinas evidently means to emphasize that the superlative has *no place at all* in the world of consciousness. It cannot be 'located'—much as one would ludicrously misunderstand the meaning of a caress if one were to describe it as no more than a localized awareness of being touched.

distance in order to classify or explain it, as is the practice of consciousness—“a hither side which is presupposed otherwise than as a principle is presupposed by the consequence with which it is synchronous,”¹⁸⁷ for that would only make the hither side an a priori extension of ordinary synchronic logic. Recall that the hither side is the no-place “outside of any place” and yet “in myself” (OB 118) where the “obsession” of responsibility prevents the self from returning to itself once it has encountered the other.¹⁸⁸ Since it is without origin or principle, the hither side is itself *an-archival*. The an-archy of the hither side, its absolute cognitive groundlessness, ensures that responsibility is not founded, epistemologically or ontologically, on anything more basic.¹⁸⁹ Responsibility, in Levinas’s sense, *is* one’s hither side, hence one’s responsibility is ‘too close’, as it were, to be the object of consciousness. This is a point continually overlooked by critics of Levinas who insist that we are not conscious of any basic responsibility to all others. Responsibility is the non-conscious source of consciousness itself. One is conscious *because*—that is, in response to the fact that—there are others to whom, pre-linguistically and pre-consciously, one is first response-able.

The primary witness to the reality of the hither side is therefore one’s personal responsibility for the other—one’s response-ability, the simple ‘ability’ to respond. This ability is less a power one has among other powers than a pre-original, an-archival *passivity*. How can passivity translate into a positive recognition of something *as other* than oneself? We consider that question in the next chapter. To anticipate, passivity leaves an opening, a space for the other analogous (but not identical) to what Weil calls the void, an opening which is a kind of inversion (effectively a *subversion*) of Heidegger’s idea of the clearing (*Lichtung*). To understand *how* the other fills this opening—in fact, fills it continually to excess—would be to understand why there are others, or

¹⁸⁷ OB 160, translation modified.

¹⁸⁸ The “hither side” was introduced briefly in the previous chapter.

¹⁸⁹ For Levinas, writes Lyotard, “the simplest prescription”—the slightest evidence that I have responsibilities— “at one stroke situates the one to whom it is addressed outside the universe of knowledge” (Lyotard 1989, 308)—in fact, Levinas would insist, outside the universe of being.

why there is anything at all, questions perhaps beyond answering. Weil would simply say that the mechanism is *grace*. We consider what Weil means by grace in the next section.

Abilities and powers, far from explaining it, only increase my responsibility, my obligation to respond to the other. They do this first of all by expanding the resources I have for responding, whether materially or in a more general sense by enabling a richer understanding of the world as the other sees it. But this increases my responsibility in a second way, for I thereby become responsible not only for my view of the world but for the other's as well.¹⁹⁰ To respond or *communicate* is to "make common" in the sense of sharing one's world with the other. This is not usually conscious. Every human endeavor comes down to a communication or sharing of *worlds*, hence Levinas goes so far as to declare that "responsibility for the others, or communication, is the adventure that bears *all* the discourse of science and philosophy. Responsibility would be the very rationality of reason or its universality, a rationality of peace."¹⁹¹ It is response-ability, the ethical, that makes logic necessary, not the other way around, since the need for logic arises only from the need for objectivity, for agreement on *what is*, for mutual understanding and the work of reconciliation—hence arises from the very subjectivity of the subject who is dependent on all *others* for the ability to do anything at all that requires thought and hence *language* (in the broadest sense of the word)¹⁹²—that is to say, just about anything at all that human beings do. Responsibility is therefore prior to logic, rationality, discourse, and even Being. Clearly we have ventured beyond the neighborhood of the one and singular Other. We have arrived at the point where we need to introduce Levinas's important notion of the *third*.

¹⁹⁰ "To maintain that the relationship with a neighbor, incontestably set up in saying, is a responsibility for the neighbor, that saying is to respond to another, is to find no longer any limit or measure for this responsibility" (OB 47). It is to be responsible for an entire world (CP 97). Cf. Mishnah Sanhedrin 4:5, which reads in part: "if any man has caused a single life to perish from Israel, he is deemed by Scripture as if he had caused a whole world to perish; and anyone who saves a single soul from Israel, he is deemed by Scripture as if he had saved a whole world."

¹⁹¹ OB 160, some punctuation added. On saying and communication, see OB 48. See also "Is Ontology Fundamental?" in which Levinas writes of "a relationship prior to understanding that constitutes reason" (EN 4 = BPW 5).

¹⁹² See Chapter 5 below, on the role of language in Goodman's notion of worldmaking.

Although the *third* is not mentioned explicitly in *Totality and Infinity*, the motivation behind the idea is present from the very beginning of that work in Levinas's fundamental notion of the *transcendent intention* (TI 29).¹⁹³ One does nothing intentional, nothing having meaning, down to the simplest recognition of an object, without tacitly intending that an other, *any* other, might pass judgment on whatever one takes to be truth. All discourse, all logical thought, all representation, is a "monstration" (*monstration*, OB 23 / AE 29), a *showing* of something to someone, hence all of these things are nothing if not shared. Thus, "the object is *presented* when we have welcomed an interlocutor" (TI 69). In *Totality and Infinity*, the position of the other with regard to the one who shows is represented by the metaphor of *height*, in *Otherwise Than Being* by the less obvious but ontologically less problematic trope of *proximity*. Even when one thinks in solitude, the "other within" (see above, p. 66) tacitly passes judgment on one's thoughts. There is no such thing as a private truth or a private world.

The third appears to be Levinas's answer to Buber that there is more to the other than the second-person Thou of dialogue. The reciprocity understood to be part of the second-person relation does not capture the idea of the transcendent intention, for the latter suggests on the contrary that there is a third-person-ness about the other that, independently of whatever social relations I have with him, *obligates* me to submit my entire world to his judgment. It is this obligation that makes the other truly *other* and not simply an alter ego. In this respect, the third-person-ness of the specific other I happen to encounter not only reminds me of the multiplicity of all the other others in the world (OB xli); as third he also represents every other who might verify or deny the world-as-I-presently-claim-to-see-it. Thus the face is not only the signification of my responsibility for the neighbor who happens to be present in my world here and now; it is also the "face of faces, visage and visible [*le visage des visages—visage et visible*]" (OB 160 / AE 204),

¹⁹³ James Mensch stresses the importance of the transcendent intention more than most writers. See Mensch 2015, 23-24.

standing in for all the other others who have ever had, or ever will have, a place or a stake in that world.

My obligations to the third, whether or not a third person is actually present, are the mundane but infinitely demanding responsibilities (plural) Levinas calls *justice*. Thus, while the term *third* undoubtedly derives from the fact that the other others exist in addition to oneself and the neighbor, who are two, Levinas may also have in mind what he calls the “excluded middle” between being and non-being (OB 29, 169, 181, 184)—an ‘in between’ he sometimes identifies with “the infinite which commands in the face of the other” (OB 97).¹⁹⁴ In this sense, the third naturally suggests the Law of the Excluded Middle, sometimes called the Law of the Excluded Third, a law of logic that does in fact exclude the enigmatic trace from traditional logic’s domain—that is, from ontology.¹⁹⁵ This *excluded* third is surely meant to call to mind “the widow, the orphan, and the stranger” whose exclusion from society requires our inclusive response. Paul Ricoeur seems to play upon this last sense of the third in *Oneself as Another* when he declares, evidently as a challenge to Levinas whose notion of the face Ricoeur has just discussed, that the “third,” the “anonymous” outsider, is the “inclusive middle term (*tiers inclus*)” in the just institution—the *included* third! The excluded third’s inclusion, as Ricoeur rightly maintains, prevents the reestablishment of a further excluding “diadic dialogic [us vs. them] relation” with the outsider (Ricoeur 1992, 195). But despite Ricoeur’s critical intentions here, the differences between Ricoeur and Levinas, which in general are indisputable, in this case seem to be only a matter of language.¹⁹⁶ Levinas would undoubtedly agree that the “anonymous” outsider ceases to be excluded when justice has *included* him. It is not just that he follows the biblical

¹⁹⁴ Levinas could be offering this as an alternative to the Heideggerian “in between” which Dasein occupies between beings and Being (BQP 145, CPE 23).

¹⁹⁵ Levinas explicitly equates the “excluded middle” with the *non-lieu* or “no place” without ground (OB 14), as well as with the “hither side” (OB 86) and exemption from “logical rules” (OB 151). The third may also be an “ironic allusion” to Aristotle’s “third man” argument (CP 29). The trace will be defined below.

¹⁹⁶ Ricoeur’s intent to criticize Levinas is unmistakable, for Ricoeur immediately adds that “the plurality,” the just institution, “includes third parties who will never be faces” (Ricoeur 1992, 195)—a misreading of Levinas’s notion of the face, since the face is a metaphor for the inescapable vulnerability of every human being without exception and at all times, including the ‘third’ who is not present.

tradition in choosing to refer to the one to be included as the *stranger*. For Levinas, it is phenomenologically truer to the experience of the other to describe it as an encounter with an outsider, since it is the *exterior* Other who makes an ethical demand *on me* in the person of the vulnerable “sufferer” who, excluded from my world (interior) simply because I am conscious, begs for inclusion by disrupting that world every moment.

Thus, that the other is always “excluded” is fundamental to one’s subjectivity. Consciousness itself “is born as the presence of a third party” (OB 160),¹⁹⁷ since it is *the entry of the excluded third* that makes communication, justice, and world possible, not to mention necessary in order to do the work of justice. That there is not only *meaning* because there are others, but also *consciousness*—this, for Levinas, is less a truth about *what there is* than an acknowledgment of our dependence on the ethical for a world and for the Being of beings. At the same time, however, in positing “a synthesized and synchronous world” for itself, consciousness necessarily leaves out the other by invariably turning him or her into the same. The work of justice is one’s conscious effort to right this wrong—to make room for the other as other (the essential meaning, for Levinas, of ‘Thou shalt not kill’)—a wrong against the other that, for its own part, justice cannot help committing. The communication with the third that ‘makes things common’ requires a world in which there is rigor and objectivity and *logic*, even as this “objectivity of justice” continually “offend[s] the alterity of the face that originally signifies or commands outside the context of the world” (EN 167), demanding the very communication that excludes him. Justice must answer for its own injustice even as it carries out the work of justice—excludes, even as it tries to include. In this regard, Weil would point out that nothing in all of creation is free of evil.

“Justice is thus found to be the source of the objectivity of logical judgment” (EN 165). Hence logic is grounded on responsibility, not vice versa. Responsibility, on the other hand, can have no source or ground without detriment to what Levinas calls the “glory” of the infinite (OB 144). To

¹⁹⁷ That is, consciousness of an external world. See CP 25-27.

want grounds for responsibility, to want a guarantee of the reality of the Good, to want to ground ethical truth in logic, is to miss the point of the ethical and weaken the priority of the Good, to the detriment of a *relation* that one is not supposed to understand or verify, but desire and love (EN 72). This is Levinas's idea that ethics is an "optics" (TI 29), a way of seeing. Consideration of the other opens up a view not accessible to either theoretical or practical thought, which are based on the ontological privilege. One will find no sign of the Good unless one looks with the ethical eyesight of desire and love, whose only object (whatever be the object of consciousness) ultimately is the Good. Since 'knowledge' of the Good is dependent only on an ethical optics, the cognitive reality of the Good always remains *inherently uncertain*. Its cognitive uncertainty does not, however, preclude certainty of the reality of the Good according to another meaning of the word 'certainty', an 'ethical certainty' centered on the individual's responsibility for preserving the Good in spite of its vulnerability. This ethical certainty will be one topic of Chapter 3.

2.2 Weil's Modal Logic of the Eternally Ambivalent Good

No "excess" can threaten one's sense of meaning, one's trust in the world, so personally and so overtly as the human other—not simply when the other intends to do one harm, but more generally as a language user who embodies another version of the world, perhaps radically different from one's own.¹⁹⁸ In particular, it is possible that nothing else is capable of destabilizing one's belief in a transcendent Good. And yet, without the originary novelty of the other person one could have no experience of transcendence in any sense at all. What Levinas claims, essentially, is that there is only one alterity, the alterity of the other person.

¹⁹⁸ In the case of child abuse, violence by the other can even prevent one from forming a world in the first place.

The alterity of the other is not a particular case, a species of alterity, but its original exception [*ex-ception*].¹⁹⁹ It is not because the other is new, an unheard-of quiddity, that he signifies transcendence, or, more exactly, signifies, purely and simply; it is because newness comes from the other that there is in newness transcendence and signification. It is through the other that newness signifies, in being, the otherwise than being. Without the proximity of others in his face [*la proximité d'autrui dans son visage*] everything is absorbed, engulfed, walled up in being, goes to the same side, forms a whole, absorbing the very subject to which it is disclosed.²⁰⁰

Only another person, someone with whom one shares language, can break through one's pre-linguistic environment, the "elemental" that gives itself simply to be enjoyed and becomes like an extension of oneself,²⁰¹ to make one conscious for the first time of what is other than oneself—in fact, just plain *conscious*. Without unpredictable and potentially dangerous neighbors, one would not develop a world in the first place. Nothing could be disclosed. According to Levinas, only a subject related to—*subject to*—an other that is like itself as well as absolutely foreign,²⁰² can discover what is not itself, whether person or thing. It is therefore the other who at every moment re-creates one as a *dis-coverer*.

But this means that the other, prior to consciousness, is already more than just another being. "The other ... does not belong to the intelligible sphere to be explored. He stands in proximity" (OB 25). He does not await my exploration of 'what is' in order that I may discover him as a being, with a view to fitting him into my understanding of the world. He does not wait for me to

¹⁹⁹ Hyphenated in Levinas's French. Levinas may be playing on the meaning of 'inception': the alterity of the other is the original inception of alterity, but it has the character of an *ex-ception* because the other is an exception to—"takes one out of" (Latin *excipere*, to take out)—the sameness of one's being-in-the-world.

²⁰⁰ OB 182 / AE 229, translation modified. *D'autrui dans son visage* is a reference to the third, as perhaps is the "excluded middle of essence" a few lines earlier (OB 181). On the third, see above.

²⁰¹ Recall that for Levinas, the 'elemental' denotes all that one enjoys for oneself in the world: good food, clean air to breathe, a roof over one's head, etc. See TI 131-32, 135ff. 'Enjoyment' (*jouissance*) is "living from ..." (TI 110-14) and the elemental are the things one "lives from" in the world. See also CP 25.

²⁰² See Diane Perpich's discussion of Derrida on the alter ego, in Perpich 2008, 71.

“let his being be,” but is always already right here and now, standing before me, demanding not “solicitude” but justice, insisting on empathy, someone for whom I can *substitute* in Levinas’s sense. He is not so much in close proximity in either a physical or an existential sense,²⁰³ which would make him already part of my being-in-the-world, as he is *proximity itself* in a new sense Levinas first defines in *Otherwise Than Being*. This new sense, paradoxically, is that of an other too close to be ignored even when I am unconsciousness of his existence. The other is “on the hither side of being and of the nothingness that is thematizable like being” (OB 109), closer than consciousness can know, closer therefore than the event of Being which requires “exertions of thought.”²⁰⁴ For Levinas there can be no consciousness, no being-in-the-world, without a pre-conscious encounter with alterity, and that means alterity in the form of the other person. Nothing makes one so vulnerable to others, so exposed to the harm or good they are capable of doing, as this profound need one has for alterity, and hence for some connection with every other person, if only to receive from them, through the transcendent intention, the motivation for and verification of one’s current version of the world.

The other, writes Levinas, acts as an “intervention of a meaning.” In other words, meaning is the effect on one’s world of alterity. It is an *event*. But this implies that meaning is inevitably, inherently, profoundly *uncertain*:

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*. ... But 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

²⁰³ Existential senses of ‘close’ would include: close because obvious, natural, or akin to me; close as mattering most to me in terms of my projects; close because threatening or anxiety producing (‘looming’); close as stifling or crowding (as when someone stands too close); close as intimate, private, etc.

²⁰⁴ Heidegger, CPE 17. On the role of thinking in becoming cognizant of the event of Being, see CPE 23-24 and *passim*.

proclaimed itself! It is, to be sure, possible to ask anew if this departure, this humility of being ab-solute, this *divinity*, does or does not exist. And nothing can stop this triumphant question. For how transparent is the shadow that troubles the clarity of coherent speech! (“Phenomenon and Enigma,” CP 70-71, emphasis added)

The “supreme goodness” of the other, the other’s “divinity” in “passing beyond being” in order to give way to being (cf. EN 67), rather than being satisfied merely to “reflect beings or the being of beings” in the manner that every being does simply insofar as it is meaningful (CP 70)—this is an ethical claim that is not at all obvious to cognition. Might Levinas’s supreme goodness that refuses to announce itself be only a hopeful illusion? Recall Weil’s response to similar objections:²⁰⁵

But—it will be asked—does the good exist? What does it matter? the things of this world exist, but they are not the good. Whether the good exists or not, there is no other good than the good. And what is this good? I have no idea—but what does it matter? It is that whose name alone, if I attach my thought to it, gives me the certainty that the things of this world are not goods. If I know nothing more than that name I have no need to know any more, provided only that I know how to use it in this way. (FLN 315-16)

All that matters, she decides, is that one believe that there is a point to using the word *good*, if only to refer to the enigmatic ‘object’ of a desire. Using the word does not require an “ontological commitment,” nor does the contradiction in ‘*x* is the object of a desire that can have no object’ prove that there can be no such *x*, hence no supreme good. If discourse on the Good has a logic, it must be a modal logic that allows for an inexorable *perhaps*. Perhaps the Good ‘exists’, perhaps not. As a Platonist, Weil could readily have conceived of the Good as something beyond being.

²⁰⁵ See Chapter 1 above (“Decreation and Desire”).

The modality of the beyond being, however, is not certainty/uncertainty. The proper modality of the Good, or of whatever is beyond being, is exclusively that of *desire*. What matters is the *relation* one has with the Good, a relation that can very well exist apart from one's ability or inability, for whatever reason, to acknowledge consciously the reality of the Good.

Weil, however, offers what she calls an “experimental ontological proof” that it makes sense to use the word *Good* despite the uncertainties to which the Good is vulnerable. Specifically, her example ‘proves’ that it makes sense to think the idea of perfection, hence to desire and pray for perfection, even when one has serious doubts about perfection's existence. The idea is that, in a manner analogous to the earnest desire for good which produces the good because this desire is itself a good (see Chapter 1), so also an earnest desire for perfection can produce a sense of the reality of perfection, since desire is always only for what is *real*. Here is Weil's proof:

I have not the principle of rising in me. I cannot climb to heaven through the air. It is only by directing my thoughts toward something better than myself that I am drawn upwards by this something. If I am really drawn up, this something which draws me is real. No imaginary perfection can draw me upwards even by the fraction of an inch. For an imaginary perfection is mathematically at the same level as I am who imagine it—neither higher nor lower. What draws one up is directing [*or*, the orienting of] one's thoughts toward a veritable perfection [*L'orientation de la pensée vers une perfection réelle est ce qui tire*]. N 434 / C III 52.

Weil's proof is “ontological” only in form, since it does not aim to prove perfection's *existence*, only its *reality* as an object of desire.²⁰⁶ It is “experimental” in that it derives its weight not from

²⁰⁶ Unfortunately, Weil often uses the word ‘existence’ when she means ‘reality’. She does this, for example, in the following ‘ontological proof’ from later in her *Notebooks*, showing that the non-object of a desire for the Good is real: “Nothing on this earth is really an object for the desire that is in me. However, I cannot conclude from this that the world is viler than I am myself; for I form part of the world. Since I exist and this desire for absolute good constitutes the foundation of my being, there must be something in Reality which possesses at least the same value as this desire. But I am separated from it; I am unable to reach it.

logic but from personal experience. For Weil, the real is anything that forces itself upon the mind as unavoidable even with all of its contradictions, as opposed to what we make consistent with our world through the work of consciousness, which she calls “imagination”. Reality itself can be known only through experiencing its ambiguities, not (or at least, not without some element of betrayal) by eliminating them through a logical argument concluding in an intelligible representation of reality. Like the other in Levinas, the real for Weil is not an object of knowledge but the non-object of a desire. Thus when Weil writes of “directing my thoughts towards something better than myself,” she means, counterintuitively, that one abandons any attempt to cognize perfection. For in “imagining” perfection on the level of imperfect human consciousness, one only betrays what is meant by (or desired in) the thing itself. Instead one should *empty* the mind of every conception of what “something better” might be, and then, turning one’s attention to this empty, contentless idea, simply *wait* (N 545). “Waiting” for Weil always means *desiring* and requires self-emptying (kenosis) or self-abdication. “Directing one’s thoughts” means orienting them towards the non-object of one’s desire, which is a kind of void. Weil says that grace then fills the void with something one ultimately recognizes as validating one’s desire in some way (N 146, 198), even if (perhaps *only* if) it is not in a way that one could have anticipated.²⁰⁷

Grace, as Weil uses the word, probably cannot be defined, since it stands for something which is inherently “unintelligible” (N 221). The rare occasions in which one sees with unquestioned

All I can do is to know that it exists, and wait—even if it means for years” (N 562). Weil now comments: “Unreality entirely takes away the value from good, that is to say, good itself. Whence the ontological proof, even in the matter of the Incarnation. Either the perfect man has existed, or else he isn’t the perfect man” (N 563). This last remark sounds like Descartes’ ontological proof for the existence of God in the *Third Meditation*. But then Weil adds: “The *reality* which proceeds from good. It constitutes the ontological proof” (emphasis added). We know from FLN 315-16 (quoted above) that by *reality* she cannot mean (ontological) existence. If at times Weil’s language obscures the difference, she is far from equating, in general, reality with existence. This is true even of the “perfect man”: for Weil, as for Kierkegaard, the reality of the “perfect man” for faith transcends any question of his *existence*. ... Weil’s choice of the word “value” may also be unfortunate, as it suggests that the object of this desire is open to a judgment on my part. On the contrary, I do not love the Good because it is highest on some scale of values, but simply because it is the Good. This, I assume, is why she qualifies “value” by adding “that is to say, good itself.”

²⁰⁷ Since one only anticipates what one “imagines” (cognizes).

clarity what one should do to resolve an ethical difficulty (N 110-11), anything giving one an intimation of a higher “level” (as in Weil’s experimental ontological proof), anything that leads one to love others simply because they *are* (N 57)—all of these Weil is likely to ascribe to grace. Although grace is independent of human will, it is possible to prepare oneself for it since grace is cultivated by “attention oriented towards the good with love.”²⁰⁸ But if the good is contradictory, one would seem to need grace in order to love it. And while “grace is enabled by detachment” (LPW 81), at the same time detachment is possible only through grace, since detachment requires seeing detachment “as the supreme value.” But then, “in order to see detachment as the superior value, it is already necessary to be detached from all the other values.” Weil calls this a “vicious circle” which makes detachment “look like a miracle. The word ‘grace’ expresses this miraculous character” (LPW 32). In effect, the circle comprises a practical hermeneutics of grace. The circle develops inevitably in attempting to *interpret* detachment as a possibility for oneself. Since one needs detachment in order to seek detachment, one can enter the circle properly only through desire—itself a gift of grace.²⁰⁹

Weil says that “ontological proof is mysterious because it doesn’t address itself to the intelligence, but to love” (N 375). This is because only love can validate what is beyond the power of thought. “All that I conceive of as true is less true than these things of which I cannot conceive the truth, but which I love” (N 238). For Weil, love is indispensable in making any contact with the real. In fact, “love (consent) produces reality” (FLN 90)—that is, consent to Necessity makes the real present through one’s self-abdication, for the self is the sole obstacle to

²⁰⁸ LPW 85; cf. 57.

²⁰⁹ Levinas rarely uses the word grace in anything like Weil’s sense, nor would Weil’s favorite personal example of grace, her experience in 1942 of God’s presence as deeply personal and concrete, be likely to resonate with him. But her use of the word is reminiscent of Levinas’s use of “the Good” or “goodness” to refer to what cannot be thematized or comprehended but only loved as “*other* than being” (OB 18). Many examples could be cited from *Otherwise Than Being* alone: OB 11, 15, 57, 95, etc. In at least one place, Levinas mentions grace explicitly in order to describe a gratuitous charitable act: “There is a moment where the idea of freedom prevails—it is a moment of generosity. Here there is a moment where someone plays without winning. That is Charity. For me, this is very important. Something that one does gratuitously, that is grace. Grace begins there” (“The Paradox of Morality,” in Bernasconi and Wood 1988, 176).

contact with the real, the only barrier between Love and Necessity. On the other hand, “the role of the intelligence—that part of us which affirms and denies, formulates opinions—is solely one of submission” (N 238)—that is, of *obedience* (FLN 81). Again, this means obedience to what is real, consent to Necessity, practically synonymous with the non-active action Weil calls *attention*.²¹⁰ Needless to say, attention is, for Weil, absolutely indispensable for her method of ‘proof’.

Attention is never done with. Weil’s ‘proof’ never becomes a stand-alone argument drawing a conclusion that one can then say has been established once and for all provided that the logic is correct. It is closer to being an outline of a process or practice that generates a certain experience. In Levinas’s sense, it is an “optics” (TI 29). The ‘premises’ are not propositions one must first accept, but something one *does*. The argument purports to show that *if* your desire for the Good is great enough to make a difference in your actions, *then* what you will feel drawn by must be real and not a product of your imagination. The practice is *decreative* in that the proof only works if one is willing to undergo a kenosis, an abdication of the self from its central position. It is also hermeneutic. If the real, the non-object of one’s desire, cannot be cognized, then whatever seems to fill the waiting void is only a temporary substitute. The proof must be repeated, unceasingly: one must continually empty one’s mind even of that which, under the influence of grace, seems to fill the void. But if something real is behind the grace that fills it, one can be sure that the process has a goal and therefore a point even while it never reaches a final conclusion, just as the desire for the Good has a point even though this desire can never be fulfilled. The parallel is not accidental, since desire for the Good is the motivation for the proof.

Weil illustrates the form of attention which in the proof she calls “directing one’s thoughts” [*l’orientation de la pensée*] by contrasting imagined courage, produced by self-suggestion, with true courage, which involves an actual redirection or “change of plane” in one’s life. One

²¹⁰ See the section on “Non-Active Action” below.

acquires real courage not by consciously applying oneself to thinking about courage, but by emptying one's mind of all one's ideas about courage and allowing the reality in which one finds oneself (in effect, Love and Necessity) to take control of or "direct" one's thoughts and actions. Thought direction is therefore non-intentional, a passivity that loosens one's thematic grip on the world. For that very reason it can lead one to 'the obvious thing to do' which, to those viewing it from outside, looks like what is typically called courage.²¹¹ Weil opposes thought direction, the "optics" of attention, to "suggestion": trying consciously to *convince* oneself that one is brave.

What is thus brought about by thought direction is in no way comparable to suggestion. If I say to myself every morning: 'I'm brave, I'm not afraid,' I may, in fact, acquire courage, but this courage will correspond to what, in my present state of imperfection, I imagine under that name, and consequently will not reach beyond this imperfection. It can only be a modification on the same plane, not a change of plane. (N 435)

The "courage" one acquires by "suggestion" is imaginary. True courage and "imagined" courage are incommensurable; they are not on the same "plane". Imagined courage blends seamlessly with one's world, since conscious thought manufactures it for itself. With access to all the facts about the conscious life of the person whose idea it is, one could theoretically trace the development of someone's imagined idea of courage from its origins all the way to its present form, since everything relevant would be thinkable. Imagination can use only what consciousness gives it. One's imagined idea of courage would then be totally continuous with one's conscious world. This is strikingly not the case with true courage. According to Weil, true courage creates a *discontinuity* in one's world. It not only requires more of one's capabilities than one typically needs in order simply to make sense of things, but in addition it introduces contradictions of its

²¹¹ "Breton cabin-boy's words to the journalist who asked him how he had been able to act as he did: 'There was nothing else for it.' Purest form of heroism. (More frequently found among ordinary people than elsewhere.)" (N 155).

own in the form of incompatible virtues, such as toughness and sensitivity, daring and prudence. (In Levinas's terms, true courage is diachronically unavailable, even to oneself.) "All veritable good involves contradictory conditions, and is therefore impossible. He who keeps his attention really and truly fixed on this impossibility, and acts accordingly, will carry out good" (N 410)—by grace, as it were. Grace is neither supernatural intervention nor a product of human intentionality; it is simply the manner in which good makes its uncertain appearance in a world in which the Good is impossible. Hence its appearance is never pure but always mixed with evil (N 57). That is why decreation is necessary *and possible*: "If evil were not irreducibly mixed up with good in creation, creatures would not be able to desire not to be any longer" (N 415)—that is, desire the transformation of the created part of oneself entirely into the uncreated part (decreation).

We may now use Weil's method to 'prove' that the other beyond being is real: one can direct one's thoughts toward the other—the real other, the contradictory non-object of one's desire, as opposed to one's conscious version of him—only if a *real other* has taken the initiative and somehow drawn one out of one's world of the same, enabling one to transcend it. Like Weil's proof, the one that follows is meant to be concretely experiential, an "entering into relationship with the ungraspable while guaranteeing its status of being ungraspable" (CP 98). This it does through the non-intentional relationship of *desire* for alterity, for contact with the other.²¹² As it is based on the fundamental relationship of response-ability, this would be "decreative" hermeneutics (we have yet to define precisely what this means) at its most fundamental. Here is my 'proof':

²¹² The principle at stake might even apply to one's attitudes toward non-human beings, if with Heidegger we think of beings as soliciting Dasein for the freedom to be themselves in Dasein's world. Granting them this freedom would depend on experiencing beings as 'other' in a way that is at least *analogous to* one's (very different) relations with human others. Heidegger certainly writes as though he takes such an analogy seriously, often personifying beings (they "call," "bring themselves forth," "hide themselves"), but he seems unconcerned about the difference of *non-indifference* (p. 108 above). In the next chapter, we will see in what way the difference of non-indifference is Levinas's answer to Heidegger's ontological difference.

I have not the principle of alterity in me. I cannot step outside myself while remaining within my world. It is only by directing my thoughts toward something other than myself that I am drawn outside by this something. If I am really drawn outside, this something which draws me is real. No imaginary alterity can draw me outside even by the fraction of an inch. For an imaginary alterity is mathematically on the same level as I am who imagines it—neither more nor less outside. What draws one outside is directing one's thoughts toward what is truly other.

The other—just as perfection in Weil's example—is indicated uniquely by his resistance, his *refusal*, to become an object of my thought. As before, to *direct* one's thoughts toward an unthinkable *X* means at the very least, and perhaps at most, to acknowledge an inability to think *X*. Emptying oneself of all intent to comprehend, one abandons oneself to the passivity of being drawn to the other in a non-cognitive way. What else could draw one in this way but *the other himself*? One “turns to the absolutely other only on call from the Other” (TI 67). How would one otherwise know that one had encountered the genuinely Other, what else would lead one simply to ascribe reality to something that *transcends* one's being-in-the-world, than the experience of a disruption, however slight, in that very world? Could anything signify the *other* if it were altogether logically consistent with the familiar and same? Consciousness can have only indirect indications of what is truly other than itself. These indications may well appear to consciousness as logical contradictions, or they may amount to nothing more than vague intimations of one's being placed in question, of having the centrality of one's world challenged in some small way—signs that signify by pointing to a disturbance having no cause that one can thematize.²¹³

Weil concludes her own ontological proof by noting that “contradiction is the criterion. We cannot by suggestion”—that is, by imagining or thematizing—“obtain things which are incompatible. Only grace can do that” (N 435). Noting that some virtues, like courage, are a

²¹³ Levinas calls such a sign a *trace* (see the next section). For Levinas, such contradictions are everywhere, founded on the incompatibility of the saying and the said (*Otherwise Than Being*).

combination of incompatible virtues (N 391, 394), Weil goes on to claim that “every truth contains a contradiction” (N 410, 349, 385), implying that a finite, self-interested human being can experience the real only as a disruption of the logical consistency of a world largely the product of the imagination. If one somehow preserves incompatible virtues in the same act, or simply makes contact with the real, it is not by conscious effort but only through what Weil calls grace. Thus when Weil tells us that “contradiction is our wretchedness,” we are meant to hear the emphasis on the word *our*. Since contradiction has no place in Necessity, it is not a property independent of us; it is an event that takes place nowhere else but in the human mind. Accordingly, when Weil writes that “the feeling of our wretchedness is the feeling of reality” (N 411), we need to read this in two senses: that our wretchedness tells us when we are close to the real, and that the experience of the real is always deflating because the real is contradictory not just logically but *personally*. The real is what ‘cannot really be happening’ to *me* (N 153, 191, 216, 386). The real is what the intellect finds it impossible to think without contradiction—and impossible *not* to think, or at least desire, in that it forces itself upon the mind, never more so than in the extremes of affliction or pure joy, but always to some extent at every moment, even as we try to keep its contradictions at bay.

Similarly in Levinas, the contradiction between the transcendent saying and the immanent said exists not in some realm of eternal logical truth but only *as subjectivity itself*, in the form of a diachronic split:

The contradiction which should compromise the signification of the beyond being—the beyond being which evidently is not—is inoperative without a second time, without *reflection* on the condition of the statement that states this signification. In this reflection—that is, only after the event—contradiction appears. It does not break out between two simultaneous

statements, but between a statement and its [prior] conditions, as though [contrary to fact] they were in the same time. (OB 156 / AE 198-99, translation altered, gloss added)

“Reflection” obviously implies a *subject*. There is a contradiction between the saying and the said *only for a subject who experiences it as such*, as an experience that transcends being. The point Levinas is making here, near the end of *Otherwise Than Being*, returns to the idea with which the Exposition began four chapters earlier in that work, where Levinas argued that the ontological question of what shows itself as a “being” is displaced by the question of “who is looking” (OB 23-25). Nothing shows itself without showing itself *to someone*, thus introducing an interruption in the ontological event, as though Being had been surprised in the act of clearing a space for beings. Even if, as Heidegger later maintained, it is I myself as Dasein who clears the space, this ‘I’ is always already interrupted by the other—at the very least by the other within,²¹⁴ to whom one ‘tells’ what and how things are in the world (CP 95). This running dialogue with alterity constantly interrupts the ontological project of disclosing the meaning of Being. For Levinas, the ontological *event* of Being’s unconcealment—that is, Heidegger’s *Ereignis*—“is discontinuous, and lasts from a question to the response. But this leads us to surprise the Who that is looking, the identical subject, allegedly placed in the openness of Being, as the crux of a diachronic plot ... between the same and the other” (OB 25).

The contradiction in the saying *vs.* the said as it appears to the subject upon reflection is therefore important not because it represents an unacceptable violation of an eternal law of logic, for this would make it independent both of time and of the subject who happens to think it. Rather, the contradiction receives its significance from the fact that the “condition” (the saying) which makes possible its statement (the said) inevitably includes a certain relation *in time* between the subject and the other person that the statement tries to be about and to whom it

²¹⁴ See Chapter 1 above, p. 66. The *other within* will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 3.

therefore *speaks* even when another person is not physically present. Since the relation in question is ethical, one's reflection is an ethical and hence a *social* act. Its logic, involving two times, one's own and the other's, must therefore be *diachronic* rather than synchronic. For Levinas, the contradiction in the saying vs. the said is personal because it continually places one in conversation with an *other*.

At issue in the uncertainty of the transcendent is therefore not a *what* (one's doubts, or the Good itself), which would introduce only ontological questions, but a *who*, the one who does or does not have doubts. The person *who* makes contact with the Good, as Weil points out, is not himself the Good (FLN 315), hence he can never rule out the possibility that it was not in fact the Good that he encountered. Nevertheless, the ambiguity of (one's own experience of) the Good does not *in itself* imply that one must have doubts about the reality of the Good. Even an ambiguous experience of what only *suggests* contact with the Good, however doubtful an experience it remains for the one experiencing it, can lead to at least momentary certainty about the reality of the Good.²¹⁵ Nevertheless, from an ethical rather than a logical point of view, human vulnerability insures that the vulnerability of the Good can resurface at any moment as the threat of uncertainty or doubt about its reality. The vulnerability of the Good is present not only in extremes such as affliction. For Weil, any contact with the void, any experience of the absence of the non-object of one's desire, is enough. Every contact with the void is capable of producing doubts about the reality of the Good, since the void is, for Weil, the *absence of Good*, a reflection of the fact that the withdrawal of Good allows beings that are not the Good, such as ourselves, to *be*. If one relies only on what Weil says about the void, however, one might still think that encountering the absence of the Good is a relatively rare event, like trauma or sudden loss. But we have seen already, in effect, that the experience she describes as encountering the void is not

²¹⁵ As it seems to have for Weil: "I am absolutely certain that there is not a God, in the sense that I am absolutely certain that there is nothing real which bears a resemblance to what I am able to conceive when I pronounce that name, since I am unable to conceive God—But that thing, which I am unable to conceive, is not an illusion—This impossibility is more *immediately present to me* than is the feeling of my own personal existence" (N 127, emphasis added).

rare at all: for Levinas, one experiences something very much like it every time one encounters another person, for the other *as other*, beyond consciousness, is an *absence* in my conscious world. True, this absence is immediately ‘filled’ with an excess: the absent other is paradoxically in the closest *proximity*, overwhelming me with the weight of my response-ability to every other.

As we have also seen, the uncertainty of the Good is, for Levinas, not only continually possible but in fact *necessary*, since otherwise the Good could not remain the Good *beyond being*. To have no doubts about the Good, even for a moment, would be to succeed in making the Good part of one’s being-in-the-world. The Good would then be in this world and therefore no longer the Good, by either Levinas’s or Weil’s reckoning.

Weil’s emphasis on the role of contradiction reveals a defining paradox in the ethical: that its vulnerability, the suspicion that it might be an illusion, is ultimately the only guarantee one has that the Good and the ethical are real. In other words: *my responsibility to the neighbor is proved to be solely mine by my finding it doubtful*—hardly a proof that will satisfy the canons of ordinary logic, but in Levinas’s terms the only ‘proof’ that places squarely on me the burden of responsibility, the only proof that does not sacrifice the imperative of responsibility to theoretical explanation, thematization, and therefore to being, the only proof that cedes all authority to the ethical as opposed to the “I think” (AT 34-35). The key to *making use* of this paradox (as Weil would say) lies in Levinas’s insight (also reflected in Weil’s experimental ontological proof) that the uncertainty involves not so much a doubtful *what* (for example, the Good) as a doubtful *who*, the one *who finds* the Good doubtful. As doubtful, one in fact finds oneself not only already related to others, who put one more deeply in question than any doubt generated by one’s conscious thought could do, but also capable of *desiring* the absent Good. For Levinas and Weil, as we shall now see, this defining paradox of the ethical, the ultimate uncertainty which guarantees its certainty, is essential to its transcendence. That is why Levinas writes that

transcendence is a “reversal of absence into supreme presence ... possible only through uncertainty!” (CP 74-75).

2.3 Transcendence and *Metaxu*

Q. Is transcendence inseparable from immanence?

E.L. Absolutely. It’s not any easier. It’s just as much an occasion for sacrifice.

It’s no laughing matter.²¹⁶

For Levinas, too, one discovers the impossibility of the Good through its *contradictions*, but he sees these as arising from the appearance of the *third*, all the *other* others who introduce such uncertainties into human life as the possibility that one’s actions on behalf of the neighbor may unintentionally bring suffering upon persons unknown. For Levinas, the uncertainty of the Good is what gives responsibility its full weight as *my* responsibility. If the Good were guaranteed to be certain in some presently understandable objective sense—if the Good were not “impossible”—we would never need to become subjects. We are *subject to* one another—response-able to one another—because the uncertainty of the Good leaves us no other option than to *desire* the Good. This is a desire not so much for intellectual certainty as for *relation*.

Levinas’s critics do not doubt the existence of the other, or the fact that one has some relation to her; only the idea that, as Levinas says, one’s responsibility to her is *infinite*. The idea that one has an infinite responsibility for another person, let alone a complete stranger, would likely offend us whatever we understood infinity to mean. Levinas’s language too easily—misleadingly—portrays an Other so distant, so *other*, as to make meaningful relations with her

²¹⁶ Michaël de Saint Cheron, *Conversations with Emmanuel Levinas, 1983-1994* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 2010), 33.

impossible. But Levinas often uses hyperbolic language to emphasize the need to escape certain natural ways of thinking he considers dangerous—such as the idea that the other *is* the same as the ‘person’ of whom one is conscious, that one *knows* something about her. To claim to ‘know’ the other is for Levinas so dangerous in his view that the other’s ‘unknowability’ cannot be emphasized enough. Nonetheless, some ‘knowledge’ of the other is obviously necessary if there is to be any relation with her at all. How is this contradiction to be resolved? In what *sense* is the other unknowable?

A relation to an *other* is necessarily asymmetrical (or *dissymmetrical*). My relation to you *as an other* is not the same relation as that which you have to me *as an other*, and neither relation is identical to whatever social relations we may share, such as friendship or marriage or work. In *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas conveys this idea through the metaphor of height: the other is *above* me. If my relation to the other *as other than me* were reversible, it would then be complete in itself, totalized, and not transcendent (TI 35). It would not be the relation of *alterity*. If our relations seem to me to be reversible or reciprocal, it is because I am viewing them ‘from above’, as though I were taking a “view from nowhere” in which I imagine myself, the other, and our relations simultaneously. But such a view is artificial. A relation to *alterity* is necessarily a one-way relation, *the* relation *I alone* can have with (that is, in actively “going towards”) the other, not a reciprocal formality I can view objectively and impartially. When it comes to the other, I *cannot* be impartial. The other *bothers me*. That is what makes them *other*.

For the same reason, the relation with the other is said to be infinite. Infinity is not a measure of distance with regard to the other, but an *event* that happens within me when I approach the other. Levinas calls it “the mode of being, the *infinition*, of infinity” (TI 26). In welcoming the other, my hospitality *produces* this infinition “as revelation, as a positing of its idea in *me*.” The other whom I approach *deposits* in me, as it were, something that exceeds the boundaries of my world. In spite of myself I accomplish “the astonishing feat of containing more than it is possible

to contain” (TI 26-27). Hence consciousness of the other “does not consist in equaling being with representation ... but rather ... in accomplishing *events* whose ultimate signification (contrary to the Heideggerian conception) does not lie in *disclosing*” (TI 27-28). In other words, it is the opposite way around: it is the *other* who discloses *me* as response-able. But do I not also disclose the other in the same way? The question misses the point. The responsibility in question is solely mine. It belongs right where I am, and dissolves the moment I take a neutral “view from nowhere.” Thus Levinas will argue that only as infinite can responsibility unequivocally resist “the univocity of an originary or of a principle” (OB 156)—that is, resist the totality that would categorize the other, turning him into a person-in-my-world, or worse, a thing or a type. Referring to the other as infinite is Levinas’s manner of validating the overwhelming importance of multi-vocality, plurality, equivocation, of one’s allowing the other to be *an other to oneself*. It follows that only as uncertain, contradictory, “impossible,” can responsibility to the other, whatever this means in practice, be *my* responsibility—*transcendent*, in the sense Levinas means by that word.

For Levinas, the other is transcendent not only objectively, in a cognitive sense—that is, beyond thematization by consciousness—but also subjectively, in an ethical sense that singularizes—that is, singles me out for responsibility. This singularizing takes the form of a “concretization” of transcendence (AT 25) that makes transcendence personal—in fact, personally urgent or *commanding*. Everyone has occasionally felt the weight of responsibility to such a degree that one became uncertain of oneself under the influence of its gravity, less self-confident, a *question* to oneself. If we extend this idea to a sensitivity to the questionable status in which, according to Levinas, every encounter with the other allegedly leaves the self—provided that we keep in mind that this sensibility, unlike the weight of everyday responsibilities, remains largely pre-conscious—we arrive at something like his radically generalized notion of *transcendence as responsibility*. Thus, more generally, the transcendent can be anything whatever

that calls me into question in such a way as to make a demand on me alone. But initially—and in the final analysis perhaps always—it is *the other person* who is the transcendent.

The world the other transcends is therefore not the world of beings in general, but solely my own being-in-the-world. Transcendence is not a property that some beings have independently of me, nor is the transcendent a certain Being having attributes that draw my attention to it in a way I experience as overpowering. The other person is transcendent because whenever I encounter him or her, I *cannot help* but respond. The other's transcendence—that is, not something general but the transcendence of *this particular other* before me here and now—is ambiguously and enigmatically signified solely by an *event* that I alone undergo, an event transcending the common world I share with others precisely in the sense that *I alone* seem to be singled out both *by it* and *for it*. This event resembles a summons from the neighbor, but a summons that signifies *through me*, in which I need not hear anything explicitly from the neighbor and yet find myself responding to him by saying, in effect, “Here I am.” Again, this does not mean that I am necessarily conscious of responding. Since the other is always present—though sometimes present as absent—one might say that transcendence, the ethical, is the atmosphere in which I continually breathe.

For Weil as for Levinas, the transcendent is anything that cannot be represented to the mind. Levinas is more explicit than Weil that the experience of transcendence is other-related. But Weil introduces a new idea in answering the question of how one thinks about or even simply encounter what cannot be represented (although, as we shall see, it resembles in some ways Levinas's notion of the *trace*). According to Weil, one experiences the transcendent through intermediaries she calls *metaxu*. Usually in classical Greek the word *μεταξύ* is an adverb for *between*, but it is sometimes made into the noun *τὰ μεταξύ* meaning *intermediary*. Thus Weil defines a *metaxu* as a mediating representation, any “representation which draws us toward the

non-representable.” When she says that “the transcendent can only be known through contact since our faculties are unable to construct it” (N 242), she does not mean that the transcendent has some enigmatic immanence. Rather, the contact is not with the transcendent itself but with the *metaxu* that serve as its mediators. In the absence of concrete intermediaries, we tend to rely on imagination, invariably interpreting reality so as to create a version of the transcendent which fits our world and thus, needless to say, no longer *transcends* anything. We only end up with another part of ourselves, “seizing hold of nothingness instead of full being” (N 233). With the *metaxu* on the other hand, provided they are understood as intermediaries between ourselves and the transcendent and not as our version of the transcendent itself—and Weil means intermediaries in the very broadest sense, as her examples show—we are always dealing with something concrete, hence are less likely to imagine the transcendent to be whatever we like.

But we must use the concrete in the right way. Hence, worldly goods or “precious things” can be *metaxu* if we forsake them as possessions, loving them purely for themselves instead of imagining what we might do with them to further our projects. One simply loves “the whole universe” through them in all their concrete reality. In doing this “we do not become detached” so much as “we change our attachment. We must attach ourselves to the All” (N 21).

Pain can be a *metaxu*, provided that it does not reach the extreme of soul-destroying affliction. Our own experience of pain is a *metaxu* if we succeed in not letting it “break our contact with the world,” but through it we give our unconditional assent to reality. Whether another person’s pain can be a *metaxu* for oneself is a problem we will need to take up in a later chapter, one having obvious relevance to the question of how one should think about the victims of atrocity.

While the whole point of using a *metaxu* is usually to avoid the imaginary, in some cases the imaginary itself becomes part of the *metaxu*. The loss of a loved one can be a *metaxu* in this way. “The presence of the dead one is imaginary, but his absence is very real; it is henceforth his manner of appearing.” By concentrating on the very real difference between the imaginary

presence and the real absence, one can “use the loss itself as an intermediary for attaining reality” (N 28).

More generally, “everything that wrenches” (N 22) has the potential of being a *metaxu*. Trying to solve a difficult problem in mathematics is a favorite example of Weil’s. As a humbling and therefore “wrenching” experience, struggling with mathematics is an especially appropriate *metaxu* since, according to Weil, mathematical truth has a nearly transcendent purity that makes it by analogy one of the closest things in this world to contact with the Good:

You require a number (in the sense in which the Greeks used ἀριθμός as synonymous with λόγος) such that —. How are you to find it? But it is there already. It is defined by the words which follow after ‘such that’ —. You are then able to look for the properties necessarily bound up with this definition.

It is like absolute good. How are you to find it? It is there. It is defined by the orientation which constitutes finality. This analogy is an aspect of the function of μεταξύ fulfilled by mathematics.

Need is creative by itself in the case of mathematics, like desire is in that of prayer. (N 548)

The *metaxu* are not *evidence* for the transcendent so much as a means for making non-cognitive contact with it—it is in fact an *ethical* contact in Levinas’s sense of ethical, as we shall see in a moment in his notion of the *trace*. A *metaxu* is anything that helps one have a certain orientation toward the transcendent Good. As noted earlier, this orientation is difficult to describe. It might consist only of knowing how to use the word ‘good’ in the ‘right’ way (FLN 316).

In connection with the transcendent, Levinas defines something he calls the *trace*. The trace, unlike a sign, does not point toward a signified that would then reveal itself as immanent, “inserted” into the “order” of the world (CP 103). Instead, an *event*—my “Here I am,” tacit or

spoken, in response to the other, for example—witnesses to my responsibility for the other. I myself witness to what can have no immanent witness (OB 147)! This seems to be yet another example of a *metaxu*. The trace is not itself the transcendent, nor evidence for it in any cognitive sense. It is too uncertain for that. The trace is something concrete or residing in the concrete—a “concrete abstraction” (OB 91)—that calls to mind or abandons me to my transcendent responsibility. It might be my speech or actions insofar as they have the effect of my saying “Here I am.” Or it might be the *third* who brings the everyday, concrete problems of justice into one’s neighbor-relation (see above), or it could be the unique difficulty of the problems themselves, which thereby transcend my everyday concerns. The *face* is Levinas’s usual metaphor for the trace of the transcendent in the other, in part because, as the most obviously vulnerable part of the body, it is perhaps most likely to call to mind human vulnerability in general. It, too, should therefore count as a *metaxu* in the very broad sense Weil seems to give that word. For Weil, anything and everything can serve as a *metaxu*. Hence one cannot deprive a person of a possession without risk of depriving him of the *metaxu* that gave him access to the eternal (N 49). Levinas, sounding like Weil, says that traces are things that “wrest [or wrench] the *I* from its irresistible return to self” (AT 35; cf. CP 99). More generally, any *said* can be a trace or *metaxu* insofar as it mediates between the subject, who understands only thematization, and the saying which is transcendent (OB 6). (Sometimes, however, Levinas refers to the saying as a trace.) Conversely, under Levinas’s assumption that transcendence is always the transcendence of the other, any *metaxu* can serve as a *trace* of alterity.

2.4 Towards a Decreative Hermeneutics of the Void

Desire for the other, Levinas insists, leads me to approach the transcendent. But what does it mean to *approach* the transcendent? How can one approach what is infinitely far? The answer has

two parts, both of which were outlined above. First, the infinitude of the other is not literally one of distance, but is an event “produced” (as one’s subjectivity) by the presence of the other (TI 26-27), the infinitude of my response-ability, which in *Otherwise Than Being* Levinas refers to as *proximity*. Second, as we saw above in connection with grace, we might say with Weil that experiencing the transcendent means nearing, not the transcendent itself, but a *void* which only the transcendent can (impossibly) fill, a void representing the non-object of a desire that is satisfied in not being satisfied (Chapter 1). The experience of the void turns out for Weil to be the primordial *metaxu*, the paradigmatic intermediary between oneself and the Good, the intermediary that most directly expresses the contradiction in the idea of mediating the transcendent. Levinas, who is more likely to describe the experience of the other as that of an excess or surplus than as a void, in fact often mixes his metaphors, as though implying that the precise metaphor one uses is not what is important here. He writes, for example, that the proximity of the other, “as though it were an abyss, interrupts being’s unrendable essence” (OB 89), and a few pages later wonders whether the face might be “emptiness.” The other’s excess, on the other hand, appears to be located not in the other but in oneself: “But the surplus over pure nothingness, an *infinitesimal difference*, is in my non-indifference to the neighbor, where I am obedient as though to an order addressed to me” (OB 91, emphasis added). Just as my obligation to the other is “the sense of the non-phenomenality of the face” (OB 89), so the void is Weil’s metaphor for the non-phenomenality of the desired but absent Good.

Weil describes the void as an impression of absolute emptiness, a “feeling of impossibility” that can often result from such forms of acute suffering as “sudden death, betrayal, absence of one we love, sudden loss of something to which our thoughts for the future were attached” (N 198, 153), as well as forced labor without purpose (FLN 159) and what might be considered its dual, the discovery that a great effort toward a good purpose has been exerted entirely to no effect. Weil gives us what amounts to its phenomenological description: “The void produces an anguish,

a desperate revolt, followed, as a result of exhaustion, by resignation; but with a loss of the sense of reality, involving partial death, often inward untruthfulness, and a dispersal, a cutting up of time” (N 137). The latter likely refers to an inability to tell a coherent story about what happened, thus the relevance of the void to the experience of trauma should be obvious. We will return to it in later chapters.

Since the void serves no useful purpose from the point of view of consciousness, imagination continually tries to fill it (N 139, 147, 160, 201). Weil refers to this futile exercise as “inward untruthfulness,” since the reality is that the void cannot be filled. “All sins are attempts to fill voids” (N 149), hence “the void (non-accepted) produces hatred, harshness, bitterness, malice” (N 139). The void might be described as the limit one discovers wherever the imaginary ends and the real begins. Hence the void, like the saying/said dichotomy, can open up at one’s feet anywhere.

Since the void is of no use to consciousness, Weil says that it “is only of service to grace” (N 148). This is apparently because it swallows up everything with which the imagination tries to fill it, turning it once again into the void. In this way grace continually leaves a way open for grace: “Grace fills, but it can only enter where there is a void waiting to receive it, a void for whose creation it is itself responsible” (N 198).²¹⁷ The void is only filled by the one thing that cannot deceive (N 495). Hence, at one point, Weil announces that the void is God (N 82).

It is through the experience of the void that everything in the world—that is to say, everything which is not good, including especially the ‘I’—is seen to be the nullity that it is, an experience of the real that is equivalent to recognizing that the self is nothing more than a Desire that cannot be satisfied by anything in this world. Welcoming the void is therefore the equivalent of decreation. Since the void cannot be integrated into one’s world, one knows that one is in contact with it—that is, with the real—through the contradictions one finds oneself confronting. Hence the ‘logic’

²¹⁷ For Weil’s notion of grace, see above, p. 137-38 and note 209.

of the void is a paraconsistent logic in which contradictory statements can both be true or both false:

Logic with regard to transcendent things: when can two contradictory things be true? With regard to the transcendent, one can only deny, and affirmations are in their true sense negations. An affirmation is a denial of an error; but the contrary affirmation may be something totally different from this error. Two contrary errors may both be errors at the same time.²¹⁸ (N 254)

To affirm, for example, that God is a personal God is to deny that one can state categorically that God is impersonal. But this does not mean that it is incorrect to claim that God is ‘impersonal’. Both statements are true ...and both are false: “Thus God is neither personal as we are nor impersonal as a thing is. We love him (which is never fully the case with things)”—that is, God is in some sense personal—“but not as we do a friend, etc., etc.”—hence also, in an important sense, impersonal. When Weil adds that “the errors which have to be denied are *in fact* degradations” (N 254), she may mean that the only errors one must altogether avoid, as errors from which one can learn nothing, are assertions whose sole intent is to destroy—as when, in denying that the Good ‘exists’, one denies the Good itself. As we know, Weil does not consider the statement ‘the Good does not exist’ necessarily false. When she says that the Good, for all she knows, may not exist (FLN 315-16) she is far from denying *the Good*. Her intent, in fact, is quite the opposite.

The point is that in order to state in all honesty that “the Good does not exist,” one must have personally *experienced* the Good in that way—that is, as concretely absent. Since the Good (and God) *is* in fact absent according to Weil’s theology—present as absent and absent as present, to

²¹⁸ This may be a reference to the Buddhist notion of *catuskoti* (Gr. *tetralemma*). For a general discussion, see Graham Priest, “The Logic of the *Catuskoti*,” *Comparative Philosophy*, 1(2) (2010), 24-54.

put it in the non-dialectical sense of the Kabbalah²¹⁹—a denial of its existence from someone who experienced its real absence would not be at all surprising, but only honest, for that is precisely the experience of the void. But the denial must be rooted in one’s personal experience, not in logic. No logic will ever prove that the Good does or does not exist as long as, like traditional logic, it needs to maintain its independence from experience. By contrast, Weil’s “logic of the absurd” is an unorthodox “system” of logic “inseparable from concrete experience.” After giving a few examples of contradictions according to traditional logic (“God is the cause of everything; God is only the cause of good”), Weil declares, without elaborating, that her system is a logic of *levels*. Two “contrary affirmations” can occur “at the same level.” What this seems to mean is that a statement *A* and its negation *not A* may both be false when it comes to making statements about the transcendent because each is contrary to, or incompatible with, a statement *B* whose truth lies on a level that transcends the first level. On the level of experience, for example, God is both “personal” and “impersonal,” as well as both present and absent. On the other hand, two contraries can “belong to different levels,” as when, on the level of experience, we know only the non-reality of God, while on a higher level, inaccessible to our experience, God is necessarily real (N 254).²²⁰ A popular way of distinguishing these two levels is by saying that ‘what is false for reason is true for faith.’ Weil is not claiming that faith has its own logic, much less that faith is knowledge (Gnosticism), so much as that there is an appropriate logic, a logic of the “absurd,” for correctly *contrasting* faith with knowledge. The fact that certain statements can be simultaneously asserted and denied at a given level, while others *must* be denied at one level but can be affirmed at another, suggests a dialectic between apophatic and cataphatic approaches to faith which, Weil might claim, makes it impossible to subscribe to either approach to the exclusion of the other.

²¹⁹ There is no evidence, other than the resemblance of some of her assertions and concepts to its ideas, that Weil had any interest in, or acquaintance with, Jewish mystical thought.

²²⁰ Experientially inaccessible apparently does not mean having no effect on experience: “I am absolutely certain that there is not a God, in the sense that I am absolutely certain that there is nothing real which bears a resemblance to what I am able to conceive when I pronounce that name, since I am unable to conceive God—But that thing, which I am unable to conceive, is not an illusion—This impossibility is more *immediately present to me* than is the feeling of my own personal existence” (N 127, emphasis added).

Faith. To believe that nothing of what we are able to grasp is God. Negative faith. But also, to believe that what we are unable to grasp is more real than what we are able to grasp; that our power to grasp is not the criterion of reality, but on the contrary is deceptive. To believe, finally, that what lies beyond our grasp appears nevertheless—hidden. (N 220)²²¹

It is inevitable that the transcendent will seem unreal at the level of ordinary experience if, as Weil says, our only access to the transcendent is through experiencing the void. This experience is negative in the sense that in the void everything we think we know about the transcendent turns out to be false or contradictory. Whenever we think that we have succeeded in *grasping the transcendent* (itself a contradiction), it must be our imagination trying to fill the void.²²² It is necessary instead to use one's pretended knowledge as a *metaxu* or bridge *away from* the very question of knowledge and toward actual contact with the real. This leaves one in contact with what one is unable to integrate into one's knowable world, with the result that the real may well appear meaningless. Thus in extreme affliction one's contact with reality is so contradictory that it can destroy the soul. The only way to prevent such a great evil, Weil warns, is to have already begun the process of decreation.

This, in outline, is the idea behind what I call decreative hermeneutics. One uses the apophatic against the cataphatic, and vice versa. Whatever we think we have grasped about the transcendent must be assumed false—for it is a contradiction to grasp what transcends—but one's comprehension must not, for all that, be abandoned. Instead, one uses the false comprehension as a bridge or *metaxu* to another level at which the goal of comprehension becomes irrelevant. For

²²¹ Hence for Weil, as for Levinas, the other must be more real than Being if, as Heidegger maintains, we do have an understanding (or 'grasp') of Being (BQP 74, 86).

²²² Cf. Levinas's comment on religion in the *Carnets de captivité*, in which he says in effect that religion does not anticipate *arriving* at the transcendent; it has no plan, and it does not expect "success": "ne pas attendre de la religion une technique et des succès (les attendre, c'est passer de la religion à la magie)" (*Oeuvres* I 232).

the goal is the real. But since the real cannot be comprehended, while consciousness does nothing but try to comprehend—that is, to integrate everything into its world—one must consent to the unreality of everything of which one is conscious, not excluding oneself. The process of moving to another level is therefore none other than decreation. Because a denial is also an attempt to comprehend, decreative hermeneutics is not negative theology any more than it is positive.

For Levinas, communicative contact with the other serves as a *metaxu* at every moment in life. This contact with the transcendent, characterized by an absolute disturbance of the sameness of one's world, however slight—absolute because it is a disturbance that cannot be reabsorbed into the same, perpetually *absolving* itself from inclusion in one's world and therefore continually disturbing its peace—Levinas calls “wakefulness as a sobering”:

Wakefulness and sobering by the Other who does not leave the same alone, and through which the Same, as living, and through its slumber, is at once overtaxed. It is not an *experience* of nonequanimity posited within the theme of a knowledge, it is the very event of *transcendence* as life. It is the psychism²²³ of responsibility for the Other, which is the lineament of this transcendence and which is psychism *tout court*. Transcendence in which, perhaps, the distinction between transcendence toward the other man and transcendence toward God should not be made too quickly. (“Philosophy and Awakening,” DEH 178, emphasis in original).

The fact that, for Weil, contact with the transcendent occurs chiefly through the *metaxu* of everyday events such as loss, degradation, and suffering is further proof that what she means by contact with the real (that is, Necessity, or God) is not a ‘mystical experience’ in the self-engrossing and self-enclosed sense Levinas calls “participation.” And the fact that these are all disruptions of one's equanimity suggests that the *metaxu* are essentially an encounter with

²²³ Here *psychism* probably refers to the subject's destabilization or “dephasing” by the other (OB 68). In earlier works, the word refers to the other's resistance to my attempt to totalize her; see TI 54 and Introduction, p. 30. The two meanings are not identical, but are obviously related.

alterity, and vice versa. What Levinas would take to be Weil's "mysticism" thus turns out to be the experience of being struck by the identical "event of transcendence" which for Levinas, on a smaller scale, is the motive force of human temporality, the continual interruption of the same by the other, a constant stirring up of the same which prevents time from congealing into a homogeneity that would ultimately mean death. Could communion with the other be the origin of time itself? Every encounter with the other is in any case an encounter with what Weil calls the void, an encounter with the transcendent and contradictory. It follows that every encounter with the other has the potential of introducing an inescapable worry that the transcendent is an illusion, that we are "duped by morality" (TI 21), while at the same time holding out a promise of hope in grace. Decreative hermeneutics tries to maintain both the vulnerability and the hope, as the only way in which one can consent to the real.

The hermeneutics of grace mentioned earlier in this chapter is therefore decreative hermeneutics. The decreative detachment required by grace itself requires grace. Detachment cultivated by encountering the void is necessary for decreation. There is no linear progression from one level to another, but a spiraling movement in which one uses one's current state, whatever it may be, as ground for a leap to a new level. One must bear in mind (1) that one cannot help but try to fill the void every moment, for this is what it means to be conscious, but also (2) that the void cannot be filled, for the void represents the nothingness which is the reality of the self. One must interpret every act of consciousness, every attempt at comprehension, as a *metaxu* mediating between the emptiness of the void and the impossible object of one's desire. We now consider two applications of this idea and then conclude with some general remarks on decreative hermeneutics.

2.5 Non-Active Action

Levinas makes one explicit reference in *Otherwise Than Being* to the *metalogical* character of the ethical. Intriguingly, he associates it with what sounds like a kind of hermeneutical “passion”:

It is in a *responsibility that is justified by no prior commitment*, in the responsibility for another—in an ethical situation—that the meta-ontological [*méta-ontologique*]²²⁴ and metalogical [*méta-logique*]²²⁵ structure of this Anarchy takes form, undoing the Logos in which the apology is inserted, by which consciousness always regains its self-control and commands. Passion absolute in that it takes hold without any *a priori*. As a result, consciousness affected [*atteinte*] before forming an image of what is coming to it, affected in spite of itself.²²⁶

For Heidegger, logic is the *logos* or story of Being, the Being of “a being possessing itself in an equality, l’être ἀρχή” (OB 102)—sovereign, free, in command of itself. Levinas’s logic, in explicit opposition to this—or, more accurately, as its radical underpinning—is a *meta-logos*, the closest thing to a *logos* or logic of the saying. Every *saying*, by proxy of a new said, goes “beyond” and “undoes” an earlier said—only to be undone and betrayed in turn by the very said that rescues it. That a new saying always recurs as a result of each betrayal is, according to Levinas, the sole guarantee of the return of the ethical—in fact, the return of the saying *is* the ethical. Conversely, every *said* is an *apo-logy* consciousness makes for itself, the *logos* of the “as

²²⁴ The only occurrence of the word in OB. It occurs in one other work, the lecture series *God, Death, and Time*. See C. Ciocan and G. Hansel, eds., *Levinas Concordance* (Dordrecht: Springer, 2005).

²²⁵ The only occurrence of the word in OB, *méta-logique* occurs once each in *Difficult Freedom*, *Outside the Subject*, and *The Time of the Nations*.

²²⁶ OB 102 / AE 129-30, emphasis and capitalization in the original, translation slightly altered. Unaccountably, Lingis translates *méta-ontologique* as *me-ontological* (that is, *an-ontological*, the *negation* of ontological) rather than as *meta-ontological*, *beyond* ontology. The French *mé-ontologique* is found nowhere in OB and occurs only once in Levinas’s works, in *Entre Nous* (1991), EN 55.

for me” (OB 89) or ‘what about me?’ of self-justification, the *logos* of being-in-the-world insofar as consciousness engages continually in accounting for and thus mitigating the other’s disruptive interruption. The need for the apology, given that one is unavoidably in-the-world, is the reason the ethical remains vulnerable in spite of its recurrence. But it *does* recur if given a chance, as we will see in the next section. The ethical is, after all, *our* responsibility. The recurrence is patently hermeneutic, a never-ending alternation of saying and said.

Thus the *meta*-logic of the saying, undermining the *logos* of the apology, would have to be a contradiction-tolerant, paraconsistent anti-logic of response-ability, of “responsibility over and beyond the *logos* of response” (OB 102), a logic beyond logic. This meta-logic is an-archic: as the *logos* or story of one’s response-ability, it can rest on no prior axiom or principle (*archē*). It claims no sovereignty of its own, nor is it the final story behind all stories. The question we shall consider now is: why does Levinas give the term *passion* to the responsibility that subverts the *logos* of Being? Is this only a reference to the passivity of responsibility, a concept by now familiar to us, or is there a deeper sense in which logic, the meta-logic of responsibility, is passionate? In favor of the latter possibility is Levinas’s hyperbolic language at this point.

Since the apology is an expression of, or reaction to, one’s being at the mercy of the other’s interruption, Levinas often calls this state a *passivity more passive than any passivity* or a “passivity on the hither side of all passivity” (OB 101 / AE 128).²²⁷ In the continuation of the passage quoted above, however, it is simply called *absolute*. But more striking is Levinas’s trope for subjectivity’s passive submission to the other, amounting to what he calls an obsession. It is *persecution*.

Passion absolute in that it takes hold without any a priori. As a result, consciousness affected before forming an image of what is coming to it, affected in spite of itself. In these traits we

²²⁷ Lingis, however, translates *passivité en deçà de toute passivité* as “passivity beneath all passivity.” This is not incorrect, but it leaves hidden the connection with Levinas’s important idea of the “hither side.”

recognize a persecution, a being called into question prior to questioning, responsibility over and beyond the logos of response. It is as though persecution by another were at the bottom of solidarity with another. How can such a Passion take place and have its time in consciousness?²²⁸

The question repeats earlier questions: “How can the passivity of obsession find a place in consciousness, which is wholly, or is in the end, freedom? ... How in consciousness can there be an undergoing or a passion whose active source does not, in any way, occur in consciousness?” (OB 102 / AE 129). As a preliminary answer, Levinas suggests rhetorically that perhaps there is more to subjectivity than consciousness. Indeed there is! It will turn out that the passion in question has an independent source beyond or on the “hither side” of consciousness. It therefore circumvents the traditional logic which motivates the doubts expressed in these questions—doubts we have seen are inevitable. It circumvents them not because passion is illogical but because the passion of persecution obeys the “logic of the absurd” we identified earlier with the modal logic of alterity and uncertainty, a logic we will now show allows the self, a being that invites its own decreation, to ignore the contradictions that produce doubt about the existence of the Good. In Weil’s terms, doubt and passion are not on the same level, hence there must be a mediation, a *metaxu*. This is where decreative hermeneutics will help us move up a level: *one utilizes doubt in order to enable passion to subvert doubt*.

But first we need more detail on what Levinas means by Passion. In a footnote, Levinas explains that Passion denotes for him “a relationship without any a priori which arises from a spontaneity.” This is not, however, the spontaneity of consciousness, “which ontology requires in a finite thought. For, in order to welcome entities finite thought, a pure receptivity, must operate as a transcendental imagination, formative of the imaginary” (OB 194n5 / AE 130n5). Finite

²²⁸ OB 102 / AE 130. I capitalize both occurrences of Passion for consistency. In the French, the first occurs at the beginning of a sentence and the second is capitalized.

thought depends on the transformation of *passive* receptivity into an *active* (spontaneous) or “formative” production of meaning. This contradictory notion of a receptive spontaneity or active passivity naturally calls to mind Kant’s transcendental figurative synthesis of imagination, which actively unifies the moments of time it receives passively. In phenomenology, a similar idea motivates Husserl’s description of consciousness as both constitutive and receptive.²²⁹ Heidegger discusses the same paradox in connection with Kant’s figurative synthesis in *Logic: The Question of Truth* (see LQT 306), observing that only with the advance of phenomenology and its notion of intentionality has philosophy succeeded in respecting its true *meaning*. For him, the meaning of the paradox of active passivity is ‘time’ itself (LQT 310).²³⁰

In Levinas, on the contrary, absolute passion has no meaning in itself, for it is not something that can be integrated into one’s being-in-the-world. It is a *pure receptivity of the other* that occurs before meaning-creation has a chance to take place, the ur-relation of primordial responsibility outside ontology mentioned earlier (pp. 126, 154) which Levinas calls *proximity* (OB 139). It is not a paradox *for* consciousness (having no place there), as in Husserl or Kant, but a paradox in which passivity, the other’s disruption of the same, is the outcome of one’s actively “going towards” or approaching the other. Passivity results from an *action*, but an action that occurs without knowledge of the impulse that produced it. It is thus a *passive action* whose outcome for the subject, “affected in spite of itself” (OB 102), is the pure passivity of recognizing the *other’s* action as imposing an inescapable responsibility on oneself. One becomes “hostage” to the other (OB 11, 127, 141), “obsessed” by him, as though one had entered a field of influence that forced one’s attention in his direction.²³¹ Moreover, one’s ransom escalates as one tries to pay it (OB 12, 93). As is often the case, Levinas’s language here is metaphorical. It must constantly be

²²⁹ *Analyses Concerning Active and Passive Synthesis: Lectures on Transcendental Logic*, Husserl 2001, 210.

²³⁰ We return to Heidegger’s idea in Chapter 3.

²³¹ “The particular and the personal, which are unsurpassable, as it were magnetize the very field in which the production of infinity is enacted” (TI 26), the field of human existence.

emphasized that by “obsession” he means an inversion of intentionality which is *not conscious*—which in fact *grounds* consciousness (OB 87, 192n24). The word *ob-sessed* in both French and English originally meant *besieged* by a force that *sits before* one. Thus Levinas writes that faced with the other, one is “assailed” without possibility of escape (OB 77). The other “assails” or “obsesses” me by forcing me to “break with the rectitude of consumption and cognition” (OB 191n10) which until that moment had characterized the natural economy of my relatively serene “enjoyment” of the world. That the breaking in of the other happens *every moment* makes it the motive force of time’s passing. Heidegger is therefore right to say that its meaning is time, but it is a meaning beyond meaning in his sense. It makes meaning possible, hence it is beyond Being.

How does decreative hermeneutics use absolute passion to undermine doubt? Weil provides an answer in the form of a passive activity she calls *non-active action*, a generalization of her idea that love is ideally *impersonal*.²³² Non-active action is action in which self-will plays no role. It involves self-emptying and waiting, the opposite of a literal or figurative “muscular effort” consciously applied to a goal one has explicitly in mind (SWR 46). Instead, one acts solely as the instrument of Necessity. Even manual labor can take the form of non-active action—in a certain sense, it is Weil’s canonical example²³³—but she applies the concept much more widely. Prayer, for example, is non-active action (N 504): “It is not my ‘I’ which prays. If a prayer takes place within me, I must hardly be aware of it” (N 173). In fact, since Weil considers attention the same thing as prayer (N 205, 218), effective solely insofar as it is impersonal, it follows that attention itself is non-active action.

²³² See FLN 129 and Chapter 1 above, p. 61 on the “impersonal”. For Miklos Vetö, non-active action “implies a certain ‘formalization’ of the concept of action emptied of its ‘personal’ elements” (Vetö 1994, 129). I think it is more accurate to say that it not merely implies, it *is* that formalization—or even better, its *concretization* (cf. AT 25), since for Weil action is precisely what is concrete. Non-active action is the everyday, concrete form action takes when it has been “emptied of its ‘personal’ elements.”

²³³ Vetö (1994, Ch. 7) analyzes the physical forms of non-active action in some detail. Non-active physical action is clearly reminiscent of Zen. Vetö does mention its connection in Weil’s mind with Karma. If one’s previous lives determine one’s present actions, then non-active action is not premeditated. (See below.)

So also, according to Weil—and at first this seems counterintuitive—is the work of justice. “Justice is essentially non-active. It has to be either transcendent or else exposed to suffering.” By transcendent she means that it is “totally deprived of any support discernible by the senses, even the love of God in so far as it can be felt” (N 375). It no more depends on successfully bringing about ‘justice’ than the act of “going towards” the neighbor aims intentionally to do the neighbor ‘good’. For Weil, who considers the work of justice to be the very opposite of the use of power, the ultimate act of justice would be Christ’s pure powerlessness on the Cross: “The Passion,” she says, “is the actual existence of perfect justice without any unreal admixture”—that is, emptied of everything ‘personal’ (N 375).²³⁴ Hence “love is on the side of non-action, of powerlessness: Love which consists of loving simply that a thing should *be*, of not wanting to tamper with it” (N 541). Such a love would be a pure respect for alterity, and only thus for Being. Non-active action might be defined as action that does not remain entirely within the same, as do intentional acts, but that ultimately belongs only to the other, not to the actor. Consequently it becomes wholly ‘other’ to the one who acts, foreign to his or her self-image—hardly typical of most conscious acts!

Conversely, non-active action in general can be described as action that does justice to others by fully respecting their alterity. As a work of justice itself, non-active action is therefore characterized by an “impulsion” towards the neighbor (N 359), it tends to require the “union of contrary virtues” such as mercy and disinterestedness (N 385), and its immediate effect is something “outside ordinary time” (N 192). This last feature leads Weil to cite, by way of explanation, the Hindu notion of *apūrva*, defined as a “potency” certain ritual acts have which survives the act itself, accounting for its results long after it is committed.²³⁵ Where Western philosophy would explain the effects of an act in terms of a chain of synchronic causes and

²³⁴ On God’s powerlessness see, for example, N 191, 542.

²³⁵ See, for example, Ujjwala Jha, “Mīmāṃsā Theory of Apūrva,” *Journal of East-West Thought*, March 2018, 8(1), 13-18.

effects (N 193), Weil (in company with Levinas) finds causal explanations often inadequate. An example she gives here is original sin: a sin “committed *before* any sin. Outside time, transcendental. *Apûrva?*” (N 192).

The relevance *apûrva* has for us would be that it seems to involve a temporality similar to that which Levinas discovers in the other-relation, of which Levinas writes: “It is not a question of an effect undergoing a cause. The subjective does not only undergo, it suffers. ... The neighbor strikes me before striking me, as though I had heard before he spoke. This anachronism attests to a temporality different from that which scans consciousness” (OB 88). In other words, it is *diachronic*. Non-active action, action motivated by justice understood as respect for the other’s alterity, likewise cannot be ‘explained’ in terms of a sequence of causes and effects. It takes its impulse solely from a non-thematizable, an-archic relation with the other. This would seem to make it the ideal form of action in the face of doubts about the Good. Motivated by non-active action, there is simply *no time* for such doubts. Doubt is already too late; it is out of place, since one has already acted diachronically ‘for the Good’ in spite of not knowing how or even whether one so acted—an ignorance based on the fact that one’s acts are always invariably “mixed” with evil in an ultimately indeterminable way (N 57). Whatever “potency” the Good may have is not synchronically discernible. As Weil would express it, it is mysterious—like *apûrva*.

This unavoidable diachronic difference in the other relation—whether the other in question is the neighbor or the Good—is the heart of the ethical. In Levinas’s terms, it is the difference of *non-indifference* that separates me absolutely from the neighbor and yet makes me absolutely response-able to her. Non-active action is a similarly diachronic expression of my responsibility for the transcendent other—solely *my* responsibility in the sense that the transcendent singularizes me, but decidedly *not* mine in the sense of sameness with my personal world. If non-active action is action out of love of the Good, and if, as Weil insists, acting out of love of the Good requires consent to one’s inescapable obedience to Necessity, amounting to decreation, then it is irrelevant

to the one who acts whether or not the Good actually ‘exists’. One does not even need to be cognitively certain of the *reality* of the Good. All that is required is obedience to whatever impulse strikes one as unavoidable after one has given the other one’s fullest attention—provided one always remains hermeneutically open, in the decreative sense, to the possibility that a different impulse might become operative in the very next moment, for one must resist the universal temptation to fill the void (of the absent Good) with precipitate action. Equivalently, one must have unceasing respect for the rule of Necessity, largely incomprehensible to human intelligence, over all of one’s actions. The motivation of non-active action is not the intent to ‘do good’, nor a cognitive understanding of what the Good is, nor even the need for decisive action, but solely a desire for a Good one can neither will nor comprehend but only love.

It follows from this that non-active action might validly be defined as the practical application of decreative hermeneutics.

2.6 The Skepticism of Recurrence

Can the a-logical other become an object for reason and remain other? One might suspect not. Yet Levinas declares that “reason is the one-for-the-other!” (OB 167). What does he mean by this? He certainly does *not* mean, in accordance with a common view in philosophy, that reason grounds ethics. For him it is the other way around. But Levinas explicitly admits two kinds of ‘reason’. The *first*, and also prior, is the reason of “intelligibility as proximity,” the reason of the *saying*, a “pre-original reason” that ensures “peace” with the other, but a peace which it is *my* responsibility to maintain (OB 166). This first reason is that which Levinas calls “the one-for-the-other” or “living reason” (DEH 167). It is not easy to say just what the first reason *is*, since every attempt to describe it makes use of the *second* reason, the “reason of representation,” of

“intelligibility as an impersonal logos,” the reason of the *said*, which always betrays the first. The second reason is reason as we normally think of it.

One way to make the difference clear might be to distinguish the two reasons by their logics. The second reason, the reason of representation which ensures a coherent world, is traditionally the guarantee of rationality and order. It is the reason that obeys logic in one or more of its standard forms. Its purpose is not to ground one’s responsibility for the other but to ensure “the coherence of the one and the other despite their difference, in the unity of a theme” (OB 165).

The logic of the first reason, by contrast, would be a paraconsistent logic having a tolerance for contradiction. As the *reason of responsibility*, it reasserts itself in every encounter with the other person, producing the momentary “break-up” (OB 165) of the second reason. Consciousness (the second reason) must then re-thematize the disturbance in order to restore coherence to its world. The first reason is the reason of the ethical, the second that of world-making (Chapter 5), and while the first has priority according to Levinas—for philosophy needs to interpret (decreatively and hermeneutically) the second in view of the first—it cannot dispense with the second. In Weil’s language, the first is reason in the service of Love; the second, reason in the service of Necessity.²³⁶ Reason in the service of Love turns out in practice to be a variety of skepticism reflecting a concern for the other that takes the form of *attention* in Weil’s sense of the word. Levinas describes the first reason as the “skepticism of recurrence” because it coincides with one’s being called into question by the other. The self is constituted as one’s continual recovery or “recurrence” from a never-ending other-induced self-skepticism (OB 102-9, 165-71).

Since we can say nothing about either of the two reasons without employing the language of the *said* guided by the second reason, what prevents the first reason, which has no beginning or principle (OB 166), no ontological foundation to guarantee its continuation, from becoming

²³⁶ This would seem to bring Necessity very close to what Heidegger refers to as the “material a priori.” He even sounds like Weil when he observes that “all of geometry as such is proof of the existence of a material a priori” (HCT 74 / GA XX 101). Weil continually finds analogies in mathematics, which she studied in an amateur way throughout her life. Weil’s brother was the brilliant mathematician André Weil.

engulfed by the second? Levinas puts the question in this way: “Does the reason characteristic of justice, the State, thematization, synchronization, re-presentation, the logos and being [that is, the second reason] succeed in absorbing into its coherence the intelligibility of proximity in which it unfolds?” (OB 167). Could the second reason manage to make *everything* intelligible to consciousness? It might seem initially that the question answers itself: if it is *within* the first reason, the intelligibility of proximity, that the second reason “unfolds,” then the said depends on the saying for its very existence. Unfortunately, the first reason has no reality apart from the individual. Hence it is fundamentally characterized by an essential vulnerability to being absorbed, just as the individual is inescapably vulnerable to being treated as the ‘same’. There is nothing to prevent the demise of the first reason in generalization, other than the frail individual who defends it by acting from the same response-ability that makes him or her a subject.

The danger that the first reason will be absorbed into the second is the inherent vulnerability of the ethical. That is why the ethical, along with justice, can be preserved only by individuals who makes choices which, as we have seen, essentially further their own decreation. From a practical standpoint, this amounts to basing one’s choices on a decreative hermeneutics of the first reason, “intelligibility as proximity.” The reality of the first reason is permanently dependent on the precarious reality, for the individual, of the Good. And if the Good is by nature vulnerable, then to love the Good is invariably to suffer for it even at the risk of one’s own possible demise.

The first reason, the reason of responsibility, is therefore preserved and defended by the “audacity” of a skepticism which claims, in effect, that nothing ‘said’ is true because the said always betrays the saying (OB 7). Like all skepticism, this variety, which we will call skepticism₁ for the time being since it corresponds to the first reason, invariably “returns” however often the second reason, the reason of representation or “reflection,” seems to refute it (OB 167). Levinas explains that, in general, what every legitimate philosophical skepticism does is to call into question the assumption that all truths are on the same “order and level” (OB 168). Ordinary

epistemological skepticism,²³⁷ for example—we might call this skepticism₂ since it is based on the second reason —claims that there is a *truth about truth-claims* (of a certain kind, whatever that truth might be, short of a wholesale denial of the very possibility of human knowledge) which is not reabsorbed within the scope of those specific truth-claims. Skepticism₂ cannot be refuted by pointing out, for example, that it happens to contradict itself. A truth about truth claims is expressly *not* among the truth claims to which it refers—it is not on the same “level”—hence it cannot apply to itself.

In much the same manner, when skepticism₁ claims that the contradiction between saying and said must be sustained, the reason of representation does not refute skepticism₁ by objecting that skepticism₁ violates logic because if the said is always false then what the first reason has just *said* (about the said being false) cannot be true (OB 167-68). The refutation fails because the logic violated is the ordinary logic of the reason of representation, the logic of the said, whereas skepticism₁ obeys a paraconsistent logic of the saying which Levinas claims *transcends* the “order and level” of the logic of the said. Levinas explains this in terms of the *temporal* levels of saying and said. We outline his explanation below, and then, in the next section, show how Weil’s more concrete approach complements Levinas’s when made precise phenomenologically.

The key to understanding the skepticism of recurrence lies in Levinas’s claim that the saying is absolutely inaccessible to knowledge grounded in the said. The saying cannot even be a limit asymptotically approached by more and more accurate ‘saims’, for then it could be defined—that is, *said* to be—this limit. The saying is consequently *betrayed* by the said without fail and as a matter of course, and not simply because of the limitations of the human intellect or because more time is needed to acquire the knowledge that would bring the said sufficiently close to representing the saying for all practical purposes. Levinas surmises that the skepticism that reveals the betrayal by denying the claims of the said continually returns because the saying and

²³⁷ Not to be confused with what Husserl calls “epistemic skepticism” or “logical-noetic skepticism,” which questions the very possibility of knowledge (*Logische Untersuchungen*, Vol. 1, §§32-33).

the said belong to different *temporal* levels. The saying belongs to the “instant” outside of the everyday time of the said, and is therefore ‘experienced’ as *absent* from everyday time.

Metaphorically speaking, the saying is infinitely far from the said, an ‘eternity’, and at the same time, infinitely close, in that it never returns in the ordinary time of the said but is always ‘here’ in its own time: in every instant in which one encounters the other. The saying is therefore never synchronizable with a past-present-future continuum, but instead “signif[ies] a temporality in which the instants refuse memory which recuperates and represents.” The saying is therefore a “skepticism” in the sense of “a refusal to synchronize the implicit affirmation contained in [the] saying and the negation which this affirmation states in the said” (OB 167). Skepticism always returns because, in effect, *the saying itself is skepticism*, a continual calling into question of the said, while the said depends for its existence on the saying it betrays. The *raison d’être* of the saying is to preserve the contradiction between the ethical truth of responsibility and the thematic truth of the said. And the saying is *always true*—in that it can be trusted as an invariable witness to the ethical *against* the said—while the said which is its expression is *always false*, since it cannot be more than a representation of the saying, and the saying cannot truthfully be thematized. Expressed more concretely: the saying is the truth of the responsibility I have to the neighbor who stands before me, while the said is the imperfect discourse of justice which betrays the saying even as it does its job.

To declare that the *saying* is ‘true’—that there is an “implicit *affirmation* contained in [the] saying”—therefore means something very different from what we typically mean when we assert that a statement, a *said*, is true. The said can be the implementation of an intentional act the purpose of which is to declare an objective truth as part of maintaining a shared world. The saying, on the other hand, as it is beyond synchronic world-time, is never intentional. It signifies a commitment thrust upon me *prior to* intentionality which singles me out as *already substituted* for the other. The obligation to the other is always already imposed, but not in time. It is present

only as an absence that leaves a *trace*—for example, my “Here I am,” ambiguous by its very nature. Levinas compares the trace to an indistinct and intermittent “blinking light” (OB 154, 193n31; cf. 152): one thinks one may have caught a glimpse of it, but there is no way to be sure, and even if it returns, one is no more certain of having seen it the second time than one was the first. Similarly, there is no solid proof of my responsibility for the neighbor. Only indistinct indications or “traces” which one is forced to interpret ... and interpret, and interpret again.²³⁸

The obligation of responsibility which is the truth of the saying is therefore of a different order than any obligation the will can recognize or resist. Indeed, this obligation cannot be recognized *soon enough* to be resisted, since it is already fundamentally constitutive of the consciousness that would do the resisting. It is recognized only in the obeying and not before. Consciousness *is* in fact the primary everyday form that this obedience takes.

The trace of the 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.²³⁹ ... 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 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. (OB 168)²⁴⁰

The truth of the saying, which is none other than responsibility itself, is not an object of belief or of opinion, nor a form of epistemic knowledge—that is, a truth-claim—but a *relation* that clears

²³⁸ On the trace, see above, p. 152-53. For other metaphors of the trace: “Phenomenon and Enigma,” CP 65-66.

²³⁹ A reference to Heidegger’s notion that Dasein posits a world by unconcealing beings.

²⁴⁰ Religion, as Levinas defines it, is not voluntary, but a fact of life, the “relationship of illeity ... ordering me to responsibility” (OB 168) to the neighbor, as though I was obligated to keep faith with an other who continually absolves himself or herself from the very relationship produced by my keeping faith. Illeity is the trace of the pure otherness of the Other, of all the other others. See Ch. 4 below, p. 246.

space for one's giving attention to the other.²⁴¹ The said, by contrast, is the expression in language of what Miklos Vetö calls "living from perspective," or in Levinas's terms, turning the other into the same. In a sense, there is no more to the saying than the fact that it is betrayed by the said, for as we noted above, the saying simply *is* the indefatigable witness of this betrayal, of the inability of the said to do justice to the other. Otherwise, the saying has no content. Conversely, there is only a very little more to responsibility than the fact that it cannot be expressed in language—for responsibility is perhaps entirely characterized by its antipathy to totalization. Responsibility is response-ability, and the ability to respond to the other begins and ends with the desire to *go towards* the other. It does not depend on making them part of one's world, however necessary this betrayal is, but the other way around: one cannot be conscious of the other without having *already* pre-consciously obeyed an obligation to approach them.

We know about the saying only through the barest traces it leaves, in its betrayal by the said. The saying has nothing to say to us directly about our obligations toward the other. The truth of the saying is not correlated with any explicit command, and yet it "commands"—an idea central to Levinas's thought even prior to his introducing the terminology of saying and said.²⁴² Its truth is on an altogether different *level* from that of the said. It is not the truth *about* one's responsibility, but one's responsibility itself: the proximity of the other as a commitment one never committed oneself to. It is more like an invariable trustworthiness, ensuring the dependability of the other always to disturb the same, than it is like an object of knowledge, much less a guide as to how to treat the other, something it can never be at all. If traditional logic is "the rational necessity that coherent discourse transforms into sciences" (OB 160), then the logic of the saying can only be *the ethical necessity that coherent discourse transforms into justice*. As we

²⁴¹ This idea borrows something from Heidegger's notion of truth as "unconcealment," applying it not to Being but to the Other, while leaving behind his idea of truth as a strictly *temporal* phenomenon, truth as "presence-now" (LQT 173). For Levinas, truth is not an "ur-temporal" phenomenon of existence (LQT 168-69) but what we might call *trans-temporal* in the sense of transcending being and time. Or else, truth is the "time" of the Other, diachronic rather than synchronic, but by no means a matter of "presence."

²⁴² See, for example, TI 178, 213.

have seen, this *ethical necessity* is but one definition of what Levinas calls responsibility. It is absolutely basic—and yet at the same time absolutely vulnerable because dependent on the said for its manifestation in the world. That is why the work of justice requires the continual reinterpretation of the said in order to recover some (hopefully better) sense of the saying. And because the work of justice is a form of non-active action (p. 165), the hermeneutics of the saying is a *decreative* hermeneutics.

2.7 Decreative Hermeneutics and the Lever of Transcendence

For Weil, *contradictory truths* are “truths which are of such a nature that by affirming them one destroys them (e.g. the grace included in sin).”

[This is] because they are not true on the plane on which the opinions one is affirming are found (on that plane, the reverse is true), but on a higher plane. They are only able to be perceived as true by such minds as are capable of conceiving on several vertical, superposed planes simultaneously; to other minds they remain completely incommunicable. (N 163)

Such truths are “only true behind (above) the contrary assertion” (N 80). Theology aside, Weil’s telegraphic example that sin is grace for the person who repents at least shows how two contraries work together. They do so, however, only in a ‘who’—not in some independent realm of logical truth. Only when the contradiction is ‘personal’—meaning, of vital importance to oneself—is one allowed to think of grace as “included in” sin. If this is a correct reading of what Weil means, then she is very close to Kierkegaard’s insistence that contraries such as sin and grace can only be *existential* problems for the “single individual,” never intellectual or doctrinal questions without detriment to what the contraries are supposed to do ethically or spiritually.

Weil's examples may appear to imply that she intends contradiction to be respected only in the case of certain spiritual or mystical truths, but it would be a mistake to read her that way, for she insists, as radically as does Levinas (OB 171), that we use contradiction to learn the truth about anything whatsoever, mundane or spiritual. Hence, Weil says, "reality is the obstacle," and since "the obstacle for a thinking being is contradiction" (N 387),²⁴³ reality will show itself as contradictory. This use of contradiction as a criterion for truth, indicating the reality beyond the familiar and self-confirming same, Weil calls "the lever of transcendence" (FLN 134). The idea is to employ two contraries like triangulation points: by conceiving both at once, concentrating one's attention on the inescapable contradiction between them, one arrives at a third point on a higher level, necessarily beyond the self that thematizes, from which the entire relation appears as an indication or trace, however fleeting, of the transcendent (N 341).

In *Otherwise Than Being*, Levinas gives an example of the lever of transcendence worthy of Weil. If asked for an example of a "really hard problem," a Western philosopher working in the analytic tradition is quite likely to mention the difficulty of explaining the phenomenon of mind in a material world.²⁴⁴ Levinas defines the mind-body problem in his own way, as "the unintelligibility of incarnation, the 'I think' separated from extension, the *cogito* separated from the body" (OB 79). He has an answer to it, but not the kind of answer analytic philosophy seeks. Levinas would have us see the "impossibility of [mind and body] being together" not as a problem to be solved but as "the trace of the diachrony of the-one-for-the-other": evidence of a third term, one's responsibility for the other, which Levinas calls exteriority and which has priority over the separated self in its "inwardness" (*intériorité*) and the body it supposedly inhabits. In other words, the impossibility of thinking mind and body together, the problem of their identity, is itself a *trace* of the *ethical*,

²⁴³ "Car le réel c'est l'obstacle, et l'obstacle d'un être pensant, c'est la contradiction" (C II, 304).

²⁴⁴ See Owen Flanagan, *The Really Hard Problem: Meaning in a Material World* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2009). Flanagan's 'answer' to the problem, however, is not Cartesian but fundamentally ethical, and therefore closer to Levinas's. On the other hand, Flanagan is a scientist as well as a philosopher, and in that respect closer in spirit to Weil, who maintained an active if amateur interest in science throughout her life.

the trace of *separation* in the form of inwardness, and of the for-the-other in the form of responsibility. Identity here takes form not by a self-confirmation, but, as a signification of the-one-for-the-other, by a deposing of oneself, a deposing which is the incarnation of the subject, or the very possibility of giving, of dealing signifyingness. (OB 79)

The deposing of the subject before the other *is* precisely the incarnation of the subject, and vice versa. One has a body in order to give to the other. The question of how body and mind go together therefore misses the point, which for Levinas is first of all and consequently (since there is no time for anything else) *ethical*. To put it in Weil's language, the fact that the subject is created with a body is proof that the subject is meant to be *de-created*. That is precisely why "the subject does not only undergo, it suffers" (OB 88). And once the subject is decrelated, there can be no question of a mind-body problem in any other (that is, non-ethical) form.

The problem of putting mind and body back together again is already, then, prior to philosophy, not an intellectual problem but simply the problem of how to live an embodied human life among other embodied humans, therefore a 'problem' not historically traceable. It dates back to a time before time, as Levinas would say. The trace of the other, of the Infinite, is the trace of an other who in every encounter contests the very separation of mind and body that, if one takes it seriously, can only hinder living one's life as ethical. Thus the trace signifies a deposing or abdication of the sovereign self, making the self *identical to* its "incarnation." That is, the deposition *is* one's ability to give to the other the bread from out of one's mouth—something impossible without being incarnated. It is therefore a trace of one's decreation, in which the intellectual *mis*-understanding that there is a contradiction between mind and body becomes a *missed* understanding of what is at stake for a being that continually confronts *others*.

Similarly, Weil's method of experimental ontological proof is not so much an intellectual tool as it is a way of using contradiction to make an advance in one's becoming a self before God, if we may speak for a moment in Kierkegaardian terms. In other words, Weil's ontological proof is intended to be a lever of transcendence. The principle employed here is the same as that operative when she says, thinking of a different Incarnation, that the "incarnation, too, is a matter for ontological proof, *for it is only a truth where love is concerned*" (N 375, emphasis added). For both Levinas and Weil, trite as it may sound, certain standard problems of philosophy resist solution because they are meant to be lived (or loved, as Rilke once put it), *not solved*. And yet, if this is really so trite a thing to say, why do we continually try to *solve* these problems rather than meet the challenge of *living* them? One cannot help wondering whether the reason has to do with the fact that many of them became philosophical rather than ethical or religious problems only at a certain point in history—namely with the rise of modern science and its paradigm for problem-solving which, at least until quantum theory, had no tolerance for ineliminable chance or contradiction.²⁴⁵

There are two contradictory relations Weil considers to be of the highest importance, the God-human relation and the relation of God to God's-creation-as-seen-by-us: "These two contradictions can never exist in any stable fashion, but they take on a certain sort of existence under the form of Becoming, in the course of the process in a soul whereby that which says 'I' is made to disappear little by little. The thinking creature then reaches up to the absolute and God reaches down to the particular" (N 378). Both relations resemble the mind-body problem in at least one respect: resisting synthesis into a world view, they seem to represent insurmountable contradictions. In cases such as these, Weil advises, one must use the contradiction even though it is unstable, precisely in order to resist the desire to maintain stability through the elimination of

²⁴⁵ Weil blames the rise of science for the decline of religious belief at NR 244. Weil had no tolerance for quantum theory despite its acceptance of contradiction. Her reasons for this had to do with what she saw as its loss of human contact with Necessity. Quantum theory, as she views it, is based entirely on the abstractions of algebra, whereas Greek mathematical and physical science preserves a connection with the realities of human existence through its foundations in geometry.

what violates traditional logic and therefore offends the rational self. Traditional logic only solidifies the rule of the conscious 'I' that is allergic to the contradictory *other*. Hence the 'I' is resistant to decreation and the reality decreation signifies, the reality of the instability and vulnerability of the Good.

Decreative hermeneutics is similarly a method of interpreting life (rather than solving its problems), one that cultivates respect for the utility of contradiction and the vulnerability of every interpretation as an artifact of language and human ethical relations. We have seen in the present chapter that it attempts to do this by continually re-interpreting whatever presents itself before consciousness as *other*. Specifically, decreative hermeneutics takes explicitly into account the betrayal of the saying by the said which reflects the eternal ambivalence of the Good. This perhaps makes decreative hermeneutics the one appropriate hermeneutics of the *ethical* in Levinas's sense of the word. If phenomenology aims to make contact with a reality that often turns out to be *other than* the cognitions one tends to form of it, then it needs a hermeneutics that goes beyond cognitive representation in order to make contact not so much with so-called being as with *alterity*, and in particular with the basic foundation of the experience of alterity in the *ethical* reality of the other person. This was why it was necessary to spend some time on Levinas's logic of ethical alterity and Weil's modal logic of the eternally ambivalent good, both of which we elaborated with the help of Levinas's idea of transcendence as fundamentally ethical and Weil's important notions of *metaxu* and the void. We will often have occasion to employ all of these ideas in the chapters to come. Meanwhile, the next chapter will continue to lay the groundwork and provide the necessary background for the introduction of decreative phenomenology in Chapter 4 by considering the relation of Levinas's and Weil's ways of thinking to the work of Martin Heidegger.

3.0 Better Than Being: Philosophy in a Transcendental Axiological Key

But the very *principle* of my enterprise—*giving value to* the relation of infinite responsibility which goes from the I to the Other—remains. — Emmanuel Levinas, “Transcendence and Height” ²⁴⁶

It is the desirable that is valued, it is not value that gives rise to desires.

— Emmanuel Levinas, “Ideology and Idealism” ²⁴⁷

To say that what we really want is always and only the good is like saying that what we desire is the desired. ... The good is nothing else but the object of our will.

— Simone Weil, *Notebooks* ²⁴⁸

In his *Introduction to Metaphysics*, Heidegger writes that “what philosophy can and must be according to its essence is ... a thoughtful opening of the avenues and vistas of a knowing that establishes *measure and rank*, a knowing in which a people conceives its Dasein in the historical-spiritual world and *brings it to fulfillment*” (IM 11, emphasis added). For Heidegger in 1935,

²⁴⁶ BPW 22, emphasis added.

²⁴⁷ GWCM 6.

²⁴⁸ Here (N 490) undoubtedly, and in the previous citation (GWCM 6) explicitly, both Weil and Levinas have in mind Spinoza’s resolution of the Euthyphro dilemma: “So it is established from all this that we do not endeavor, will, seek after, or desire something because we judge it to be good, but on the contrary we judge something to be good because we endeavor, will, seek after, or desire it” (*Ethics*, part 3, prop. 9, scholium, translated by G. H. R. Parkinson, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000). For Weil on value, cf. N 247 on “the mystery of good in actions.” On her Spinozist affinities, see Nevin 1991, 52.

Dasein's "fulfillment" lay in its role of uncovering the meaning of Being,²⁴⁹ a task he claimed had been abandoned almost before it began with the pre-Socratics.²⁵⁰ This task, he wrote, constituted Dasein's "greatness": "The moment we grasp our humanity as existent, the act of beginning the beginning [of the history of Being] becomes the first and last necessity" (BWP 74-75).

What justifies the claim—a claim which, if not essential to Heidegger's argument, is surely intended to enhance its force—that precisely the guardianship of Being, and not something else, defines human "greatness"? This is a value judgment, coming from a philosopher who was notoriously critical of "values,"²⁵¹ whose philosophy makes virtually no mention of ethics, even though (or perhaps because?) it developed in the midst of historical events that for many proved the irrelevance of ethics altogether. It is evident that the "first and last necessity" proposed here is not an *ontological* necessity. The fact that Being does not force this necessity upon us is proved by centuries of our having ignored it,²⁵² and as far as anyone can tell, nothing prevents us from continuing to ignore it indefinitely. But if the "first and last necessity" is not an ontological necessity, what prevents it from being an *ethical* one? Indeed, Heidegger does not rule out the possibility that the effort of thought required for what is clearly a *service* to Being might demand a self-sacrifice or kenosis which one could only call ethical, even if Heidegger himself never

²⁴⁹ In this chapter, I will generally write Being for Heidegger's *Sein* (or *Seyn*). Other translations have included be-ing and beyng. Note that *Sein* and *Seyn* do not refer to the same thing in the later Heidegger. Levinas writes *l'être*, not usually capitalized, translated as either being or Being, although, as we will note later, he often uses the word *essence* to mean the same thing—that is (roughly), 'being' understood as a verb (the *being* of beings), Heidegger's *Sein*.

²⁵⁰ Worth noting here is Levinas's own example of Heidegger's use of "ethical significations" in the characterization of "pre-Socratic" *being* as generous, modest, and humble (GDT 30-31).

²⁵¹ "Thereby the step is taken over to 'value,' to 'meaning,' to the 'ideal.' The guiding question of beings as such is here already at its limit and likewise at a place where it relapses and henceforth values *beingness*, instead of grasping it in a more original way, and *values it such that value itself is declared to be what is highest*" (CPE 164, final emphasis added). For another example of a Heideggerian value judgment, see Jacques Derrida, *Of Spirit: Heidegger and the Question*, in which Derrida suggests that when Heidegger writes of the animal's "poverty of world" or of "spirit" he implies that it is *better* to "have access to entities *as such* and in their Being" than to have access to them as an animal does (Derrida 1989, 51). On the axiological implications of this dichotomy between 'animal' and 'Dasein', see especially 55-57 of that work.

²⁵² According to Heidegger's narrative of the history of Being, ignorance of Being's deliberate "withdrawal" characterizes the present era, an ignorance in danger of becoming irrevocable. See CPE §56.

explicitly does. In that case, one would like a clue as to Heidegger's understanding of *ethical* necessity. What is Dasein's relation to the ethical? Of this we hear very little from Heidegger. Simone Weil furnishes, in her own person, an example of how he might have approached the issue: "Not I exist, and the beautiful line of poetry, the act of charity, etc., takes place; *but* I don't exist, and that thing, whatever it is, takes place" (N 348). She might have affirmed the same about any being whatever, for decreation is removing one's *self* from between beings and their disclosure as what they truly are.

Heidegger frequently suggests that the supreme importance of the guardianship of the Being of beings overwhelms one as soon as one becomes aware of Dasein's responsibility for Being's disclosure. Let us assume for the sake of argument that awareness of one's responsibility for Being is indeed an experience that should be cultivated, and not a temptation to be dismissed. Might it be an example of what Levinas calls a subversive-disruptive event (*bouleversant événement*)?²⁵³ But in that case, Heidegger is guilty of an even more elementary value judgment, no less ethical: one *ought to* live in a way that leaves one open to such events, to their disruption of the everydayness of life.²⁵⁴ Given Heidegger's signature dedication to deconstructing the meanings of the terms he uses, what are we to say of the implied presence of the normative in his expression of humankind's part in Being's history? In the *Introduction to Metaphysics*, Heidegger devotes less than five pages (IM 210-214) to the question of how Being differs from the Ought,²⁵⁵ a discussion that quickly dissolves into a general polemic against "values."²⁵⁶ Valid though Heidegger's critique of the bourgeois proclivity for valuing may be—not so much its need to *value*

²⁵³ OB 151. Lingis translates *bouleversant* as 'overwhelming.' For my discussion of this passage, see Ch. 4, p. 246. In Heidegger, the realization of Being's withdrawal (its "refusal") and the responsibility this entails for Da-sein, begins with shock (*Erschrecken*), followed by the restraint (*Verhaltenheit*) necessary for one's "readiness for the refusal [of Being] as gift" (CPE 14). In other words, one makes the momentous discovery that Being has concealed itself precisely in order to *give one* the responsibility *oneself* for its unconcealing.

²⁵⁴ Live—or think? What does 'life' mean for Heidegger, especially in light of his condemnation of the momentariness and person-centeredness of "lived experiences" (*Erlebnisse*)? See CPE 17, 42, 87, 101-5.

²⁵⁵ As compared to nineteen on 'Being and Seeming' and eighty-eight on 'Being and Thinking'.

²⁵⁶ Anyone who has read those pages will recall that they are among the most controversial in all of Heidegger's published works, apart from the Black Notebooks, for political reasons not immediately relevant here.

things (but why insist on the word ‘value’ when one might simply call it love?) as an obsession with the dubious qualities it is pleased to call *values*—his own thinking does not avoid reference to an occasional unsupported value judgment or ethical pronouncement. Is Heidegger then not free to make value judgments and ethical pronouncements? Of course he is. What is unacceptable is leaving their explicit mention out of his philosophy as though they served no legitimate purpose.

Levinas, too, bases his project on certain ethical presuppositions and value judgments. One of these is the assumption of the transcendent intention mentioned above in Chapter 2. Another is Levinas’s supposition of the asymmetry of the ethical, which we discuss later in this chapter. Unlike Heidegger, Levinas gives his presuppositions some philosophical justification. How he does this will be the focus of the following two sections. We will then take up the importance of Desire to Levinas and its relation to valuing. The remainder of the chapter is devoted to analyzing certain parallels and differences between Weil’s and Heidegger’s thinking with a view to showing how Weil strengthens Levinas’s case against Heidegger’s ranking of ontology over ethics.

3.1 The Other Within

The idea that non-intentional comportment (*Verhalten*) characterizes most human behavior is central to Heidegger’s thought from *Being and Time* on. From Levinas’s point of view, however, one is always ‘kept awake’ by a *more fundamental* non-intentional sensibility, a sensibility to *alterity* which Levinas indeed refers to as “insomnia” because it is involuntary and prevents one from resting in the sameness of one’s home world.²⁵⁷ Levinas identifies this fundamental sensibility with what he calls the *other within*: “the substance of the Same, as identity, as repose,

²⁵⁷ “The dominant signification of sensibility is already caught sight of in vulnerability, and it will be shown in the responsibility characteristic of proximity, in its restlessness and its insomnia ...” (OB 63-64). “Proximity” refers to the absolute imminence of the other within. See also OB 87, 93, and above, p. 107-8.

as presence, as sleep ... is cored out²⁵⁸ by the Other who tears this rest ... from the hither side of the *state* where equality tends to settle.”²⁵⁹ The other within is the assurance that, even when one is alone, the ‘other’ is so close—on one’s “hither side” is how Levinas puts it—that consciousness cannot gain the distance necessary to register it. The other within is ‘who’ I turn to for validation of my experience of the world as a *shared* world when no others are actually present, but turn to with the expectation, or anxiety, that the other may call that world, insofar as I call it ‘my world’, into question. It is the fact that, Heidegger notwithstanding, one needs the other simply to become aware of anything at all as something other than oneself—not excluding Being.

This idea, that the relation to alterity is more basic than comportment to being, is central to Levinas’s suggestion, for example in the essay “Reflections on Phenomenological ‘Technique’” (1959), that there might be *non-epistemological* foundations for knowledge.²⁶⁰ These would be foundations of which, paradoxically, one can be certain without knowing *what they are*—foundations “more certain than certainty,” more certain even than Being itself:

Situations, the intention of which is not reducible to knowledge, can be posited as conditions of knowledge, without this positing taking on the appearance of an irrational decision. A fully phenomenological way of proceeding is to discover, for relations of knowledge, foundations that properly speaking lack the structure of knowledge, not because these foundations impose themselves without certainty, but because as anterior and conditioning they are *more certain than certainty, more rational than reason*. (DEH 101, emphasis added)

²⁵⁸ From *dénoyer*, to stone (fruit).

²⁵⁹ GWCM 59, translation slightly modified. For the important idea of the ‘other within’—“the other in the same,” “the other in me,” “the psyche in the soul”—see for example, OB 25, 69, 141.

²⁶⁰ See also GWCM 57.

Foundations that “lack the structure of knowledge” and yet “are more certain than certainty” must lie “on the hither side of [that is, are more primordial than] the subject-object correlation and its privilege” that has traditionally characterized objective cognitive knowledge in the West since Descartes (DEH 101).

From a Heideggerian point of view, the dichotomy of subject and object dissolves once one sees that Dasein is always already ‘outside’ itself as being-in-the-world. But Levinas argues that the subject-object distinction, however inappropriate from the standpoint of ontology, has a legitimate “hither side,” the subject-*other* distinction. As we saw in the last chapter, the “hither side” is Levinas’s trope for a domain closer to the subject, as Levinas understands that overburdened word, than the self-conscious ego that turns even the subject herself into an object. “Anterior and conditioning” for all that the subject is, the hither side is where the subject remains pure subject inasmuch as *subjected to* the Other. Far more radically than sensibility and passivity for Husserl, the hither side is the non-site or no-place (*non-lieu*) of a passivity beyond passivity, a “sensibility” attuned to, and attuned *by*, the other.²⁶¹ For Levinas, the subject just *is* this extreme sensibility other-wise, a passivity that goes far beyond the passivity implicit in Heidegger’s idea that we “belong” to the truth of Being (CPE §197). The certainty that this *sensibility otherwise* lends to our knowledge is “the reverse of certainty that falls back on itself” (OB 56) by relying on reason’s ability to restore and stabilize the Same. It is a certainty that is “an awakening of spirit beyond certainties or uncertainties, modalities of the knowledge of being,”²⁶² a certainty of finding one’s knowledge and *oneself* put radically in question, if not by a present other, then by the *other within*. It is apparently a certainty one acquires only by employing the lever of

²⁶¹ On the passivity beyond passivity, see OB 47-48, 92, 113-15 (with substitution), and 124 (“death-like” passivity of “persecution”).

²⁶² “From Consciousness to Wakefulness” (GWCM 21).

transcendence to move up a level from that which privileges objective reason (see section 2.7 above).²⁶³

The *other within* is a trope for the “restlessness of the same disturbed by the other” (OB 25) which for Levinas defines responsibility. Since consciousness always places its objects at a distance—indeed, consciousness *is* this very placing-at-a-distance—we can characterize the other within as that which is too close, as it were, to be the object of conscious awareness. The other within therefore prevents one from ever reaching a point where one has succeeded in placing a distance between oneself and one’s entire world, as though taking a “view from nowhere.” This would amount to one’s having achieved the impossible (and not really desirable) goal of making the whole of experience conformable to one’s worldview—not really desirable, first of all because it would leave one in a solipsistic world devoid of others, but also because it would mean that the passage of time, the necessity of having continually to revise one’s worldview, had ceased altogether. Is it not *alterity* that, surprising us in (what we call) the next moment, demanding some minimal revision of our world, sets this moment apart from the previous moments? But if there is really only one alterity, as Levinas claims, then the motivation for time consciousness ultimately comes solely from the fact that one encounters *others*.

Levinas’s principal claim in *Otherwise Than Being*, for which virtually the entire work comprises an argument, is that nothing is more “certain” than that one has been chosen or designated by the other as responsible for the other. This despite the fact that whatever one *says* about the Other is nowhere near certain from the point of view of consciousness and the reason that serves to maintain the Same (the “first reason” described in 2.6 above). By contrast, as cognitively *un-certain*, the certainty that I now call *transcendental* or *ethical* is a certainty that paradoxically unsettles and destabilizes. Not allowing any rest, the other continually demands that one abandon one’s efforts to make everything the ‘same’ long enough to recognize his or her

²⁶³ “For the sense of our whole effort [in *Totality and Infinity*] is to contest the ineradicable conviction of every philosophy that objective knowledge is the ultimate relation of transcendence” (TI 89).

vulnerability to precisely one's same-making. In other words, the other keeps one awake by continually begging for *attention* (in Weil's sense of the word). Since it is experienced in the midst of the mundane Same and yet invariably takes one outside of oneself, this insomnia is an ethical wakefulness that is truly "transcendent in immanence" (GWCM 25-26).

True, Heidegger is no less critical than Levinas of cognitive certainty. In *Contributions to Philosophy* he calls it "self-certainty" (CPE 31, 99, 158-59, 349) or "no longer letting oneself be called" by Being. It is an "obduracy against all intimations, the *inability to wait*; always only calculating" (CPE 94). However necessary calculative thought often is, to Heidegger it invariably precludes the experience of Being. But for Levinas, an experience of Being can be no more certain than the non-intentional sensibility to the *other* on which all certainty ultimately rests. Without the other's resistance to—more precisely, their "contestation" (TI 38) of—one's worldview, one's certainty is merely a self-satisfied or lethargic complacency in the Same. From moment to moment, only the Other can keep one from dozing off into sleepy Sameness. Thus, when Catherine Keller suggests that "the possible beyond the impossible can only break open from within," she is unknowingly giving us an apt image of Levinas's source of transcendental certainty.²⁶⁴

Levinas's argument for the transcendental certainty of the other within is indeed an argument against ontological assumptions that have formed the background of all of Western philosophy since the Greeks, including Heidegger's. The argument specifically takes the form of contesting Heidegger's dismissal of transcendence in anything but the weak senses he gives the word. Jean Wahl notes that for Heidegger these senses all converge upon a single theme:

²⁶⁴ Ironically, however, she ascribes the opposite view to the "anti-ontologists," among whom she includes Levinas, who she says "wait for some pure outside to break in," that is, a "coming versus becoming. As though, otherwise, we only repeat the same" (R. Kearney, *Reimagining the Sacred*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2016, 69). It should be evident by now that this is not at all Levinas's view.

The difficulty of speaking of transcendence in Heidegger arises from the fact that this word seems to have different senses in his thought. At first he speaks of the transcendence of being in relation to nothingness [*au néant*]. Then he employs the word “transcendence” when he characterizes our relation with *being-in-the-world*. And in the third place he employs the word “transcendence” when it is a matter of describing our life insofar as it is always out ahead of itself, projecting itself towards the future. So existence is transcendent starting from nothingness, it is transcendent in relation to the world, or the world is transcendent in relation to it, and it is transcendent in relation to itself. But all of this only makes us appreciate more fully what it is that characterizes existence for Heidegger, and that is its finitude.²⁶⁵

It is clear that if Heidegger has any use for transcendence, it is a paradoxical use driven by a need to move beyond transcendental thinking as too metaphysical, in order to arrive at a thinking centered on the meaning of Being and one’s role in Being’s history. Since Da-sein is finite and Being unfolds in Da-sein, nothing in-finite can ‘be’. Heidegger can therefore speak counterintuitively of the “finitude of transcendence.”²⁶⁶

Against the Heideggerian aversion to both infinity and any transcendence that goes beyond the weaker senses he gives the word, Levinas issues a challenge at the very beginning of *Otherwise Than Being*: “If transcendence has meaning, it can only signify the fact that the *event of being*, the *esse*, the *essence*, passes over to what is other than being. But what,” he asks, “is *Being’s other*?” His answer, of course, will be that it is the other person: “not *to be otherwise*, but *otherwise than being*” (OB 3).²⁶⁷ Levinas is saying more, however, than that there must be something “beyond” or “otherwise than being” if transcendence is to have meaning. The event of being must itself “pass over” to what is Being’s other. That Levinas uses the phrase “the event of being” and

²⁶⁵ Jean Wahl, “Subjectivity and Transcendence,” in Wahl 2016, 35, translation modified.

²⁶⁶ KPM 55, 80. With Wahl in mind, compare: “Being itself is essentially finite and reveals itself only in the transcendence of Dasein which is held out into the nothing” (“What Is Metaphysics?” BW 108).

²⁶⁷ Recall that “essence” is Levinas’s word for Being—that is, being understood as a verb, *Sein*.

emphasizes it suggests that he has Heidegger's *Ereignis* in mind.²⁶⁸ But if so, he contrasts *Ereignis* with an entirely different “event,” instigated by the Other, in which finite Being gives way to what is wholly *not* Being. It is because Levinas agrees that “being and consciousness” are essentially finite (OB 26) that he makes “beyond being” synonymous with infinity, defining the infinite to be that which “passes the finite” even as it “comes to pass there” (OB 150). Infinity is thereby *implicated in* the finite, conjoined with it. Being and the ethical, entirely distinct, cannot be separated: “The ethical is the field outlined by the paradox of an Infinite in relationship with the finite without being belied in this relationship” (OB 148)—a paradox altogether different and, Levinas argues, deeper than the Heideggerian paradox of a finite transcendence.²⁶⁹

Where Levinas writes explicitly of the *otherwise than being*, Weil tends to refer to the Good, using the word in much the same way Levinas does: Platonically, to denote the transcendent ‘beyond’. And just as Levinas departs from Plato’s notion of a ‘good beyond being’ in seeing it as implicated in the world not through the Ideas but in the ethical, so also for Weil the Good is similarly implicated in the finite world and its necessity, without its being ‘in’ the world: “There are two things which come to us from outside, necessity and good; and they come to us together” (N 515). They are, in fact, the two faces—we could even say *traces*—of God. Just as, for Levinas, responsibility requires a finite body to bear it witness through “order[ing] me by my own voice” (OB 147), so also for Weil the Good requires a finite created world as witness to the infinitude of the absent Creator’s love (N 403).

Our eventual goal will be to show that human relations have meaning for Levinas (and concomitantly for Weil) only if being, at least in the form of *human being*, *gives itself up to*—or, perhaps more accurately, leaves itself open to *being given over to* or “*surpassed*” by—that which

²⁶⁸ Levinas mentions Heidegger’s *Ereignis* explicitly at GWCM 42. He more than likely encountered Heidegger’s idea of Being ‘as’ *event* in “The Way to Language” (1959) and “Time and Being” (1962). The major works in which Heidegger discusses the *Ereignis* at greater length were all published much later than *Otherwise Than Being* (1974). Those available in English translation, with the dates of original publication in German, include *Basic Questions of Philosophy* (1984), *Contributions to Philosophy* (1988), *Mindfulness* (1997), *The History of Being* (1998), and *The Event* (2009).

²⁶⁹ Recall the epigraph at the beginning of section 2.3 above.

is other than being, a continually recurring process which is the passage of time. From this perspective, even Heideggerian transcendence as Dasein's projection of itself ahead of itself into the future would have meaning for a human being only through what amounts to a kenosis that renounces the preeminence of its own being-in-the-world. For Levinas, against Heidegger, Dasein can transcend itself toward the future only by emptying itself of concern for its own being at least sufficiently to allow what is other than itself to appear—even if, as soon as it appears, the *other* is immediately assimilated into the *same*. A phenomenology that does justice to the transcendence of the other would therefore have to be a kenotic or *decreative* phenomenology. We investigate the potential for such a phenomenology in the next chapter. Meanwhile, the certainty Levinas sometimes calls “more rational than reason” (DEH 101) and at other times “the very rationality of reason or its universality” (OB 160) turns out to be a certainty derived from one's self-abdicating responsibility for the other as brought home to one in an immediate way by the other's inescapable proximity. Specifically, transcendence in immanence (GWCM 25-26) owes its certitude to the experience of being *subject to* the other, the experience of *the other within*, an impossibility of escaping or defusing the experience of alterity which Levinas, in his usual flair for metaphorical speaking, compares to insomnia. The transcendence in immanence of the subject guarantees that it will never have a more fundamental motive for doing or thinking anything than the response-ability to others that makes it a subject.

Obviously, what we have here is not certainty in the usual epistemological sense of the word—certainty based upon success in com-prehending, in intellectually *grasping* what we then call the ‘truth’ about ‘objective reality’—for in that case it would be a contradiction to place it beyond reason, a comprehension beyond comprehension. Nor is it the certainty (if Heidegger would allow the term) of one's having a role, positive or negative, in Being's history. Instead it is closer to the certainty of an obligation that will not let one go, that not so much *grounds* one's being as

troubles it—or grounds it by troubling it. One can neither grasp such a certainty nor take one's stand upon it as upon familiar ground.

There might still appear to be a danger, however, that even a transcendence defined as beyond or otherwise than being does not free itself completely from being's domination. Is it not possible that transcendence understood as the ethical might in some late-Heideggerian sense turn out to be only another event in the history of Being? In calling it otherwise than Being, are we not defining it in terms of Being? To put the question in Levinas's words:

But one immediately wonders if in the formula "otherwise than being" the adverb "otherwise" does not inevitably refer to the verb to be, which simply has been avoided by an artificially elliptical turn of phrase.²⁷⁰ Then what is signified by the verb to be would be ineluctable in everything said, thought and felt. ... *But then no transcendence* other than the factitious transcendence of worlds behind the scenes, of the Heavenly City gravitating in the skies over the terrestrial city, *would have meaning*. (OB 4, emphasis added).

Here we have the crux of Levinas's opposition to the Heidegger who argues throughout his later works that the essence of human being is precisely its inescapable obligation to be the guardian and preserver of Being. For Levinas, the price of such an exclusive commitment to Being, *were it possible*, would be the complete demise of transcendence in its most originary form, on which all other forms of transcendence depend: that of one's responsibility to the other, and along with this, the impossibility of the experience of time's passing. It is here, therefore, that Levinas launches his transcendental argument for the preeminence of the ethical over being. Its ultimate conclusion will be that *human relations*—even so little as the sharing of time and space with someone else—would have no meaning, no import, if meaning were grounded only in Being. The meaning of

²⁷⁰ Presumably because 'otherwise' could be interpreted to mean '*being* otherwise'.

human relations—their value, if you will, or the reason for valuing them—*cannot* be grounded at all, for the simple reason that the essence of human relations, which Levinas calls the ethical, is itself the groundless ground of meaning.

This, I now show, is the reason Levinas’s argument requires from his reader at least an openness to a certain pre-orientation, according to which the other takes precedence over one’s ‘self’.

3.2 Levinas’s Fundamental Axiom of Asymmetry

Each of us is responsible before everyone, for everyone and for everything, and I more than the others.

— Dostoyevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov* ²⁷¹

The other [*autrui*] always comes first. This is what I have called, in Greek language, the dissymmetry of the interpersonal relationship. If there is not this dissymmetry, then no line of what I have written can hold.

— Levinas, *Of God Who Comes to Mind* ²⁷²

We have already mentioned one form this precedence takes. It is the *transcendent intention* (TI 29) which motivates all that we say or think, since all that we say and think is tacitly intended for the other who reserves the right to pass judgment on its truth, its justice, or its appropriateness. The phenomenological evidence for the transcendent intention is readily available: pay attention to whatever you think or say or do, and you will find that in no case do you ever fail to imagine someone overhearing it or witnessing to it—if no one else, then certainly *yourself*. Hence, the

²⁷¹ This statement, perhaps Levinas’s favorite literary quotation, is often erroneously attributed to Alyosha Karamazov. In fact, Alyosha hears it from Father Zosima who is quoting his (Zosima’s) brother. See Robbins 1999, 147-48.

²⁷² “And this is vulnerability. Only a vulnerable *I* can love his neighbor” (GWCM 91, emphasis added).

other within. “The I that thinks hearkens to itself thinking or takes fright before its depths and is to itself an other [*s’écoute penser ou s’effraie ses profondeurs et, à soi, est un autre*]” (TI 36 / Tel 6). It likes the sound of its own voice, or dreads it, but in any case, it appears to itself as another thing (*autre*, not *autrui*).

Only a little later in *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas introduces explicitly his key concept of the asymmetry (or dissymmetry) of the ethical. This idea—that there is “a separation of the I that is not the reciprocal of the transcendence of the other with regard to me”—seems so ordinary and obvious, “impos[ing] itself upon meditation in the name of a concrete moral experience,” that it is striking how easily critics of Levinas overlook it when confronted by his claim that the ethical relation is not reciprocal. For all that he means is that

what I permit myself to demand of myself is not comparable with what I have the right to demand of the Other. This moral experience, so commonplace, indicates a metaphysical asymmetry: the radical impossibility of seeing oneself from the outside and of speaking in the same sense of oneself and of the others, and consequently the impossibility of totalization—and, on the plane of social experience, the impossibility of *forgetting* the intersubjective experience that leads to that social experience and endows it with meaning (TI 53)

Again, the evidence is phenomenological: one need only bring oneself and the other to mind at the same time to realize that the perspective one has on the other is fundamentally different from that which one has on oneself. I will never have access to the other’s experience in the same way that I have access to my own, for otherwise I would coincide with the other. From this it follows that *I can never totalize myself and the other in the same way at the same time*. One of us, if not both, comes across as discernibly betrayed.

It is obvious that *ethics*, as we commonly mean the word, is reciprocal, ‘symmetrical’. Here Levinas’s language is cause of some little confusion. As we have seen, what he calls the *ethical* relation is not *ethics*. The ethical, the very response-ability that singles one out as having an obligation to respond, is what makes the reciprocity of ethics (which Levinas calls justice) possible. The whole point of the ethical—as opposed to ethics, that is, morality, which it grounds—is precisely that it is *not* reciprocal! This asymmetry drives Levinas’s assertion that I am not “duped by morality” (TI 21), the argument for which in telegraphic form goes like this: the reason I am not duped by morality is that morality always depends on the ethical, on my response-ability, and the ethical, my ability to respond to every other, ultimately depends on me. It is always my response-ability that is at stake and no one else’s, nor ‘responsibility in general’. Thus if ethics appears to me to be a deception, the fault is mine. I cannot blame the other or circumstances or history.

The asymmetry of the ethical is a function of the univocity of the saying. All saying, Levinas claims, says essentially the same thing: “It is only by saying that sincerity, as exposition without reserve, is possible,”²⁷³ the exposing of one’s vulnerability to the other in the act of proposing a world.²⁷⁴ The saying “makes the self-exposure of sincerity possible; it is a way of giving everything, of not keeping anything for oneself.”²⁷⁵ If all saying says the same thing, no instance of saying can be more sacrosanct than another. Every instance of saying has equal significance. The specifically *ethical* significance of the saying (by definition it has no other significance) lies not in *what* is said, which unfailingly betrays it, but in the saying itself which, always identical, is pure sincerity and exposure. The said can only at best allude to the sincerity and exposure of the saying in hopes that one will take the hint and adopt an appropriate perspective, an ethical

²⁷³ GWCM 74 / DQVI 121. Cf. OB 47.

²⁷⁴ That is, a version of the world. We take up this process (“worldmaking”) in Chapter 5.

²⁷⁵ E. Levinas, in Richard Kearney, *Debates in Continental Philosophy*, New York: Fordham University Press, 2004, 79. “Not keeping anything for oneself” presumably means that in responding, one cannot help but offer one’s whole world to the other. It is not possible to give the other only *part* of one’s world, for it is all too closely connected. It is who one is.

“optics” or way of seeing that above all refuses to discount the vulnerability of the other and of oneself (TI 29).

What is this “optics”? Levinas repeatedly reminds his reader of “the widow, the orphan, and the stranger”²⁷⁶—that is, of one’s obligations to relieve the neighbor’s suffering “in a world where it is necessary to aid and to give” (TI 216).²⁷⁷ Another continual refrain throughout Levinas’s philosophical works is the commandment “Thou shalt not kill.” On some occasions, he interprets this as the requirement that one not let the other die alone; on others, having Pascal in mind, he reads it as a prohibition against appropriating the other’s place under the sun, understood not merely as validating intellectually the other’s right to *be* (this much Heidegger would agree to do) but as recognizing a fellow sufferer who has something to say to me and who demands a response (EN 5-7). The correct optics is the view that gives the other’s demand *first* consideration. This does not mean that one gives it one’s *exclusive* consideration, even notwithstanding that it returns every moment, for in the midst of every moment one also finds the considerations of justice. Unlike the ethical, justice (“ethics” in the usual sense) *does* take into account my situation and that of all the other others—but always, once again, at the price of continual interruption by the ethical.

It might strike the reader as an obligation too obvious to need mentioning, that if one’s neighbor is starving and one has food to give him, or even if one can do nothing, then one ought to take notice of the neighbor *first*, before taking time for anything else. But if this is obvious, we seem to need not its everyday acknowledgement, so much as the “optics” that appreciates the miracle of one’s ability to respond to others in general, an ability that is not immune to deterioration or destruction, but is vulnerable and needs our preservation. For Levinas, responsibility for the other

²⁷⁶ Mostly in *Totality and Infinity*: “The Other who dominates me in his transcendence is thus the stranger, the widow, and the orphan, to whom I am obligated” (TI 215). Cf. TI 77, 78, 244. But see also EN 168 for a reference specifically mentioning Heidegger.

²⁷⁷ In Jean Améry’s words: a “social world, in which we can live only if we grant our fellow man life, ease his suffering, bridle the desire of our ego to expand” (Améry 1980, 35).

is always also responsibility for ethics itself as something vulnerable. In any case, the neighbor's suffering is not always obvious. An optics that takes responsibility for response-ability would also presumably minimize the occasions on which we are blind to the neighbor's suffering because the neighbor happens to be 'starving' in ways that we are not in the habit of noticing. And indeed, it is always the case that the neighbor is suffering, if with Levinas we understand 'suffering' more generally as signifying the other's priority for our attention as vulnerable. Levinas's ethical optics would therefore seem to be an example of, if not the basis for, what Weil means by *attention*.

On the other hand from its seeming obviousness, presupposing the priority of the other might appear to beg the question in an argument that is supposed to show that the ethical has priority over ontology. Perhaps, someone might suggest, Levinas should follow Heidegger's example and turn the guiding presupposition into a guiding *question*: *does* the other have priority?²⁷⁸ But to refute the claim that we are duped by morality, Levinas does not need to justify every impulse to help the other. He need not explain why, in ordinary cases, we feel compelled to notice the other's suffering with a view to relieving it if possible. Instead, what he needs to show more generally is that belief in an ultimate *point* to such actions makes sense even after the extremes of Auschwitz. The philosopher who worries that we might be duped by morality could still be concerned lest his philosophical work interfere with attending to his ageing mother (to modify Sartre's famous example). One can feel compelled to relieve another's immediate suffering even while believing that, the world being what it is, such actions are ultimately pointless or absurd. Quite apart from what one might do to relieve the other's suffering in any particular situation if it is not too excessively demanding, the worry that one's acts of charity might be pointless or groundless has spread to an unprecedented degree since Auschwitz.²⁷⁹

²⁷⁸ On the *guiding question* versus the *basic question*, see CPE 8, 28, 32, and *passim*.

²⁷⁹ This circumstance is now sometimes acknowledged in the observation that today we seem much less certain than in the past about *what sort of beings we are*. What does it mean to be human? Probably not distractions and entertainment. But what, then?

Charitable acts were not altogether absent in the camps, even among inmates who despaired of the reality of the Good. Nevertheless, the popularity of such acts among commentators on the Holocaust, as though they proved something reassuring about humanity,²⁸⁰ obscures the more challenging problem of trying to understand the opposite behavior, far more common there: the “self-ish” anxiety simply to live one more day, if need be at the expense even of one’s own kin.²⁸¹ One may act benevolently toward another person and yet, in a moment of weakness due to physical or mental exhaustion, perhaps deliberately engineered by one’s torturers, render that very act meaningless by stealing the same person’s remaining piece of bread. As Weil observes (N 288-89), one’s defenses against such behavior are inherently weak. It is *this* that leads to the question of the viability of ethics, a question not answered by evidence, however plentiful, that people usually feel the need to help one another, and do so, when they are in trouble—for this generally happens only when the conditions are not too extreme. Nor does such evidence help us with the problem of our own refusal to involve ourselves when we witness atrocity, or the related problem of how to remember the victims of atrocity without slighting the enormity or relevance of their suffering, as we do when we dismiss it as an accident of history that we need to ‘move beyond’.

Doing justice to the other, Levinas reminds us in an early essay, “is not so much a matter of opposing one essence to another, of saying what human nature is”—this would amount to bringing the other under the power of our totalizing—as it is “primarily a matter of our finding a

²⁸⁰ Lawrence Langer, in *Holocaust Testimonies* (Langer 1991), gives many examples of this tendency in interviews of Holocaust survivors. Almost invariably, the survivor interviewed turns the conversation back to relating experiences that question the optimism of these examples—as though desiring to make the point that the interviewer and his audience cannot possibly understand what the concentration camps were like, thus sabotaging his or her own temptation to express optimism about human good. Langer confesses that it is difficult to know what to make of such behavior; perhaps one can only speculate about its possible motivations in individual cases. But our present discussion suggests that generally it touches upon Levinas’s central concern over the difference between what compels an individual to act in a particular situation and what leads him or her to ascribe reality to an ultimate Good.

²⁸¹ Langer makes a distinction between *selfish* behavior in the usual sense, which requires at least some awareness of the difference between concern for self and concern for others, and the “self-ish” behavior of someone who, for example, is too close to starvation to think clearly about anything, not even the moral consequences of his actions, except finding something to eat. See Langer 1991, 124.

vantage point from which man ceases to concern us in terms of the horizon of being, i.e., *ceases to offer himself to our powers.*”²⁸² For Levinas, a view that has learned not to admire power²⁸³ is a view from a standpoint other than Being. An ‘optics’ that privileges Being does not see the neighbor at all. *Does* Being in fact call us to *sacrifice* the neighbor? Unfortunately, there are all too many instances where Heidegger implies it.²⁸⁴ Levinas will argue that Being cannot require anything of us, cannot demand that we respond to its call if indeed it calls us, until we have first learned how to *respond* in general—that is, have been prepared for response-ability by having already discovered our originary response-ability to the neighbor.²⁸⁵

It is surely significant, another of those facts that ought to surprise us more than it does, that human beings appear to be the *only* beings capable of conscious resistance to what is essentially their totalization—their being reduced, for example, to ‘history’, including the history of Being.²⁸⁶ If, as Heidegger argues, *all* beings refuse to be ‘totalized’—that is, resist any thematization that prevents the unconcealment of their own being—then in human beings alone this refusal takes on what can only be called *ethical* importance for the totalized being, a being capable of *protesting* (cf. TI 36). Here would appear to be a difference no phenomenology of Dasein can afford to ignore. Beings are never our accusers in the same way a *human* being can be. If Heidegger is right that any inquiry must give all beings their due as the *kind* of beings they are, then we must ask: can one honestly give *human* beings their due as the beings they are if one fails to take into account their uniqueness as beings for whom not only their being but their

²⁸² “Is Ontology Fundamental?” (1951) EN 8-9 = BPW 8, emphasis added.

²⁸³ Certainly a view shared by Weil, who concludes her essay on the Iliad with the advice that we learn “not to admire force, not to hate the enemy, nor to scorn the unfortunate” (SWA 195).

²⁸⁴ For a particularly egregious example, see *Überlegungen XIV* in *Ponderings: Black Notebooks, 1889-1976*, 3 vols., Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2016-, vol. 3, 113.

²⁸⁵ On service to Being, see e.g. CPE 30, the section “Restraint and Care” (§13) and CPE 181 (§117), where Heidegger promotes “being in service to beings even if, as cause [of necessary effects], being would seem to be the master.” (Cf. Heidegger, *Mindfulness*, M 15). Admittedly this sounds a lot like Weil’s idea of *consenting* to the rule of Necessity, except that, for Weil, there is another side, since God is both Necessity and Love.

²⁸⁶ Cf. TI 57.

vulnerability to totalization is an issue? Here we seem to have another version of Levinas's fundamental ethical presupposition: only the *other* can protest his or her totalization.

3.3 Desire as Desire for the 'Better Than Being'

Being qua being is a function of justice. (OB 162)

If a role for desire cannot be avoided in an argument, then there is already an implicit valuing. Or a *devaluing*, as in the following passage from late in *Otherwise Than Being*:

Can one not understand, *beyond Essence*, the subjectivity of the subject as commencing with an *Exit* from the concept [of being, *l'être*], with a forgetting of being and non-being? Not with a forgetting which is not "under control" [*oubli «sans contrôle»*], which still lies *interior to* the bipolarity of *Essence*, between being and nothingness. But a forgetting that would be an ignorance in the sense in which nobility *ignores* what is not noble and in which certain monotheists do not recognize, while entirely aware of it, that which is not the highest. Ignorance beyond consciousness; open-eyed ignorance.²⁸⁷

Just as nobility is aware of what is not noble without taking explicit notice of it, so too subjectivity, defined as desire for the other, might register what has no bearing on the immediate exigencies of the neighbor without seeing it as significant or priority-changing. To desire the noble is to take on the responsibility of making appropriate value judgments, to have one's

²⁸⁷ OB 177 / AE 223, all emphasis in the original French; translation modified. (For another reading of this passage, see Zarader 2006, 144-46.) *Interior* might be a reference to the interiority of the psychism that lives free of the timeline of history, whose life and death matter to it independently of the story the historian tells about the individual to whom it belonged (TI 55-56).

priorities decided ahead of time. To desire the other is similarly to open oneself to responsibility (in a more fundamental sense). It is to have one's priorities decided automatically by one's desire. The difference is that desiring the other, unlike desiring the noble, is not voluntary, for it is generally not conscious. At a pre-conscious level we all desire the other, and hence *at that level* our priorities are predetermined in the other's favor. In the passage just quoted, Levinas is asserting that these priorities include an *ap-proprie* forgetting of being, a certain *propriety* in favor of the other *over being*. This is clearly a forgetting of being quite apart from or beyond the forgetfulness of Being that Heidegger considered reprehensible. Genuine openness, as desire for the other, *is* the very deference of the issue of one's own being in favor of the other's alterity. It follows that it must not be one's Dasein that defers the issue of one's own being, since precisely the issue of its being *defines* Dasein. And therefore, however basic it may be from an ontological standpoint, Dasein cannot denote what is primary about the whole human being.²⁸⁸ Since Levinas defines human subjectivity as openness to—that is, desire for—the other who is beyond being, and since desire automatically determines relative values, we should not be surprised when he declares that certain things are *better* than being. And yet, as this value judgment comes from a philosopher, we are.

Before pursuing the reasons for this surprise, we should note parenthetically that if what was said above is correct, Levinas's "forgetting of being and non-being" may be a first step towards resolving the problem of the meaning of ethics after Auschwitz. Giving the neighbor unequivocal priority over ontology would mean deliberately *relating* to him or her neither as a being nor as an instance of Being. As what, then? At the very least as someone who is vulnerable. Only an open-eyed ignorance of Being—in favor of the vulnerable individual whose precarious singularity, according to Levinas, is owing to his or her election to responsibility (at the same time electing

²⁸⁸ What do I mean by "the whole human being"? Something like what Weil means in "Human Personality" (SWA 50-51) when she declares that it is not an individual's "personality" that is "sacred" about him, but "the whole" individual, absolutely all that goes to make him the unique individual he is, without exception.

me to my own)—can open up “the terrain necessary for the distinction between truth and ideology” which allows the ethical truly to overcome the cynicism of history and ideology (OB 178). For all we know, Heidegger notwithstanding, there may be an important sense in which Being is perfectly capable of fending for itself, and perhaps would even be better off if left to do so.²⁸⁹ What allows us to assume we know what is best for Being? In any case, both Levinas and Weil would insist that there is more to truth than the truth of Being. There is, for example, *justice*. Even if we discover that we have some responsibility toward Being as well as toward the Other, it may be that only by prioritizing the Other over Being can one effectively demonstrate the *ethical* difference between, on the one hand, the history of Being in the West, which indifferently plays itself out in historical forces and ideologies, and on the other, the individuals overcome by that history. Is it not ironic that these nameless individuals—whose personal stories are nowhere to be found on the radar of history²⁹⁰—have been the means, simply as language users, of keeping thoughtful discourse alive and hence of giving history, a form of discourse, all the meaning it will ever have? For it is not solely to the exceptional few who play a recorded part in history’s narratives that we owe whatever meaning the world has. Hence, Levinas finds *every* individual to be “absolute with regard to history” (TI 52). No one, he says, is dispensable. The true irony of history is that the countless unnamed who have been lost to history are the very ones who gave history its power to consign them to invisibility. It is therefore not surprising that here, on the “margins” of history, Levinas finds the key to philosophy’s gaining access to what is genuinely beyond-Being:

And we would not have ventured to recall the *beyond essence* if this history of the West did not bear, in its margins, the trace of events carrying another signification, and if the victims of

²⁸⁹ *Despite* Dasein’s very real duty towards Being and admitting that it remains to be determined what ‘fending for itself’ *means*, the question is worth exploring, and we do so in Chapters 5 and 6.

²⁹⁰ For the essential distinction between what history tells us about the Holocaust and what its survivors can tell us through oral and written testimony, see Langer 1991, especially 52, 58, 66-68, 78-84, 108-110.

the triumphs which entitle (*intitulent*) the eras of history could be separate from its meaning. Here we have the boldness to think that even the Stoic nobility of resignation to the logos already owes its energy to the openness to the *beyond essence*. (OB 178)

The task of philosophy then becomes not primarily the unconcealment and preservation of Being, or even the promotion of a stoic “resignation to the logos” of nature (or history), but instead the recovery, from history’s shadowy margins, of the traces of an originary resignation, the sacrifice of those whom history has left behind. These traces are adequate to verify one’s fundamental responsibility to the other, provided one’s attention is “open-eyed” enough to see, beyond the alleged importance of Being or history, the priority of justice over ontology.

To advise that one *forget being* in order to give preference to an other who is said to be beyond being is to propose that desire for the other is in some sense *better than* thinking ontologically. Levinas’s philosophical endeavor might even be characterized, very roughly, as the attempt to develop an ethical phenomenology that is simply *better than* a Heideggerian ontological hermeneutics, in an unapologetically moral sense of the comparative *better than*. The justification for this moral judgment—perhaps the sole justification it can have—is solely that value judgments follow inevitably when one makes *desire* fundamental. Levinas can be quite explicitly unabashed about making such judgments, as when in *Totality and Infinity* he declares that “to think the infinite, the transcendent, the Stranger ... is in reality to do more or better than think” (TI 49)—or when in *Otherwise Than Being* he writes that the Good is simply “better than being” (OB 19).²⁹¹ But however necessary from the standpoint of desire or justice, what allows a

²⁹¹ Other examples, not always so explicit: TI 103, 113, 145, 195, 268, 290, and OB 54, 57, 92-93, 122.

phenomenologist to claim that one thing is *better* than another? Is there a legitimate place for value judgments in phenomenology?²⁹²

Value judgments might even be necessary to an investigation *as phenomenological*. For example, they might be unavoidable in doing whatever it is one needs to do in order to make visible what would otherwise remain invisible. Recall Weil's justification for spending time harvesting grapes: "There are things that I would not be able to say if I had not done these things."²⁹³ Not only *say* but also *see*, and not only having *done* certain things but also having made certain *judgments*. If Weil would not have acted as she did had she not judged that doing so was *better* than doing some other thing, then her value judgment must be considered along with everything else that contributes to the experience and its phenomenology. If deciding on the relative values of certain acts is the only way that one can have a certain experience, then these valuations would seem to be of relevance to any phenomenological investigation of that experience.

This might be true especially of any experience we would be inclined to call *transcendent*. In the previous chapter we noted that Levinas appears to recognize only one experience of transcendence, the transcendence of the self by (its responsibility to) the other. Every experience of transcendence without exception is an experience of alterity—of others, *autres*—hence for Levinas is derived from one's experience with ethical others (*autrui*).²⁹⁴ Since these others require a response, one ends up acknowledging in spite of oneself, in everything one says or does in regard to any others (*autres*), the ethical claim these others (*autrui*) have on oneself. In effect, all of one's actions say to everyone 'Here I am'—that is, available to respond. Even Dasein owes to the other its experience of transcendence as projection toward the future, since Dasein cannot

²⁹² In contrast to a phenomenology *of* value, such as one finds in Scheler. But see below.

²⁹³ Pétrement 1976, 441.

²⁹⁴ It is unfortunate that there is no simple linguistic distinction in English, as there is in French, between generic and impersonal others (*autres*) and other people (*autrui*). In particular, *autre* is an adjective that can be used as a noun, whereas *autrui* is always a noun or pronoun.

project itself into the unknown without having some notion of alterity,²⁹⁵ and the notion of alterity, so Levinas argues, is grounded in the encounter with the other through the other's prior claim on me, their demand for a response. Thus one is responsible because one has been placed in question not by beings in general or by Being, but by another being *like oneself*. This privilege that others (*autrui*) have over beings in general is due to the fact that the other person is the only other (*autre*) that is absolutely other in the sense that always, without fail, it absolves itself from every response one can give to its questioning. The other is the only being one cannot totalize.

The reason human be-ing cannot coincide with Dasein is that Dasein immediately slides into subjectivity as soon as it encounters the other. Thus, when Heidegger writes that “our comportment toward beings within which we as existing beings factually move is the instigation for us to become conscious of them [as beings],” we can say that our comportment toward the others, beings like ourselves, is the instigation for us to *respond* to them. And when Heidegger adds that the “instigation to become conscious” means that “*there is something like an understanding of being* in this comportment to beings,”²⁹⁶ we can add that there is “something like” a (non-intentional) understanding of one's responsibility, a desire for the undesirable (OB 123), in one's every comportment toward others—and by extension, toward *all* beings. “The I endowed with personal life, the atheist I whose atheism is without wants and is integrated in no destiny,” is perhaps the closest a human being comes to being (impossibly) nothing but Dasein. But it cannot last: the atheist I immediately “surpasses itself in the Desire that *comes to it from* the presence of the other.”²⁹⁷ The other *invests* it with this desire, “a desire perfectly disinterested—goodness” (TI 50). As soon as one meets the other, the Dasein story ends (at least Heidegger's version of it) and the ethical story begins. But this is to say that the Dasein story never really begins.

²⁹⁵ See, for example, Heidegger, *Logic: The Question of Truth*, LQT 158-59.

²⁹⁶ PIK 149 (GA 25, lecture series from 1927-28), emphasis and gloss added.

²⁹⁷ TI 62, my emphasis. Levinas will in fact call this a *reverse* or *inverse* intentionality. The “atheist I” is the ego of enjoyment (TI 110).

The reason the other *as other* can only be desired, rather than simply thought, is not due to the limitations of human cognition, but rather to an *excess* that characterizes alterity. Levinas compares the encounter with this excess to the unavoidable “lassitude” of ageing, a “passive exposure to being which is not taken up, exposure to death, right here in this place [*par là même*], invisible, premature, always violent” (OB 54 / AE 69). Ageing, Levinas writes, is “that singular ‘too much of being’ [*«trop être»*] which is also a failing,” but a failing to which one cannot give oneself up as long as one is still alive, since always one is confronted by a “necessity of service,” or at least of response, that constitutes one’s being-for-the-other. If this necessity—which according to Levinas is the first and most basic reason for human survival—interrupts the egoistic enjoyment that is so pleasant in isolation from others (really only a primitive ideal), nevertheless the restlessness it produces “is *better* than” the “repose” of being always at home with oneself:

Lassitude: that singular “too much of being” [*«trop être»*] which is also a failing, but through a deficiency in which the *conatus* does not relax, in which suicide is desertion, as though being, distancing itself, were but a modality—an *eon*²⁹⁸ of the Kingdom—of necessities of service of “being for another” of “one for the other,” of the proximity more serious than being or not being. Necessity of a service without slavery. Necessity, because this obedience is anterior to every voluntary decision it could assume. And necessity overflowing the Same of repose [*le Même du repos*], of life in possession [*jouissant*] of life—because it is the necessity of a service, but, in this non-repose, this restlessness, *better* than repose. Antinomy which is the very witness of the Good. (OB 54 / AE 69-70, translation modified)

The “necessity of service,” a kind of restlessness or “non-repose” (*non-repos*), is said to be “better than repose,” better than “the Same of repose” which since Plato has been the primary

²⁹⁸ A transliteration of *ἔων*, Ionic for *being*? Here (as at AE 67 / OB 52: “the Eon of the Kingdom of God”), *eon* is italicized in the original French, with no accent. Elsewhere Levinas writes *éon*, French for *aeon*, as in: “an eon in consciousness and knowledge” and “the eon which triumphs in the said” (OB 44 / AE 56).

attribute of Being (GWCM 112)—hence, this restlessness is *better than Being* (cf. OB 19).

Responding to the other is always better than reposing in one's being-in-the-world—not only because, having met others, repose in isolation and innocence of others is impossible anyway, but also because only in non-repose does one encounter the Good. “To be responsible over and beyond one's freedom ... is better than the merits and faults and sanctions proportionate to the freedom of one's choices” (OB 122). Moreover, I do not need to choose this responsibility “over and beyond [my] freedom,” since the Good has already chosen me in my very encounter with the other (OB 11).

Later in *Otherwise Than Being*, Levinas suggests that if we are troubled by the word *better* in this context, so much the better! Taking into account this feeling of being troubled is exactly what the argument calls for.

Is not proximity, in its restlessness and emptying [*dévidement*] and diachrony, better than all rest, than all the plenitude of an instant suspended? Everything is successive (even truth),²⁹⁹ but the diachrony is not only the sadness of the flowing away of things. The word *better*, and the Good it expresses, which turns up here, perhaps makes all our discussion suspect of being “ideology.” But the least intoxicated and the most lucid humanity of our time, at the moments most free from the concern “that existence takes for its very existence” has in its clarity no other shadow, in its rest no other disquietude or insomnia than what comes from the destitution [*misère*] of the others, and where insomnia is only the absolute impossibility of slipping away and distracting oneself. (OB 92-93 / AE 118)

If one is made uneasy by what seems to be a value judgment—or by anything else!—Levinas implies, the uneasiness ultimately has its roots in the fact that one is always already living in

²⁹⁹ Levinas evidently means that truth is the result of a constant amplification and revision of partial truths over time.

proximity to the “destitution” of the other. The other’s destitution is presupposed in every form of personal disquietude, for it is simply the destitution of mortality, of human vulnerability, of which even the most trifling discomfort is a potential reminder and a kind of proxy, signifying the ubiquity of responsibility for the suffering of others. For Levinas, the humanity “most free from” self-concern is a decremented humanity whose “lucidity” results from attention, a humanity troubled by *one thing* only: the other’s vulnerability. To value anything that is not *other* is to value the same, hence to seek one’s own good without regard for the other person. There is, then, but one ‘value’ for Levinas: being-troubled-by-the-other, *for* which one does not find oneself expressing a preference as a result of something (ontological) one feels or intuits intellectually,³⁰⁰ but *to* which one is instead drawn by a desire of which one is not conscious. In other words, assuming that values are something one holds consciously, the one ‘value’ for Levinas is justice. Levinas would more than likely agree with Heidegger’s criticism of *values* (noun) as opposed to *valuing* (verb), and would simply find the use of the verb superfluous.³⁰¹

Uneasiness is necessarily uneasiness about something *other*—ultimately, uneasiness about the other’s and/or own’s own destitution. Only because one has had the experience of one’s destitution or nothingness, whatever its cause (and there are many; see section 2.4 above), is one capable of recognizing destitution in others. Conversely, it is through seeing this same destitution in the face of the other that one recognizes it in oneself. The argument is not circular, as though begging the question, since the primordial recognition of the other’s vulnerability (which Levinas calls the “face”) is necessarily unconscious and simultaneous with the recognition of one’s own. All disquietude therefore has its origin in basic human vulnerability. For Levinas, one’s vulnerability is the source of consciousness itself, hence of all rest and enjoyment, too, since rest is precisely consciousness of a respite from one’s vulnerability. That is why Levinas considers

³⁰⁰ In the “philosophical tradition of the West,” Levinas notes, “the affective remains an information: about oneself, about values (as in Max Scheler), about a disposition in being’s essence, ... an ontology” (OB 66).

³⁰¹ For Weil, ‘value’ is practically synonymous with ‘good’: the object of any desire. In this sense of ‘value’, philosophy is nothing more nor less than a reflection on values. See LPW 30-36.

anxiety over the *other's* death to be the event that defines human subjectivity, rather than conscious anxiety over one's own. *Otherness* comes first.

Thus Levinas turns the accusation of ideological bias back upon itself: one's disquietude over his word "better" is evidence against the very objection, for this disquietude—that is, *any* disquietude whatever, any unrest that disturbs the evenness or enjoyment of one's world—witnesses indirectly to one's involuntary non-indifference to the other's vulnerability. All uneasiness is rooted in one's own and the other's primordial ethical 'destitution' or essential vulnerability, however obscured it may be by everyday affairs and what Weil calls the imagination's tendency to fill up voids.

Levinas's frequent emphasis on the commandment 'Thou shalt not kill', which he interprets as the requirement that one not let the other die alone, or alternatively, as a prohibition against ignoring the other's suffering, characterizes disquietude as fundamentally *ethical*, in that every feeling of disquietude, because it evokes self-questioning before what is disturbingly other, prompts a decision as to whether or not to keep company with the "non-desirable" (OB 123), one's present neighbor in his or her destitution. Equivalently, it presents one with the option of decreation, of devaluing one's own world in deference to the other's, a preference for Socratic ignorance over complacent knowledge of the other, to which Weil adds the supplement of her idea of attention, a notion certainly present in Levinas at least in spirit. Only attention can ensure that the decision to keep company with, or do anything else on behalf of the destitute other, is made for no other reason than the exigency of the other's circumstances as they become evident to a vision purified of self-concern. The non-desirability of the other, in his or her destitution, guarantees that this concern is not merely disguised self-aggrandizement. Altruism is the accidental result, not the intentional objective, of response-ability. A feeling for the other need not lead to self-sacrifice, at least if the other is the stranger. If there is a feeling that leaves one obligated to every other, Levinas maintains, it is better described (hyperbolically) as persecution

or trauma (OB 197n27). The person who acts against his will is more likely to do good than the do-gooder. If this is a correct interpretation of non-indifference, it presents Levinas as very Kantian.

At this point, certain parallels between Weil's thought and that of Martin Heidegger become pertinent. Weil has a notion of being-in-the-world, or at least an appreciation for the total world-immersion of human be-ing, similar to Heidegger's. But unlike Heidegger, she holds that recognition of the universality of human suffering—in *the other*, not just one's own anxiety—plays a central role in uncovering the real presence of things, whatever they might be. Weil reveals that in the other, Being has a fundamentally ethical side Heidegger never adequately addressed.

3.4 Being-In-The-World-With-Others³⁰²

If Weil works from a fundamental presupposition, it would be the belief that there is a serious, non-sentimental use for the phrase “the good.” Weil's writing seems continually to come back to this idea, which is clearly expressed in a passage we have quoted before:

But—it will be asked—does the good exist? What does it matter? the things of this world exist, but they are not the good. Whether the good exists or not, there is no other good than the good. And what is this good? I have no idea—but what does it matter? It is that whose name alone, if I attach my thought to it, gives me the certainty that the things of this world are not goods. If I know nothing more than that name I have no need to know any more, provided only that I know how to use it in this way. (FLN 315-16)

³⁰² This section is based in part on an unpublished paper presented before the 2013 Colloquy of the American Weil Society held in Providence, RI. The author thanks the participants for their comments and suggestions.

Here Weil would seem about as far as one could be from Heidegger, for whom the word ‘good’ never occupies a central position, or perhaps even any position at all worthy of mention. Being is the only ‘good’, but it is a good that effectually cancels the meaning of the word—for whatever one means by calling a being good, it is always solely its *being*, and not ‘goodness’ that matters.

And yet, Heidegger and Weil place a similar emphasis on how best to live in the world vis-à-vis whatever one finds within it. Both would agree that one should be *fully alive in* the present moment and *open to* whatever situation happens to confront one. If they describe this ‘being in’ and this ‘openness’ in what seem to be very different terms—Weil in social, political, and later, religious language, Heidegger in that of hermeneutical phenomenology—they agree that it is a matter of one’s accepting one’s finitude. Heidegger calls the ideal human comportment *resoluteness* (*Entschluß*) and later *mindfulness* (*Besinnung*). Its object is Being. Weil calls it *attention*, the object of which is *reality*. Neither means quite the same thing as the other, and both mean something very different from what we generally think of in connection with either being or reality. For that matter, Heidegger’s use of the term *comportment* (*Verhalten*) refers not so much, as in ordinary usage, to one’s conduct or style of life, as to the way in which Dasein *relates to beings* (*sich verhalten zu Seienden*) as such (BT 23 / SZ 4). Practically synonymous with the phenomenological term *intentionality*, Heideggerian comportment is a “directing-oneself-toward” or “being-directed toward” beings (BP 58). The “involvement” he calls being-in-the-world is precisely the process by which a finite Dasein gives meaning to beings in its comportment towards them.³⁰³ How close does Weil’s thinking come to this idea? Close enough, I will argue, to be of significance for Levinas’s critique of Heidegger.

For Heidegger, meaning is not something we discover already attached to objects or that we invent in any way we want. It is a reflection of our efforts, individual and collective, to interpret

³⁰³ Giving meaning to beings is in fact Dasein’s work of disclosing the Being of beings.

experience intelligibly, taking into account the obvious fact that things have a (sometimes brutal) *thereness* independent of human projects and concerns. The way in which things impact on human experience without concern for human existence Heidegger calls their *facticity* (*Tatsächlichkeit*). Things manifest themselves to Dasein as already *structured* in a manner that allows them to be encountered only in certain ways and not in others.³⁰⁴ Facticity is very nearly what Weil means by Necessity. She would easily understand the opposition or “strife” Heidegger sees between *world*, as human- or Dasein-made, and *earth*, as Being’s resistance to human attempts to create meaning.³⁰⁵ Heidegger, unlike Weil however, has much less to say (almost nothing) about the effects of Being’s often painful brutality in the form of human suffering.³⁰⁶

Heidegger’s perception of being-in-the-world is profoundly and often explicitly anti-Cartesian in the sense that his analysis does not begin with our existence as somehow logically *prior* to the ‘outside’ world, only then moving on to the question of how we are related to or affected by that world—for example, considering whether and how we can know that our thoughts match up with the world ‘as it really is’. It is not always clear that Weil—whose thinking owed a conscious debt to Descartes however little she worries about whether human knowledge of objective reality is possible—altogether escapes the subject-object point of view. For Heidegger, of course, the subject already *is* essentially the object it takes itself to be related to. Dasein already *is* its world.

As such, Dasein is always in a state of continual anticipation of what will turn up next. In the simplest of acts, such as walking from one room of a house to another, beings rely on us to bring them out of “concealment” and into *be-ing* (verb).³⁰⁷ Dasein, as be-ing-in-the-world, *unconceals*

³⁰⁴ Dasein does not first exist and *then* encounter beings in certain ways unique to Dasein. Instead Dasein *is* the way it encounters beings through its comportment, and thereby becomes responsible for the way beings have their being. See the next paragraph.

³⁰⁵ See, for example, “The Origin of the Work of Art” (BW 169-75, 180).

³⁰⁶ Levinas explicitly criticizes Heidegger for this. See the section on Blanchot in PN 138-39.

³⁰⁷ Heidegger cannot hyphenate *being*, as we do here, since in German the word *Sein* is monosyllabic. Our problem is that *being* suggests the noun. I try to emphasize the verbal aspect by writing *be-ing*. Another, half-serious but perhaps nonetheless helpful alternative might be the absurdly awkward *being-ing*. Later, Heidegger tries to get around this problem by using the archaic *Seyn* instead of *Sein*.

the relation one room has to another, as well as their relation to everything else in Dasein's world, the process of unconcealment being precisely what it means for beings to 'be.' In order for any being to *be*—one is tempted to add *for Dasein*, but as being-in-the-world ourselves, do we know of any other kind of be-ing?—there needs to be a Dasein to disclose it. If this is the basic difference, for Heidegger, between houses and people—for while there might conceivably be a Dasein of certain animals, there is certainly no Dasein of a house—he is not denying that there are other differences, nor that there would still 'be' something if no Dasein happened to be around to disclose it. He is only claiming that what fundamentally characterizes human existence as opposed to the be-ing of anything else whatsoever in our experience is the fact that only the human, as Dasein, un-conceals a *world*. It is the overwhelming importance that the early Heidegger attaches to the disclosure of this difference, as *fundamentally* what it means to be human, that Levinas will explicitly contest—as we shall see Weil does too, if indirectly, for while she must have heard of Heidegger from colleagues, I know of no unequivocal evidence that she actually read him.

Only within a *context* of some kind is any being present (for Dasein) as the being it is. The *existential* that Heidegger calls *mood* or “moodedness” (*Befindlichkeit*)—especially the “fundamental mood” of anxiety—plays a central role in producing the specific context, but for the greater part, the context that allows beings to be unconcealed is supplied through the medium of human *language* (*Rede*), broadly conceived to include all forms of reference or communication.³⁰⁸ Dasein unconceals beings simply in referring to them by name within a community of other language-users. Since we think of this as speaking the *truth* about things, Heidegger notes the happy circumstance that the Greek word for truth, ἀλήθεια, is derived from

³⁰⁸ In *Sein und Zeit*, Heidegger suggests that there are three main ontological characteristics or *existentials* of being as Dasein: understanding, language, and mood. See SZ §§28-34.

the word *λήθεια* (to hide) prefixed by the privative alpha.³⁰⁹ Truth, in other words, is *unconcealment*, and since unconcealment as *making present* takes place in (or *as the experience of*) *time*, truth is fundamentally *temporal*—although in a special sense of *temporality* (more accurately, *Zeitlichkeit*) peculiar to Heidegger.³¹⁰ So much is this the case that in an early lecture course on logic, Heidegger refers to truth as the *ur-temporal*.³¹¹

The traditional philosophical question about truth asks how our propositions are able to match up with the way the world ‘really is’. This problem appears to have had little importance either to Heidegger or to Weil. For Heidegger, ontology always takes precedence over epistemology. After the turn (*Kehre*), ‘truth’ for Heidegger is solely Being-historical truth: truth as nothing more nor less than the history of the Being of beings. And while Weil clearly had a more than ordinary love of the virtue of truthfulness, the overriding problem of truth for her is not so much that of making certain that our statements match up with the way the world really is, as it is that of learning how to become de-creatively ‘transparent’ so that *through* us things might show themselves, or simply *be*, as they really are. This is what she evidently means when she writes a year or so before her death that the “exchange of love between the Father and the Son passes through creation. All we are asked to do is to consent to its passing through. We are nothing but this consent” (FLN 102).³¹² That is, we must become ‘transparent’ so that the divine love can pass through *us*, as

³⁰⁹ Heidegger’s 1942–43 lecture course on Parmenides goes into great detail on this: *Parmenides*, translated by A. Schuwer and R. Rojcewicz (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992).

³¹⁰ What Heidegger means by temporal is not to be identified with temporality in the ordinary sense. Time, he later says, “names something that is predetermined in an incomparably different way by the *question* concerning the *clearing* of be-ing itself as the swaying that belongs to be-ing” (*Mindfulness*, 268). See Sheehan 2015, 95–100. For this reason Sheehan translates Heidegger’s term *Zeitlichkeit* as ‘opening up’ or ‘clearing’ rather than the more usual if less evident ‘temporality’, ‘temporalization’, or ‘temporalizing’.

³¹¹ *Logic: The Question of Truth*, especially the final sections of Part III.

³¹² Here is the context: “God desires to be, not because he is himself but because he is the good. Through love, the Father causes the Son to be, because the Son is the Good. Through love, the Son desires not to be, because only the Father is the Good. / For the Father, God is the Son. For the Son, God is the Father. Both are right, and this makes a single truth. So it is that They are two Persons and one single God. / The Father is creation of being, the Son is renunciation of being; this double pulsation is one single act which is Love or Spirit. When humility gives us a part in it, the Trinity is in us. / This exchange of love between the Father and the Son passes through creation. All we are asked to do is to consent to its passing through. We are nothing but this consent” (FLN 102).

though we were not there. The transparency we should aspire to, which allows the Truth to “pass through” us, hardly implies that things transparently show themselves *to us* in particular. Almost the opposite. It only means that we make room for beings, as it were, by removing the barrier that the self imposes between beings and God. Weil’s notion of transparency, in which we are ‘appropriated’ by divine love for the benefit of Creation, clearly resonates with Heidegger’s idea that Being appropriates Dasein in order to unconceal the being of beings.

Equivalently, truth allows things simply to be loved for what they are rather than exploited for one’s own projects—“held in standing reserve” is the way Heidegger later expresses this giving precedence to their utility. Weil would agree with Heidegger that technological exploitation tends to impoverish things of their reality. Things are real when science “contemplates them under the order of necessity.” They cease to be real when science becomes technique oriented toward power and not toward obedience, in a Baconian sense, to the laws of nature (FLN 79-80). “That which gives more reality to beings and things is good, that which takes it away from them is evil” (N 8). Hence modern science, Weil believes, has become an evil insofar as it has separated itself from principles all human beings can relate to:

If ... the physicist chooses to frame suppositions, laws, and conceptions incompatible with the ideas which are common to all, he will alienate himself not only from the peasant, but first of all from himself, from all that part of himself in which he resembles the peasant.³¹³

If Weil’s idea of the peasant’s life was perhaps as romanticized as Heidegger’s, at least she made an attempt at times to live it herself, sharing in its burdens and hardships as much as its joys.

Weil would also understand Heidegger’s notion of the “clearing” in which Being is disclosed by Dasein’s “openness of comportment.” The truth of Being is not so much *known* as *happens*

³¹³ “Wave Mechanics,” SNL 76.

through us, as though we were a catalyst of a reaction that proceeded without concern for human interests while yet requiring human creativity.³¹⁴ Truth is the uncovering of things that in some sense “beforehand already were” (BT 269 / SZ 227)—for this is part of our facticity or “thrownness”—even as their unconcealment requires a *Da-sein*. The range of potential modes of unconcealment includes every form of human activity—science, art, philosophy and, to mention one in particular that would certainly have resonated with Weil, ordinary manual work. In the latter especially, it is evident that we do not act with the conscious intent of unconcealing beings. It is difficult to say whether, as the primary mechanism for this creative process, Weil would share Heidegger’s preference for deliberate “resolute” *thinking*, even in the innovative sense he lends to the word.

Heidegger’s idea that it is *we* who, in the words of Magda King, “give things a chance to show themselves genuinely as they are”³¹⁵ undoubtedly suggests that we ‘owe’ a certain allegiance to Being which it would be wrong to ignore—more accurately, that we are *owned by* Being. But Heidegger, unlike Weil, drains the idea of all ethical or spiritual significance. To say, as the later Heidegger does, that we must acknowledge our “en-own-ment” by Being (see the next section) amounts to acknowledging that we have a responsibility we did not impose on ourselves—a response-ability (to Being) ‘built into’ our being-in-the-world—an obligation not to allow beings to become for us mere things that assist or resist our plans and projects. Heidegger grants the importance of freeing beings from human control without suggesting that this introduces an ethical problem. For Weil, in effect, it is nothing but ethical, for she insists that ordinary human *suffering* can be the best teacher of humility in one’s comportment toward all beings. More

³¹⁴ Hatab 2000, 44. Heidegger speaks of the “creative exposure to beings out of a belonging to being” (CPE 13). “To create—in the broad sense in which it is intended here—refers to any sheltering of the truth in beings” (CPE 21). The freedom this requires is not that of license, but the “basic disposition” Heidegger calls “restraint” (CPE 38, 42), which he opposes to all fabrication, calculation, and organization insofar as these are instruments of technicity (CPE 75). The modes of true creation, he writes, are therefore “poetry—thinking—deed—sacrifice” (CPE 76).

³¹⁵ King 2001, 26.

immediately than anything else, suffering forces the self to submit its will to the same Necessity to which *all* beings are subject without exception (WG 79).

Far from deploring the finitude that ties us to this earth, Weil finds it paradoxically liberating, since it frees one to give oneself over to Love completely—as love of *this* world in the most uncompromisingly concrete way possible, namely through consent to Necessity. She would not shy away from the claim that behind this finitude there is nothing—nothing, that is, except the need to give one’s consent to *letting beings be*, even when they are the cause of pain. But for Weil, this is principally a matter of giving one’s *attention* to the reality of human *suffering*. As we shall see, she would join Levinas in insisting that one cannot do justice to Being without giving first priority to seeking justice for the neighbor in need—which means, allegiance to a Good beyond Being.

3.5 Heidegger and Levinas Face Alterity

One might ask, somewhat naively, what motivates Dasein to turn its attention toward beings other than itself—that is, to open up space for them in its world? For the moment, we set aside the problem of how Dasein recognizes others *like itself*.³¹⁶ How does Dasein manage to “step beyond” or *tran-scend* itself in order simply to admit, non-solipsistically, the mere possibility of a being, not necessarily another Dasein, that has a being other than Dasein’s? The remarkable answer Heidegger gives to this question in 1929 is a radical reinterpretation of Kant’s idea of the

³¹⁶ If it is a problem for Heidegger. In SZ §26, *Mitsein* (Being-with) is described as an *existential* of Dasein (SZ 120, 123): it is simply part of Dasein’s being-in-the-world that Dasein is in-the-world with others “among whom one is too” (SZ 118), with whom one shares the same Dasein or ‘being there’ (singular). (Hence it is a mistake to refer to the others as other ‘Daseins’.) While encountering another is not like encountering what is present-at-hand or ready-to-hand, the difference is that Dasein encounters the other in much the same way as it “comes across” itself: as being-in-the-world, engaged and concerned (SZ 119). There is a *problem* only if one makes the mistake of first defining the self as an independent ‘I’. Levinas avoids this mistake in a very different way: defining the self not by the mode of being that one shares with the Dasein of the other, but by the subjectivity that arises through one’s response-ability to him or her.

transcendental imagination. The foundation of all anticipation of alterity, Heidegger claims, is the pure expectation of one *now* after another *now*—that is, “the immediate taking-in-stride of a ‘this-here’”, “a taking-in-stride of what [Dasein], as taking-in-stride, lets come forth from out of itself” (KPM 125-26). Thus the original impulse to recognize alterity comes from *within Dasein itself*, in the form of a pure intuition or “self-affection” independent of experience, which Heidegger identifies with the consciousness of time (KPM 84).

This is paradoxical. One becomes conscious of any being other than oneself by *initiating* what amounts to a *passive expectation* of alterity, opening space in one’s experience for a “letting-the-other-being-be-over-against” oneself. Time is experienced as alterity, and yet it is made real to human consciousness through the work of human imagination: the self momentarily leaves itself open to what is other than the self, not necessarily by anticipating beforehand the other being *per se*, of course, but by means of a *pure open-ended anticipation*, anticipation without an object. Left unresolved in this non-traditional, scarcely still Kantian notion of time, is the question of what sets in motion even this little bit of ‘passive’ anticipation.

Time-consciousness as a roughly Kantian open-ended anticipation of alterity gives way in Heidegger’s later work to a submissiveness to the dictates or “gifting” of Being itself. Dasein’s “historical” role in the letting-be of beings remains fundamentally time-related (CPE 256), but the emphasis is less on Dasein’s ownmost perspective on its world, which permitted the earlier approach through a reinterpretation of Kant’s transcendental imagination, and more on the hold Being has on Dasein as the sole Being-historical agent owned or “appropriated” by Being. The only history that matters is the unfolding of this process—for what else *is* there but Being?³¹⁷ It is an unfolding that Dasein, as Being’s guardian, is able to further consciously through the discipline of *thinking*. But in much the same way as one perceives only the objects that physical nature presents to one’s senses, one *thinks* only the “thought-provoking” that Being gives one to

³¹⁷ For Heidegger, writes Levinas, “there is no other epic than the epic of being” (GDT, 57).

think. Being “gifts” itself to Dasein as “food for thought.”³¹⁸ In this way Dasein is “en-owned” or “appropriated” by Being itself—that is, invested into the historical unfolding, “projecting-open” (CPE 1999, 39) or “pro-jection” (CPE 45) of Being. This event, in which Being appropriates Dasein and Dasein thereby appropriates Being, is what Heidegger refers to as *Ereignis*. William Richardson explains that the thinking demanded by *Ereignis* “means more than merely intellectual activity—it involves an authentic response of the whole man to the revelation of Being. As such, it is non-conceptual and non-representational—a total, accepting openness to Being.”³¹⁹ The thinking that thinks Being is seeking a certain modality of being which Heidegger will later call *Da-sein*, hyphenating the word to distinguish the new Being-historical emphasis from the earlier existential emphasis of *Being and Time*. The thinking that Being-historical Dasein does, significantly, does not aim for results to be communicated to other Da-seins, unless communication is to be accomplished through the example of one’s manner of being-in-the-world. Da-sein seeks only to open *itself* to the call of Being.

To this Levinas would surely object that the idea that one can *initiate* an openness to anything *other* than oneself is problematic to say the least, whether one is Da-sein or Dasein. To experience the alterity of anything is to learn that one is vulnerable through having to respond to it, and Levinas’s main theme is that one always ultimately learns this through another vulnerable *human* being. Only an *other* like oneself can *demand* a response. One does not need to respond to the same. For there to be openness to anything, conscious or not, there must first be a forcing-open of a separated self by a non-self, the neighbor.³²⁰ This will likely occur originally through a face-to-face encounter that exposes one to what one cannot help but find at least minimally disturbing. It is not the call of Being, therefore, but the other’s always unexpected, not necessarily

³¹⁸ The “thought-provoking is what gives us to think”; thinking is a *response* to a *call* or offering (WCT 167; cf. 144-46). On Being as *es gibt*, see TB 5-6. For “gifting” as what Beyng does, see HB, 81.

³¹⁹ From M. Heidegger, “Nur noch ein Gott kann uns retten,” *Der Spiegel* 30 (Mai, 1976), 193-219. Translated, with notes, by W. Richardson as “Only a God Can Save Us” in Sheehan 1981, 67n26.

³²⁰ On Levinas’s notion of separation, see the Introduction above, p. 51. See also, specifically, TI 149.

verbal *ethical* demand ('What will you do about me?') that supplies the *originary* motivation for responding to, or even just thinking about, anything 'other' whatsoever, not excluding the call of Being.

For Levinas, thought is always a response to an *other*: "Language is always addressed to the other, as if one could not think without already being concerned for the other. Always already my thinking is a saying" (IR 235). Thought therefore does not express 'me' so much as it expresses a relation beyond me, a relation in which the other necessarily calls the whole notion of 'me' into question. What is more, we *desire* to be called into question in this way, insofar as we depend on the other for verification of our world (the transcendent intention). In a notebook entry, Levinas appears to suggest that it is in the course of thinking—about anything—that one literally *becomes* the subject one is, because all thinking is thinking-with-the-other:

In reality my thought contains before all else my relation with others—invocation of others. I *am* in the thought—not because it is an activity that implies an author, but because in thinking I *say* my thought—that is, because I have entered into relation with the other—because I have shattered my interiority. It is not by hearing that I have been in relation with exteriority, but *already in thinking*. To think—to be conscious—is not to be for oneself nor in oneself, nor outside oneself—but for the other. Insofar as one thinks, one proceeds by question and response.³²¹

Not only in speaking directly to another person, but simply in doing *any thinking at all*, I thereby acknowledge the other's judgment of, *invasion* of, my world. What makes me a human subject is

³²¹ E. Levinas, *Notes philosophiques diverses, Liasse B, Oeuvres I*, 357, my translation: "*La pensée est inséparable de l'expression. ... En réalité ma pensée contient avant tout mon rapport avec autrui—invocation d'autrui. Je suis dans la pensée—non pas parce que c'est une activité qui implique un auteur, mais parce que en pensant je dis ma pensée—c'est-à-dire parce que je suis entré en relation avec l'autre—parce que j'ai brisé mon intériorité. Ce n'est pas en écoutant que j'ai été en relation avec l'extériorité, mais déjà en pensant. Penser—avoir conscience—n'est pas être pour soi ni en soi, ni en dehors de soi—mais pour l'autre. Dans la mesure où penser —c'est procéder par question et réponse.*"

the fact of being subject to the *other* even in the privacy of my mind. To Heidegger's idea that the truth of Being is disclosed through Being's "appropriation" (*Ereignis*) of Dasein, Levinas would respond that the thinking appropriated by Being has already been appropriated by the other. But if the other is present at every instant—where *present* means present as constantly demanding a response, whether or not one is conscious of the demand—then must not any responsibility one thinks one owes Being be negotiated ahead of time with the neighbor? Must we not question the assumption that Being *always* has the first and last word, that it dictates the terms of every relation, even the relation with my neighbor in his or her destitution? And as mortal, the neighbor is *always* destitute. It seems instead that Being gives or "gifts" nothing that is not already a gift *of* the other, in both the subjective and objective sense of the genitive.

But from the beginning, Heidegger finds himself compelled to describe the thinking of Being in terms that are deliberately segregated from any question of ethics. As early as in *Being and Time*, the thinking of Being is responsible or responsive only to Being. And much later, in a passage remarkable for its directness, Heidegger writes that thinking "no longer concerns itself with good and bad, ... amiability and violence, but merely sees and grasps the things that *are*, so as to help these beings ... into beyng ..." (CPE 191). If all thinking is to some degree a social act, then the thinking appropriated by Being is unusual in apparently having no moral consequences whatever. It runs its "course" much as a river does: as both the flowing and the path the flowing follows, this thinking is the "path that itself proceeds." To assume that everywhere and at all times, "a history of being itself and 'only' this history is running its course" is to find the supreme task solely in furthering the progress of Being—or at least in not interfering with it.³²²

We began this section with the question of what motivates Dasein to recognize a being as *other* than itself. While the relationship Dasein has with another being like itself will not be the same as that which it has with non-Dasein beings (SZ 120), it should be evident from Heidegger's

³²² HB 63. The reason for the scare quotes around 'only' is unclear. Heidegger may be referring here to his notion of the fundamental simplicity of history as solely the history of Being. Cf. OWL 92-93, CPE 236.

dismissal of any Being-historical role for ethics that, Being-historically, another being like itself has no specifically ethical priority over jugs and trees. Indeed, if Heidegger had any reason to avoid entanglement in ethical questions, he could not have chosen a more effective way to do it than by subordinating *all* beings indiscriminately to the sole task that mattered, the guardianship of Being.

For Weil, by contrast, recognizing something as other than oneself requires one to be at least somewhat free of the temptations of imagination. But this means accepting above all the reality of suffering, the other's and one's own—of destitution, of the death which always comes too soon, of pain. For if one refuses to accept the reality of pain, one forfeits connection with the real altogether. And since one can accept the reality of one's own pain only through a sensitivity to the pain of the other person, and vice versa, it follows, according to Weil, that recognizing anything as *real*, as other than oneself, requires the sensibility she calls *pure compassion*:

The capacity for pure compassion is exactly proportional to the acceptance of one's own suffering. By what mechanism?

To account for this mechanism, we require the notion of universal sensibility [*sensibilité universelle*] (not unconnected with that pure sensibility Kant makes use of for space and time), which is also related to beauty.³²³

It is the refusal to accept for oneself the possibility of suffering which places an obstacle in the way of compassion. ... The notion of necessity, which alone enables one to suffer while accepting one's suffering, alone enables one also to transfer through the mind one's own 'self' into some unhappy being. ...

Compassion implies acceptance, since one voluntarily causes one's own being to descend into some unhappy being. The compassionate impulse is not that of revolt. (N 284-85)

³²³ "Beauty and Reality are identical" (N 309).

The last sentence is a reference to Ivan Karamazov, whom Weil often mentions in this context. Compassion is incompatible with rebellion against God, because to rebel “is to represent God to oneself as a sovereign” who is omnipresent and in control (N 283), whereas compassion acknowledges the real absence of God.³²⁴ To rebel is to “avert one’s eyes” rather than give one’s full attention to the other who is in pain (N 287). God is present in this world only as the trace of love in the soul which has compassion for the suffering of others—that is, in someone who can look the reality of God’s absence fully in the face.³²⁵

For this reason Weil says that one cannot have compassion for “misery” without loving “the source of it” (N 287), by which she means Necessity. “To accept what is bitter; acceptance must not be allowed to project itself on to the bitterness and lessen it”—for example by expecting eternal consolation or recompense—“otherwise the force and purity of the acceptance are proportionally lessened” (N 288) and with it one’s ability to mitigate the other’s suffering. A common form of religious sentiment, this “flight into unreality ... does not constitute a movement of love” (N 293). To reduce suffering in any way other than by relieving it through an understanding of the forces of Necessity that contribute to the suffering here and now, to the extent that such an understanding is humanly possible, represents a refusal to accept reality and therefore a refusal of compassion. If it is not possible to bring relief to the sufferer, then one must increase the effort of attention while remaining open to the possibility that one will eventually

³²⁴ See Introduction, 20-21, 23.

³²⁵ *Compassion* for Weil is therefore less a feeling than an act: an active *suffering with* the other: “Compassion consists in *paying attention to* an afflicted man and *identifying oneself with* him in thought. It then follows that one feeds him automatically if he is hungry, just as one feeds oneself. Bread given in this way is the effect and the sign of compassion” (FLN 327, emphasis added). Levinas avoids the word *compassion*, evidently because he thinks that it too readily suggests a conscious “psychological event” (OB 125, 146): an *active* attempt to understand the other, which amounts to projecting my world onto him, together with passive feelings of pity compatible with turning *away* from the other, despite the other’s appeal which is, for Levinas, impossible to evade (OB 128). Compassion then becomes something one may “indulge” oneself in (TI 257). Substitution as response to the other’s appeal, on the other hand, is more basic. It is “the source of all compassion” (OB 166; cf. TI 271). Clearly Weil’s understanding of compassion is closer to what Levinas means by substitution.

have a clear insight into an appropriate course of action. One cannot deny *any* part of reality without damaging one's ability to mitigate or even simply to *notice* the reality of pain, for the sufferer relies for help on someone who sees reality (especially the sufferer's own) as it is.

Therefore the "universal sensibility" Weil compares to Kant's pure intuition can be defined as simply the *desire* for the real. It is universal not simply because we all have it, but also because it acts at every level of consciousness, even including (as we will see in Chapter 5) that of sense perception. Of relevance here is the equal certainty with which we can now say that this same universal sensibility must also come into play in the experience of Being—always assuming that such an experience is possible, and permissible, without neglecting the neighbor. But most important is Weil's emphasis on suffering, which has the effect of making compassion concrete, an action as opposed to a passive feeling of pity. Levinas makes a similar comparison with Kant for a like purpose: what "sensible experience" is to Kant in giving content to concepts, "interhuman relations" are to Levinas in giving a concrete meaning to what he calls "metaphysics" (TI 79).³²⁶

Compassionate intuition of suffering, in oneself and others, is so basic for Weil that it grounds the possibility of awareness of anything at all. Compassion, love of truth, acceptance of the real—these are equivalent. All three are essential to any clear thinking about anything. The need for compassion is therefore an expression of the equally essential "transfer" of self to other that we have seen Weil call *decreation*. As we established earlier (Chapter 1), *decreation* is substitution. The idea that substitution might be necessary for thought, while certainly present in Levinas, in Weil is more closely tied to what one actually *does* as a decreated subject. Hence, thought, which we can say is for both Levinas and Weil an outcome of one's response-ability to the other, leads invariably to the responsibilities of justice and to action. If one cannot think the reality of anything, not excluding the meaning of Being, without placing oneself continually and

³²⁶ Recall that metaphysics, for Levinas, is the ethical understood as anything that cannot be totalized.

unconditionally (‘infinitely’) in debt to the other person—simply through one’s exposure to the reality one shares with them—then *all* thought that seeks the real must have a tendency to lead to action on behalf of the other, even when that tendency is ignored, repressed, or submerged in self-interest. “Imagination” is Weil’s term for all ‘thought’ that does not seek the real and therefore does not lead to action. The question one invariably asks is: what must the nature of the required action be if Weil and Levinas are not to fall victim to the misunderstanding, common among critics of both, that they make impossible and therefore *un-realistic* demands? We have already hinted at a partial answer: it is action guided by what Weil calls *attention*. This idea now needs some further elaboration.

3.6 Non-Active Action as Mindfulness of the Other

To be happy that there are thinking beings other than oneself; essential form of grace.

— Simone Weil (N 57)

Pure action, according to Weil, is action that breaks free of the self that acts, so that one acts solely as the passive instrument of Necessity. Action is at its purest when the person who acts disappears behind the act, when the act becomes simply part of the dialogue between Love and Necessity in which they are free to “exchange their secrets” without interference (N 422). As we saw in Chapter 2, Weil calls such action *non-active action* or action without a will: “Acting not *on behalf of* a certain object, but *as a result of* a certain necessity. I am unable to do otherwise. This is not action” in the usual sense “but a sort of passivity” (N 124).

Non-active action is not an intentional act in the everyday non-phenomenological sense. One does not make it happen; it is what one *finds oneself* doing as a direct result of *attention*.

Attention is the sole premeditated act we owe another person insofar as we desire his or her good

(and perhaps also the sole such act we owe beings insofar as we desire their Being). Whether one desires the other's good or the Being of beings, the primacy of attention signifies the impossibility of bringing about a good or desirable result with conscious intent—an impossibility measured for Weil by the infinite distance in which “the essence of the necessary differs from that of the good” (N 410). Whatever we do, we do by necessity. Hence Weil, for all practical purposes, is a moral determinist.³²⁷ Since the necessary is *absolutely other than* the good (N 350, 379, 400) and Necessity rules all of existence, it follows that pure good is to be found nowhere in the world. Hence there is no such thing as an unqualifiedly good action. To endeavor intentionally to ‘do good’ in any sense or capacity that ignores the fact that all of our acts without exception occur solely by Necessity—that is, to act in any other way than through the practice of attention—is for Weil an impertinence.³²⁸ Similarly for Levinas, the “distance” between self and other is “infinite” in that the self is absolutely incapable of diminishing that distance by any intentional act. Every conscious act, however well-intentioned, necessarily reduces the other to the same. One must therefore make contact with the *other* non-intentionally, acting as the agent of an incomprehensible and largely invisible Good.

Unlike Levinas, however, Weil would call this state of affairs supernatural (see Introduction, p. 45). By this she does not mean something mystical. The language of the supernatural is her way of acknowledging that the Good is *not natural*, not part of the world. But for Levinas, the infinite distance between what Weil calls Necessity and the Good, elects or “invests” one with the freedom for responsibility, a freedom that is utterly gratuitous since it knows no limits measurable in terms of conscious intentions (TI 84, 88, 245-46; OB 11, especially 187n8). Thus Levinas, too, seems to see it almost as something supernatural when he writes that the “surprising saying” which is “prior to anything said” is the “gratuity ... required of substitution, the miracle of ethics before the light” (OB 43-44). It could be argued that attention is the practical side of

³²⁷ We return to Weil's determinism in Chapter 6.

³²⁸ Many references in the Notebooks. See, for example: N 57, 150, 179, 220, 256.

what Levinas calls the *reduction* of the said to the saying. What attention tries to do is to set aside every distraction that would obscure the good. But this is essentially an attempt to make contact with the saying, pure responsibility, which leaves its trace in the said.

Thus Weil notes that, just as in writing one “sets aside those words which conceal the model, the silent thing which has to be expressed,”³²⁹ so also in action at its purest, one sets aside every “unbalanced” thought or action that seems to obscure the good, preventing one from seeing clearly what needs to be done:

Action which springs from a situation, which expresses it. How to define it? Beautiful action. Action which concludes, suspends the indefinite dialogue between the unbalanced elements that respond to each other, and establishes the unique balance corresponding to the given situation. Action in which the person behind it does not appear. (N 29)

If non-active action is action which express the real, then it must express not the unreal “person” who acts but the “situation.”³³⁰ In striking the “unique balance,” one sets aside not simply interfering thoughts, but at some point even intentional thought itself, and with it one’s very *self*, in order to act solely in obedience to Necessity, which forces itself on one’s attention in the form of “a certain action ... imposed by the situation itself, clearly perceived” (N 52). For Weil, all thought is contaminated by the self, if only because one invariably thinks in part by means of the imagination. Hence the real is what the *body* finds itself doing from necessity. It is not the mind but “the body which ... is a true balance when the attention is uniform” (N 57)—that is, when attention is motivated unwaveringly by a pure love of Necessity. Actions, as opposed to thought,

³²⁹ Is this not a surprising though almost certainly unconscious parallel, in the anti-Jewish Weil, to the importance of *silence* in the Hebraic biblical experience of God?

³³⁰ In “Human Personality” (SWA 50 = SWR 314), Weil makes a distinction between the unreality of the “person” or “personality” vs. the “whole human being.” Cf. Heidegger: “the personal ... misses and misconstrues the essential unfolding of ek-sistence in the history of Being” (“Letter on Humanism,” BW 231).

therefore have a privileged relation to reality: they are the one and *only* means of “lift[ing] ourselves above illusion right up to Necessity” (N 57). Can such a role for action be found in Heidegger’s notion of Being-historical thinking? If not—if in fact the two are at antipodes—then Weil’s non-active action supports Levinas’s anti-Heideggerian priority of ethics over being. Nevertheless, there are some interesting parallels with the later Heidegger.

Heidegger uses the prefix *er-*, often with a hyphen, to emphasize *achievement*, *enhancement*, *carrying-* or *bearing-forth*, in many words to which he gives a “be-ing historical” sense. These include, among others, *er-eignis* (event or “en-owning”), *er-denken*, *er-bringen*, and *er-sehen*.³³¹ The last seems closest to Weil’s attention, the single intentional (perhaps minimally so) non-act capable of bearing forth action. Indeed, Heidegger defines *er-sehen* in *Basic Questions of Philosophy* as a seeing that “enables” or “brings forth” (§23, BQP 74-77). For Heidegger this means that it discloses or brings forth Being, enabling beings to be what they are for the being (Dasein) to whom they must be disclosed if they are fully to *be* the beings they are capable of being. Attention as *er-sehen* would be a seeing that enables the “situation” to be seen for, and thus to *be*, what it truly is, but with the difference, first of all, that whereas in Heidegger *er-sehen* enables *thinking*, in Weil it would be a fullness of seeing that for the first time enables (calls forth) the *action* the situation demands—quite apart from whatever thinking one is able to do—and thus enables one’s action to be truly *compassionate*. Thinking is never enough, for Weil, since it is never sufficiently decreative. Only by letting Necessity act through one’s body does one approach the removal of every trace of self and self-delusion that prevents contact with the real. If immediate action is not possible, then thinking is subordinated to the form of self-emptying Weil calls *waiting*, which is not the same thing. A second difference with Heidegger, a paradoxical reversal of the first, is that while for Heidegger *er-sehen* is *active* at least to the extent of revealing Dasein’s “power” to disclose beings (despite the fact that one acts through *thinking*

³³¹ For a general discussion of Heidegger’s use of these and similar terms, see CPE99, xxxvii-xxxix.

and therefore as the passive agent of Being),³³² for Weil, by contrast, attention is ideally *passive* from the beginning, in that it is self-effacing and hence requires no more than the very minimum of intentionality. But perhaps this difference is not so great, since in both Weil and Heidegger, the active and the passive seem paired in a dialectical relation.

Despite the differences, attention serves a purpose analogous to that of *er-sehen*. This is evident in another Heideggerian parallel in which Weil compares actions to tools, instruments for bringing one closer to the world and therefore closer to beings. More so than for Heidegger, however, she sees action as bringing one closer to the *other*: “My actions increase or reduce the thickness of the veil which separates me from the universe and from other people. Like the sort of movements that I make when handling a tool” (N 51). A number of passages in Weil’s notebooks suggest that the effects of our actions extend to everything we encounter, without exception, in a way that makes us responsible for all beings.³³³ Consequently, an unintended effect of our actions can be to bring things and people out of the shadows to which we have consigned them as part of imagination’s efforts to tame Necessity. Another unintended effect is the inevitable evil that results from whatever we do, since all our actions are a mixture of good and evil. Given that evil is often the result of attempts to avoid our own pain or Necessity, the harm we accidentally do to others can be one of the most effective cures for the illusion that avoidance is possible (N 564).

Since the only way to test one’s thought against reality is by means of action, Weil advises that “we should translate into acts, immediately if the opportunity presents itself, as often as possible (but within certain limits), the glimpses which the mind receives of the veritable existence of the world and of men” (N 51).³³⁴ The risk, of course, is that actions have effects.

³³² Levinas comments on Dasein’s “power” to disclose beings in “Philosophy and the Idea of Infinity” (1957), CP 52.

³³³ “To create oneself, by one’s actions, a screen [i.e. obstruction] ... between oneself and reality. ... Or, on the contrary, actions which are as levers towards greater reality” (N 46). Actions are *μεταξύ*, levers of transcendence (Chapter 2 above, section 2.7). “Need for *μεταξύ* in order to prevent us from seizing hold of nothingness instead of full being” (N 233).

³³⁴ “Such actions represent the use of the blind man’s stick” (N 51). See Ch. 1 above, pp. 109-10.

Levinas calls this “the violence of transitivity,” the fact that actions *do things to* others, and he goes on to give a version of Weil’s advice that sees in this the significance, indeed the miracle, of ethics, of responsibility for others: “What, in action, breaks forth as essential violence is the surplus of being over the thought that claims to contain it, the marvel of the idea of infinity” (TI 27). In other words, only action places one out in the world with the inscrutable other, from whom one cannot return home as quite the same person one was. To this Levinas opposes solitary thought, which “remains closed in itself despite all its adventures.” The adventures of thought “in the last analysis are purely imaginary, or are adventures traversed as by Ulysses: on the way home” (TI 27). Thus Weil’s model thinker is not the philosopher who thinks the meaning of Being while never leaving his study or the lecture hall, but T. E. Lawrence, who first “pondered in his tent” and then set out to do what he felt compelled to do, without the slightest illusion that he was doing anything other than taking his part in “a play of necessary causes” (N 53).³³⁵

Might there be acts, beyond that of doing more thinking, into which it would not only be possible but perhaps even *necessary* to translate one’s “glimpses of the history of beyng” (CPE 352)? Heidegger seems to suggest something along these lines when he claims that a certain “thoughtful and explorative questioning” can be a “renunciation that *takes action*.” He means action “that adheres *to* the refusal [of Being to show itself directly] and thus brings it [Being] into the light” by making its absence clear.³³⁶ Such an action expresses a “situation” that happens in some way to be marked by Being’s refusal. Similarly, non-active action expresses the refusal of the Good to show itself. Non-active action is action whose only conscious motivation is to remove the thinker as a barrier between the two faces of God, Necessity and Love—or, if we may

³³⁵ Of course, the action need not be anything so significant either ethically or historically as Lawrence’s proved to be. What Weil admired in Lawrence was his utter *lack* of any desire to be a significant actor. See Henry Leroy Finch, “T. E. Lawrence and the Purification of Evil,” in *Simone Weil and the Intellect of Grace* (New York: Continuum, 1999), 51-58. Lawrence was no Ulysses. Apparently he never again really felt at home in the world after he left Arabia.

³³⁶ CPE 352, emphasis in original, my gloss.

venture another parallel with Heidegger, between beings and the truth of Being.³³⁷ Equivalently, it is action motivated solely by attention. The main difference from Heidegger, of course, is that since one of the two faces of Weil's God is Love, non-active action is essentially a recognition not only of *Being* but also of the *other person* "as such and as a whole"—to transfer Heidegger's phrase to Weil's definition of what matters more than the "person". One becomes open not only to one's being-in-the-world but also to the neighbor to whom one is indebted for that world.

For Weil, the fact that human beings *suffer from being* would be more important than the preservation of being itself. The suffering other "appropriates" one's thought in a manner very different from Being. Thinking of the other is far more likely to miscarry—it is riskier and more dangerous—if only because, unlike ontological thought, one cannot think of the other *as other*—hence in his or her particular destitution—without translating one's thinking into acting. It is riskier because actions always have consequences beyond one's control, and more dangerous because human actions are inseparable from evil.

Non-active action is not something one chooses, but instead something one opens the door to the moment one gives the other one's full attention. And it *will* come in that door: "Silence all the motives, all the incentives in yourself, and you will nevertheless act, impelled by a source of energy which is other than the motives and the incentives" (N 247). Recalling that all actions, however impersonal,³³⁸ are a mix of good and evil, the following passage is a concise summary:

An action carried out in this way acts as a lever. It is *possible* that it may lead to better conditions—in which duty is less mixed up with evil. Only possible.

We are not defiled by actions from which we are absent in this fashion (in this fashion, for there is another way of being absent),³³⁹ in spite of the fact that they are mixed up with evil.

³³⁷ Provided we keep in mind that Weil's (like Levinas's) idea of truth is very different from Heidegger's.

³³⁸ In Weil's sense of 'impersonal': not involving the self.

³³⁹ This other way is undoubtedly that of acting without attention, from self-interest.

We must likewise be absent from good.

Act not *for* a certain object, but *because we cannot do otherwise*.

A true balance: it is the body which is the balance, for each moment it can perform but one action. It is a true balance when the attention is uniform. (N 57)³⁴⁰

Weil, like Levinas, gives a novel meaning to the role of passivity in what might be called *ethical being*: a way of being or mode of human existence that takes into account not only the being of beings but also the *other-ing of others*. The Other grants ethical being the *response-provoking*, in a manner analogous to that in which Being grants ontology the thought-provoking. Ethical being is being in which one does not so much act (intentionally) as one lets the body find the right balance between action and attention, on its own. Balance, a central idea in Weil,³⁴¹ is always to be sought because only balance makes space for the other as other, and because every act, and even every thought, inevitably closes off avenues for attention:

It is impossible for us to think without movement. Consequently, we kill in ourselves the thoughts which we do not express by acts every time that it is possible to express them so. Since the body at any given moment can have but one single attitude, each one of our acts is a slayer of thoughts, for each act excludes an infinite number of other acts and makes it impossible at that particular moment for the thoughts corresponding to them to reach a state of existence. We must refrain from killing thoughts that are precious, refrain from bringing into the world thoughts that are vile, base and defiled by unreality. (N 52)

³⁴⁰ “But the supernatural lies in this, that for a moment the balance stops moving and remains in suspension. After the stoppage, the same forces act upon it, only now it is more exact” (N 97). “Continually to suspend in oneself the work of the imagination, filler up of voids and restorer of balances” (N 145).

³⁴¹ For a reading of Weil’s thought in general, based on this idea, see Winch 1989.

Here Weil gives her own expression of the asymmetry of the ethical: my actions are important to me in a way that the other's actions can never be, since my actions can tell me what *I* have betrayed in myself, whereas the other's actions, from my point of view, never tell me about the other as other, but only betray him as false expressions in which he is no longer present.³⁴² Consequently one is responsible for one's actions even when one acts solely as the instrument of Necessity. "Although no motive or incentive is the cause of this action, a host of motives and incentives converge towards its execution" (N 247). Unlike the results of one's actions, motives and incentives are something over which one always has at least some control. That is why what one merely *thinks* is so important for Weil.³⁴³

By contrast, on Heidegger's view, one owes humanity above all an attention to the summons of Being. One opens oneself to this call by a special activity of thought. But if, as Weil insists, every thought closes off avenues of attention and hence of action, and if acting or not acting always have consequences for others, then must we not consider devotion to Being to be a form of comportment towards others, and therefore subject to ethical judgment?

Heidegger claims that, as *Da-sein*, one owes one's very *human* being, which has a history, to the part one plays in the history of Being: "human being occurs as historical through the appropriation that summons *Da-sein* in one way or another" (CPE 186). To say that human being *occurs* suggests that human *being* is an *event*. In fact, for Heidegger, human being *happens*, solely as a byproduct of carrying out of the *history of Being*.³⁴⁴ The being-appropriating *event* (*Ereignis*) *calls* into being the particular mode of being of *Da-sein*, which is granted the thought-provoking solely in order that, more and more, beings might be disclosed as having the be-ing of

³⁴² Compare this with Levinas, TI 66-67.

³⁴³ Thus Weil often suggests 'thought exercises' for making the other more present to oneself.

³⁴⁴ *Seinsgeschichte*, from *Geschichte* (history), related to the verb *geschehen*, to happen, occur.

beings for a Dasein.³⁴⁵ Only Dasein has this special relationship with Being, one that makes a *being*, in this case human being, *uniquely* responsible (as far as we know) for the unconcealment of beings. But the event that “appropriates” us needs only our Dasein. For this task, Dasein’s *humanness* is of secondary importance. A non-human being would serve just as well if it had the being-in-the-world of *Dasein*. What the human being, as Dasein, owes to the historical unfolding of the Event is no more and no less than what is owed to Being, namely Being’s restoration and continued preservation—specifically, one’s small part in bringing about or preparing the ground for that restoration, which more than likely will be accomplished, if it ever is, by unknown others in a far distant future. For Heidegger, one’s loyalties are to Being first of all, to one’s neighbor only derivatively in the form of those everyday responsibilities that happen to occur as part of one’s being-in-the-world with others (*Mitsein*). And one seems to owe more to future ‘neighbors’ than to those with whom one is presently living face to face.

Unlike the stone which has no world, or the animal whose world is allegedly “impoverished” compared to Dasein’s (as Heidegger argues in *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics*), the human other *suffers from* its being-in-the-world and in extreme cases is vulnerable to *losing* that world altogether. This would seem to be a fact that any phenomenology of human being would need to take into account. Heidegger’s thought, despite all of its turnings, certainly does not. In the next chapter, we lay the groundwork for a phenomenology that does take into account human vulnerability in this way, a phenomenology founded on the assumption that the certainty for which philosophy must strive is not ontological but the certainty of an *obligation*. Decreative phenomenology, as I will call it, begins with what Weil calls *attention* and ends (if it ever does) in *waiting* or *non-active action*. That this is the appropriate method for any phenomenology of the ethical was the point of the argument made above for a transcendental axiological approach. It is based on the axiom that the ethical relation is not reciprocal: “what I permit myself to demand of

³⁴⁵ That “world-formation [i.e. Dasein] is something that occurs” (FCM 285) means that Dasein is not present at hand. Similarly in CPE, that “human being occurs” mean that a human being is not simply present but is a result or ‘happening’ of the history of Being.

myself is not comparable with what I have the right to demand of the Other” (TI 53); in terms of Levinas’s favorite quote from Dostoyevsky, “Each of us is responsible before everyone, for everyone and for everything, and I more than the others.” Beginning with this axiom, one is led to a transcendental or ethical certainty that unsettles and destabilizes: the certainty of uncertainty, the certainty of obligation. Without the uncertainty of the ethical, there is nothing that can be called transcendent—hence Heidegger had little real use for any notion of transcendence. But a response to Being requires an ability to *respond*, and one can learn this only from an other, the other whom we desire and therefore “go towards” in the act of responding. I have attempted to show in this chapter why Levinas must make the axiological claim that desire for the other is ‘better than Being’. This is not a judgment that lends itself to proof. One assumes it in order to do justice to one’s vulnerable neighbor—that is, in order that ethics may have a point.

One last step was required before moving on to the next chapter: since action is the test of ethical thought, a definition of the kind of action required by the decreative phenomenological method was needed. Thus we ended this chapter with a discussion of non-active action, which Weil argues is the only action mindful of one’s neighbor as another vulnerable being like oneself.

4.0 Preliminary Investigations in Decreative Phenomenology

As we saw in Chapter 2, Levinas does not recognize a non-contradictory logic of the encounter with the other, which for Levinas is not an experience characterized by intentionality in the phenomenological sense. It follows that there is no way to represent the ethical encounter in the discourse of traditional phenomenology, as though observing it neutrally ‘from outside’ (GWCM 61). Hence, Levinas says that phenomenology must itself be “thrown” into the midst of the encounter with the other, into a “paradox” that requires a contradictory “ethical language” for its expression (OB 121). In part, ethical language is needed because, as we shall see, this paradox is of the kind Weil thinks ought to be *used*, not resolved, and utilization always raises ethical questions about purposes and effects. But even more fundamentally, a phenomenology of the encounter needs to be “ethical” because only in this way can there be an encounter to describe. As part of its encounter with the other, phenomenology in its very practice must take responsibility for preserving the other’s *absolution* (“withdrawal”) from every attempt to describe him, since this is fundamental to what it means to be *other*. If the encounter with the other absolutely resists description in rational discourse, then the only option would seem to be to describe the resistance.

The other’s resistance to thematization, to synchronization, to being made part of the ‘same’, confronts the phenomenologist with the general problem of *absolute difference*: How can there be a *relation* between two terms, absolutely ‘other’ to one another, which does not compromise the status of either one? How can the other remain ‘other’ if I *relate* to it, since relating to anything would seem to require that it become, to some degree, part of my ‘same’? Or is it the case that instead of assimilating the other to myself, I do the reverse: in relating to the other, I myself

become part of the other? But this is no resolution either. Once again, even if there is a relation to the other that does not make the other into the same or the same into the other—as Levinas, of course, claims there is, namely the ethical relation—how do we describe it phenomenologically without in the process converting it into the observed, identified, remembered ‘same’, thus betraying the very relation we are trying to describe (see OB 46)?

Phenomenology’s approach to the other, as an approach to the other, is bound by the same conditions as any other ethical encounter. Levinas outlines the problem phenomenology confronts as that of trying to “follow out the reverting of thematization into anarchy in the description of the approach.” *Approaching* the other is a pre-conscious act that needs to be contrasted with anything intentional—such as trying to learn something *about* the other, thus to some extent turning the other into the same. One cannot represent any part of this process without the other immediately withdrawing, leaving behind nothing to be described—except the effect of the withdrawal on oneself.

Starting with the approach, the description finds the neighbor bearing the trace of a withdrawal that orders it as a face. ... The approach is not the thematization of any relationship, but *is the very relationship*, which resists thematization as anarchic. To thematize this relation is already to lose it, to leave the absolute passivity of the self. The passivity prior to the passive-active alternative, more passive than any inertia, is described by the ethical terms *accusation*, *persecution*, and *responsibility for others*. The persecuted one is expelled from his place and has only himself to himself, has nothing in the world on which to rest his head.³⁴⁶ (OB 121, emphasis added)

³⁴⁶ Undoubtedly a reference to Matthew 8:19-22.

The phenomenologist, in Levinas's hyperbolic vocabulary, will find *herself* accused, persecuted, "traumatized" by the other, a stranger to her own world in a way that goes far beyond the experience of encountering an object one cannot yet identify. A phenomenology of the other cannot be a thematization of something pre-existing the phenomenological encounter. It is a new encounter altogether, a *relation* with the other that I will argue calls for the passive/active practice of *attention*, attending especially to its effect on oneself—a form of what Weil calls non-active action. There simply is no non-ethical relation—whether everyday, scientific, or philosophical—with the human person *as other*. There can be no non-ethical (in Levinas's sense of ethical) phenomenology of a phenomenon to which one can relate *only ethically*. In investigating such a relation, phenomenology, as part of its task, is forced by this ethical obligation to recognize and question its own limits—to experience *itself* as accused, persecuted, questioned by the other. This makes phenomenology anything but a purely objective, academic pursuit:

It reverts from the activity of being a hunter of images to the passivity of being prey, from being aim to being wound, from being an intellectual act of apprehension to apprehension as an obsession by another who does not manifest himself. ... It is a pre-original not-resting-on oneself [*ne-pas-reposer sur soi*], the restlessness of someone persecuted. (OB 75)

If this is what phenomenology's encounter with the other must be like, then it would seem that a "phenomenology of the person" aiming to give a description of human relationships cannot be carried out within the tradition we have inherited from Husserl.³⁴⁷ While the encounter with the other "does indeed arise from ... non-philosophical experiences, which are ethically independent"

³⁴⁷ Sokolowski 2008. Oddly enough, ethics is not a major concern in Sokolowski's book, except in the form of truthfulness. In fact, right from the start he identifies the human person with the "agent of truth." *Veracity*, which Sokolowski defines as "the human inclination to attain the truth of things," is not a virtue but "the *eros* involved with rationality," the aspect of our rationality which amounts to "the *desire* to possess truth" which Sokolowski claims we need to cultivate in order to be fully human (Sokolowski 2008, 20-21).

(OB 120), treating the encounter like any other phenomenon results in an irreducible opposition between two constraints, one of which defies description. On the one side, there is the necessity reflected in the laws of nature—an eidetic necessity Husserl was first to analyze thoroughly, perhaps identifiable with Weil’s Necessity. On the other side, however, a paradoxical “necessity” operates on, indeed threatens the existence of, the conscious *will* of the person having the peculiar borderline ‘experience’ of encountering the other.³⁴⁸ This second necessity—“the constraint imposed on a will by the situation in which it finds itself, or by other wills and desires, or by the wills and desires of others”—Levinas insists is *not* a phenomenon (OB 120). How then can phenomenology describe it? Obviously not directly. What it can do, Levinas seems to suggest, is to pursue the task of thematization all the way to where it “breaks up” before the face of the other, where “the face of the neighbor signifies ... the very collapse of phenomenality” (OB 88), at which point phenomenology is “thrown” into a “paradox” that Levinas claims it will nonetheless be able to “express” (OB 121). If there is anything like a “phenomenology of the person,” it must pursue this paradoxical course. There can be no phenomenology of the person without the “breakup” of phenomenology, a traumatizing of phenomenology that reflects the trauma of the ethical encounter with the other and results in a questioning of phenomenology itself which goes far beyond that proposed by Husserl in introducing his important idea of the role of the *subjective*.³⁴⁹ It will be the goal of this chapter to give some indications of what this entails in terms of actual practice.

We could have named the phenomenology that finds itself to be vulnerable in this way *ethical* or *hetero-affective* phenomenology.³⁵⁰ But since it is through attention, in Weil’s sense of the word, that one recognizes one’s vulnerability—‘attentionally’, one might say, as opposed to

³⁴⁸ Levinas also calls it “heteronomous experience” (Drabinski 2001, 155).

³⁴⁹ On the itinerary of Husserl’s treatment of the subjective, see Levinas, “From Consciousness to Wakefulness,” GWCM 17-23.

³⁵⁰ For the term *hetero-affective*, see OB 121 and Levinas’s discussion in “Transcendence and Intelligibility” (1984), especially the section “The Logos of the Infinite” (BPW 157-8). One would rely not on thought comprehending (grasping) its object, but on the subject being affected (grasped) by the ‘object’, the other.

intentionally—the phenomenological recognition of one’s vulnerability must require a form of detachment from self and world similar to decreation. I will therefore call it *decreative phenomenology*. Decreative phenomenology is ethical in Levinas’s fundamentally non-normative sense of the word, in that it takes the investigator up to the point where she encounters the ethical in more or less its purity, where the ethical is initially experienced as inaccessible to phenomenological reduction, where it becomes a puzzle that cannot be resolved by intentional analysis, and then abandons her —perhaps to unavoidable or obvious action in response to the other, for where the ethical is involved, action is never far away—but often only to “waiting.”³⁵¹ It is not a phenomenology *of* ethics or the ethical, for there can be no such thing as Levinas conceives the ethical, although undoubtedly there is a phenomenology of the experiences we tend to call ‘moral’ or ‘ethical’ in the usual sense of the words. The aim of decreative phenomenology is to do full justice to what is *ethical about* these experiences, in Levinas’s sense of ‘ethical’.

4.1 Decreative Phenomenology as Subversive-Prophetic Witness

If the aporia phenomenology runs up against in encountering the other can be described, the description must somehow define the limits of the *ethical* in Levinas’s sense of the word. This is not possible for a phenomenology of being, since the limits of the ethical are precisely those that set the ethical apart from ontology. Because the relation of the-one-for-the-other is not itself another ethics in the usual sense, it is not an entity accessible to ontological analysis. Beyond

³⁵¹ This may have an analogy in Lacanian psychoanalysis. The aim of psychoanalysis, according to Lacan, is to bring us to a “threshold” and then leave us there, free to “enter the real” (Seminar VII, 21-22). It would be risky, and take us far afield, to pursue this analogy further, but on one reading, the Lacanian analyst at that point would abandon the analysand to the ethical task, her *own* task, of becoming a *responsible subject* —that is, someone who, insofar as she acquires an awareness of the role her desire plays in her self- and world-constitution, in that way acquires what Lacan calls a “measure” for her actions, a way in which to incorporate her actions responsibly and self-consciously into what she then understands to be her ‘self’. See R. Reed, “A Lacanian Ethics of Non-Personal Responsibility,” *Pastoral Psychology* (August 2013) 62(4), 515-531.

being, the ethical is the pre-ontological relation that characterizes all ethical relations whatsoever, the an-archic ‘groundless ground’ of every ethics.

Thus the ethical comprises the very limits of human experience in general. The last frontier, so to speak, is the no man’s land separating oneself from one’s neighbor “who has no frontier with the same” (TI 203), who is always more *other* than anything else we know. It is from the aporia of the other person’s alterity that we derive the very idea of otherness. To encounter the limits of the human is therefore always in itself to encounter an ethical challenge. Which is to say that *every* encounter with the other is ethical. Conversely, every ethical problem, when referred (as it always can be) to the *ethical* in Levinas’s sense, leads one to the limits of human existence insofar as it leads one to what makes the other *other*, something infinitely-other-than-onself.

Recall that the word ‘infinity’ here, as Levinas himself employs it, refers to the fact that the other invariably exceeds everything I am capable of anticipating or knowing about him. Hence the other *as other* is not something I come to know, so much as he is an enigma that continually invades the boundaries of my experience from outside the very province of knowledge, calling those boundaries into question. A phenomenology of the ethical relation is therefore possible only if the phenomenologist is willing to confront an *ethical* enigma. As ethical, the confrontation cannot remain a purely intellectual one. The phenomenologist, herself a subject who owes her subjectivity to the ethical relation, witnesses to the relation by somehow thematizing the way in which she finds herself related to the *terms* of the relation—namely, herself and the other—in the particular situation in which she finds herself *ethically involved* here and now. Hence she finds her intellectual understanding incessantly challenged by the other. To describe her own situation vis-à-vis the other therefore requires attention (in Weil’s ethical sense) to her own and the other’s vulnerability, the same attention she applies to her ethical *response* to every ethical aporia, a response-ability (substitution) which is essentially decreative, as we have seen (Chapter 1).

An example Weil gives of the process involved in trying to remember something one has forgotten is suggestive of the kind of attention decreative phenomenology requires:

[A] thought comes into my head which seems to me important. I haven't the wherewithal for noting it down. I promise myself to remember it. Two hours later, it occurs to me that there is a thought which I have to remember. I haven't the remotest idea what it is, or even what it is about. So I turn my attention towards this thing about which I know simply that it *is*, but about which I haven't the least idea *what* it is. This effort of attention, empty of all content, may last several minutes. Then (if all goes well) the thing comes to me. I recognize, with absolute certainty, that it is indeed that. This empty form of reality has become a certain definite form of reality, ever real to me. (N 333-34)

Analogously, in the attempt to bring to mind the reality of the other as other, or the reality of the relation I have with him, the "effort of attention, empty of all content" would be directed to something I am not conscious of in my present experience of the person before me, in the situation in which I find him, and in myself as the one addressed by the other (explicitly or not). This 'something' becomes the "empty form of reality" that corresponds to the reality of the other as other, or the reality of the relation I have with him. The "definite form of reality" I know exists is the other person himself, whom I always somehow miss meeting in the world as I presently experience it. Thus the "empty form of reality" is like a hole in my world, an absence that cannot be accounted for in terms of the Necessity into which I have been "thrown" and with which I am compelled to work in order to give meaning to any encounter. The "definite form of reality" is the person, the "infinite" *other*, who fills the hole.³⁵² The hole can be thought of as a pocket (within

³⁵² Levinas makes similar use of the image of "holes" on at least one occasion: "Freedom, be it that of war, can be manifested only outside totality, but this 'outside totality' opens with the transcendence of the face. To think of freedom as *within* totality is to reduce freedom to the status of an indetermination in being, and forthwith to integrate it into a totality by closing the totality over the 'holes' of indetermination—and

one's world) of the unthematizable "reality outside the world" to which Weil refers in her 1943 "Profession of Faith."³⁵³ In order to bring to mind the other as other, as a reality outside the thematizable world, one must apply the method of directing one's attention to the empty form of his reality and then simply *wait*. The critical difference between this process and Weil's example is that here, what is to be 'recalled' is not something I once possessed, a memory or a thought, but the realization that I am confronting something that can *never* be possessed.

This no doubt seems anticlimactic. What is it that one waits for, if not something one can call one's own? Nothing else but *the ethical* itself, which 'appears' in the form of a "command" addressed to oneself, and therefore *possesses me* rather than vice versa.³⁵⁴ What one waits for is not the glimpse of a being, something *in* the world, but a "provocation" whose "transcendence ... lies in the fact that the 'epiphany' comes in the saying ["Here I am"] of him that received it" (OB 149). In the phenomenological experience itself, the phenomenologist finds *herself* saying, in effect, 'Here I am' (as opposed to the 'Look!' of traditional phenomenology). The transcendence consists in the fact that one cannot avoid carrying out the command—it transcends intentionality—since one hears the command only in the process of carrying it out. Writes Levinas: "The order that orders me does not leave me any possibility of setting things right side up again with impunity, of going back from the exteriority of the Infinite, as when before a theme one goes back from the signifier to the signified, or as when in a dialogue one finds in 'you' [*toi*] a being" (OB 149-50).³⁵⁵ This provocation, which makes itself known in one's own words or behavior, Levinas calls *prophecy* or *prophetism* (*prophétisme*). One becomes both the bearer and the hearer of the injunction—more precisely, the *hearer* insofar as one is oneself assigned to be the *bearer*

seeking with psychology the laws of a free being!" (TI 225). It might be said that, until Levinas, philosophy's tendency was to construct totalities that in effect closed over the 'holes' of indetermination represented by the other. In this connection we cannot fail to mention Sartre, who with a very different emphasis also refers significantly to the other as a "hole" in one's world (*Being and Nothingness*, New York: Washington Square Press, 1956, 343).

³⁵³ Quoted in the Introduction above, pp. 36-37.

³⁵⁴ On the meaning of "command" in Levinas, see the Introduction above, pp. 26-30.

³⁵⁵ Or in 'thou'. A reference to Buber?

or prophet. It is not a foretelling of the future, as prophecy is typically understood, but a disclosure of oneself to oneself in the guise of one's own actions vis-à-vis the other, as dictated by Necessity. Thus it is more like prophecy in the Hebraic biblical tradition, according to which a people are told how they must act or behave now if they want to avoid certain evils that Necessity will otherwise disclose in the future. The difference is that here, the prophecy is revealed to oneself alone, *in the very actions to which one is commanded*. Having 'bracketed' the self—that is, having emptied the mind of all pretense to understanding, all need for stability—one then *waits* for whatever enters it on its own. Whatever enters in this way is always essentially *other*—in Levinas's case, the Other who enters, disturbs, or *subverts* the sameness of one's world by presenting one with an unanticipated, indeed un-anticipatable command.

To be sure, Weil applies her idea of "forms of reality" not to a phenomenology of the ethical relation, but to the "understanding of symbols, images, etc." which for her ideally serve to signify such realities "outside the world" as *beauty* and *truth*. We tend to think of symbols and images as objects *within* the world that need to be interpreted by comparing or contrasting them with other objects, or ideas about objects, within the world.³⁵⁶ When Weil says that "one should not try to *interpret*, but *contemplate* [the symbols or images] until their significance flashes upon one" (N 334, emphasis added), she describes a process quite different from Levinas's prophetism, which is a matter of acting and not contemplating. Nonetheless—and this is the real point of the comparison—in both cases the result is a bridge (*metaxu*) to a definite form of reality *outside* the world. While for Weil this reality outside the world is beauty or truth, for Levinas it is the *other*.

Since what is required in either case is patience and *waiting*, the most important dimension of the process is *time*.

³⁵⁶ Levinas: "A symbol still brings the symbolized back to the world in which it appears" (CP 102).

In the case of sensible perception, if one is not sure about what one sees, one shifts one's position while going on looking (for example, one goes around the object) and the real appears. In the life of the spirit, time takes the place of space. Time brings modifications in us, and if throughout these modifications we keep our gaze directed on to a certain thing, finally what is illusory is dissipated and what is real appears; always provided that our attention consist of a contemplative look and not one of attachment. (N 334)

The process Weil is describing here is a form of decreative hermeneutics (Chapter 2). Obviously, one does not learn very much about a person by viewing her in physical space from various angles. One needs to gain an acquaintance with her over time. Over a period of time, one continually reinterprets experience in view of the expectation that nothing one experiences (that is, interprets of the world) will do full justice to the other as *other*. This amounts to refraining from filling voids, and therefore includes the self-suspicion that one will use one's imagination much more than one is aware. Whatever one thinks one knows is sure to be wrong in some sense, and usually imagination is the culprit. To let go of what one thinks one knows, if one carries the operation far enough—and there is no obvious limit to how far one may carry it—inevitably involves decreation. Decreative phenomenology as described so far is thus *already* self-emptying and substitution for the other.

Weil does not associate the realities outside the world with the alterity of the other person, as does Levinas. She refers them to God. But Levinas also mentions God in a context in which the issue is the reality of the other as other, as opposed to the reality of Being. In his case, the opposition is expressed in terms of the 'saying' and the 'said', and the treatment leads to the question of justice.

The word God, writes Levinas, "is an extraordinary word [*mot extra-ordinaire*], the only one that does not extinguish or absorb its saying" (OB 151). The saying is not a being, but human

vulnerability itself as a signifier. What the word God ‘says’, prior to its betrayal by the ‘said’, is *justice*. For Levinas, responsibility for human vulnerability is a matter of doing justice to the other by allowing the other to appear in all her impenetrable yet fragile mystery. Properly heard, properly brought to mind, the word God need therefore signify nothing more than my an-archival response-ability to the neighbor as vulnerable. Hence Levinas insists that this word, perhaps uniquely, does not “disclose” or “thematize” anything. Its sole purpose is to signal a *prophecy* in Levinas’s sense of prophecy, as discussed above. “I can indeed state the meaning borne witness to [by the word God] as a said”—just as we did earlier in this paragraph—but I do not have to, and it may even be better (at least outside of philosophical discourse) that as a rule I do not. For its meaning is not to be found in its reference, but “is the bottomless passivity of responsibility” itself which Levinas sometimes denotes by “sincerity” (OB 151). Thus the word God is meant to be translated immediately into responsibility for the neighbor, as though it were nothing but the command ‘do me no harm’ expressed in the face of the other. Far from being “a simple word,” the word God witnesses to the need for justice, for attention to the *good* of the other,³⁵⁷ for which one makes oneself available in the simple “Here I am!” This is quite often unspoken, and in any case makes no mention of the God whose “glory” Levinas claims the word witnesses. Thus the word God *transcends* every said by immediately referring the person who hears it to an action of some kind, not directly but in the form of the command expressed by the face of the neighbor. For Levinas, it is as though God had literally nothing more to ‘say’ to us than “Justice, justice, you shall pursue!” (Deut. 16:20), ‘speaking’ solely through the face of the other. But this is more than enough. To which one answers,

“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

³⁵⁷ Hence there really is something to be said for identifying the word God with the phrase *the Good*.

precisely not to state this extraordinary word [*ce mot extra-ordinaire*], as though glory would be lodged in a theme and be posited as a thesis, or become being's presence. (OB 149)

It cannot be accidental that more than once in these paragraphs Levinas hyphenates the word *extra-ordinaire*. The word God is extra-ordinary, beyond the ordinary, because it is the only word that 'refers' to what is beyond being—namely, by 'referring' me to the other to whom I am made (by this very 'reference') responsible.

So far so good, perhaps, if somewhat unorthodoxly. But then we read:

The word God is a subversive-disruptive [*bouleversant*] semantic event that subdues the subversion [*subversion*] worked by illeity. The glory of the Infinite shuts itself up in a word and becomes a being. But it already undoes its dwelling and unsays itself without vanishing into nothingness. It invests being in the very copula with which it receives attributes.³⁵⁸

Recall that Levinas's term *illeity* denotes the "third person who in a face has already withdrawn from every relation." It is the thirdness in every other, and the otherness in every third.³⁵⁹ "This 'thirdness' ... is the third party that interrupts the face to face of a welcome of the other man, interrupts the proximity or approach of the neighbor, ... the third man with which justice begins" (OB 150). *Illeity* is therefore the trace of the pure otherness of the other, "the whole infinity of the absolutely other" (CP 104). The Infinite, in the form of the proximate neighbor whose boundless ethical claim I can never fulfill, interrupts its own proximity by now 'referring' me to the *third*, all the other others of whom I must take account in the fulfillment of my responsibility for this

³⁵⁸ OB 151, translation modified; *bouleverser*, the participle form of which Lingis translates as "overwhelming" (as in *upsetting*) can also mean to *overthrow* or *subvert* (*renverser*).

³⁵⁹ There is an ambiguity in Levinas's use of the words *illeity* and *the third* here. On the one hand, *illeity* is the third-person-ness of every other, including the neighbor with whom I am face to face. But on the other hand, this implies that the other's *illeity* refers me to all the other others, so that in my relation with this one particular other, my neighbor, a third always intrudes. On the third, see Chapter 2 above, pp. 129-30.

one other who, here and now, awakens “the irreplaceable singularity that lies in me.” That there can be a singularizing call to responsibilities of *any* kind is due to the unique relation to the neighbor with whom I happen to be face to face at the present place and time. It is in this sense that the neighbor is near with a proximity I do not simultaneously share with any others, but which *in itself* brings all the others a bit closer to *me*—that is, to the ‘me’ who comes into being only at the provocation of the neighbor, the *me* as accused (in the accusative—*me voici*) of responsibility.

But how does the introduction of the third *subdue* the subversion or interruption of the neighbor’s proximity if at the same time the word God *expands* my responsibility to include all others? This seems to be anything but a mitigation. My responsibility for all the others, however, is fundamentally different from the response-ability with which the neighbor invests me. The latter is subjectivity-producing and leads to my singularization, while the responsibilities due to others are consciousness-producing and lead to the more prosaic demands of justice. While the demands of justice are certainly boundless from the world’s point of view, they are not “infinite” in the sense that one’s responsibility for the neighbor is infinite, in that the latter responsibility *transcends* one’s being-in-the-world. By contrast, one’s responsibilities for the third are always mediated: by consciousness, by one’s being-in-the-world—and therefore even by the call of *Being*.³⁶⁰ Thus, in announcing the third, “shutting itself up” in the language of justice, the word God is far from reducing the ethical demand. I am subverted, tricked into being-for-the-other, into “defecting” against my will and going over to the ‘other’ side, the side of the others (OB 153). The demand is transformed into a matter of deliberation, judgment, and conscious action—that is, justice. It is cut down to my size. This is a blessing, since after all I am only a finite being. I need not respond infinitely, if nonetheless whatever I do is never enough.

³⁶⁰ It is possible that Levinas’s statement, “the glory of the Infinite ... invests being in the very copula with which it receives attributes,” is a response to Heidegger. Levinas is saying that Being is not originary, but is already invested in me by the other.

One does not witness to the infinite as something that appears to one, but only through one's "belonging to the infinite" in the work of justice (OB 146). Decreative phenomenology therefore bears witness through the relation to the infinite that develops in what the phenomenologist *does*, in action, and not solely through what he or she thinks or perceives. It reveals the alterity of the other in the vulnerability of the face through an active response to that vulnerability as it happens to present itself to the phenomenologist, a response that can only be ethical and hence is founded on the phenomenologist's own vulnerability. Every finding of decreative phenomenology must therefore itself be a *trace* of the ethical—a response, some form of action, embodying the phenomenologist's own response-ability to a particular other. Only then is something available to be described phenomenologically that truly involves the other. It is described by clarifying the phenomenologist's own situation at the edge of the abyss between herself and the specific other she encounters. In this way the response that phenomenology cannot help thematizing becomes a *witness* to the unthematizable *beyond being* (OB 148).

What exactly is this action? That would seem to depend on the individual case, since ethics (that is, justice) is about the particular. Does this mean that phenomenology becomes the practice of justice? Why not! At least in some sense we will have to work out. Conceivably, for a few, the action could take the form of the study and/or production of texts, philosophical or otherwise, or works of art or of science in a way that does justice to the fact that every such work is, above all else and invariably, characterized by human vulnerability in all of its dimensions, whatever its outward pretensions may seem to be. But, perhaps more likely, it might involve psychological, social, or political work. Does the phenomenologist then become a social worker or a psychologist? Perhaps not in the strict sense of these words, but if the object of attention is another *person*, something along those lines might be unavoidable if attention is to be true to the other as other. In any case, someone with a professional background in psychology or social work might employ phenomenological ideas and methods towards a better understanding of what she

experiences in the course of carrying out her researches or interventions. These suggestions of the application of decreative phenomenology clearly need elaboration and greater substance. Rather than trying to provide that at the present time, I suggest in some detail a different sort of example in the next section that will have clearer relevance to our attempt to characterize the role Holocaust literature plays in making connection with the victims of extreme atrocity.

4.2 Henry James and Decreative Phenomenology

Decreative phenomenology aims to reveal something “less than a phenomenon,” an “exorbitance of proximity” beneath or beyond phenomenality, something that does not show itself until I respond to it, and even then does not ‘show’ itself as an appearance (OB 90). As what, then, does it ‘show’ itself? As something that happens *in me*, and only if I am sufficiently attentive to it in the right way—which, we have decided, is decreatively. It shows itself as my self-abdicating *responsibility* for the other, “as though I were responsible for [the other’s] mortality, and guilty for surviving” him or her, who is nonetheless “reduced to having recourse to me” for justice (OB 91). The ‘something’ decreative phenomenology ‘reveals’ is the other, or the otherness of the other, but this becomes evident only in my responding to their destitution, their mortality.

So far, decreative phenomenology therefore seems to involve the following characteristics: (1) It seeks the “empty form” of a “reality outside the world”—the other *as other*—a goal one is not able to anticipate beforehand, at which one can aim only by directing one’s attention to a void or absence. (2) One discovers what one seeks through how it *affects* one, prior to knowing what exactly is doing the affecting. One discovers what one responds to in the making of one’s response. Levinas calls this “prophecy.” (3) It takes time, because the other whom one seeks only ‘appears’ as one’s relation to her alters over time. This requires a continual self-abdicating

revision of one's assumptions, a process that I have called decreative hermeneutics. Finally (4), decreative phenomenology requires an active concern for justice. Just as one cannot discover the other *as other* through solitary thought, since conscious thought is always confined to the same, so one cannot discover her without actively taking into account her destitution. Hence one must *do* something in response to the other's vulnerability, simply in order to *see* the other as other. One sees the other as other only if one does justice to her as other—this much seems obvious—but decreative phenomenology assumes that to do justice to the other, it does not suffice to be intellectually responsive to his or her difference. It is necessary to address the other's vulnerability, perhaps even to *advocate* for her against whatever persons or forces oppress her.

The novels of Henry James often depict this very process in the way certain characters are awakened to the truth about other characters. (1) Rarely does a character know what is happening to her while the process of awakening is unfolding. It is as though she were being carried along by something outside of her world—as indeed she is, namely by the other's demand for a response. Hence (2) the development of the character's perspective proceeds not only by cognitive thought but more importantly by affective alterations. Therefore (3) it happens over time—for which reason, by the way, the novel may well be the ideal artistic medium for depicting it. Most important for James (4), there is a situation involved in which the problem of interest to the reader is explicitly the question of whether or not justice will be done to a certain person who seems to be at the mercy of others more powerful.

In "The Art of Fiction" (1888), James mentions a New England Protestant suspicion of 'art' that sees in it something potentially dangerous to morals, something sinister that is more readily concealed in fiction writing than in painting: "When it is embodied in the work of the painter ... you know what it is: it stands before you, in the honesty of pink and green and a gilt frame; you can see the worst of it at a glance, and you can be on your guard. But when it is introduced into

literature it becomes more insidious—there is danger of its hurting you before you know it.”³⁶¹

The real danger is not, however, the one that worries these moralizing critics. It is one of which James was a master at depicting in its effects on others. It is the danger of something unsettling one’s worldview through creating a life-changing discontinuity. Many of Henry James’ works include scenes in which a character experiences such a discontinuity in a sudden moment of revelation, a kind of epiphany that I will call ‘traumaphany’ since it involves the ethical nature of the encounter with the other which Levinas often designates somewhat hyperbolically as “trauma.” Robert Sokolowski, in his *Phenomenology of the Human Person*, gives several examples of such episodes from James’ novel *The Ambassadors*, but without noting the fact that they all involve a traumaphany, instead interpreting them as examples of what he calls “syntax,” his “plain word” for Husserl’s notion of categoriality. Syntax, as Sokolowski means it here, is essentially our ability to thematize things. As conscious, we employ it all the time, ostensibly in order to extract or construct meaning from our perceptions.

But this always involves a primordial relation with the other that Levinas calls “primary signification” (TI 206): I give meaning to things always only in response to being placed in question by the other.³⁶² It is not the case that we sometimes apply our meaning-giving abilities to persons and sometimes to other things, as though to two different categories of beings. Every meaningful encounter with anything whatsoever occurs in society with others, because it involves language (TI 206-7). A purported analysis of human relations as thematization, therefore, does not go far enough, not for Levinas and not even for James, who indeed tries to depict, insofar as it can be in a novel, the encounter with the other as a confrontation with an absence. He is doing, or at least describing—but can one describe it without doing it?—decreative phenomenology.

³⁶¹ Henry James, *Literary Criticism* (vol. 1): *Essays on Literature, American Writers, English Writers*, Library of America (New York: Literary Classics of the United States, 1984), 47-48.

³⁶² This is related to Levinas’s notion of the “transcendent intention” (see above, p. 129, and TI 29).

What Sokolowski finds especially intriguing in James is the latter's notion of "taking it all in," which occurs repeatedly in *The Ambassadors*, as well as in other works, although it is not always so explicit. According to Sokolowski, "taking in" goes beyond identifying a thing as what it is; it involves a deeper "understanding" of how that thing is related to other things. James uses the notion in a great variety of applications, but by far the most important to him is "taking in" a human situation. This often has the form of a sudden epiphany revealing how matters stand between two characters who, prior to this discovery, had seemed opaque to a third who now, usually through some minor chance occurrence, suddenly finds revealed a relationship that had completely eluded him. I am thinking here of such 'recognition scenes' in James as Isabel Archer's silent encounter with Osmond and Madame Merle in Chapter 40 of *Portrait of a Lady*, or Strether's recognition of Chad and Madame de Vionnet from the lakeside cafe in *The Ambassadors*, which Sokolowski discusses in *Phenomenology of the Human Person* (307-8).³⁶³ Sokolowski's summary of the process of recognition is, however, extremely general:

When we take something in, we identify a particular situation, event, or entity, but we do so by understanding what it is. ... The thing is recognized for what it is, and we now understand, or at least think we understand, what is going on, and we can distinguish it from other things and events: it is a betrayal, a deception, a lapse into weakness, an act of generosity; or a tree, a spider, a shelter, a tribal ceremony; or perhaps something that still needs a name and that will get one, very likely, with the help of qualification or metaphor added to a familiar name. We take in the essence of something. We do so, however, not just in a single, isolated grasp, but within and underneath the articulations of syntactic structure.³⁶⁴

³⁶³ Other examples might be found in James Joyce's use of what he called "epiphanies," such as Gabriel Conroy's discovery about his wife's past near the end of *The Dead*.

³⁶⁴ Sokolowski 2008, 308.

Now, there is a great difference between an act of generosity and a tree, a difference that goes far beyond syntax. It is, of course, the “infinite” difference the *other* makes. In the case of understanding a situation involving other people, the cumulative effects—and *affects*—of a number of seemingly insignificant events will likely be necessary. Insofar as these are conscious, they are what Weil means by the “modifications” time makes in one’s understanding of self and other (N 334; see above, p. 244). Something like this occurs whether the process of recognition aims at a physical object or a human situation, but there are at least two important differences. In recognizing a physical object, one does not aim for the “empty form” of a “reality outside the world,” nor does one need to be concerned actively for the object’s ethical vulnerability. Doing justice to a physical object, whatever that might mean, is completely different from treating another human being with justice. Decreative phenomenology is primarily concerned with the ethical dimension. It is not so much about achieving a greater clarity of vision or a “passage from one knowledge [*connaissance*] to a better knowledge [*connaissance*]” of what shows itself (GWCM 29), as it is about achieving a removal of a self that *interferes* with things showing themselves, and in particular the *other*, whether or not this removal, whose purpose is deeper, leads to knowledge. Further examples in the sections and chapters that follow should make this additionally evident.

4.3 Decreative Phenomenology as Waiting For ...

Since it requires attention, one of the most important attributes of decreative phenomenology will be *patience*, the ability to *wait* as long as necessary for the appropriate response to the other to become obvious. One difference between the practice of decreative phenomenology and any other life guided by attention in Weil’s sense, would be that the phenomenologist attempts to *describe* her response from a philosophical standpoint. Whatever value this has, it is clearly

secondary to actually *living* Weil's ideal of attention, which is essentially the process of decreation. Paraphrasing Kierkegaard, we might say that the decreative phenomenologist knows the same things the attentive person knows; the only difference is that the decreative phenomenologist knows that she knows or knows that she does not know, at least about some things.

Waiting, of course, is a temporal process, and normally one waits for something in the future. To a certain extent this must be true of any waiting, part of the root meaning of the word. Thus one will likely consider it paradoxical, if not nonsensical, to speak of waiting for something in the past. In fact one does it all the time. Moreover—and this is the reason we give some space to the topic here—there is a sense in which waiting for the past might even be considered the primordial form of all waiting, namely as ‘waiting’ (whatever that word will turn out to mean in this context) for what Levinas calls the *an-archival past*.

One can wait for one's own past in the sense that one waits for how it will appear to oneself at some point in the future, when one will then recall it in light of circumstances which at present have yet to occur. One waits, usually not (or not quite) consciously, for the experience of being able to “take in” (as Henry James would say) what one has become in light of what one *will have learned* about oneself in the meantime. If one is conscious of this process at certain times (for it is unlikely that one could be conscious of it always, without comically forgetting to live, as Kierkegaard might say), then one can look at it phenomenologically as the unfolding of various ‘sides’ or ‘aspects’ of oneself over a period of time, much as one acquires a total(izing) view of a physical object by looking at it from different angles. Along these lines, Weil has already given us an idea for the phenomenological technique involved, in her method for interpreting symbols, which makes use of time in much the same way that traditional Husserlian phenomenology makes use of space. We will come back to it in a moment. Waiting for the past is therefore waiting for a recollection, perhaps experienced as a kind of epiphany. If one's past is ‘present’ to one only as

remembered, then as long as one has not remembered an event (assuming it is recoverable through memory), that part of one's past (that is, its 'presence' to oneself) is still in the future.

An everyday indication that one waits for the past is the worry expressed in the common question, 'Am I growing old?'—that is, 'Is my youth already in the past?' One waits for a sign: grey hair, wrinkles. When the wrinkles begin to appear, one knows one's youth has passed. The wrinkles are a sign not of the past itself, much less *are* they the past, but the sign of a *phase of* the past: the passing of one's youth as now present. "This past is not *in* the present, but is as a phase retained, the past *of* this present," as Levinas puts it, "a lapse already lost which marks ageing, escaping all retention, altering my contemporaneousness with the other" (OB 88)—and, we might add, with myself. The past (one's youth) of *this* present—as recalled now, when one is older—is not, of course, the past which *this* present will become when it is recalled still later as an epiphanic moment of revelation ('I realized then that my youth was gone'), but one of several phases belonging to the past of the earlier, later-remembered (youthful) present.

The past has three general types of phases. The *past of the past* is the unchangeable or immemorial past, no longer recallable, and therefore no longer knowable *as it was* (without a time machine, and perhaps not even then, since the person who goes back in time is not the same person one was then). If the past of the past is not knowable, then in a sense it is no longer 'my' past—that is, mine to comprehend and thereby claim *as* mine. But the past of the past is a *phase* of what is still arguably *my* past, understood as a more complex entity having several phases. We have already mentioned another of them, the *past of the present*. It is as ephemeral as the present and yet it is all the past that one can lay claim to consciously. Finally, the *past of the future* is the past one waits for.

The past of the past is irrecoverable, not (or not only) because of a failure of one's powers of recollection. It is *fundamentally* lost for the more basic reason that it can be 'found' only as the *past of the present*, which is not the same thing. In a sense, therefore, the past of the past might

almost seem to be the past of another person. It belongs to an ‘other’ who was once oneself and now no longer *is* at all. But this ‘other’ is not the true other in Levinas’s sense, except perhaps in pathological cases such as extreme prosopagnosia (face blindness), in which a person does not recognize his own face in the mirror, or the phenomenon of ‘splitting’ produced by trauma. The latter often appears among Holocaust survivors. One has two selves one cannot reconcile: the person one now is, and the person, who perhaps barely existed on the borderline of the human, who experienced the camps. In either case, if there is such a sense in which one can be an ‘other’ to oneself, it is only because one has already met the truly *other* in the neighbor.

In connection with her method of interpreting symbols, Weil describes something that sounds very much like the past of the past. The “past,” she says, “forms part of the reality of this world, but a reality absolutely beyond our reach, towards which we are unable to make a single step, towards which all we are able to do is to turn ourselves so that an emanation from it may come to us. For this reason it is the image *par excellence* of eternal, supernatural reality” (N 334-5). Levinas, of course, also speaks of something that comes out of a remote past, namely the an-archic call to responsibility that makes one an ethical self. Elsewhere he writes that “eternity is the very irreversibility of time, the source and refuge of the past” (CP 103). Surely Weil, like Levinas, is thinking not simply of the past of ordinary time—the past of the present—but of a past that might well be described as diachronic. Description of this “past” can only be indirect: “The intelligence can never penetrate the mystery” of such a past, Weil tells us, “but it can—and it alone can—pronounce on the suitability of the words used to express it” (N 336). In assigning reason (“intelligence”) sole authority over the language used to refer to what she calls supernatural reality, Weil gives expression to her spiritually (and skeptically) qualified intellectualism. But reason’s authority is, for her, a paradoxical authority that constantly calls itself into question.³⁶⁵

³⁶⁵ Much as the ‘authority’ (although he does not use the term) of the grounding of be-ing for Heidegger is not that of certainty but that of submission to what is “question-worthy” (M 208, 218-19).

For Levinas, phenomenology similarly employs “reason understood as *watchfulness* or *vigil*” (GWCM, 187n1)—an “insomnia” or inability to go on sleepwalking through *my* world as though others with worlds of their own did not exist—in order to open itself to an “emanation” (not Levinas’s term) from “the hither side.” To protect the emanation (the saying) from betrayal by phenomenology’s description (the said), phenomenology continually calls itself into question (“immediately reducing the *eon* which triumphs in the said”³⁶⁶). At the same time, phenomenology “retain[s] an echo of the reduced said in the form of ambiguity, of diachronic expression” (OB 44). Phenomenology can be aware of the unthematizable other only in the very process of trying (in vain) to thematize him.³⁶⁷ This makes decreative phenomenology a hermeneutic process—more precisely, “a spiraling movement”—in which the trace of the *saying* that remained from the previously reduced *said* is directed to reducing the present *said* in order to reveal a new trace.³⁶⁸ Thus, writes Levinas, “the saying is both an affirmation and a retraction of the said. The reduction could not be effected simply by parentheses which, on the contrary, are an effect of writing. It is an *ethical* interruption of essence that energizes the reduction” (OB 44, emphasis added). In other words, since one cannot ‘bracket’ the said without introducing another said, no once-and-for-all act of bracketing is possible. Only continual interruption can keep the phenomenological experience true to the hither side that phenomenology always only partially announces and describes. Phenomenology can keep the trace alive only through a continual act of resuscitation. The reduction is an *ethical* interruption because it is not the solitary effort of the phenomenologist but mainly the work of the other, whoever he or she may be, who interrupts the phenomenological process simply in being present as *other*. As we will see in a moment, here is where Weil’s notion of *waiting* plays an important role. One must *wait* for the interruption, without waiting *for the interruption per se*. As other, the interruption is never something one can anticipate, much less produce.

³⁶⁶ Here, *eon* seems to refer to the synchronic temporality of the thematized world.

³⁶⁷ An idea by no means unique to Levinas, Husserl mentions it in *Cartesian Meditations*.

³⁶⁸ For more on this hermeneutics, see the section below on the “an-archeology of the saying.”

The other who interrupts is the sole source of meaning. If phenomenology is about anything, it is about the meaningful. But insofar as there can be a phenomenology of (the experience of) the other as other, *this* particular meaningfulness—the source of meaning—cannot be grasped or comprehended; it can only be *desired*. Above all, then, the experience of the other must be *questioned* whenever it seems to take form in thought (GDT 114). A decreative hermeneutic questioning would be required. One expects that the absence of this source of meaning, which Weil calls the void, will be filled continually as a matter of course—for consciousness hates a void—but one expects it to be filled always with something other than the meaningfulness desired, so that one must continually attend to and ‘decreate’ the efforts consciousness makes to fill it. The desirable is a paradoxical meaningfulness that “exceeds thought,” a *meaningfulness* that needs to be contrasted with *meanings* in a manner analogous to the distinction Heidegger makes between Being and beings. Unlike Being, however, the source of meaning exceeds thought in the sense that it does not respond to one’s attempt to comprehend it—or rather, it responds by *provoking* a response in oneself. Thus the meaningful is diametrically opposed to the Heideggerian idea (on Levinas’s reading of Heidegger) that one’s inquiries of the world result in a response from Being in the form of clearly identifiable things, the unconcealed *beings* that were sought, ‘desired’, or questioned (GDT 115). The source of meaning, by contrast, is the ‘object’ of a “a passivity more passive than any passivity, ... a nonassumable passivity.” In other words, it is the object of *attention* in Weil’s sense, implying that there is never anything definitive about it at all. An “affectation” of the same by the other, it cannot be something one is able to anticipate. Instead it demands a patience that can “endure that which still remains outside in its transcendence, that which is not a *that* [*ce*], a term, or something awaited. *It is an awaiting without something being awaited*” (GDT 115, emphasis added).

However attentively it waits, decreative phenomenology, as a descriptive endeavor, obviously cannot entirely avoid betraying the ethical through its use of language. Language, worldmaking³⁶⁹—acts of will—are forms of what Weil calls *attachment*, and therefore work against attention: “Attachment manufactures illusions, and anyone who wants to behold the real must be detached” (N 334). One must wait patiently for the real to *show itself*, whereas “attachment is nothing else but an insufficiency in the feeling for reality” that constitutes a form of impatience or even *anxiety*.³⁷⁰ Nonetheless, attention and attachment represent two essential activities of the soul, as Weil illustrates through a fable from the Upanishads: “Two birds are on the branch of a tree. One eats the fruit, the other looks at it” (WG 105). Attachment (the first bird) anticipates and immediately seizes the moment before it can fully appear on its own; attention sits back and waits, so as to allow the moment to unfold in its own time. Hence attachment’s failure to allow the moment its fullness indicates the inability of a finite being ever fully to give the real its due. It is a failure holding a promise, however, namely that of “the marvel of time, as futurity and postponement of this expiration”—the promise of time’s passing as the postponement of death—but also as the fallibility of human vulnerability “to techniques of seduction, propaganda, and torture” (TI 237). Time is the necessary medium of attention—and of the violence that can make attention impossible. There is a sense in which, conversely, attention is the essence of time, if we recall that for Weil, attention requires a suspension of the will that allows alterity to interrupt one’s *same*.³⁷¹

In any event, a phenomenology faithful to alterity would be extremely reticent, cautious, satisfied with no more than mere *traces* of a “manifestation without manifestation,” rather than

³⁶⁹ See Chapter 5 below.

³⁷⁰ “Hence the attitude of that woman who, when passing close to a queue in front of a fish-shop, would stop because if she had gone on the fish being sold there would have been wasted. She thought that the food which she and those of her family didn’t eat didn’t exist” (N 365).

³⁷¹ Weil does not mention it here, but this would seem to require courage, the courage to hold back the will that hides the real. Along these lines, compare Heidegger on allowing being to be and his discussion of *ressentiment* in *What Is Called Thinking?* Levinas writes that the will is not usually heroic, but this is not due, he says, so much to “human cowardice” as to the “precarity of courage, always on the verge of its own failure by reason of the essential mortality of the will, which in its exercise betrays itself” (TI 236-37).

“the indiscreet and victorious appearing of a phenomenon” (CP 66). What Rudi Visker says of Levinas’s God—that “His absence does not deny his presence; his presence is not contrary to his absence”³⁷²—applies not only also to Weil’s God, but to every phenomenon decreative phenomenology lets appear without its appearing to be: “beings appearing without their being,” absent as present and present as absent.³⁷³ Decreative phenomenology waits, not for the big event, but for the seemingly insignificant detail or nuance that, like the epiphanies and traumaphanies illustrated in James Joyce and Henry James, produces the little jolt or discontinuity in one’s worldview that makes the difference between seeing and not seeing the other.

Since all thought involves language and language is communal, “all thinking is subordinated to the ethical relation” (IR 211). Hence the scope of decreative phenomenological investigation includes the phenomenologist’s own subjectivity, her relation to others. It is indeed possible for phenomenology to “go back to the hither side of being” (OB 45) in order to locate the phenomenality of ethical phenomena—the pure phenomenality of *shame*, for example—but only if the phenomenologist attends to the phenomenon of shame *in herself*. And since the past about which one is ashamed is unavailable except through the mediation of *language*, which enables one to lay claim to memory by recalling it in the present, this requires that phenomenology itself be an ethical relation, a relation to *others*. Otherwise there is no ethical phenomenon to attend to. What Weil can teach us here is that the attention required is accomplished by the phenomenologist not simply detaching herself from every personal interest she might have in the outcome of her investigation, despite its centering on her own subjectivity, but also through her leaving her thought empty of all cognitive preconceptions about shame (to stay with the example). Having reached this point, there is no further she can go on her own. She can only *wait*.

Wait for *what?*—the reader will ask. But the object or event awaited cannot be predicted or described in advance, for the whole point of decreative phenomenology is to make contact,

³⁷² Visker 1999, 241.

³⁷³ “From Consciousness to Wakefulness,” GWCM 15.

perhaps at a boundary where phenomenology breaks down, with something Other, the other that interrupts, that forces its way into the predictable, describable Same. It must therefore be a waiting for what cannot be awaited, for a ‘past’ to become present through its *absence*, the immemorial an-archival past of the call to responsibility. This, I claim, is the only way that phenomenological technique can respect the *alterity* of the other. If one anticipates anything about the other in advance—if one makes an intentional gesture toward the other—one prematurely betrays the other to the same. While betraying the other cannot be avoided (OB 43), there is a point to minimizing the betrayal as much as possible, the point to the “reduction” of the said to the saying. One way the phenomenologist can do this, in accordance with Weil’s definition of the real, is by cultivating a predilection (perverse or even mad as it may sound) for whatever forces itself on the mind against the will. One waits for the real to show it itself as an unanticipated disruption of the same. Since this waiting requires detachment from the self, we might call it the *decreative reduction*—an inordinately *passive* reduction! While the intersubjective reduction leaves me with the knowledge or the feeling of my “secondariness” (DEH 164-65 = GWCM 28) with respect to the neighbor—the realization that *I am not the center of the world*, that there are others who are centers of their own worlds—the decreative reduction, on the other hand, would leave me with the desire not to be in the other’s way, and thus would ultimately leave me with the realization—according to Weil, a welcome one—that, to put it simply, *I am not*. We return to this idea after the next section.

4.4 Decreative Phenomenology as Madness

Phenomenology is usually described as a movement or a method, not a branch of philosophy or a doctrine. Levinas, who was instrumental in introducing Husserl’s work to France,

summarizes its position within philosophy in the essay, “Reflections on Phenomenological ‘Technique’” (1959), as follows:

Phenomenology unites philosophers, although not in the way in which Kantianism united Kantians or Spinozism Spinozans. Phenomenologists are not bound to the theses formulated by Husserl; they do not devote themselves exclusively to the exegesis or the history of his writings. It is a way of proceeding that they have in common. ... Phenomenology is a method in an eminent sense, for it is essentially open. It can be practiced in the most diverse domains, rather like the method of mathematical physics after Galileo and Descartes, dialectics after Hegel and especially Marx, or psychoanalysis after Freud. (DEH 91)

This suggests a discipline without well-defined boundaries, in the course of its development taking various forms not always mutually compatible, thus raising questions within the field itself about just what its defining characteristics are supposed to be. Nevertheless, there is general agreement that these characteristics include (1) a focus on the cultural and social ‘life-world’ of human beings that refuses to reduce human experience to what belongs strictly to the domain of natural science. This gives priority to the *meaning* of such notions as truth and certainty, over a search for truth and certainty that does not analyze the experiences that lead us to apply these terms (DEH 47). With this focus or subject-matter goes (2) an emphasis on ‘seeing’ or ‘intuiting’ as a route to understanding the life-world, over the usual preference for logical analysis, philosophical speculation and argument. Perhaps we should add a third characteristic, phenomenology’s almost universal emphasis on the important idea of *intentionality*—the idea that thoughts, actions, and even feelings always have an object, a “somewhere they want to get to [*worauf sie eigentlich hinaus will*]”³⁷⁴—although the role of intentional experience undergoes

³⁷⁴ Quoted by Levinas from Husserl’s *Crisis* (?) in “Transcendence and Intelligibility” (1984), BPW 153.

some radical changes as phenomenological technique evolves from classical Husserlian practice to the later variants of Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, and Levinas.

A phenomenologist is likely to respond to the skeptic, not by saying ‘Here is an argument’ but with ‘Look!’ That is, learn to *look* at the thing in the right way, and you will *see* aspects more basic than those you originally took to be elemental. What you see fundamentally is not a ‘box’, for example, but a set of three planes meeting at various angles and distinguished by a certain pattern of shading and color. The goal of looking is not an explanation of the phenomenon as free as possible of ambiguity (whatever that would mean), but a description in which the ambiguities that seem to attend the experience of the phenomenon are considered part of the phenomenon. Thus phenomenological seeing requires that one set aside or ‘bracket’ one’s preconceived notions about the world (e.g. ‘what everyone knows’ about boxes) in order to allow the experience to speak for itself (planes of color, etc.). The extent to which this is actually possible is a matter of some debate, but the controversy does not seem to threaten phenomenology as a method; rather, the problem of its limitations is held to be a legitimate issue within phenomenology itself.

The main point of relevance here is that in order to acquire the phenomenological perspective one needs to do a certain violence to one’s customary worldview.³⁷⁵ This implies that even traditional phenomenology can be said to have an ethical goal: one must cultivate a disciplined, exacting responsibility for what one thinks about what one ‘sees’, together with a willingness continually to question one’s conclusions (DEH 48). In Weil, a similar responsibility grounds what she calls *attention* or detachment from perspective—in its purest form, decreation. The parallel this has with phenomenology enables us to recognize in her philosophy the rudiments of a phenomenological approach that departs from the traditional in a way that anticipates Levinas’s.

A series of entries in Weil’s notebooks comes close to describing a decreative phenomenological method. She first makes a startling comparison: “The use (methodical or

³⁷⁵ “The phenomenological reduction is a violence which man—a being among other beings—does to himself in order to find himself again as pure thought” (DEH 72).

otherwise) made of divers forms of madness in the practice of mental asceticism and mysticism corresponds to the purificatory use of scepticism (pure idealism, solipsism) on the philosophical plane” (N 312). For Weil, paradoxically, the ‘madness’ or ‘unreason’ of decreative detachment from self is the only route to *reading* the world in a purer more reasonable way. Only by removing the obstruction of the self can one give reality its due. A detached reading of the world will therefore necessarily and continually contest its own reading, even to the extent of negating itself in a manner reminiscent of phenomenology’s method of bracketing: “It is a question of uprooting our reading of things, of changing them, so as to arrive at a non-reading”—a reading that continually subverts itself. Because of the power of “imagination”—more generally, the work of consciousness in constituting one’s being-in-the-world—our readings invariably serve self-interest (or as Levinas would say, reinforce the ‘same’), tending to read the world in a way that, as much as possible, keeps it looking safe and familiar, not to mention simply *coherent*. Hence it is often the imagination, or consciousness in general, that inhibits the process of a non-reading that goes beyond establishing the minimum coherence necessary for being-in-the-world at all. For this reason Weil advises, as a philosophical project, that “we should recognize, experience and test the role, the power and the degree of participation of the imagination in Perception” (N 312).

Here I think it is safe to say that Weil’s notion of Perception is very broad. If we consider phenomenology a specialized form of perception, then a decreative phenomenology would, according to her idea, have to be particularly sensitive to the role of consciousness or “imagination” in preventing the purer reading of the world that is supposed to be phenomenology’s goal—perhaps more so than traditional phenomenology.³⁷⁶ “It is attachment which produces in us that *false reality* (ersatz form of reality) connected with the outside world. We must destroy that ersatz form of reality in ourselves in order to attain to the true reality” (N 313). In this connection, Weil mentions the work of her teacher Alain (E.-A. Chartier, 1868-

³⁷⁶ Husserl, of course, has few equals in attentiveness to the role of imagination, positive and negative, in phenomenological investigation.

1951) and Alain's mentor Jules Lagneau (1851-1894). She sees their ideas as leading to "*a philosophy of Perception*, of a practical and experimental nature," which she says "lies at the basis of this form of knowledge." In particular she means "the study of pathological phenomena produced from within" (N 313). Whatever else this is, it could be taken to be a prescription for a way of *learning to see* which transcends the traditional boundaries of seeing in general and even those of traditional phenomenology. Thus her diagnosis of "attachment" (or "imagination"), as opposed to attention and decreation, might be said to parallel Husserl's critique of psychologism in the *Logical Investigations*, the aim in each case being contact with reality free of obscuring assumptions.

In other places, Weil speaks of attention in terms of reality-bestowal.³⁷⁷ Reality is what things *become* when we no longer see ourselves in them, when we 'bracket' the self, so to speak, removing the obstacles which the self opposes to clarity of (in)sight. We "*confer ... the fullness of reality ...*," she writes in *Intimations of Christianity among the Ancient Greeks* (IC 188), and in her last notebooks she claims that love (equivalent to *consent to what is*) *produces* reality (FLN 90). Decreative phenomenology might be characterized, then, as a *phenomenology of consent*: a seeing in which contact with things is mediated by the act of *bracketing one's entire self*, a consent to the real in the form of a sensitivity to one's tendency to reconfigure it more to one's liking, a refusal to give in to this tendency and a preference for letting things *be* apart from oneself—that is, apart from one's consciousness which, working hard to render everything innocuous, tends to lull one to sleep (GWCM 27). Decreative phenomenology would require discipline, precisely the discipline of attention, but most of all the stimulus of the intersubjective encounter. The point would be that, unlike Husserlian phenomenology, decreative phenomenology gives a primary role in the investigation to a *sensitivity* on the part of the investigator to his or her own *ethical* situation, in Levinas's sense of the word—that is, to the

³⁷⁷ "Attention is what seizes hold of reality, so that the greater the attention on the part of the mind, the greater the amount of real being in the object" (N 527).

other's tendency, which normally one keeps hidden from oneself, to call one's world into question. Hence, it will never become a science in the way that Husserl hoped phenomenology would, since practicing it would require that one be attuned to one's relations to other people, *whatever the object of the investigation*. It is a little closer to the hermeneutical phenomenology of Heidegger, but with some significant differences.

Bracketing one's self, for example, requires bracketing one's entire world, one's being-in-the-world as meaning-creation. But surely one cannot bracket all meaning? In that case, only meaninglessness would be left—perhaps the *il y a*, pure meaningless *Being* without beings—or madness! Nevertheless, bracketing one's self is a necessary prerequisite for the “‘possession’ of the same by the other in responsibility” which Levinas calls the *psychism*. Concerning this, he notes tellingly, “the soul is already a touch mad, psychism already psychosis” (BPW 102) or “a seed of folly” (OB 142, 191n3). Given that the work of Foucault and, from an altogether different angle, R. D. Laing, among many others, has demonstrated the dependence of definitions of madness on society's judgments of socially appropriate and inappropriate behavior, decreative phenomenology could find itself attempting to bracket the influence of social and cultural prejudices to an extent going far beyond what Husserl imagined. This might indeed require the phenomenologist to become versed in methods of which Levinas and Weil would have been skeptical at best, such as those of critical theory, psychoanalysis, Marxist thought, and the study of biopower.

One characteristic of madness is that reality is experienced as contradictory. Decreative phenomenology could therefore appear ‘mad’ simply because it tolerates contradiction. When Weil writes that “the contradictions the mind comes up against ... are the only realities: they are the criterion of the real,” this is in part an expression of her idea that God has two faces, Necessity and Love. These naturally appear contradictory to us because human intelligence, aided by imagination, stands between them and prevents their counterintuitive relation from being

acknowledged, locally as it were, by personal experience. To try to *resolve* the contradictions rather than preserve them—attempting, for example, to reconcile biblical narrative with certain commonly accepted facts of science (but not others!)—not only leads to further contradictions but also, according to Weil, reduces the divine to something imagined, causing one to lose contact with it altogether (NR 244). Every attempt to reconcile Necessity and Love in a higher unity in which their contradictions would disappear will have the opposite effect, for the reconciling intellect simply becomes a new barrier between the two. The necessity of a proper respect for contradiction was argued in Chapter 2.

A comparison with Camus may be helpful here.³⁷⁸ Camus similarly writes of being “faithful” to, or “obeying,” reality—a reality that frequently appears to him to be, as he calls it, *absurd*. Its absurdity is not due to the limits of human knowledge, requiring some new theory or discipline to bridge the gap between the human mind and the truth. Ronald Srigley points out that for Camus, “the greater reality from which the absurd man is divorced is there, immediately present. . . . No mediator is required in order to know it. Indeed, there is good reason to think that the proliferation of such mediators in his time may be just what prevents the absurd man from experiencing reality directly.”³⁷⁹ Although Weil has an important concept of mediation or “intermediaries” (*metaxu*), this is not what Srigley is referring to here but to something closer to Weil’s notion of attention. Ridding oneself of the influence of mediators in Srigley’s sense corresponds to giving up the habit of covering over essential contradictions by totalizing them, thereby domesticating the world. “For the absurd man it is not a matter of explaining and solving,” writes Camus, “but of experiencing and describing. . . . Describing—that is the last

³⁷⁸ The comparison is more than apt, since Camus had an expressed interest in Weil’s thought. In his capacity as an editor for Gallimard, he was instrumental in having her work published in France. When he accepted the Nobel Prize in 1957 and was asked who in French literature had influenced him the most, he replied by giving two names: the poet René Char and Simone Weil. On his way to Stockholm he had spent a weekend at the home of Weil’s mother in order, he later explained, to collect his thoughts prior to making his acceptance speech.

³⁷⁹ R. Srigley, *Albert Camus’ Critique of Modernity* (Columbia, Missouri: University of Missouri Press, 2011), 30.

ambition of an absurd thought.”³⁸⁰ Thus Camus’ absurd might surface in the resistance of reality to phenomenological description, and Camus’ phenomenology of personal experience (if we may call it that) would then be the explicit rejection of every misguided attempt to *explain away* what is real about that experience. Hence it is the absurd itself that becomes an intermediary for Camus, in Weil’s sense of *metaxu*. For Camus, the absurd needs to be *used* as a bridge to truth and not simply respected, much less abandoned as a form of madness. What Srigley calls the “proliferation of mediators,” on the other hand, would be all the distractions and self-serving interpretations we introduce into our lives. For Weil, *these* mediators (in Srigley’s sense) act as barriers separating what is essentially inseparable, Love and Necessity. Only when such distractions are bracketed can the absurd appear and be utilized as a window on the real. In this way the absurd becomes indispensable as the mediator between oneself and the real, in the sense Weil means of an *intermediary* or *metaxu*: a bridge to reality.

4.5 Decreative Phenomenology as *Metaxu*

An attachment which contains an impossibility is a μετὰξύ (N 222)

Weil’s love of the world was a true refusal to abandon the significance of ordinary experience, not excluding its suffering. Yet even as she remained “rooted in the world,” she did not abandon the transcendent. She did not need to: each was necessary for the other. “Experience of the transcendent: this seems contradictory, and yet the transcendent can be known only through contact since our faculties are unable to construct it.”³⁸¹ This “contact” always involves some direct exposure to Necessity, the face God shows us in the experience of this world’s beauty and

³⁸⁰ *The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays*, New York: Vintage, 1983, 94.

³⁸¹ N 242 = GG 121.

brute facticity—specifically, in the face of the Other who often appears as an intrusion, an inconvenience, or a threat, whom we therefore both *desire* and *suffer* concretely. It may seem odd to speak of making contact with the transcendent *through* the world, but this is precisely the absurdity of the human condition that Weil seeks to validate and exploit as a lever that raises us to an experience of, or at least some form of contact with, the other face of God, which is Love or the Good. To Weil’s mind, one does not know Love unless one loves reality, and one cannot love reality except through an intimate acquaintance with Necessity—hence, through suffering. Otherwise, she claims, one’s contact with the real, not to mention with anything one imagines to be higher than the real, is mere sentimentality, self-deception, and escapism. If there is a phenomenology of the transcendent, therefore, it must begin from the first reality, that is, make use of the ordinary experiences of the cultural and social ‘life-world’ of human beings. Only by that route can it hope to ‘see’ or ‘intuit’ the transcendent, whatever this should turn out to mean. For Levinas, of course, it turns out to mean the other person—and ends in leaving me sleepless with responsibilities.

In Weil, writes George Pattison, “the way to God is not and cannot be a way out of the world, but is inseparable from the way in which we encounter the world, in its formal structures, in its beauty and in the affliction we experience (but can never know),” for affliction “occupies a place at which no knowing subject can survive.”³⁸² Once again, one could interpret this as an invitation to a paradoxical *phenomenology without a will* or a *phenomenology of consent*—as Weil puts it, letting each thing be “as it is when I am not there” (N 423):

May I disappear in order that those things that I see may become perfect in their beauty from the very fact that they are no longer things that I see. ... I do not in the least wish that this

³⁸² “... for [affliction] occupies a place at which no knowing subject can survive, a place where what was once a human being has become blind hunger, blind fear, blind pain” (George Pattison, “Desire, Decreation and Unknowing in the God-Relationship: Mystical Theology and its Transformation in Kierkegaard, Simone Weil and Dostoevsky,” in A. Grøn, et. al, eds., *Subjectivity and Transcendence*, Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2007).

created world should fade from my view, but that it should no longer be to me personally that it shows itself. To me it cannot tell its secret which is too high. If I go, then the creator and the creature will exchange their secrets (GG 42 = N 383, 422).

Weil desires a seeing in which, in effect, it is not she herself, her 'I' or ego, that does the seeing, but something impersonal within her or, more accurately, *through* her. Thus, she writes, "I can easily imagine that [God] loves that perspective of creation which can only be seen from the point where I am. But I act as a screen. I must withdraw so that he may see it" (GG 41 = N 364). Such *impersonal* seeing is no more paradoxical than Levinas's notion of the saying, which, as signifying an unlimited responsibility for the other, is prior to any commitment and hence not one's own personal act or accomplishment. The saying is analogously *impersonal*. As signifying the oneself-for-the-other, the saying is prior to the said. By contrast, the said is the expression of a self that is conscious of itself as identifiable by its principles, character traits, history—in short, always only through what it is able to represent to itself—and thus it turns everything into the representable. We might say that Levinas's responsible self is impersonal in the same sense that for Weil "what is sacred in a human being is the impersonal in him" and nothing else (SWA 54). If what can be *represented* is always personal—because *I* represent it to *myself*—then the impersonal, which Weil calls the "sacred" (Levinas would prefer the word *holy*),³⁸³ cannot be represented. It is expressed not in the said but in the saying, which is unrepresentable by definition.

As Weil views the matter, in order to gain access to reality without obscuring it one must, paradoxically, make use of precisely those events and circumstances in life that seem to threaten the reality of the personal self along with its world: "The loss of contact with reality—there lies evil, there lies sorrow. There are certain situations which bring about such a loss: deprivation,

³⁸³ A peculiarity of Levinas's language is his habit of making a sharp distinction between the *sacred*, which he associates with "participation" (see Introduction above, p. 51), and the *holy*, the glory of the Infinite, which is beyond being (see, for example, BPW 103).

suffering. The remedy is to *use* the loss itself as an *intermediary* for attaining reality” (N 28, emphasis added). In cases of suffering or affliction, one must see the circumstances as though it were *not oneself that sees them*, as though one’s self were no longer in the world. Equivalently, one sees them not as *one’s own* suffering or affliction, but as manifestations of impersonal Necessity. Far from making the world appear less real, the experience of suffering, provided one consents to it even in the slightest degree, can in this way act as a bridge or mediator (*metaxu*) from the everyday state in which one lives “from perspective” to that of living in transparency, in which ‘God’ is able to see the world as it is *through* the decremented self. Only by moving in this direction, from perspective to decreation, does the world become *more* real—as if reality becomes accessible only in my absence, the absence of the personal self that lives from perspective and in fact has no reality of its own to speak of.

The relevance of this situation to phenomenology may be brought out by comparing it to that of viewing a painting, as Husserl analyzes it.³⁸⁴ In viewing a painting of a tree, “consciousness apprehends a stratified intentional object, composed of an ‘image-thing’ (*Bildding*), an ‘image-object’ (*Bildobjekt*) and an ‘image-subject’ (*Bildsujet*) (Hua XXXIII, 19).”³⁸⁵ The image-thing is the physical painting itself, the image-object is the tree in the painting, and the image-subject the tree in real life which the painting depicts. “Image-consciousness is a double-apprehension: seeing a depicted image-subject *in* the image-object is based on, but not the same as, the seeing of an image-thing *as* an image-object.”³⁸⁶ The “hybrid form of appearance” of the image-object makes it something like a *metaxu*: in the case of viewing a painting, the image-object is an intermediary between the physical object viewed by the eye and the physical object depicted (even if the latter is not real but imaginary, as in the case of an image of a unicorn).³⁸⁷ Thus there

³⁸⁴ See de Warren 2009, 146-50.

³⁸⁵ De Warren 2009, 147. De Warren’s references to Husserl are to the *Husserliana* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff), denoted Hua, followed by volume and page number.

³⁸⁶ De Warren 2009, 147-48.

³⁸⁷ De Warren 2009, 148.

is for Husserl an important sense in which (what Weil calls) *metaxu* play a role in perceiving certain cultural objects. But the idea can be generalized: one could, for example, compare the experience of suffering to viewing a painting—a bizarre comparison from our usual perspective, to be sure, but Weil would find the analogy appropriate given her belief that one should take an impersonal view of one’s own suffering. Physical suffering would play the role of image-object or *metaxu*: the image-thing would correspond to the embodied self, the image-object to the experience of suffering in the body, and the image-subject to Necessity, the reality of the suffering as something independent of oneself. Just as one must learn (usually at a very early age) how to look at a painting or at any image, so one must learn through decreation the even more difficult skill of looking at suffering so as to see it as it ‘really is’—that is, in order to see the real thing (Necessity) that the suffering ‘depicts’, for all suffering is nothing more than the action of impersonal natural laws.

For this way of seeing, Weil claims, “a logical system needs to be thought out.” Weil is not very explicit here, but she appears to mean a logic—or, perhaps better, a *logos*—of “relationship as *μεταξύ*,” of *mediated relationship*. The paradigm for *μεταξύ* is Christ: “the Son is *λόγος*, and not *νοῦς* because he is a mediator” (N 228). But Weil might well substitute *logic* (or “logical system”) for the more biblical *logos* in order to suggest that everything happens in this process strictly according to Necessity—for her, epitomized by the unwavering laws of logic and mathematics. For Weil, what makes Christ the Mediator is the fact that he is the supreme *μεταξύ*, the image of perfect obedience to Necessity. Christ bridges the infinite distance between Necessity and Love, between the necessary and the good (GG 105). To return to the analogy above, one needs to see Christ as (a ‘picture’ of) God: the image-thing is the physical man on the cross (Necessity), the image-object is Christ the obedient Son, and the image-subject is God the Father (Love).

But I left out a line from the passage quoted at the beginning of the previous paragraph. After mentioning the need for a “logical system” and prior to the mention of “relationship as *μεταξύ*,” Weil writes: “Creation as the production of an appearance which we have got to undo (or is it sin? but can the two be separated?). The appearance that there is something other than God” (N 228). Weil repeatedly insists that the only thing that can produce the false appearance of “something other than God” is the human self.³⁸⁸ Hence this production is equated with sin. Since the effects we need to “undo” are inseparably part of our creation, undoing can only mean *de*-creation. What Weil outlines here, in effect, is a suggestion for a possible decreative phenomenological method: in order to see something as a *metaxu* or bridge from the appearance to the reality, one must “de-create” the appearance—that is, detach one’s self from it by viewing the appearance as though the reality it represented were *not* part of one’s world, or as though one had no part oneself in the reality to which the appearance corresponds. Obviously, doing so would not be easy, amounting to something like a spiritual exercise. Going against the very grain of consciousness, this decreative practice would ‘bracket’ not only the natural attitude but also traditional phenomenology.

Almost anything is capable of being a *metaxu*,³⁸⁹ provided that it is neither pure evil (which, by definition, cannot mediate the good) nor pure good (which mediates only itself). What counts as a *metaxu* for someone depends on where that person is in life—there is no reason error cannot be a *metaxu*³⁹⁰—hence phenomenology as *metaxu* would need to be an *ethically* oriented phenomenology. It would show respect for the absolute alterity of the other by continually

³⁸⁸ Which might suggest that ‘God’ is something like ‘Being’: in one sense, God ‘exists’ only insofar as human beings have a relation to ‘him’, but in another sense, there ‘is’ only God, and not human beings along with ‘other things.’ Whether one believes ‘there is’ a God or not, as long as one represents this situation to oneself, one is living godlessly, that is, from out of the *self* to which one opposes, consciously or not, that which is *non-self*—whereas in reality self and therefore non-self are illusions. Eastern philosophy appears to be more practiced at conveying this lesson than we are in the West.

³⁸⁹ Even the basic dogmas of the Church are *metaxu*. Weil sees purgatory, paradise, and hell, for example, as “indispensable for pondering on the subject of death” (N 467).

³⁹⁰ “Whoever asks bread of God will not receive a stone. He who desires truth, if an error appears to him, it is because it represents for him a stage along the road to truth, and if he continues his way he will see it as an error” (N 228).

allowing for the possibility that the other's *metaxu* might appear contradictory, excessive, or even evil from one's own point of view. The purpose of decreative phenomenology as *metaxu* would be to see every entity, without exception, as what it truly is: something we should not want to destroy because, though it is mixed with evil (as is everything else on this earth), it might be someone's bridge to the good. The idea is to see the Creation as one great *metaxu*.

What is it evil to destroy? Not that which is base, for that doesn't matter. Not that which is high, for, even should we want to, we cannot touch that. The *μεταξύ*. The *μεταξύ* form the region of good and evil.

If we create for ourselves *μεταξύ* in organic life itself, then we cannot lose them so long as we remain alive. Yes, but ...

No man should be deprived of a single one of his *μεταξύ*. Is this possible—when many people have some that are, in fact, mutually exclusive? For example, a human being who represents *μεταξύ* for several other human beings? (N 48-49)

Unless one happens to be a hermit living in the woods and not dependent on any human being for the necessities of life, it is useless to try to raise oneself above the *μεταξύ*, one remains in the sphere of good and evil through the relations established with those of the other people who are there too. It is impossible, therefore, for the problem of good and evil to disappear in the movement of ascent. (N 49)

Of course, even the hermit is dependent on other (in fact *all* other) human beings. The example of the solitary hermit is therefore only formal. In reality, there is no sense *at all* in trying to “raise oneself above the *μεταξύ*.” The impossibility of raising oneself above the *metaxu* is an expression of human finitude, but a finitude that makes possible a unique relation to all other beings on earth. With regard at least to inanimate objects, the relation can be in part one of *utility*,

in which the object is related to the accomplishment of one's "projects," but this hardly suffices in all cases. Each thing with which we have anything to do, if we learn to become detached from it, can become a *μεταξύ* through which we love the Good impersonally, and without thought for what it can bring us in the way of personal advantage or comfort. As noted above, nothing in Creation is exempt. Even destruction and death can, according to Weil, serve as a *metaxu*:

To love God through and beyond the destruction of Troy and of Carthage—and without consolation. Love is not consolation, it is light.

True earthly goods are *μεταξύ*. We can only respect those of others (e.g. foreign cities) if we regard those we possess ourselves only as *μεταξύ*—which implies that one is on the way towards the point where one will be able to do without them. (N 258)

One can apply this to Levinas's idea that my life and the other's run on different tracks. Time is *diachronic*: the other's time is not my time, the other's world is largely unknown to my world. Ethics at the very least would fundamentally involve respect for this difference. The *metaxu* then become the things in *my* world (the world as my consciousness constitutes it) that I use as bridges to the *other's* world as truly *other*—that is, as ways respecting the other's difference. When Weil suggests that everything in my world can, and should, serve mainly as *metaxu*, this is the same as to say that human existence is fundamentally *ethical* in Levinas's sense of the word. For Levinas, the other person is infinitely 'above' me (in the sense of height of *Totality and Infinity*) and simultaneously infinitesimally *near* (in the sense of proximity of *Otherwise Than Being*). What Weil adds to this idea is the suggestion that all the things I perceive or know about my world derive their main signification not from being part of *my* world, but from their potential as intermediaries between my world and the other's, ways of becoming aware of the other's transcendence, interpreted as either height or proximity. The other thus has a significance transcending every signification. Since the beings in my world have no real significance apart

from their role as *metaxu*—they are, Weil says, *nothing* (in themselves)—it follows for Weil as well that, in effect, it is not being-in-the-world but the ethical that is fundamental. This means that phenomenology will not be true to the phenomena it investigates if it leaves out their universal status as potential *metaxu*. Whatever phenomenology discloses it must disclose in relation to the transcendent other. Hence it is always the other whom one finds, as “transcendental subject,” when one brackets not simply the natural attitude but one’s entire world as ‘mine’, not excluding the ‘mineness’ of one’s phenomenological experience. The “transcendental subject” is everywhere—proof that, as we have suggested before, the alterity of inanimate objects is related to, if not derivative from, that of the neighbor as the primordial alterity. Since bracketing one’s world is decreation, the attention required to make the other visible is aptly described as decreative phenomenology.

4.6 Interlude: Phenomenology and the Void

The word *vide* usually has no special significance for Levinas. Often it simply means ‘empty’ or ‘emptiness’. An example would be the emptiness filled by a need, as in: “Need indicates void [*vide*] and lack in the needy one” (TI 102). It is noteworthy, however, that in *Totality and Infinity* the word *vide* turns up in a description of how one thinks of the object of desire, that is, the Infinite, the Good, the Other. Contrary to need, which is characterized by an emptiness until satisfied, desire is always satisfied in the very desiring, filled by its very ‘emptiness’, hence never satisfied as filled if this means the end of desire. What satisfies it, therefore, is something which, when one tries to give it thought (as opposed to desiring it), seems to be an “apparently wholly empty notion” (“*cette notion, toute vide en apparence*,” TI 50 / TeI 21). The thought of the other, of the Infinite, of the Good, is thus an empty thought of something which nonetheless satisfies desire. Perhaps this explains why many people find talk of ‘the Good’ abstract and pointless,

while others, among them Levinas and Weil, appear to find the notion of ‘the Good’ absolutely essential to their ethical or religious thinking. The difference is that one must have a positive place for the void in one’s system of thought. A contradiction? Is not the void something *negative*? It is not contradictory if the void Levinas refers to here corresponds closely enough to what Weil means by the void. Recall that in Chapter 2 we suggested that for Weil the void is the ultimate *metaxu*.

Three other occurrences of *vide* in *Totality and Infinity* associate the void with the ethical. In the first, the void is said to “break the totality” of “totalizing and synoptic thought” with the help of the other, who *faces* one as the sole resistance against totalization (TI 40). The other person is like an abyss that opens up at the edge of the same, a constant threat to the totalizing ambition of worldmaking. A much later passage reiterates this idea in an arresting image: the “absolute void ... on all sides beats against the islet of the I who lives interiorly” (TI 147). Here again, the void is a figure for exteriority, for the other who threatens the self-secure interiority of the same. Finally, Levinas calls language a “contact ... across a void. It takes place in the dimension of absolute desire by which the same is in relation with an other that was not simply lost by the same” (TI 172). The same cannot simply rid itself of (“lose”) the other, for the same depends on language in order to totalize, and language as saying is always already desire for the other. The same is “contact across a void” in spite of itself. Totalization is subverted *from without* by the other within.³⁹¹

Occurrences of the word *vide* are less frequent in *Otherwise Than Being*, but there are several that pursue these same ideas in greater depth. Here is one example:

In space as a void which is not nothingness but is like the night, this trace of infinity shows itself enigmatically, like a blinking light. But this new plot [*intrigue nouvelle*] does not

³⁹¹ Normally. Possible exceptions will be considered in Chapter 7.

remain in negative theology. Its positive character still leads us to the notion of substitution.

(OB 193n31 / AE 115n31)

The “trace of infinity” is ambiguous, enigmatic, like something one notices only in one’s peripheral vision. There might be a trace ... or there might not be. The trace would have both a negative character (it is ‘not this, not that’) and a positive one, since it enables decreation or substitution. Consequently “there is a defecting of the intentional correlation of disclosure,” a continual slippage or failure of intentional consciousness in its attempt to reveal the trace. In one’s always just missing the trace, the “exorbitance of proximity” cannot help showing itself. This happens, for example, in such ambiguous phenomena as the caress, since a caress might be thought of as the expression of a desire to welcome (into one’s own proximity) the *other’s* proximity—a desire to express the inexpressible that succeeds precisely insofar as it is experienced as a failure. The failure of the caress *is* the witness to this desire. Similarly, the failure to transcend the face witnesses to its transcendence. One goes over to the other side by always failing to arrive. “Phenomenology defects into a face” (OB 90; *défection de la phénoménalité en visage*, AE 115) by finding itself in a void, an impossible no man’s land intermediate between a place and a non-place, the oneself and the other. The void is not actually a place in between the two, nor is it the one or the other, but a metaphor for the impossibility of both ‘at the same time’.

There is a similar passage in the essay “Language and Proximity” (1967) where Levinas more explicitly compares one’s approaching the other to a caress, in that there is “the unity of approach and proximity.” He writes: “In the neighbor’s presence there is then the grazing touch of an absence [*s’effleure donc une absence*] by virtue of which proximity is not a simple coexistence and rest, but non-repose itself, restlessness” (CP 120).³⁹² The absence of a presence (the presence

³⁹² Lingis has: “In the neighbor’s presence there then rises an absence ...” But *effleurer* means “to graze, to skim the surface of, to touch lightly” (*Casell’s French Dictionary*), so the sense would seem to be closer to

of an absence? a *non*-presence?) is compared to “a hunger, glorious in its insatiable desire, a contact by love and responsibility, ... a way to seek him who is nonetheless as close as he can be”—that is, the other, who is infinitely far, and therefore always needs to be sought (desired), and at the same time infinitely close, the desirable that makes one a subject. The experience of the other *as other*, if it can legitimately be called an experience (since one is only ever conscious of the same), is ambiguous if not impossible: the other is *altogether absent*, he is *altogether present*, he is *both at once*, and *neither*. This is the Buddhist logic of the tetralemma.

But is it an absence? Is it not the presence of infinity? Infinity cannot be concretized in a term; it contests its own presence. In its unequalled [*unégalable*] superlative, it is an absence, on the verge of nothingness. It always flees. But it leaves the void [*le vide*], a night, a trace, in which its visible invisibility is the face of the neighbor. Thus the neighbor is not a phenomenon, and his presence is not resolvable into presentation and appearing. It is ordered out of [*à partir de*] *the absence in which the infinite approaches*, out of its *null site* [*Non-Lieu*], *in the trace of its own departure*; it is ordered to my responsibility and my love which, beyond consciousness, it obsesses [*à ma responsabilité et à mon amour que—par-delà la conscience—elle obsède*]. Its trace is still warm, like the skin of another. (CP 120-21, translation slightly modified, emphasis in original)

The implication of all of this seems to be that the infinite leaves its trace in an emptiness or void which attests to its presence as absence. The infinite cannot be present because it is incapable of commensurability with the same. But it is not altogether absent, for one *experiences* its absence. For Weil, the encounter with God is similarly enigmatic: we find her using the word ‘void’ not only more often but more consistently than Levinas, to refer to the experience of a world drained

the following: “one feels in the presence of the other an absence like the barely recalled touch of a hand that a moment ago brushed across the surface of one’s skin”—an image that would agree well with another that turns up a little later: “Its trace is still warm, like the skin of another” (CP 121).

of meaning. Repeatedly, however, she says that it is precisely *in the absence of meaning* that we find God, the ultimate guarantee, if there can be one, of meaning—an impossible guarantee. As Lissa McCullough expresses it:

The hidden God is the one actually encountered through the void, in the midst of the dark night of faith. God is most truly known through void, for when illusion is burned away there is nothing in the void but nothingness, and within that nothingness emerges the “nothingness” of God, who is the “fullest possible fullness” (N 492).³⁹³

By *nothingness*, Weil does not mean a Sartrean nothingness which is the simple negation of being (the meaning Levinas usually seems to give the word), but a nothingness which is also a fullness, for it is only in this nothingness that there is room for (the ‘experience’ of) God. It is a fullness not unlike that of the *il y a*, except that it is not a fullness of Being without beings, but the fullness of an *emptiness* or absence which is the fullness of God without God, since God has abdicated in order that beings might be. Expressed otherwise, it is the experience of one’s full consent to the absence of the Good and the goodness of that absence—that is, the fact that it is precisely because the Good is good that it is absent, its goodness consisting in its allowing the not-good to be. Thus the absence of the Good is in another sense the presence of the Good. Acceptance of God’s abdication, of the fact that the Good is not anywhere and especially not within oneself—equivalently, acceptance of the void—is the sole intermediary between the created self and the decreed self, insofar as one manages to imitate God’s abdication, embodied in Christ on the cross, as the mediator or *metaxu* between the necessary and the good.³⁹⁴ Not an intentional act, acceptance of the void is therefore equivalent to substitution, which Levinas calls the “positive

³⁹³ McCullough 2014, 48.

³⁹⁴ McCullough 2014, 181. Numerous notebook entries corroborate this. One example: “Humility is consent to the thing by which nature is horrified, the void. I am not, and I consent not to be; because I am not the good, and I desire that only the good should be” (FLN 102). See also N 137.

character” of the void. Similarly, writes Weil, “the void,” as decreation, “is supreme plenitude, but man has not the right to know this; and the proof is that Christ himself, for a moment, completely ignored it” (FLN 161), a reference to Matthew 27:46. “The void is God, the void is primordial” (N 82).

For Weil, the void is always experienced as a radical loss of meaning, a feeling one has that nothing good remains in the world—not merely for oneself, but any good *at all*. The only remedy for such a feeling of loss, she says, is the desire for the Good beyond the world, a desire which is itself constitutive of good and therefore always satisfied. To desire the Good beyond the world is to concede that nothing purely good exists *in* the world. Having this desire is therefore equivalent, for Weil, to facing reality. On the other hand, to be completely overwhelmed by the void is to lose one’s sense of reality altogether. To recall Weil’s phenomenological analysis: “the void produces an anguish, a desperate revolt, followed, as a result of exhaustion, by resignation; but with a loss of the sense of reality, involving partial death, often inward untruthfulness, and a dispersal, a cutting up of time” (N 137). A phenomenology of the void would, contrary to what one might expect, be concerned with the most common and concrete of phenomena, for there are “sensible forms of the void” the voluntary acceptance of which has a spiritual efficacy. Examples Weil gives are “thirst, hunger, chastity—carnal privations of all kinds—in the search for God” (N 137). This is but the phenomenological side of Weil’s belief in the efficacy of suffering as a means of learning the truth—that is, facing the real: decreative phenomenology as a kind of spiritual exercise.

The “cutting up of time” may be a reference to a temporal experience of “lack of balance” or “deprivation of a future” (N 136). The encounter with the void might, for example, accompany the discovery that a long and painful effort at some task has turned out to be totally valueless and without effect. In such a case especially—one in which it is painful to maintain oneself for very long—there is a temptation to make up the balance, and thus to avoid the pain, with the help of

the imagination. One imagines, for example, that the compensation, reward, or revenge one has missed out on will be supplied in an ‘eternal life’ to come. Weil is clear that this temptation is always to be resisted, since the experience of the void is the experience of reality and therefore not to be a-voided: in the experience of the void one obtains a privileged glimpse into the nothingness of *all* intentional effort, which is the reality of the human condition. Hence Weil insists that one should never do anything ‘for God’, but only act so as to become ‘transparent’ to God, allowing God to act through oneself (N 358).

If anything, the experience of the void is the experience of one’s own nothingness. This often takes the form of an extreme loneliness, an involuntary detachment from a world that as a result seems drained of all meaning, as in the experience of sudden personal loss or trauma. Decreation is the *voluntary* cultivation of such a detachment, hence it should not be surprising that decreation, to some minimal degree, would be a prerequisite for pursuing the phenomenology of the void. Weil does not usually recognize *degrees* of decreation, but she does say that affliction, normally a threat to the very existence of the soul, cannot destroy a soul that has made the slightest effort toward consent to its own non-existence (N 337). She may be thinking of Matthew 17:20 and the parable of the mustard seed. This seems to imply that decreative phenomenology need not require more than a minimum of decreation. But without such an experience of emptiness, however minimal, it is not possible to witness the trace of the “phenomena that erase their own phenomenality.” This suggests, once again, that decreative phenomenological practice might require the discipline of something like spiritual exercises or an *askesis*, consisting of a limited form of self-deprivation. Weil seems to have thought so, for she often recommends certain practices as having the explicit purpose of sensitizing oneself to the suffering of others. Examples we have already considered include: using one’s own suffering as a *metaxu* (Ch. 2, p. 151), “contemplation of the essential contradictions of the human condition” (N 32; cf. Ch. 2),

exercising the will in order to renounce the will (N 280, 364), and trying always to turn one's best thoughts into actions (N 51; cf. Ch. 3, p. 228).

Does this reduce decreative phenomenology to a form of religion, and not philosophy? Here we might recall that for Levinas, 'religion' is a matter of keeping faith with the *neighbor*. It is "a relation without relation" (TI 80) that would "cease the apology for itself" (TI 253): the relation of 'response-availability' that is really a non-relation because it cannot be thematized even simply as a *relation*. The 'practice' of this 'religion' involves substitution—that is, decreation—or conversely, decreation is the practice of this religion. Hence we can say, without compromising its status as philosophy, that decreative phenomenology is indeed *religious*. And this would perhaps be enough to account for its resemblance to religion in the usual sense of the word.

Decreative phenomenology's close acquaintance with the void suggests that it might be the best phenomenological approach to the experience of trauma. Indeed, trauma may be privileged among experiences in that it introduces the sufferer directly to the primordial metaxu, the void. If there is a danger that the affliction may become too great, perhaps that is the price one pays for one's finitude: one can be saved from the danger only when the danger is so imminent that one is on the brink of "falling":

The soul has to go on loving in the void, or at least to go on wanting to love, though it may be only with an infinitesimal part of itself. Then, one day, God will come to show himself to this soul and to reveal the beauty of the world to it, as in the case of Job. But if the soul stops loving it falls, even in this life, into something which is almost equivalent to hell. ("The Love of God and Affliction," SWR 442)

God can never be perfectly present to us here below on account of our flesh. But he can be almost perfectly absent from us in extreme affliction. For us, on earth, this is the only possibility of perfection. That is why the Cross is our only hope. (SWR 446-47)

By contemplating the Cross, Weil says, one learns the love of Christ—that is, a love that can look upon the infinite separation of God from oneself, the Good from evil, as being itself a good. “For those who love, separation, although painful, is a good, because it is love” (SWR 446).

This is a ‘religious’ version of the need, mentioned earlier, for decreative phenomenology to describe the ineffable by approaching so close to it—that is, simply by *approaching* the *other*—that phenomenology breaks up. The problem is then to describe the breakup, the same problem as that of describing the saying in spite of or *through* the resulting betrayal by the said. Trauma is Levinas’s metaphor for this very process, and trauma itself, in the usual sense, might be defined as the pathological experience of the same breakup before the ineffable. Decreative phenomenology might then be characterized as the reduction of experience to its potential to become traumatizing. As such, its special domain would be the experience of affliction.

Affliction, writes Weil later in the same essay (“The Love of God and Affliction”), “is not a psychological state; it is a pulverization of the soul by the mechanical brutality of circumstances” (SWR 462). For those still able (barely) to consent to it, this is the only perfection open to human beings in this world. But it is a perfection uncomfortably close to the total loss of the soul. This suggests the paradox that the “drowned”—Primo Levi’s term for those in the camps whose souls had died prior to the inevitable death of the body by gassing or starvation—were in some sense closer to perfection/salvation than the “saved”—the survivors—because only they were in a position to consent to the total absence of the Good, even if, for all we know, few if any of them were actually able to take that step. If the saved, on the other hand, were never close enough to it

to be saved, how could they have been saved? Then was *anyone* saved in Auschwitz? We return to that question in the final chapter of the present work.

4.7 An-Archeology: The Meta-Semantics of the Saying

In *Otherwise Than Being*, Levinas more than once hints at the possibility of a phenomenology of the ineffable—specifically, of the saying as opposed to the said. Phenomenology would let the saying ‘speak’ *within* the said, or perhaps *in spite of* the said. It would be a *logos* of the *an-archic* and *a-logical* saying, a *logos* of what has no principle or beginning, a *logos* of what has no *logos*. Hence revealing it would amount to what Levinas calls “an-archeology”—digging, as it were, for the hidden saying in the said:

A methodological problem arises here, whether the pre-original element of saying (the anarchical, the non-original, as we designate it) can be led to betray itself by showing itself in a theme (if an an-archeology is possible), and whether this betrayal can be *reduced*; whether one can *at the same time* know and free the known of the marks which thematization leaves on it by subordinating it to ontology. Everything shows itself at the price of this betrayal, even the unsayable. In this betrayal the indiscretion with regard to the unsayable, which is probably the very task of philosophy, becomes possible.³⁹⁵

The problem is time: “Can this *saying* and this *being unsaid* be assembled, can they *be* at the same time?” Not literally *at the same time*, Levinas thinks, without reintroducing ontology: “to require this simultaneity is already to reduce being’s *other* to *being* and *not being*. We must stay with the extreme situation of a diachronic thought” (OB 7). Thus the problem comes down to

³⁹⁵ OB 7, emphasis added. The term *an-archeology* occurs nowhere else in Levinas.

whether there is a *diachronic* alternative to simultaneity that would allow the reduction of the betrayal. But how does one introduce, or induce, a “diachronic thought” in such a way as to “stay with” it? Levinas’s answer seems to be that it is accomplished through the “audacity” of skepticism.³⁹⁶

An an-archeology of the saying, taking the form of skepticism, would be the continual deliberate calling into question of the possibility of a truthful said—in Levinas’s terms, the reduction of the continual betrayal of the saying by the said. This archeology would excavate for traces of a pre-original, an-archical past buried deep beneath accumulated layers of the said. But unlike the actual science of archeology, it would not be a matter of going further back into chronological time, but of a hermeneutic process that circles or “spirals” while remaining on the spot. The deep past at which the process aims lies on the hither side of the present, waiting to be unearthed in the very instant in which one is. This instant does not coincide with the present, since the instant is not synchronic. It has no relation to the past or future, but signals a “time before time,” “immemorial,” the “diachronic *passed*” of the passing of the Infinite which leaves its trace in each manifestation of the said. The task for phenomenology would be somehow to make the trace show itself without another betrayal—or, since this is not possible, with a minimum of betrayal—or again, if betrayal is unquantifiable, with a betrayal always open to skeptical revision. The digging, so to speak, characteristic of such a phenomenological excavation would never be finished. There would always be further layers to unearth within the layers already revealed. Based on the description so far, however, it is difficult to see what the point of the process would be.

Stated another way, and leaving behind the archeological metaphor, our goal is the somewhat paradoxical idea of a *semantics* of the saying. Since the only access philosophy has to the saying

³⁹⁶ See in Ch. 2 above the section “The Skepticism of Recurrence”. Also recall Weil’s remark that “the use (methodical or otherwise) made of divers forms of madness in the practice of mental asceticism and mysticism corresponds to the purificatory use of scepticism (pure idealism, solipsism) on the philosophical plane” (N 312; see above, section 4.4).

is through the reduction of the said (OB 43-45), it might at first seem that a semantics of the saying could only be a *representation* in terms of the semantics of a reduced said. The latter certainly does exist: it is the semantics of ordinary language. This representation, however, could only ever be a *mis*-representation of the saying, a mistaking of the meaning of the said, or some part of it, for the meaning of the saying.

And yet, if the saying itself has a meaning independently of the said—in Levinas's words, the "meaning of the signaling," the meaning of a "transcending diachrony" (OB 9)—then should it not have a semantics—that is, some way of making the meaning known? But what sort? Is there reason even to expect conscious access to a meaning of the saying? It would have to be a meaning that endows experience in synchronic time with a content from another time beyond that time: a *diachronic meaning*. Is this not a contradiction in terms? A *meaning* from another time somehow present *now* would be synchronic—hence, an *ontological* proxy or trace. Leaving aside the problem of how we would express it, simply encountering a semantics of the saying would seem to require that we have some access to the saying *in isolation from* the said. But we can have no such conscious access. Conscious knowledge takes the form of the said—and then it is no longer the saying. There is also the possibility that the search for a semantics of the saying is simply, ethically, ill advised because it misses the very point of the saying: its meaning would be that it has no meaning other than 'itself'. The saying *is* the call to responsibility apart from any question of 'meaning'. Even this, however, demands explication.

The saying does leave a *trace* in the said, which Levinas claims can then be used to recover or recuperate the saying or its 'meaning', at least to some degree. This recovery is the process he calls the *reduction*. It is precisely through the reduction that the non-meaning of the saying is recovered as *responsibility*. Here the ethical *resounds* with "the resonance of other significations forgotten in ontology" (OB 38), if they were ever known there. These significations are signified in or by the trace, not as the 'meaning' of the saying but as the call. But access to the trace seems

problematic—unless it is access to one’s own ethical task, which according to Weil the ethical situation will always make perfectly clear provided one gives it one’s *attention*. It is either an obvious course of action or a command to wait. Thus the desired explication of the saying may well be ethical: one misses the point as long as one fails to respond as ethically called by the other.

In other words, the two coincide, the *trace* and the *task*. That, in fact, seems more or less what Levinas says, especially when he is read through Weil. The trace is declared to lie *on the hither side of the said*. What else do we find on the hither side? The ‘other within’, of course (see section 3.1 above). And this, according to Levinas, is precisely where the reduction occurs:

A philosopher’s effort, and his unnatural position, consists, while showing [*montrant*] the hither side, in immediately reducing the eon [*l’éon*] which triumphs in the said and in the monstrations [*la monstration*], and, despite the reduction, retaining an echo of the reduced said in the form of ambiguity, the diachronic expression. (OB 44 / AE 56)³⁹⁷

To show or “expose” the hither side of the said in the reduction at least in part means turning it into another said—which would then need to be reduced, and so on, “an endless critique, or skepticism, ... a spiraling movement,” in which layer after layer of the said is removed only to uncover new layers.³⁹⁸ We seem to have slipped back into the archeological metaphor, with its obvious question: what would be the point of such a Sisyphean task? But we are no longer in quite the same place we were at the beginning of this section, and now perhaps we can begin to see that to look for a ‘point’ is to miss the very point. The continual need for reduction and exposure is one indication (not the only one) of the finitude of the ethical (CP 115). Knowledge

³⁹⁷ Recall that for Levinas, *monstration*, showing something *to someone*, is the very substance of thought and discourse. See Ch. 2 above, p. 129 and OB 23-25. The word *eon*, which appears several times on this page, seems to refer to the “spreading out” or “stretching” [*s’étaler*] of the instant into a temporal duration.

³⁹⁸ The process we are describing should remind the reader of the continual refutation of skepticism and its inevitable return we discussed in Chapter 2.

does not begin with an intentional desire to know, however important that might subsequently be. It begins with a prior contact with alterity in the *proximity* of the quintessential unknown, the other—in other words, with the ethical. One does not intend to learn unless there is an other from whom to learn, a difference that shows itself as a non-indifference, a sense that the other calls one's knowledge (and oneself!) into question.

Thus the reduction does not take us from one world of being into another “more real world” of being (OB 45). The next chapter will make the futility of this transport obvious. Worlds are constructions of language, hence all worlds belong to the said. Being is wholly said, and the said is the whole of being, the *logos*. Through the *logos*, “being is inseparable from meaning.” Levinas takes the inseparability of being and meaning, which is perhaps Heidegger's major theme, beyond being, and shows it to have an ethical foundation.

That the really true being and entities are *in the said*, or that they lend themselves to expression and writing, takes nothing from their truth and only describes the level and seriousness of language. To enter into being and truth is to enter into the said; *being is inseparable from meaning!* It is spoken. It is in the logos. (OB 45, emphasis added)

If that is the case, then the point of the endless cycle of reduction, if it can be said to have a point, would simply be to clear the way not just for the generation of meaning, but also for a ‘meaning’ beyond the meaning of being, one which shows itself in the ethical demand of responsibility. Philosophy—specifically, decreative phenomenology—aims for the “reduction of the said to the saying beyond the logos ... to the one-for-the-other involved in responsibility (or more exactly in substitution)” (OB 45). It brings continually to light the demands of responsibility over against the reduced said, and thereby against a reduced, that is, weakened, *conatus essendi*. The weakening of the *conatus essendi* is what makes it a decreative operation. Being enjoys no

independence with regard to this operation. In fact, the dependence of being on language and the other is the reason the operation is necessary, since language and others introduce questions of justice. As we have seen, there is consciousness of being only because the question of justice evolves out of the question of responsibility—in particular, out of the need for a shared world. Consciousness posits being in order to do justice to the other, who must therefore already have a significance prior to being (OB 45). We can now see that the reduction aims continually to bring the other out from under the shadows where the said cannot help but leave him. The decreative reduction is nothing less than the work of justice.

It is as if consciousness discovers (or is *itself* the discovery) that it owes it to every conscious other to work out some agreement on *which things exist*. Do we not discover early in life that if one wants to get along with other people one must go along with them on the question of *what there is*, at least to some extent? This experience, validated by psychoanalysis at least in its object relations version,³⁹⁹ would be a reflection—at a higher level of sociality—of the contact with the other Levinas calls *proximity*. Proximity is Levinas's term for the neighborliness (in the sense of the non-spatial ethical propinquity) of the other, as defining for one's subjectivity and for "consciousness as the passive work of time" (CP 114). From this, one develops as a conscious subject who is conscious of the other as another subject to whom one is responsible for the way one understands him or her, along with oneself and everything else that one calls the 'world'. All of this, of course, is necessary and possible because one uses language. Levinas describes the process as one's becoming responsible for the entirety of creation. It is one's realization of one's need to do justice both to *all of being* and to the *beyond being*, the other:

It will be possible to show that there is question of the said and being only because saying or responsibility require justice. Thus only will justice be done to being, will the affirmation, the,

³⁹⁹ For example, in the work of D. W. Winnicott.

to take it literally, strange affirmation that through justice “all the foundations of the earth are shaken” be understandable. Thus alone will the terrain of disinterestedness that allows us to separate truth from ideology be given its truth.⁴⁰⁰

The terrain of dis-inter-ested-ness, the terrain of not-among-being-ness, would be the domain of the saying, the hither side of being. If the truth or ‘meaning’ of this domain could somehow be ‘given’, it would seem to be our sought-for semantics of the saying. This might take explicit form only in the said, of course, perhaps reverting to a semantics of the language of justice, in Levinas’s sense of justice. But more primordially, could it not be a semantics of the *neighbor*? Something of the saying is preserved in the said, since Levinas writes that “the manifestation of saying out of the said, in which it is thematized, *does not still dissimulate*, does not irrevocably ‘falsify’ the signifyingness proper to the saying [*Dire*]. ... It imprints its trace on the thematization itself ...” (OB 46 / AE 59, emphasis added).⁴⁰¹

Levinas suggests a meaning or “signification” for the saying in a number of ways, all more or less equivalent. The meaning of the saying is first of all “the passivity of the exposure ...” to the other (OB 49)—a signification which is reversible, for not only does the saying signify passivity, but passivity also signifies the saying, as if the answer (passivity) preceded the question (‘what does the saying mean?’). But in addition, the saying signifies signifyingness itself, although again as a passivity, a deep being-affected signifying the one-for-the-other, “the one-penetrated-by-the-other” (OB 49) prior to consciousness. The saying thus signifies “the reverting of the ego into a self, the de-position or de-situation of the ego that is the very modality of dis-interestedness” (OB 50, translation slightly modified). It is “a denuding, of the unqualifiable *one*”—that is, the non-conscious *one* unable to make excuses for itself, not free to (dis)qualify itself as exempt from dis-

⁴⁰⁰ OB 45, translation slightly altered. The biblical reference is to Psalm 82:5. See also OB 116, 122, and Weil, N 19, 24 (and Ch. 6 below in connection with one’s responsibility for “supporting the universe”).

⁴⁰¹ Here Lingis incorrectly translates *Dire* as ‘said’, a rare slip.

placement and de-situation by others, put out of phase as “the pure *someone*, unique and chosen” to be the other’s servant (OB 50). Or their hostage. In any event, at the other’s mercy. Levinas concludes that the saying signifies a “dying away” of the subject’s being, a “disjunction of identity where the same does not rejoin the same” (OB 52)—“obedience where there is no desertion.”

In other words, decreation. In the following description of the undergoing of decreation (which here, as often is the case, Weil does not mention explicitly), the second contact Weil cites is that which allows the divine mind to see the universe from my unique point of view—or *would* allow it, she says elsewhere, if it were not that “I obscure it.”⁴⁰²

There are two things that are impossible because they are contradictory: the contact between the thinking creature and the divine mind, and the contact between the divine mind and creation seen from an individual point of view. These two contradictions can never exist in any stable fashion, but they take on a certain sort of existence under the form of Becoming, in the course of the process in a soul whereby that which says ‘I’ is made to disappear little by little. The thinking creature then reaches up to the absolute and God reaches down to the particular. (N 378)

We can easily imagine a third “contradiction,” closely related to the first two: contact between the responsible creature and another vulnerable creature like itself. This contact, too, is unstable, although it becomes less so as the ‘I’ undergoes decreation in the process of giving itself over (that is, being given over) to the other. Hence responsibility, in the form of the withdrawal of self from creation, is able to lend some measure of stability to the first two forms of contact as well as to the third:

⁴⁰² “God loves the perspective of creation which can be seen only from where I stand, and I obscure it” (FLN 72).

All the things that I see, hear, breathe, touch, eat, all the beings that I meet—I deprive all these of contact with God and I deprive God of contact with them to the extent to which something in me says ‘I’.

There is something I can do both for all these and for God, which is to withdraw, respect the tête-à-tête.

The strict accomplishment of *ordinary human duty* is a condition for enabling me to withdraw. Little by little it wears away the cords which hold me stationary and prevent me from doing so.

God has given me my being and at the same time the possibility of giving him something in return by ceasing to be. (N 378-79, emphasis added)

Levinas’s devaluation of ontology represents yet a fourth contradiction, as old as philosophy: that of how there can be contact between the thinking creature and the rest of creation or existence, between thought and matter. Both realism and idealism are attempts to resolve it. Although Levinas’s solution may at first appear to be a version of idealism, it does not try to resolve the contradiction but instead makes a point of preserving it. This is the contradiction in Being’s dependence upon thought, as though beings could not exist unless a mind thought them, “a kind of indigence in being, constrained to an other than itself, to a subject called upon to welcome the manifestation” of everything that qualifies as a being. Dasein does not so much disclose Being as Being depends on Dasein not only for its disclosure but for its very *Being*. “Outside of the part subjectivity plays in the disclosure of being, every game that consciousness would play for its own account would be but a veiling or obscuring of being’s essence, a lie or an ideology, whose status is difficult to establish without ambiguity” (OB 132). Paradoxically, the dying away of the *subject’s* being in its subjectivity signifies that the subject is responsible for

disclosing being *to the other*, thus giving the other's world meaning for him or her. This responsibility is expressed in the trace of the saying in the said. It is therefore available to phenomenology, indirectly, in phenomenology's unveiling of the subject's worldmaking activity, a topic of the chapter which follows. The meaning of the saying is that decreation is how one becomes responsible for the Creation—not for one's own good, but always for the neighbor's. Only a decreative phenomenology has a chance of revealing something of this priority in one's experience, insofar as all experience is dependent on one's being around others. The revelation of this priority is its whole point.

5.0 Worldmaking, Evil, Time

I establish peace and am the author of Evil,
I, the Eternal, do all that.

— Isaiah 45:7

This chapter is concerned primarily with the question of what it means to say that one literally *destroys a world* in subjecting another person to the evil of extreme affliction. Is this only a figure of speech, or is there a very real, concrete sense to it? In considering the question, we will make use of Nelson Goodman's notion of worldmaking, itself a somewhat controversial idea from analytical philosophy. My thesis will be that it is the extreme *vulnerability* of the worlds⁴⁰³ consciousness constructs in the process of being-in-the-world, and not unqualified being-in-the-world, that above all constitutes the being of a *human* being. Very roughly: being-in-the-world + world vulnerability = human being. Human existence is not, as Heidegger would have it, characterized by being-towards-death, but more generally and realistically by *being-towards-Evil*—that is, *otherwise-than-being-towards-Good*—where Evil will be defined as anything which is personally *world-destroying* or threatens to be such. In other words, if there is an orientation of human being towards the Good, it is not that of *being* but an orienting *beyond* (or on the *hither side* of) being.

Levinas often uses the words 'trauma' or 'traumatism' to describe the encounter with exteriority, the other who threatens the interior world of the self. Levinas's language is not mere

⁴⁰³ The meaning of the plural will be explained in the sections below on worldmaking.

hyperbole. Trauma is sometimes defined as the destruction of one's personal world, or as 'forbidden knowledge' of how fragile that world really is.⁴⁰⁴ In Levinas and Weil we find support for the idea that this is more than a clinically accurate description of a broad and "heart-rending" (OB 183) swath of human experience. The threat of world-destruction characteristic of trauma is fundamental to the vulnerability of the human subject.⁴⁰⁵ Consciousness is world-construction (in Goodman's sense of worldmaking) for the express purpose of warding off the continual threat of what can only be called an originary form of world-destructive *trauma*. The threat of trauma manifests itself as the threat of harm from other people, and more generally as what we call the passage of time. It is met by continually welcoming into one's world the other person.

Before continuing, we take a moment to consider the meanings that might be attached in this chapter to 'world' and certain related terms.

5.1 World and Home, Place and Non-Place

The concept of Dasein's 'worldliness' has been called the central idea governing all of Heidegger's work both early and late.⁴⁰⁶ In *Being and Time*, the world in its worldliness is the ontological reality within which Dasein gives meaning to beings through its comportment toward them. Dasein *exists* as a world-discloser, in all four senses of the word 'world' for Heidegger: world as the sum total of all things, world as the realm of a more or less clearly defined set of human practices (such as 'the world of science'), world as one's own unique perspective on one's surroundings, and finally and most significantly, world as Dasein's worldliness in Heidegger's innovative sense (SZ 64-65), the phenomenological analysis of which is the central task of

⁴⁰⁴ On trauma as a form of knowledge, see Alford 2013.

⁴⁰⁵ Might the current popularity (some would say overuse) of the word trauma in so many fields of research be due in part to a barely conscious intuition that there is something in the idea that is fundamental to human *being* in general?

⁴⁰⁶ Dreyfus 1991, 89.

Division One of *Being and Time*. Dasein's worldliness is the foundation for one's experience of 'world' in all the other senses of the word—and therefore also, at least for Heidegger, of one's experience of the *other*. The sections of *Being and Time* devoted to *Mitsein*—that is, *Being-with* or *being among* other beings having Dasein's being—therefore follow *after* the analysis of being-in-the-world in terms of the “ready-to-hand” (*zuhanden*). Heidegger's world is to be described initially as a world filled with equipment (*das Zeug*), a world that exists primarily to provide the ‘there’ for the tool-wielding, project-oriented being whose Being is ‘there-Being’. While *being-with* is an existential of Dasein, and while Dasein cannot find equipment in its world without also finding others in it who have Dasein's Being, the ways in which *Being-with* is exhibited in actual relations between others is solely of ontic interest and therefore not a proper subject of the philosophy of Being.

For Levinas, by contrast, the world is first of all filled with *others* who are altogether beyond Being. In *Totality and Infinity*, the priority of the other makes itself felt inversely in the notion of *home* as a space where one can take refuge *apart from* others, even while one owes to them the freedom to have such a space.⁴⁰⁷ While in *Being and Time*, “dwelling” receives its meaning from the “referential totality” that constitutes Dasein's being-in-the-world, in *Totality and Infinity*, by contrast, it is the dwelling as *home* that gives meaning to the outside world. “Concretely speaking, the dwelling is not situated in the objective world, but the objective world is situated by relation of my dwelling. ... We can formulate it in this way: the consciousness of a world is already consciousness *through* a world. ... Hence the subject contemplating a world presupposes the event of dwelling” (TI 153).

There is another way, however, in which being-at-home—even being-at-home in a world in which one can take one's relation to Being into one's own hands, the mode of Being Heidegger

⁴⁰⁷ There seems to be no word in French that captures the aura that *home* has in English. In *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas uses *la demeure* (dwelling) or *maison* (house) where Lingis's translation is often *home*. Levinas rarely uses *chez-soi* or *chez-moi*.

calls resoluteness⁴⁰⁸—is to owe everything to my being-in-the-world-with, and *-for*, others. This is the way of *language*, of sharing the world with others, *making* the world through discourse. For Levinas, what is meaningful in a world constructed through language is not Being's gift of meaning. Rather it is whatever one would cede, or *gift*, to one's neighbor as meaningful (to use a fine old Scottish verb). This, by the way, implies a generosity not insignificant for its being largely unconscious, a primordial generosity that perhaps explains why Levinas (in a very different way than Heidegger) is not concerned about the problem of the origin of human altruism. Altruism stands in much less need of explanation if one assumes that one's subjectivity is based on an absolutely fundamental other-orientation. What we call "objective reality," by contrast, is a gift we give reciprocally to one another. Objective reality is everything in my world that has "suitability ... for the Other," *any* other, whose presence in my world "is equivalent to this calling into question of my joyous possession of the world" which Levinas calls the ethical (TI 76). Whatever I designate as 'world' deserves the appellation only insofar as it is not only shareable (Heidegger would concede as much) but also ethically *questionable*.

In Levinas, my world is shareable with *others* only insofar as it is questionable, where questionable means not simply uncertain as an object of understanding, or incommensurable with my neighbor's world, but problematic as to the *place* I give to myself, and to the other, within it. For Heidegger, being-in-the-world implies that everything ready-to-hand has its "place" (*Platz*), its "where it belongs" in the totality of involvements that lends equipment its meaning (SZ 102-3). One's neighbor, too, can thereby have his place: think of work-stations on a shop floor or assembly line. In general, others are encountered environmentally, as simply 'there' with one (SZ 119), but still encountered in their roles, their places in society, with their agendas and concerns, and as either helpful or not (SZ 120). Dasein "*lets* the Dasein of others be encountered in *its* world," that is, as posited environmentally in Dasein's own referential totality (SZ 121, emphasis added).

⁴⁰⁸ For this interpretation of resoluteness in *Being and Time*, see CPE 70.

For Levinas, the neighbor as *other* has no locus in this Heideggerian sense. In *Existence and Existents*, one's place is the *event* of taking the body for one's "base" in "the very advent of consciousness" (EE 69, 80-82). In other words, my place is temporal rather than spatial. It precedes worldmaking and being-in-the-world, and it separates me from others.⁴⁰⁹ As a result, "the way of the I against the 'other' of the world consists in *sojourning*, in *identifying oneself* by existing here *at home with oneself* [*en y existant chez soi*]" (TI 37). The other's place is radically beyond my own, a world utterly foreign. But with consciousness, the other's place simultaneously becomes the very place outside of my place where I need to 'be' in order to become an *ethical* subject. I am to be for-the-other who is "reduced to having recourse to me" (OB 91). Placed here and now before me, the vulnerable other's "situation" is the "site" where I can *take a stand* as response-available to him or her as no one else presently is able to be (OB 102). Since this place [*lieu*] cannot be described or demarcated—it is the *other's* place—it is "the excluded middle, excluded from everywhere, no-place [*non-lieu*]" (OB 14: "non-site"). My place then becomes what I give up for the other's place, without literally *taking* her place. An 'inspiration' by the other dis-places me through calling into question my very world (OB 181-82). This implies an 'expiration' which "rends the soul," a dis-place-ment in which I become, as it were, momentarily homeless, *place*-less. But "to transcend oneself, to leave one's home to the point of leaving oneself, is to substitute oneself for another" (OB 182). Substitution is taking the other's place, not in order to take over for him, but rather in the sense of taking his or her part. This alone suffices as service to the other, since anything else one does for them can only follow from this—and must follow automatically if substitution implies Weil's notion of attention.

True, I can purposely construct my world so as to make parts of it unsuitable for certain others whom I want to relegate to its margins—this for Levinas is the definition of anti-semitism—but my exclusion of them, along with all my other "dealings" (*Umgang*) in the social world (SZ §15), cannot be sustained without vast stretches of that same world remaining inclusive and shareable

⁴⁰⁹ On separation, see the Introduction above, p. 51.

*with those same others.*⁴¹⁰ We can exclude only those whom we have already included in the mere act of recognizing them as neighboring us, but since our neighbors *gift* us the world, we include much more of every person in the world than we will ever know. For this reason alone, it is virtually impossible really to *exclude* anyone. But mainly I cannot exclude the other because I am always already substituted for them as an ethical subject. The neighbor and I are always ethically in the same (non-)place, whatever I may think of them.

Heidegger notwithstanding, only the other can “call forth attention” to the being of beings by making possible a more originary disclosure than that which leads to the (solitary) “certitude” of the truth of Being (TI 100). In the later Heidegger especially, the truth of Being is something that, as Levinas reads him, rests on an illusory freedom which “in this sense is solitary” because I do not share it with others—even if Heidegger would concede that I owe it to them. It is fundamentally a private experience and not at all frequent.⁴¹¹ By contrast, Levinas writes, “association, the welcoming of the master [i.e. my neighbor], is the opposite course” from this solitary truth, since in the society of the other “the exercise of my freedom is called in question” (TI 100). This is to say, in effect, that to be certain (in Heidegger’s sense of “resolute”) is to be alone, while to be in company with others is to risk having everything of which one is certain called into question—including one’s existential resolve. This is why the other is my (preconscious) “master,” in Levinas’s hyperbolic language, able at every moment to call my world and even my very existence into doubt, even what I think of as my being (verb), the being I identify with. The other invests me with the only freedom Levinas thinks matters, the freedom of response-ability that immediately translates into the concern that one has “not done enough”—not given enough of one’s world, insisted too much on one’s place—one expression of the worry that one is deceived about oneself. Only thus does truth become the result of “the sovereign exercise of freedom” (TI 101). “To put speech”—that is, the other—“at the origin of truth,” he writes, “is

⁴¹⁰ A paradox that clearly has a bearing on all attempts to achieve the supremacy in the world of people like oneself at the expense of others who are classified as not like oneself.

⁴¹¹ See, for example, Heidegger on “the rare and the few,” CPE 11-12.

to abandon the thesis that disclosure, which implies the solitude of vision, is the first work of truth” (TI 99).

Thus Levinas takes exception to the later Heidegger’s notion that worldmaking—the communal task of meaning-creation that Levinas might well have called world-giving—is *bauen*, usually translated ‘building’, which for Heidegger has the special sense of preserving the “four-fold”—earth, sky, mortals, gods.⁴¹² Against this idea of our proper ‘place’ in the world, Levinas writes:

Things are not, as in Heidegger, the foundation of the site [*lieu*], the quintessence of all the relations that constitute our presence on the earth (and “under the heavens, in company with men, and in the expectation of the gods”). The relationship between the same and the other, my welcoming of the other, is the ultimate fact, and in it the things figure not as what one builds but as what one gives. (TI 77)

William Richardson suggests “working” as the translation for *bauen* because it is “more flexible” in a context where “flexibility is necessary.”⁴¹³ Why not “doing” or “making” (along the lines of the Greek ποιέω)? Apparently because the “broad” sense of ‘working’, according to Richardson, is “dwelling,” so important a concept for Heidegger, and because *bauen* is related to ‘being’ in *ich bin, du bist*. Working also includes ‘doing something by labor’ in the sense of “some ‘thing’ ... that is done” which “gathers together unto itself in its own way [the polyvalence of Being].”⁴¹⁴ It is true that in doing and making, one does gather together a world in a sense, the little domestic world of the dwelling in which one lives and that we call ‘home’. Richardson goes on to explain that for Heidegger, however, Dasein’s principal work is to “tend” or ‘cultivate’ the Being of

⁴¹² See Heidegger’s seminal 1954 essay, “Building Dwelling Thinking,” BW 347-363, esp. 349-50, 352.

⁴¹³ Richardson 2003, 584.

⁴¹⁴ Heidegger, “The Thing,” Richardson’s gloss, quoted in Richardson 2003, 585.

beings, “bringing them forth as what they are” much as a farmer tends his crops. Hence “There-being’s [Dasein’s] response to Being’s appeal” is to “let [Dasein] itself be as dwelling in their near-ness,” the nearness that belongs to *things*.⁴¹⁵ None of this suggests in the least that what Dasein responds to are other beings who have the being of Dasein, however much the “tending” of the Being of beings might be a joint effort. Dasein is being-there with others who are simply alongside in their own being-there; Dasein does not attend to these others face-to-face. Dasein has no face, much less does it appear that Dasein’s attention to Being is a matter of denial of will and *decreative* self-abdication—although Weil, as we have already noted in an earlier chapter, might easily persuade us to believe otherwise.⁴¹⁶

Levinas’s point in these pages of *Totality and Infinity*, which he will underscore in *Otherwise Than Being*, is that we not only come into a world already inhabited by others, we come into it practically *obsessed* by them, held *hostage* by them and by alterity, insofar as we could not function without our worldmaking efforts continually being subject to the judgment of our neighbors. Generosity to the destitute neighbor is not just a matter of giving him bread, but is a much more basic perception of him as “independent of the egoist position” (TI 75), hence as capable of calling into question one’s worldmaking, not to mention one’s possession of the material goods he may happen to need. If a generosity to the other that makes the other independent of oneself is as fundamental to one’s identity—that is, one’s “non-identity”⁴¹⁷—as Levinas claims it is, then it is less of a mystery that other forms of generosity would tend to follow, such as altruism.

Writes Levinas, in what may serve as a summary: “The generality of the Object is correlative with the generosity of the subject going to the Other, beyond the egoist and solitary enjoyment, and hence making the community of the goods of this world break forth from the exclusive

⁴¹⁵ Richardson 2003, 586.

⁴¹⁶ See Chapter 3 above, p. 182 (in connection with N 348) and pp. 213-16. One does find indications of will-denial in *Contributions to Philosophy (On the Event)*, but it is certainly not oriented toward the other.

⁴¹⁷ On non-identity, see Chapter 1 above, pp. 67, 74, and Levinas’s essay “No Identity” in CPP 141-51.

property of enjoyment” (TI 76). Worldmaking is thus a process of generalization made possible by its potential for generosity. “To speak is to make the world common.” There is genus and species, general and particular, because there are others. “Language does not refer to the generality of concepts,” it *creates* them. “I can recognize the gaze of the stranger, the widow, and the orphan only in giving or in refusing; I am free to give or to refuse, but my recognition passes necessarily through the interposition of things” (TI 77)—that is, through the things making up our common world, which *are* things we can refer to as common to us only because we are always engaged in the language game of reciprocally giving one another the very world in which we ‘find’ them. I may even give or refuse *an entire world*, through giving or refusing certain things in that world—as when the gift of a book on mathematics, for example, opens up the world of mathematics for the one who receives it. Or to give an example of Weil’s: the gift of one’s attention to a person afflicted by a great loss can open up a world for him in which possibilities return that earlier were closed off by despair. Whatever we think we understand about some entity, however insignificant an object it might seem as compared to everything else, our understanding of it has the power, in some minimal but potentially significant way, to affect how we take (receive) and give back (re-present) the world as a whole. Thus one’s understanding of a tool or specialized implement, of how it should be used and cared for, can make a great difference in the importance we attach to other objects and even to other people. An example might be the way in which present-day Western consumer culture treats many objects of use as disposable and therefore of no lasting worth, valuable only insofar as they add to one’s momentary convenience.⁴¹⁸ Without realizing it, one might indiscriminately treat natural resources and even people in the same way. The potential of technology to desacralize the world was of great concern to Heidegger after 1945.⁴¹⁹

⁴¹⁸ On disposability as a virtue in the West, as opposed to the traditional Eastern reverence for objects of personal use, see Dreyfus 1991, 18.

⁴¹⁹ See “The Question Concerning Technology” and the Bremen lecture series, *Insight Into That Which Is*. Although Heidegger’s response to this issue is a call for solitary thought on the meaning of each being in

5.2 Worldmaking as Welcoming the Other

In the section “Objectivity and Language” of *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas argues that objectivity is not derived, verified or identified from a world independent of discourse, but is solely the product of language: “The objectivity of the object and its signification comes from language. ... [T]he object is posited as a theme offered.” In other words, what we call ‘objective truth’ about ‘external reality’ is a gift we receive from the other, one’s interlocutor. The only ‘external reality’ for Levinas is the absolute other him- or herself, “the signifier, the issuer of the sign, an absolute alterity” who, as language user, “thereby thematizes, that is, *proposes* a world” (TI 96, emphasis added). What is present *leibhaft* is the signifier, not the signified, and essentially that is *all the world is* for Levinas: a meaning spoken by an other who can be questioned, who holds the “interpretive key” to what he or she says. What we call the ‘world’ is “the out-stretched field of questions and answers” which is the product of human discourse (TI 96). Not only truth, but also Being “is produced only in veritable conversation or in justice” (TI 71).

The fact that all we know about the world—essentially the world itself—develops out of the intersubjective encounter becomes starkly evident whenever the common ground that discourse requires is precisely what is in dispute—what we normally refer to as the ‘reality’ each of us is obligated to take into account.⁴²⁰ Learning about the world is often a matter of repairing failures of dialogue, continually rebuilding some (usually small) part of what one previously took to be reality, as a result of a misunderstanding or (perhaps more often) a failure of attention. The idea that language serves primarily as the medium of world-rebuilding is closer to the truth of the human condition as vulnerable than the notion that language serves only for referring to ‘what already is’ independently of language. As a tool useful solely for the purpose of communication, language becomes a mere luxury, a superfluous duplication of effort (TI 101, 201-2).

light of the unity of the “fourfold” (*Geviert*), the emphasis seems always to be on *things*, such as jugs and bridges, rather than people.

⁴²⁰ On this problem, see Dudiak 2001, especially the opening pages.

If basic assumptions are in dispute, then in order that I and my interlocutor arrive at some provisional agreement on the truth about whatever is under discussion, it is nearly always imperative that I unilaterally cede some small part of my worldview, relaxing my perspective in order to free up space for a new version of it in which the other, at least for the moment, has the freedom to challenge my own freedom. This normally unconscious process is perhaps the foundation of “the desire to believe as we are urged to do by public opinion,” an often regrettable habit that, according to Weil, “makes us tend to reconstruct the past and the future” (N 197) in order to facilitate relations with our neighbors. In any event, it is first of all because we have neighbors that we constantly adjust our worldview in the belief that we need to maintain its conformity with something we call ‘external reality’. But the term ‘external reality’ is a reference less to an entity that actually exists than to an assumption we employ as a defense against the evil of solipsism. Belief in an external reality serves a purpose, but it is primarily an *ethical*, and only secondarily an epistemological purpose, rather than ontological.

This must be what Weil means when she writes that “love ... teaches one to believe in an *external* reality. ... One places the center outside oneself. But still in something finite.”⁴²¹ The “center outside oneself” which is “still ... something finite” would refer to the neighbor whom one is to love as oneself (N 47). This is not simply a matter of trying to ‘see things from the other person’s point of view’. However necessary or praiseworthy, empathy cannot help but turn the other into the same. The other requires a totally different response. Only self-abdication makes room for the other person as truly *other*. It does not suffice that one make room *in one’s own world* for the other, which is impossible anyway, if the other is to remain *other*. Instead one approaches the other and thereby abandons part of one’s world, or relinquishes part of one’s world in approaching the other. The two acts are really the same. Approaching is as passive as it is active. Truly to approach the other just *is* to abdicate control over some part of the world as one

⁴²¹ N 198. “Love is in need of reality” (N 293). See McCullough 2014, 34.

currently views it, and then to find one's view revised in light of what one has learned. In this respect, approaching the other is an example of what Weil calls non-active action, and thereby calls for a decreative hermeneutics (Chapter 2). In the next section, with Goodman's help, we will consider some of the methodologies for carrying out such a hermeneutics.

To withdraw from myself and my world in this way is to abandon, at least momentarily, the idea that the world '*really is*' just as it seems to me. There is another 'seeming' that has just as much right to be called real as my own, namely the world as it seems to my neighbor—another reading of *values*, in Weil's terminology—another *point of view*, in Levinas's (and also Weil's). This is what Levinas means when he maintains that "it is in generosity that the world possessed by me ... is apperceived from a point of view independent of the egoist position" (TI 75). My "generosity" lies in giving away a world and receiving another (revised one) back. It lies just as much in allowing the other to give something to me as vice versa. A view independent of the egoist position requires an abdication of the self. Note that it is not necessarily a real *world* behind the 'seeming' that asserts its claim here, but instead a real *other* who witnesses a 'seeming' that is not identical with mine. Inasmuch as my relations with the other depend on believing in a world we have in common, it is Love that determines 'reality', not ontology. On this, Weil writes:

We should have with each person the relationship of one conception of the universe to another conception of the universe, and not to a part of the universe. A man standing ten paces away from me is something separated from me by a distance (ten paces), but also another point of view under which all things appear. (N 24)

Weil will call such a relationship "supernatural love" (see below) because it acts gratuitously, in self-forgetfulness, hence in a way that is not what human beings easily and naturally do, for

consciousness always places a barrier, or a distance, between oneself and the other. What she is describing here is very close to the idea behind world-giving that we will ascribe to Levinas.

The dependence of reality on Love means that suspension of belief—that is, allowing oneself to be called into question—can have no limits. One always has the option of giving the other the benefit of a further doubt. Is not the willingness to suspend belief (*doxa*) in the other's favor one of the characteristics of love? Weil's striking proposal is that it is suspension of belief motivated by love that succeeds best at making contact with the real:

The mind is not forced to believe in the existence of anything. ... That is why the only organ of contact with existence is acceptance, love. That is why Beauty and Reality are identical. That is why joy and the feeling of reality are identical.

Everything that is grasped by the natural faculties is hypothetical. It is only supernatural love which posits. In this way we become co-creators.

We participate in the creation of the world by de-creating ourselves. (N 308-9)

Supernatural love “posits” by abdicating its world in the interest of letting the other be. This appears to be the only contact with reality Weil recognizes. To posit reality does not mean to establish the objectivity of something external to human existence but, as Levinas would say, to give the gift of the world to the neighbor, “to offer the world to the Other in speech” (TI 209). One gives up something of one's own world in order to give the other space (TI 75-76), a space which, in Chapter 7, I will designate ‘vocative space’ since it provides the right acoustics for me to hear the voice of the other *calling* me into question.

For both Levinas and Weil, every act of creation is the result of an abdication. Writes Weil:

Every man, seeing himself from the point of view of God the creator, should regard his own existence as a sacrifice made by God. I am God's abdication. The more I exist, the more God

abdicates. So if I take God's side rather than my own I ought to regard my existence as a diminution, a decrease. (FLN 213).

My existence as a world-creator is a diminution of the Good, since I am not good and I exist as a creature and creator only because the Good *makes room* for me by allowing the non-Good. Weil believes I ought to do the same for the sake of all other persons and non-personal beings. I make room for them by abandoning my own worldview to the extent that it excludes them as other than what I would prefer them to be. Weil refers to our worldmaking as an "imaginary divinity" that God has "conferred" on us so that we may imitate him by giving up our "imaginary likeness of [his] power" (SWR 470). In this way, Weil says, "we become co-creators ... by de-creating ourselves." Weil, we have seen, asserts that "everything that is grasped by the natural faculties is hypothetical," suggesting that appearances are never to be trusted because they are formed by opinions, common beliefs, *doxa*. Appearances are what Levinas calls the "silent world," a world of "pure spectacle" in which, if we could gain the kind of insight Gyges possessed,⁴²² we would allegedly comprehend the unprejudiced truth. Supposedly no one would be in a position to deceive us. But in fact we would already be deceived—by the spell of solipsism. Levinas says that in such a world, "thought would strike nothing substantial. On first contact the *phenomenon* would degrade into *appearance* and in this sense would remain in equivocation, under suspicion of an evil genius" (TI 90).⁴²³ We would always be in danger of being duped. The reason we cannot find anything but equivocation in such a world, the reason it is a *silent* world, is that "truth is produced only in ... *conversation*" (TI 71). We need the other in order to know what to

⁴²² In the myth Plato relates in the *Republic* II, Gyges wears a ring that makes him invisible to others. He can therefore acquire, without effort, knowledge that would be practically inaccessible to everyone else. Not unexpectedly, Gyges uses this power to further his own selfish designs.

⁴²³ The reference, of course, is to Descartes' evil demon in Meditation I of *Meditations on First Philosophy*.

consider true and what false. If we are not duped, only our neighbor will convince us of it.⁴²⁴ In the silent world, there is no dialogue, no “out-stretched field of questions and answers” (TI 96)—in essence, no being-in-the-world. To be-in-the-world is to rely on one’s neighbors for the very world one is in.

Here Levinas gives us an insight into how to read Weil. To be what Weil describes as a co-creator and co-decreator, it suffices for the Levinasian subject to be in conversation with the other. Only through conversation in search of the truth, which for Levinas is founded on justice, do we practice the “supernatural love” that leads to decreative respect for the other as a unique “conception of the universe.” Conversely, engaging in conversation is the surest way of being called into question, hence the easiest preparation for both decreation and true creation. Behind Weil’s ideas, which we possess only in a non-theoretical and fragmentary form, stands Levinas’s ethical metaphysics of the other.

Weil’s supernatural love, interpreted with the help of Levinas, requires that my worldview become a response to the other, an *offer* of a gift, never an ultimatum—and a tentative, at best hesitant, offer at that.⁴²⁵ As we know from frequent experience, the other is always at liberty to refuse. If they do, then I need to see this as a ‘command’ or call to revise my worldview and submit a new offer, risking comfort with my present version of the world for the sake of a new version that will make room for the other in a way the previous one did not—and perhaps could not have, since the other did not immediately recognize herself as having any place in it. If we are to believe Levinas, the other’s recognition of herself in my world is impossible anyway. At most I can hope that she will not hold this against me. Hence the failure of my offer is never something I can blame on the other’s refusal to see things ‘as they are’—to ‘see reason’ as we like to say. It is almost always the case that my laying the blame on the other amounts to an insistence that she

⁴²⁴ This is true even when we carry out our own investigation (‘seeing is believing’), since we cannot be absolutely certain of what we see until we convince someone else. Otherwise, we might be dreaming. Could this not be the real motivation behind proselytizing?

⁴²⁵ In this connection, see TI 50 and 96. I discuss these passages below.

give my point of view priority over her own. If it is objected that it can take time for the other person to acquire a point of view she is not accustomed to, and thus recognize herself, even just temporarily and for practical purposes, in my world, then we answer that the need for time can certainly be admitted, but only insofar as time becomes part of our gift to the other. This is an expression of Levinas's notion of the asymmetry of the ethical. I give the other more time by refraining from insisting on her giving me her own, in whatever subtle or not so subtle ways I tend to insist on it.

One might question one's ability to 'remake' the world—that is, one's vision or version of it—or even simply the wisdom of continually reinterpreting it in the interest of better relations with others. This could sound too much like endorsing the questionable habit of “believing as we are urged to do by public opinion” mentioned above. But the readjustment required is neither extraordinary nor even necessarily conscious. One of its everyday conscious manifestations would be the way in which the world can sometimes look utterly different, and thus need to be reinterpreted, when we are forced to change our plans—whether through an unexpected emergency or because of something so (usually) minor as an unanticipated change in the weather. But on a more basic and spontaneous level, I continually revise my version of the world as a matter of course every instant, in response to the resurgence of the new as 'other', an automatic process that mirrors that which is responsible for the passage of time.⁴²⁶ In trauma, this process of revision simply *fails* momentarily. Levinas's thesis is that the new is always a little traumatic because it is experienced as derivative of the response to the disturbance or disruption underlying every encounter with another person.⁴²⁷ At every instant there is the danger that consciousness might not be able to set its world back on track again. Although the problem here may seem to be the unpredictable otherness of Being, the fact is that Being is not 'other' in itself—Being is

⁴²⁶ If in fact it is not essentially the same process! On the instant, see EE 75-80.

⁴²⁷ That time consciousness is a response to, hence derived from, the encounter with the other *person* has been argued at several points above. See for example section 3.1 above.

nothing ‘in itself’—but borrows whatever alterity one can meaningfully ascribe to it from the ethical relation. Alterity is not a property; it is a *relation* oneself has to things which, Levinas claims, is founded on one’s relations to other people. Levinas argues for this remarkable claim in Section I, Part C, of *Totality and Infinity* (“Truth and Justice”), but the foundations for it were laid in the final chapter of *Existence and Existents*, in Levinas’s idea of the instant as a pure relation. The claim implies that there is only one *otherness*, the otherness of a relation which is fundamentally ethical whether one deals with the new and strange, the future-to-come, or the neighbor—the neighbor from whom one learned of newness and strangeness and futurity in the first place. This relation is the very substance of time.

To return to the question with which we began, the need continually to remake one’s world signifies that what we call ‘objective reality’ evolves as we give meaning to things by speaking them to others, “proposing” them. In effect, we build a world out of language: “Objectivity,” writes Levinas, “where being is proposed to consciousness, is *posited* in a discourse, in a *conversation* [*entre-tien*] which *proposes* the world. This *proposition* is held between [*se tient entre*] two points which do not constitute a system, a cosmos, a totality” (TI 95-96). The “two points” antipathetic to totalization are the two interlocutors in the conversation, while the proposition or proposal suspended between them is a provisional version or re-vision of the world—or, as we tend to say, the ‘truth’ about *the* world which the two will presumably agree upon because that will make it possible for them to ‘continue on’ (to borrow Wittgenstein’s famous phrase).

Does not Heidegger say more or less the same thing, that we build the world out of language? And does he not give credit to Dasein’s having neighbors who are doing likewise? But Heidegger, at least as Levinas reads him, sees objects as deriving their meaning from the status conferred on them by the world-defining projects carried out by a tool-wielding Dasein making decisions every day about what to *do* and what to *make*. Levinas calls this status their “finality” because the

outcome of a project brings to an end the significations of the objects involved (TI 94-95). They are “absorbed in the accomplishment of the function for which they are made” (TI 74). In *Being and Time*, it can only be a *project* that lends reality to an *object*. Objective reality depends on the roles objects play within the network of doings and makings that constitute the “worldhood” of the world for a particular Dasein. But for Levinas, this makes Dasein’s world a “silent world” in which Dasein discloses things independently of its relations with others, much as other people’s secrets were revealed to the invisible Gyges whom Levinas also mentions here (TI 90). Levinas outlines the history of this transformation of ‘mere’ appearance into industrial tool:

Once the indissoluble bond that connects apparition with signification was understood [that is, by Kant], an effort was made [by Heidegger] to render the apparition posterior to signification by situating it within the finality of our practical behavior. What only appears, “pure objectivity,” the “nothing but objective[,]” would be only a residue of this practical finality from which it would derive its meaning. Whence the priority of care over contemplation, the enrootedness [*l’enracinement*] of cognition in a comprehension that opens upon the ‘worldhood’ of the world, and opens the horizon for the apparition of the object. (TI 94, my gloss)

The term “enrootedness” has negative connotations for Levinas, in part because it called to mind National Socialism’s obsession with ‘blood and earth’. He could conceivably have introduced it here as a deliberate polemical thrust at Heidegger.⁴²⁸

⁴²⁸ See Levinas’s early essay, “The Philosophy of Hitlerism,” *Critical Inquiry* 17 (August 1990), 63-71. In “Simone Weil Against the Bible” (DF 137), Levinas turns the word *enrooted* against Weil, who uses it frequently—especially in her unfinished work, *The Need for Roots*, an examination of the political and social conditions in France near the end of the war with recommendations for postwar reconstruction. Levinas could easily have been aware of this work, since he notes her popularity among French intellectuals in the 1950s who would certainly have been familiar with it. Whether he read it, and if so, read it with much care or charity towards its author, is another question.

As Levinas sees it, there must be more to the objectivity of an object than its “finality” or use-value if, on Heidegger’s own account, seeing an object as present-at-hand requires either an extraordinary event (for example, the breakdown of machinery) or an unusual effort of attention. Something about the object itself is more resistant to Dasein’s grasp than anything it can encounter merely through a “suspension of action,” something perhaps phenomenologically irreducible that would therefore seem entitled to be called more basic to the object as object, more ‘objective’ than either its readiness-to-hand or its presence-at-hand. That ‘something’ of course is the object’s dependence, in order simply to be recognized, on the consciousness of a thinking, speaking Dasein, hence on the response by a language-user *to another language-user* who experiences the same object. The irreducible element of any object whatsoever would then be *the trace that the Other always leaves on it*.

While Levinas follows Heidegger so far as to make thought dependent on language, he departs from him in maintaining that behind language there is something even more fundamental—not the *one real world* that language is supposed to be about, nor the referential totality that gives meaning to things in terms of Dasein’s projects, but the irreducible otherness of one’s language-using *neighbor*. If any meaningful notion of objectivity depends upon recognition of alterity, on the otherness of the object from oneself, for Levinas this obvious fact leads to the paradoxical result that objectivity depends on subjectivity, one’s own and the other’s, since subjectivity is a response to the other and the other is the source of one’s very notion of alterity. Something is objective only for language users to whom objectivity *matters*, who propose the objectivity of one thing or another in a conversation in which they take responsibility for what they propose. It is the proposed meaning that is important, not ‘objectivity’ in some sense independent of language. Put another way, it is not original or ‘external’ reality in itself that matters so much as *meaning*. In Levinas’s words: “The world precisely qua proposed, qua expression, has a meaning, but for this very reason is never in the original” (TI 96).

Thus everything is signification, and signification is a communal, not a solitary activity. “All speech is teaching” (TI 96, 98). The resistance that appearances seem to oppose to being totalized—for example, their tendency to deceive, or at least to leave us in doubt—does not hint at some “obscure and hostile residue of alterity” along the lines of Descartes’ demon, but is due to the fact that our neighbors are continually adding to what has already been said about ‘reality’. This is what Levinas calls the “absolute surplus of the other” (TI 97). The interlocutor, who is a whole world unto himself, adds to what one takes to be ‘reality’ a teaching that never reaches a final result. The originary signification which in *Otherwise Than Being* Levinas calls the “saying” signifies the other, in all of his or her vulnerability, as the sole “interpretative key” that gives meaning to anything. Through language “the world is oriented” (TI 98). Or rather, since the saying is revealed only in the said that betrays it, the world is in continual process of re-orientation, rebuilding, and remaking. We will now show that this process, as Levinas and Weil describe it between them, bears a striking resemblance to what Nelson Goodman calls *worldmaking*, which in turn will give us an indication of why we need to employ decreative hermeneutics in a phenomenology of the human person, as well as how to go about it.

5.3 Farewell to the ‘Real World’

According to Nelson Goodman, *versions* (models, perspectives, conceptual schemes, frameworks) are the only worlds we have or will ever need, since all of our intellectual and practical efforts to learn about the world never arrive at anything in the end but *more versions*:

While we may speak of determining what versions are right as ‘learning about the world’, ‘the world’ supposedly being that which all right versions describe, all we learn about the world is contained in right versions of it; and while the underlying world, bereft of these,

need not be denied to those who love it, it is perhaps on the whole a world well lost.⁴²⁹

Thus versions are not merely useful epistemological tools; they are the only things to which we apply those tools. There is, in human experience, no *version-independent* reality all our versions are supposed to be versions *of*, for as soon as we say anything at all about this supposed reality, we are expounding, proposing, or utilizing another version.

If I ask about the world, you can offer to tell me how it is under one or more frames of reference; but if I insist that you tell me how it is apart from all frames, what can you say? We are confined to ways of describing whatever is described. Our universe, so to speak, consists of these ways rather than of a world or of worlds.⁴³⁰

Could we not say that the world apart from all frames of reference is something that ‘cannot be described’? But ‘something that cannot be described’ is another version, which proves its worth by how useful it is. In fact, the question makes little sense: replacing the phrase ‘say that’ with the word ‘describe’ and ‘is’ with ‘as’, the paradox becomes all the more glaring (although we know, from Chapter 2, that paradoxes, too, are meant to be used): we are describing precisely what cannot be described. The world simply *is* the product of our descriptions, a result of the categories we use in defining things, the ways in which we order or arrange them, filling in gaps or opening up spaces.⁴³¹ To the usual objection that, quite obviously, there are things and states of affairs that would be what they are even were no one around to describe, arrange, or refer to them, Goodman responds that this story, too, is but another ‘version’.

⁴²⁹ Goodman 1978, 4. See also Richard Rorty, “The World Well Lost”, *Journal of Philosophy* 69 (1972), 649-665, and for arguments on both sides, McCormick 1996.

⁴³⁰ Goodman 1978, 3.

⁴³¹ Most of Goodman’s book is devoted to detailing these various ways.

Certainly all versions are about something in the sense that version-making is an intentional act. Goodman would not deny this fact, although he was not particularly interested in giving a phenomenological account of it.⁴³² The usual objection to Goodman is ontological: there just *is* (or has to *be*) something besides our versions of things. One extreme form of this objection is the belief that there are ultimately (or theoretically) no incommensurable points of view: were all parties in a dispute able to gain sufficient information, and assuming that they had sufficient mental acuity to see clearly when and how things, entities, and beings stand independently of themselves, they would necessarily agree on the reality clearly recognizable before them.

Also conceivable is a Heideggerian objection to Goodman: independent of all versions, there is *Being*. But it follows from our previous discussion that for Levinas, Being independent of versions or ways of understanding Being—that is, independent of language-users who make it an object of discourse—would also be independent of meaning. Since meaning comes solely from the other who, in all that he or she says or does, continually proposes new *versions*, a world independent of versions would have to be a “silent world” from which the other is absent (TI 90-94). If the reality one allegedly needs to face is to have any meaning, then what one faces as meaningful can only be another version. ‘Meaningful’ implies ‘version’. Even a version that is universally accepted is still only a version. Universal acceptance may grant epistemological but no special *ontological* privilege.

Version-making—that is, worldmaking—is a form of discourse, an activity that requires other language users. Or perhaps we should say that worldmaking *is* discourse in its entirety, for all discourse adds something to what we call the world. Levinas is describing worldmaking when he says that discourse is “the constitution of truth in a struggle between thinkers, with all the risks of freedom.” Following Levinas’s analysis of “the *relationship* of language,” discourse (and therefore worldmaking) “implies *transcendence*, radical *separation*, the *strangeness* [*l’étrangeté*]

⁴³² It seems that he saw himself as simply on a crusade for rigorous honesty in philosophical thinking. He had little interest in phenomenology, although the goal of phenomenology could be expressed similarly.

of the interlocutors, the *revelation* of the other to me” (TI 73, all emphasis mine). The *relationship* worldmaking as discourse sets up is a web of meaning “held between” (TI 96) a community of language users. It creates community: “Where community between the terms of the relationship is wanting, where the common plane is wanting or is yet to be constituted” (TI 73), discourse fills in the gaps with language and thereby makes common. This is certainly what worldmaking does according to Goodman. We collectively make a shared world in an attempt to complete our worldly relations with others. Of course, these relations are ultimately incompletable precisely because of the absolute *strangeness* of the other. As discourse, the *transcendence* of worldmaking would not necessarily refer to the worlds we make, as something beyond the individual self, but to the other with whom we make them in responding to him or her. Worldmaking, “discourse,” becomes “the experience of something absolutely foreign, a *pure* ‘knowledge’ or ‘experience,’ a *traumatism of astonishment*” (TI 73, emphasis in the original). Transcendence, as Levinas tends to describe it, has its origin and ground in the encounter with the other person as other.⁴³³ *Separation* is Levinas’s term for the primordial freedom, largely ideal, in which one “enjoys” an existence independently of those others (Introduction, p. 51). This state of enjoyment (*jouissance*) is shattered by the *revelation* of the other’s existence as other. (Imagine Robinson Crusoe suffering amnesia so severe that he could not remember having ever met another human being prior to finding himself marooned. He then sees a footprint in the sand which is without doubt not his own.) It is because the other’s world is not my world, but radically beyond or outside of it, that the other transcends whatever knowledge I claim to have about so-called reality. He or she must be *revealed* to me as other in some different way than through knowledge or worldmaking. The other must be a revelation from outside of and beyond all possible versions real or imagined.

⁴³³ See above, Chapter 2, pp. 129 (on the transcendent intention), and 149 (transcendence as responsibility).

This last observation suggests why *decreative hermeneutics is the only proper approach to a phenomenology of the human person*. That the other's world is radically beyond mine is an indication of the radical otherness of the other, which we noted at the beginning of the previous chapter, in connection with Weil's example of trying to remember something forgotten, is like a 'hole' in one's own world. The other is the *void* the phenomenologist's consciousness continually tries to fill. Since the void cannot in fact be filled—the other is absolutely incommensurable with one's own consciousness—it is necessary that in this case phenomenology be decreative: it must continually reveal the void as in fact empty. Put another way, in approaching the other, phenomenology must inevitably encounter a limit at which consciousness breaks up before the absolute otherness of the other. But since consciousness invariably rebels against limits, recognizing that this limit has been reached is never automatic. An ability to recognize a breakup of consciousness before the void would therefore need to be cultivated. One way decreative phenomenology might do this by applying Goodman's methods to showing that the void is always filled with nothing but 'versions'. The phenomenologist would look for signs in her current understanding of the other that this comprehension was built up from ways of organizing, classifying, arranging—ways of worldmaking—that were entirely finite and contingent and therefore could only fail to capture the infinite exigency of the other. As noted in Chapter 4 (p. 248), Levinas teaches us that the "optics" necessary for noticing these signs is the optics of justice. Weil teaches us that such an optics requires the non-active action of decreative attention. The phenomenologist will become aware of her own versions in the self-abdicating process of abandoning them. Arguably, there is no better way of doing this than by doing justice to the other's efforts at worldmaking by working for justice for the other. Indeed, could a phenomenology of a human person afford to ignore for one moment what it is to be *just* toward the other? And does not justice necessarily have to do with how one acts towards others as a worldmaker? Conversely, learning the optics of decreative phenomenology might almost be a

prerequisite of true working for justice. How can one pretend to work for justice if one's practices fail to take into account the otherness of the one needing justice?

The critics of Goodman who object that we do not *make* the stars choose the wrong example.⁴³⁴ A stronger objection would be that, far more profoundly, it is the *other person*, insofar as they are necessarily a complete mystery to me, that I cannot 'make' as a worldmaker. Even this objection is not dangerous for Goodman, however, if we recall the "traumatism of astonishment" Levinas insists accompanies our realization that *there are others*. At least, the inscrutability of the other is no more dangerous a threat to the idea of worldmaking than it is to the existence of human language. In fact, it could be argued that Levinas provides the best argument yet for Goodman's theory: those who are troubled by the idea that we 'make' the world have only to redirect their worry to the absurdity of making other people to realize that the real danger lies elsewhere: not in forsaking reality but in our losing sight of the responsibility one has to the "absolutely foreign", the other *person*, to whom we owe that reality in the first place—that is, their versions of it and one's own. This is an *ethical* obligation far beyond the responsibility (however great) we might owe to anything within the universe itself, including the stars, to which we believe it necessary to ascribe external reality. Whatever we owe the stars we also owe to the neighbor who *gifts* them to us. To the neighbor we owe infinitely more than we owe to any one thing in the universe.

We have noted in earlier chapters that what Weil calls love of the real is the motive behind attention, and that conversely, attention essentially *gives* reality to things. That attention gives reality to things is more than a figure of speech describing one's awareness of something as what it *is*. Weil, we said, promotes all of us to being co-*creators* of the universe. Essentially she means that attention is nothing less than worldmaking motivated by love of reality. For Levinas, this is a matter of teaching, and of being taught by, the other. "Speech is teaching," he writes, but a

⁴³⁴ McCormick 1996, 138-39, 144-45.

teaching that “does not simply transmit an abstract and general content already common to me and the Other.” Instead, language builds a shared world by making a gift of the world to the other: thus “speech first founds community by *giving*, by presenting the phenomenon as given; and it gives by thematizing” (TI 98). Could this not be an elaboration of what Weil means by attention as giving reality to things? Levinas in effect reminds us that attention in Weil’s sense is never a solitary exercise, but is always ultimately an act of *giving something* (the world, that is to say, a *version*) *to someone* (all the others with whom one practices discourse).

When Levinas says that “the absolutely foreign alone can instruct us,” and immediately adds that “it is only man who could be absolutely foreign to me” (TI 73), he means primarily that only the other person is truly *new*, transcending all mere variation of attributes, so that whatever truly new thing I learn must have come to me, directly or indirectly, through the other. But this in turn implies that one learns of the new solely at the cost of discovering a void within oneself that only the other as *other* can fill. Moreover, the void is so preponderant, the world one’s consciousness constructs is so filled with discontinuities and inconsistencies if one has the ‘optics’ to see them—for they are just the contradictions of the real that we try always to cover over—that considered disinterestedly, one’s world might be said to consist of more *void* than *substance*. The other’s instruction amounts mainly to forcing me to perceive this fact, as it were “from outside,” as though I myself were *absent* from the world, destitute of having a world—and perhaps, on top of that, as though I represented everything of which the other was deprived in his or her own “destitution” (TI 75). I learn what there is under the sun only when I become capable of realizing that I have taken the other person’s place there⁴³⁵—which, in a sense, I do every time I express a view about ‘reality’, since whatever is ‘said’ never sufficiently takes into account the other as someone who is, speaking ethically, *wholly other* than the sayer. What this implies, once again, is that one can only do justice to the phenomena by doing justice to the neighbor.

⁴³⁵ “... ‘that is my place in the sun.’ Here is the beginning and the image of the usurpation of all the earth” (Pascal, *Pensées*, V. 295).

The world in which I supplant the other is the world I have been able to construct only with the other's help. 'My' world is really a communal project I have co-opted in ways that allow me the illusion that it is personally ready-to-hand—or at least as much of it that I care about. But the world can *be* nothing at all, even to me, except insofar as it is available to all others as potentially their world also. Otherwise it would not exist for me. Much less would I ever learn anything new in it. Since I learn nothing new except at the expense of what I think I already know, I have to loosen my grip on potentially anything I think I know of *the* world in order to allow the new, the other, simply to be. This is precisely Weil's idea of *attention*: a self-emptying concern for alterity that serves as the sole means of giving reality to things. Hence the relaxation of my grip on the world is the provocation behind the passage of time: out of 'desire' for the other, consciousness relaxes its hold on its present version of the world just enough to allow something 'other' to enter into it. But the other that enters in is always an excess compared to the same, hence the same is forced out, as it were, into retentive consciousness. This continual subversion of one's world, which is usually not so traumatic as to be conscious (it is in fact the origin of consciousness), is time's passing. We return to it later in this chapter connection with the excess known as 'evil'.

5.4 Worldmaking as Gravity and Grace

Love (consent) produces reality — Simone Weil (FLN 90)

The notion of worldmaking, although under a somewhat different guise, is central to Weil's philosophy as well. It is in the background, for example, when she writes that "we should have with each person the relationship of one conception of the universe to another conception of the universe, and not to a part of the universe" (N 24). What we find hard to accept on this account is that conceptions of the universe may differ and even contradict one another, and yet be equally

valid as representations of ‘truth’. Truth as correspondence to an objective reality is of no more importance to Weil than to Goodman or Levinas. Since worlds are only representations, they are subject to revision and even to destruction—as in the extreme case where, for example, affliction replaces the world with an acute “sense of unreality” (SL 159). Nonetheless, affliction teaches us the proper orientation to reality in a way that sounds very much like Levinas’s description of the other-relation. Weil writes that “since affliction causes everything to be called in question, let us call everything in question in our own consciousness” (N 191). Why? In order to impress upon ourselves both our own and the other’s vulnerability, if for no other reason. It would not be out of place to extend Weil’s notion of affliction in this passage to include the effect of the new on one’s sensibilities every instant—the cause, according to Levinas, of time-consciousness. “Time’s violence rends the soul: by the rent eternity enters.”⁴³⁶

More than anything else in her thought, Weil’s important distinction between *imagination* and *consent* suggests that she would not be one of Goodman’s critics, worried about the objective truth of an underlying reality. She does not see truth about an *external reality* (even if she does occasionally make use of the term) as an ontological or metaphysical problem but, like Levinas, treats it as ethical—or as she would probably say, ‘spiritual’. On her view, there is no need to acknowledge intellectually the existence of an external reality in order, for example, to avoid the excesses of imagination, which for her are immensely more important. They are more important for the negative reason that they create a barrier between Necessity and Love. *Consent* to reality, as opposed to replacing the real with the imaginary, occurs at a deeper level than consciousness, not to say than the intellect. What she means by consent borders on the impossible realm where one must go on loving the real even in the midst of the severest affliction. Weil continually insists, therefore, that consenting to reality requires *grace* in the sense that it is a *gift*.

⁴³⁶ N 29. On the relation between time and affliction, see also N 12, 27, 110, etc.

Grace, for Weil, is not an ontological fact, but wholly *otherwise than Being*.⁴³⁷ That is the reason she equates it with the Good, and as such, Weil's notion of grace comes very close to what Levinas means by goodness. When Levinas says that "enjoyment", for example, "make[s] up the grace of life" (TI 112), I do not think he refers only to its beauty or charm but primarily to the fact that enjoyment is a *gift*, a gratuity, an otherwise unaccountable fact about the world, something about it of which we can only say that it is *thanks to* the Good.⁴³⁸ In a similar vein, he says in another place that it is *thanks to* the Good (or to God) that there are *others*. More significantly, on at least one occasion, Levinas mentions grace in connection with the gratuitousness of a charitable act: "There is a moment where the idea of freedom prevails—it is a moment of generosity. Here there is a moment where someone plays without winning. That is Charity. For me, this is very important. Something that one does gratuitously, that is grace. Grace begins there."⁴³⁹ What is it that leads one to act gratuitously, to act for-the-other, if not the command of the face? In his next comment, Levinas verifies our suspicion that for him the *face* is indeed the very sign or trace of what Weil would undoubtedly call *grace*: "The idea of the face is the idea of gratuitous love, the commandment of a gratuitous act."

Belief in an underlying reality can be a social necessity on occasion—in the sciences, for example⁴⁴⁰—but is it a general ethical requirement? Whether or not there is an external reality as an ontological fact, one must learn to love what *is*, in some sense of that phrase, and not desire it to be otherwise. One must learn to love in such a way, for example, as makes it possible to give

⁴³⁷ By "supernatural grace (*grâce surnaturelle*) ... [Weil] means specifically: a principle of thought and action not derived from the web of determinations governing natural phenomena. The supernatural is wholly other than the natural, categorically" (McCullough 2014, 5). McCullough's last assertion affirms at least Weil's refusal to attribute any phenomenon in the world to the result of a divine intervention overriding the laws of nature. "Categorically", however, suggests that the supernatural might be other than Being as well.

⁴³⁸ For another occurrence of the word 'grace' in Levinas, see OB 82 (quoted below, p. 364).

⁴³⁹ "The Paradox of Morality," in Bernasconi and Wood 1988, 176.

⁴⁴⁰ Actually, Weil might dispute this, at least in the case of fields such as quantum theory which rely heavily on abstract mathematical methods for their 'results'. She deplored the fact that physics had seemingly cut all ties with the world as we normally experience it—the world we at least agree, for practical purposes, to call 'external reality'.

the other's suffering one's attention. This requires detachment, in order to dissipate a pseudo-reality that obscures the other: "The reality of the world is made up for us of our attachment. It is the reality of the 'I', which is transferred by us into material objects. It is in no sense *external reality*. The latter only becomes discernible through total detachment" (N 318). The pseudo-reality Weil speaks of here is quite obviously identifiable with the worlds of worldmaking. The "gravity" of truth, for Weil, is therefore *ethical*, not ontological. The purest expression of this kind of love, as Weil never tires of saying, is love of beauty, which she characterizes as the desire that the object not be changed in any way.⁴⁴¹ While her love of *what is* could be described as a love of external reality—as she implies here—the intent would not be the same as that which motivates many of Goodman's critics. Her love of external reality is more in the spirit of what Levinas calls desire for exteriority or desire for the Other. It is not motivated by a love of truth, but more the other way around. "The acquisition of knowledge," Weil writes, "causes us to approach truth when it is a question of knowledge about something we love, and not in any other case. ... Truth is not the object of love but reality" (NR 250).⁴⁴² One loves the truth only because one loves reality more. Truth is not a goal or objective but an orientation, a discipline, a redirecting of one's love toward—that is, one's consent to—reality. It requires detachment, in a spiritual or ethical sense. For Weil, McCullough tells us, "truth is the *work* that results from thought that is pure, not the *expression* of things themselves."⁴⁴³ From a Heideggerian point of view, one could conceivably read this to mean that the work of thinking the truth results not *in* propositions about beings, but *from* an undeviating love of Being, except that Heidegger never

⁴⁴¹ N 319. See McCullough 2014, 133. Goodman mentions beauty in *Ways of Worldmaking* only to dismiss the subject as irrelevant to his project. He does the same in his landmark *Languages of Art*. This may seem odd given that he is noted for pioneering work in the field of aesthetics. But everything depends on how one defines one's terms, and while Goodman does not define beauty in either book—perhaps for him as for Weil, beauty is undefinable—he considers "aesthetic merit" to be something else (for which he evidently had an acute sense). In fact, what he considers aesthetics to be is a branch of epistemology. Art is a way of worldmaking, meretricious or not depending on how much meaning it generates. See Goodman 1978, 133, and Goodman, *Languages of Art*, 2nd ed. (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1976), 255.

⁴⁴² See McCullough 2014, 21.

⁴⁴³ McCullough 2014, 21, emphasis added. Cf. Weil, *Lectures on Philosophy*, LP 195.

speaks of *love* of Being. *Allegiance* or *devotion* to Being is perhaps about as close to Weil's idea of love of reality as Heidegger comes. This would not be close enough to satisfy Weil, of course, for whom love of reality or of Being is inseparable from concern for the afflicted insofar as they suffer from that very same reality and Being.

Goodman's critics are right to insist that ethics (in the ordinary sense) depends on surmising how things stand independently of oneself. What is hard to accept is the admittedly paradoxical idea that seeing how things stand 'in reality' might actually require that one give up, or place on hold, the assumption of an independently existing 'external reality'. But Weil and Levinas are saying the same thing as Goodman when they say that 'reality' depends less on things in themselves than on the social activity of worldmaking. Weil says it in terms of one's relation to God, Levinas in terms of love of neighbor. Reality depends on how persons as unique conceptions of the universe *relate* to one another (or to the Good) as world makers.

Defining the word 'meaning' broadly enough, worldmaking should be understood as largely synonymous with meaning-creation. It could be argued that the worth of any human endeavor—scientific, religious, political, artistic, or philosophical, its ideological claims notwithstanding—ultimately comes down to the ability to generate serviceable *meanings* for *individual* human beings. Meanings are as personal as each person's conception of the universe.⁴⁴⁴ Even granting the legitimacy of judging the meaning of a statement by how well it fits with what one claims to know about the world already—that is, how 'true' the statement is to (some currently accepted version of) so-called objective reality—the fact remains that all meaning is ultimately *subjective* in the sense that whatever is meaningful must be meaningful *for* an individual subject. This remains true despite the fact that every meaning must also be a shared meaning. My religion is arguably meaningless if it is entirely private. On the other hand, it has rightly been observed that

⁴⁴⁴ Hence, if trauma is the destruction of meaning, there is no such thing as 'group trauma,' as it is sometimes called. For an argument that the notion of group trauma actually hinders the treatment of trauma in individuals, see Alford 2013.

each person makes up his or her own religion. If there is no such thing as a private, purely *subjective* meaning, it is also the case that there is no such thing as a purely *objective* meaning if objectivity implies absolute separability from the subjective—equivalently, an immunity from question (OB 36-37). This is why, for Levinas, meaning is ethical. What I call the ‘serviceability’ of meaning depends less on correspondence with an external reality than on the capacity for response-ability to others of the person whose meaning it is. If I make up my own religion, it is not worth much if it is not made with the other in mind. It is imperative, on Levinas’s view, that behind my worldmaking there is an other besides myself for whom the world is made, even if it is the indeterminate other of *illeity*.⁴⁴⁵ Meaning thereby acquires a necessary *sense (sens)* or orientation that only the other person can provide, whether it happens through discourse or simply through the other’s proximity. Without an ethical orientation, meaning is no longer meaningful.

Worldmaking, as Goodman himself continually insists, is fundamentally a *social* endeavor. As meaning-creation, it plays a far greater role in human life than its critics usually grant, for it comprises just about everything that human beings do. The novelty of the idea of worldmaking lies in the *interpretations* it henceforth allows us to give to those activities. What Goodman’s idea suggests is that the search for meaning is not an attempt to gain better access to a single, independent real world, but simply the process of trying out different perspectives—different worlds—judging their worth by whatever standards seem appropriate. The question of their ‘reality’ could not be answered in any case without assuming yet another perspective—hence Goodman’s seemingly paradoxical (and to some, absurd) conclusion that there are *nothing but perspectives*. To see the point of Goodman’s claim itself requires a change of perspective, a realization that, first of all, “many different world-versions are of independent interest and importance, without any requirement or presumption of reducibility to a single base,”⁴⁴⁶ and second, that *these* irreducible world-versions represent all of the meaningful and important world-

⁴⁴⁵ See Levinas’s essay, “Meaning and Sense” (CP 75-107, esp. 94-95 and, on *illeity*, 104).

⁴⁴⁶ Goodman 1978, 4. This is an indication of Goodman’s nominalism.

versions that will ever be available to our limited human understanding—in fact, *all the world-versions there are*, since a reduction to some base, even if that could somehow be carried out, would only introduce yet another version: the version according to which all X's are 'really' Y's. Of course, the number of irreducible world-versions might, for all practical purposes, be considered infinite.

Weil, too, assumes that discovering the 'ultimate meaning' of any particular thing, reducing it to something independent of human perspectives and yet intelligible, is not only impossible, but not even to be desired. The main purpose of reason, contrary to the predilections of the ego or 'I', is not to remove the unintelligibility of reality, but is to keep its contradictions and ambiguities always within view. As we have noted more than once,⁴⁴⁷ reality for Weil is precisely what *resists* comprehension—that is, our ambition to grasp and make it our own.⁴⁴⁸

The exercise of the reason makes things transparent to the mind. But we don't see what is transparent. We see what is opaque through what is transparent, the opaque which was invisible when the transparent wasn't transparent. We see either the dust on the window-pane or the landscape beyond, but never the window-pane. Wiping away the dust only serves to look at the landscape. The reason must only exercise its demonstrative function in order to reach the stage of being brought up against the veritable mysteries, the veritable undemonstrables, which constitute reality. The non-understood hides from view the incomprehensible and for this reason must be eliminated. (N 617)

The non-understood, that which we say we do not *yet* understand but think we have the potential to understand, must be "eliminated" (in what way, Weil does not specify) in order to see the

⁴⁴⁷ See Chapter 2 above, especially pp. 118-19, 136-37, 176-77.

⁴⁴⁸ Here Weil appears to relinquish her early Cartesianism, without going so far as Heidegger does to find in Descartes' privileging of science over ontology a disaster for Western philosophy (SZ 99-100). The issue is complicated, however, by her virulent opposition to quantum theory and abstract algebra.

incomprehensible *as* truly incomprehensible. Only then can one have the appropriate relation to reality, which for Weil is not comprehension but love. Levinas might prefer to say that it is desire, but in either case, the object is something beyond Being, namely the Good. The object of reason, on the other hand, however important it may be, remains subordinate to this. For Weil, “there is no other meaning but love attached to [the] double operation” consisting of my consent to “withdraw myself from my own soul ... in order to allow [God] to pass” through me so that the objects of the world may “have the incomparable good fortune of being seen by God ... in the same way as he himself, the Creator, has withdrawn in order to allow us to *be*” (N 401). In other words, my goal should be to become, along with everything else ideally, “transparent to the light” (N 328).

What makes Goodman’s idea initially so hard to accept is undoubtedly the strong feeling that we are much less makers of the world than creatures at its mercy. Whatever the world is, we are ‘thrown’ into it, as Heidegger says, and this would seem to make it more than a mere perspective. Weil’s expression for our being ‘thrown’ is subservience to what she calls Necessity. Whatever the ‘worlds’ we make, we make them, as we do everything else, because prompted by Necessity. Worldmaking would then seem to be reduced to the means by which we deal with the unpredictability and potential hostility of a Necessity into which we are thrown. The question one might be led to suspect Goodman of avoiding is that of how objective Necessity—the Necessity which, for example, causes pain and loss—fits together with the subjective-relative life-world, if they are not in fact fundamentally incommensurable. Must we in fact decide, with Johannes Climacus in Kierkegaard’s *Postscript*, between either the objective or the subjective, with no both-and option, no middle ground which would be impossible in any case for an *existing* human being? Or is there a bridge or *metaxu*, as Weil would call it, from one to the other? The previous paragraph provides a clue, if we interpret Husserl’s idea of the life-world to be the “unique conception of the universe” each person ‘makes’ simply in being the unique individual that he or

she is in a society with other world-makers. Levinas might then add the refinement that the *metaxu* between the subjective and the objective is the other person, in the following sense. If we truly acknowledge the other as a unique conception of the universe, then the argument so far seems to require that we divide things up differently than we have been accustomed to. Instead of considering individual experience as determined by the opposing parameters of subjective and objective, we should consider all worlds other than one's own life-world to be essentially of two kinds: either they are (1) what I will call "Goodman worlds"—that is, shared versions, symbolic structures, "frames of reference" or "symbol systems,"⁴⁴⁹ artifacts or artificial constructs which have survived as the tacit consensus of a particular group, society, or even the entire human race, as a result of such collective efforts at meaning-creation as the arts, science, religion, philosophy, and plain old everyday practical living, to which each individual lends his or her own creativity and style—or else they are (2) these individual creations, the personal life-worlds of one's *neighbors*. Certainly for the individuals whose life-worlds they are, the latter have far more reality than any Goodman world will ever have. This division of reflects our earlier distinction between the subjectivity and objectivity of one's own world, but in a more realistic way. Goodman's work explores the various "ways" in which we make the first kind of world. Levinas's work from *Totality and Infinity* on is an argument for taking the second kind, our neighbor's life-world, as constituting the only external reality we are compelled to acknowledge consciously and unconditionally—an *ethical* reality. This, the neighbor's life-world, constitutes the third of the four interpretations of 'world' Heidegger defines at the start of *Being and Time* (see above, p. 296). Goodman 'worlds', on the other hand, are generalizations of the second: the 'world of science', for example, is a Goodman world, a symbol system or symbolic structure having features that define the practice of science. (There is more than one such structure defining scientific practice, of course, and within each symbolic structure there are others, almost *ad*

⁴⁴⁹ Goodman 1978, 2, 5.

infinitum.) Goodman worlds are the specific ways in which Dasein gives meaning to the world of its worldliness.

But the creation of meaning is an ethical matter. In part this is because the way we treat others depends inevitably on the assumptions we make about the world we claim to share with them. Conversely, we depend on the teaching and cooperation of others in order to carry it out. Primordially, however, the creation of meaning is ethical because it is a response to the other's call to responsibility which is the foundation of subjectivity. Meaning-creation is an act of freedom, but it is founded on one's absolute dependence on the other.

Levinas calls our freedom to give meaning to things, thus making them familiar, our "spontaneity."⁴⁵⁰ It is precisely this spontaneity, this freedom to world-make, that is placed in question by the mere existence of the others that make it possible. "The strangeness of the Other, his irreducibility to the I, to my thoughts and my possessions, is precisely accomplished as a calling into question of my spontaneity, as ethics."⁴⁵¹ Any aspect of one's worldmaking might be called into question by the Other at any moment. What is called into question, however, is not usually the existence of one's world or some part of it, much less any underlying reality, but one's justification for whatever version(s) one is presently utilizing in making sense of things. My neighbor, however well I may think I know her or the world in which I find her, always has the potential to force a revision not only of my knowledge of her in particular, but occasionally even of the entire world as it presently looks to me. I can always assume that there is more that I could learn, one more fact about the other person, the knowledge of which would materially affect both my treatment of her and my understanding of the world in which I find her.

Because the Other is both 'infinite' (an entire 'world' apart) and finite (an individual human being)—light-years away and at the same time intimately close—I am responsible not only for

⁴⁵⁰ This veiled allusion to Kant's Second *Critique* is especially appropriate in a discussion of Goodman's ideas, for Goodman begins his book *Ways of Worldmaking* with a tribute to Ernst Cassirer.

⁴⁵¹ TI 43. Perhaps Levinas capitalizes 'Other' to emphasize here that a primary 'attribute' of otherness is indicated: to be other is to call into question my spontaneity. Levinas is not consistent about this, nor am I.

what *I* take the world to be but also for what the *Other* takes it to be. Viewed ethically, the relationship is radically asymmetric: because no one else can assume *my* unique responsibility, the *other's* responsibility is no concern of mine. Even my individuality results from the other's claim on me: no one else can take over *my position*—my non-place (see above, p. 299)—vis-à-vis the Other. This is the only 'my' that matters. Nothing else of mine has ethical reality, except as mine-for-the-other. It follows that the ethically privileged world of the Other, the Other's unique conception of the universe which, even before I try to convert it into the same, already commands me to give it priority over mine—not only in view of the other's inevitable destitution, but also in view of its ethical "height"—is of infinitely greater concern even than the so-called larger world we typically identify as objective reality. For suppose we truly accept the idea that to forget one's interests in deference to the other's means temporarily to forget how the world looks through one's own eyes, in order to give one's full attention to how it might look through the eyes of the neighbor who solicits one's compassion. In that case ethics would mean allowing the other's world to contest whatever we consciously or unconsciously take the so-called 'larger world' to be, since *how* we 'take it to be' is itself part of our responsibility toward others. With regard to anything in the world, one never takes it—assimilates it, appropriates it, perceives it—altogether passively, that is, without having learned or decided what to take it *as*. Always it is already the case that one has actively *taken* the larger world to be what it allegedly is. We can now say that one has in fact *made it* what it is, insofar as one makes choices as to what deserves notice and what does not—choices one learned to make in a past and under influences long since forgotten, choices one largely inherited and now reconfirms continually and routinely without thought.⁴⁵² But never do we simply take the world 'as it is' without mediation through the other, for there is no such thing in human experience as the world 'as it is'; always we take it in some *version* or other. The latter is never quite the same as our neighbor's version. However much our individual

⁴⁵² Again, it is the merit of Goodman's *Ways of Worldmaking* that, perhaps uniquely, it sets out to describe in considerable detail a few of the great variety of methods we use for making these very choices.

worlds may have in common, no two people will take the world in exactly the same way. The purpose of any ethics should therefore be simply to prevent the Other from becoming *invisible* in my version. The practice of what Weil calls attention suffices as a response to this ever-present danger. Making the other invisible happens, more often than not, because we settle prematurely for what that version ought to be, thus settling for a version of who *the other* is. And as we noted earlier, if one wishes to bring the Other within the scope of phenomenology, Weil's notion of attention is essential. In the context of a phenomenology of the other, attention translates into a decreative hermeneutics. One gives the other one's attention by deconstructing (un-making) not their world but one's own.

At this point it may be beneficial to remind ourselves of how odd the idea really is that we each live in our own version of the world, a unique "conception of the universe":

The Western conception of the person as a bounded, unique, more or less integrated motivational and cognitive universe, a dynamic center of awareness, emotion, judgment, and action organized into a distinctive whole and set contrastively both against other such wholes and against a social and natural background is, however incorrigible it may seem to us, a rather peculiar idea within the context of the world's cultures.⁴⁵³

In view of the peculiarity of the idea of individual worlds, John Searle is quite right to defend a belief in "external reality" by insisting that "there is a way that things are which is logically independent of all human representations."⁴⁵⁴ Viewed ethically, however, this "way that things are" is not some otherwise indescribable underlying world logically independent of our representations and versions; it is simply the *Other*, whose world is both logically and ethically

⁴⁵³ Clifford Geertz, "From the Native's Point of View: On the Nature of Anthropological Understanding", in Rabinow and Sullivan, *Interpretative Social Science: A Reader* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1979), 229.

⁴⁵⁴ Searle 1995, 155.

independent of my own representations because she is *herself* already a total mystery. To say that the Other, my neighbor, cannot be incorporated into my own world is just to say that I cannot represent to myself either her *or* her world as it is, in any manner at all, except as a kind of provisional story I tell myself which cannot help being an immediate betrayal of who she is. Certainly with respect to the other person, my representations, my versions of the world, inevitably fail to be true to ‘reality’. For Levinas, the neighbor relation comes first because it is the *only* “site,” the only place, the only ‘where’⁴⁵⁵ we know of (in truth a ‘no-where’, *non-lieu*) in which this failure consistently happens as a matter of everyday experience. All other failures of veracity are derived from it. Is it not significant that alterity is encountered first and foremost in the other *person*? In any event, on a day-to-day basis, we hardly do sufficient justice to the significance of that experience.⁴⁵⁶ Surely a phenomenology of the person ought to do so, or at least make the attempt. But for that, one must not so much ‘bracket’ as *abdicate* one’s own person—more precisely, one’s world and self.

5.5 The Decreative Phenomenology of Evil

We now take up in earnest the guiding concern of this work, which might be summarized as the relation of affliction to human freedom and the vulnerability of ethics—that is, the problem of evil in light of (or in the *shadow* of) the Shoah. The hope is to apply decreative phenomenology to its clarification. I remind the reader that the Shoah’s privilege here is only that of serving as a paradigm for evil in the present age: as perhaps the first large-scale attempt to annihilate an entire

⁴⁵⁵ I use the word ‘site’ here deliberately, as it is Lingis’s translation of *lieu*, an important term in Levinas. It is not of course a place in the usual physical sense, any more than the neighbor relation is an entity we run across in our being-in-the-world.

⁴⁵⁶ I will not rehearse again Levinas’s argument for placing the neighbor before God in this respect, except to warn anyone who doubts it that they had better be very sure that they have given the neighbor relation all of the significance it is due. A transcendent God, if one exists, might not appreciate being held higher than a paltry or inadequate version of the neighbor relation!

people, body and soul, in a deliberate and systematic way, using modern technology. Of course, a paradigm need not be unique, nor is it even necessary that it be proved historically ‘first’.

What we are seeking, therefore, is a description, a *perspective* on evil, if you will. A perspective is a form of knowledge. But knowledge, if it takes its own justification seriously, will be concerned about the reliability of its foundations. Paradoxically, knowledge best expresses this concern by attacking those very foundations, by calling itself into question. As Levinas remarks in *Totality and Infinity*, knowing is “the act unsettling its own condition” in search of its own justification. But that implies—and this is what makes it truly ethical in Levinas’s sense—that knowing “comes from the Other.” That is, it comes from “the consciousness of my own injustice,” perhaps in putting forward as true something I ought to know is false. That is to say that knowledge results from having a “conscience,” a consciousness consisting not in another cognition or a thematization—producing an infinite regress—“but rather in submitting oneself to an exigency, to a morality” (TI 86). The justification sought for one’s knowledge is the justification to be found in submitting oneself to the judgment of the Other. This, the reader will recall from Chapter 4, implies that there can be a phenomenology of the human person only if it is, at least to some extent, a *decreative* phenomenology. Decreation implies an emphasis on the nothingness of the self as an entity independent of others, hence decreative phenomenology starts with, and at every moment keeps in the foreground, the questioning of the phenomenologist—not only by the phenomenologist herself but especially by the other, whoever that may be at any given time. Decreative phenomenology therefore begins with the assumption that every human self tends to dissimulate reality *deliberately and systematically* in an effort to keep its world familiar and safe. The phenomenologist must therefore ‘bracket’ more than her cognitive assumptions about whatever phenomenon she has in view; as we saw in the previous chapter, one needs to bracket the *self*—in a sense, one’s very being-in-the-world. Failing that, one misses the phenomenality of the other *as other*. This will be primary for all that follows.

The Other is the absolute limit of my freedom, “more primordial [*originelle*] than everything that takes place in me” (TI 87), everything that I call mine. The for-itself “is *only* freedom, that is, arbitrary and unjustified, and in this sense detestable; it is I, egoism” (TI 88, my emphasis). And not only detestable, Weil would say: the I is *evil*. She is not simply making a theological point. Weil’s definition of evil is *anything that obscures the reality of persons or things*: “That which gives more reality to beings and things is good, that which takes it away from them is evil” (N 8). What is it that can obscure reality, and thus “take it away,” more often or more thoroughly than human consciousness? Almost the sole purpose of consciousness is to dissimulate reality, for the principal role of consciousness is to be the ego’s first defense against the inconvenience and uncertainty of the real, the other, that disrupts the same. Thus the cogito, which for Descartes proved his existence, can only lie! What it proves is the *ego*’s existence, by revealing the nothingness of the ‘I’.

Weil’s statement that “God created because he was good, but the creature let itself be created because it was evil” (FLN 123) should be interpreted as simple logic: the Good, in making room for something *other* than itself, necessarily gives existence to what is not good. The creature is then able to remove itself even further from the Good by acting on the basis of what it takes to be its independence—out of self-interest not only alienating itself from God but alienating God from the rest of God’s creation. Thus Weil writes, “All the things that I see, hear, breathe, touch, eat, all the beings that I meet—I deprive all these of contact with God and I deprive God of contact with them to the extent in which something in me says ‘I’.”⁴⁵⁷ Decreation, of course, is Weil’s remedy for this malady.

Notice that Weil’s list of the things I do amounts to a summary of Levinas’s notion of “living from ...”, *vivre de ...* (TI 110-115). Seeing, hearing, breathing, touching, eating—these are all modes of what Levinas calls “enjoyment” (*jouissance*), the “essence” of which is “the transmutation of the other into the same.” In carrying out this transmutation, “one lives one’s life:

⁴⁵⁷ N 378-79. See also N 361, 417, and McCullough 2014, 36.

to live is a sort of transitive verb, and the contents of life are its direct objects” (TI 111). Being itself is a transitive verb, for Levinas, a form of enjoyment: “one exists from pains and joys [*on existe de douleurs et de joies*]” (TI 111 / TeI 83). “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” (TI 112). One literally *lives on* these things, as one lives on bread. One does not just *use* the things in the world, one *enjoys* the *world*, as though one “bathed” in it (TI 129). Levinas comes close to saying that one’s role as co-creator of the world consists in part of *nothing more than* enjoying it, “in consummating terrestrial and celestial nourishments” (TI 114). “Need,” Levinas writes, is “a happy dependence ... capable of satisfaction, like a void that fills itself [*un vide qui se comble*]” (TI 115 / TeI 87, translation slightly modified). The notion of “a void that fills itself” will prove essential to the practice of decreative phenomenology.

Need, however, is a dependence on what is other than oneself, and therefore ultimately a dependence on *the* other, my *neighbor*. That is, one lives off of one’s neighbor. Weil, for her part, is very explicit about this. She begins by contrasting needs and desires, much as Levinas does,⁴⁵⁸ but what comes next is surprising:

Desire is always suffering, because it is unsatisfied. Reciprocally, all suffering is caused by unsatisfied desire. Love which adheres to the desire of another is compassion. ...

Instead of loving a human being for his hunger, we love him as food for ourselves. We love like cannibals. To love purely is to love the hunger in a human being. Then, since all men are always hungry, one always loves all men. The hunger of a few men is partly satisfied; in them one ought to love both their hunger and its satisfaction.

But the way we actually do love is very different. Thanks to their companionship, their words, or their letters, we get comfort, energy, and stimulation from the people we love.

⁴⁵⁸ She does not always distinguish them in these terms, however. For example, against “limited desires,” which are “in harmony with the world,” she will contrast “desires which contain the infinite” (N 48).

They affect us in the same way as a good meal after a hard day's work. So we love them like food. It is indeed an anthropophagous love. (FLN 284-85)⁴⁵⁹

Weil is describing two forms of loving the neighbor, one based on “living from ...” and one that loves the other's Desire. The first takes reality away from the person ‘loved’ because it treats him as a thing and ignores the Desire that makes him human. It is therefore evil. The second gives reality to the other by recognizing his Desire. Since it is undoubtedly true that “we get comfort, energy, and stimulation from the people we love,” the false love of living off of others is unavoidable. If we live from anything, we cannot help living from the other. Hence we cannot help doing evil. The remedy for this is to recognize that there is another way to love that might be expressed in Levinas's terms as *desiring the other's desire*, or *substituting* their desire for one's own.

At this point a methodological problem surfaces which is worth dealing with now as an illustration of how the decreative phenomenological approach will work. If the I or self is evil, and if decreative phenomenology brackets the self, how can there be a decreative phenomenology of either the self or of evil? For the moment, let the short answer to this question be that decreative phenomenology brackets the self precisely in order *to let the other appear*. Only the disruptive presence of the other allows us to see that we are evil. In decreative phenomenology one lets the other appear, not by analyzing one's representation of the other (really a betrayal of their alterity), but by leaving oneself open to their command, allowing a clearer view of one's responsibility for them. One gives the other person one's attention without concern for self, to the point where representations—the ways in which one constitutes for oneself one's idea of who the other is—break down, and one no longer finds the other outside in the world one makes, but

⁴⁵⁹ Cf. Levinas: In enjoyment, “the constituted ... overflows its meaning”—that is, becomes more than what consciousness represents it as being—“becomes within constitution the condition of the constituting, or, more exactly, the nourishment of constituting. This overflowing of meaning can be fixed by the term *alimentation*” (TI 128). In other words, the object we represent does not remain exterior, but becomes part of us, in some cases literally a part of our body.

suddenly *within*, as someone to whom one is responsible. The phenomenological challenge would be to describe the breakdown prior to this transformation, a description of substitution.

Decreative phenomenology is not impersonal analysis but kenosis and response to a traumatic event coupled with an attempt to describe what led up to it. The methodological problem arises from the fact that a response to the other requires self-forgetfulness, and self-forgetfulness would seem to make phenomenological analysis involving oneself impossible. One may be able to analyze one's response after the fact, however—something we often naturally do, as did Isabel Archer in her all-night vigil following her meeting with Osmond and Madame Merle in Chapter 40 of *Portrait of a Lady*.⁴⁶⁰ For weeks afterward, Isabel still did not know what the nature of their relationship was, yet the experience of that one meeting immediately transformed her entire world, without her yet knowing *how* it had changed. If she had been a phenomenologist, she might have described it as an encounter with the void in the form of the otherness of two people who, simply as human others, suddenly seemed absolute strangers to her, quite apart from whatever threat of harm they may have posed to herself and those whom she loved.

Since consciousness habitually dissimulates reality, in asking oneself what a recent 'traumatic' event *means* one leaves oneself open to being called into question by the other, whoever the other happens to be and whatever their relationship to oneself. It will be shown in the sections that follow that decreative phenomenology works with this state of affairs by making use of a connection between *meaning* and *evil*. Levinas traces the good/evil dichotomy to the very origin of *meaning*: one constructs for oneself a meaningful world in an effort to keep at bay a primordial malicious excess—malicious in that the construction itself, although it does succeed in mitigating the excess to some extent, cannot help but contribute, as all human endeavors do, to the very excess it seeks to mitigate. As we shall see in more detail later, to ask in perfect honesty 'what does it mean?' of an experience such as Isabel Archer's is to confront an inevitable dissimulation of reality by one's own consciousness—that is, to face one's own evil. Only then is decreative

⁴⁶⁰ See above, section 4.2. Isabel's vigil takes place two chapters later in James' novel.

phenomenology in a position to deconstruct the dissimulation—until the next dissimulation. The ‘result’ is a chain of deconstructions that obeys a decreative hermeneutics.

Viewing evil as the origin of meaning might seem to diminish the need for regarding certain specific acts as evil, making evil almost synonymous with egoistic existence. But the latter is how Weil in fact defines it: evil is “the distance between the creature and God” (N 342), a distance opened up when we place our ego between the face God shows us in the “pointless” laws of Necessity, on the one hand, and the face God reveals as Love, on the other.⁴⁶¹ When she says that “God created because he was good, but the creature let itself be created because it was evil” (FLN 123), evil becomes even more banal than in Hannah Arendt’s famous remark.⁴⁶² In this there may seem to be a danger of letting evil slip back into an abstraction. Weil’s motivation, however, is to drive home evil’s implications, exactly what it means for the ego to reign: I cut everything off from its connection with the Good “to the extent in which something in me says ‘I’” (N 379). In other words, whatever *I* do is evil if the ‘*I*’ in my doing, my egoity, makes it more difficult to see the good in something—as is almost inevitable. *Doing*, insofar as it is *my* doing, is always a *destruction* as opposed to decreation. The obvious parallel in Levinas would be his axiom that the slightest everyday act that places a distance between myself and another person is an affront to the Good, and therefore to some degree evil. It should go without saying that such a view of evil hardly diminishes the need to judge specific actions.

⁴⁶¹ “Pointless” is Iris Murdoch’s addition to Weil’s term. What is probably meant is that the laws of Nature serve no higher purpose. ‘Necessity’ does not mean ‘according to God’s plan’. For Weil, there is no such plan; God is absent from this world; otherwise there would be no world.

⁴⁶² Arendt seems not to have intended the banality of evil to be quite so general as this. In the case of Eichmann, the banality of his crime consisted in the fact that “he never realized what he was doing” (Arendt 2000, 379). He was not diabolical, just oblivious, even comically so. And yet, I would argue that the point she is making is reinforced by Levinas’s, that one can kill the other, or simply let the other die, only out of a profound ignorance of the fact that one owes them one’s subjectivity (Hatley 2000, 88). One would not be a human subject, a consciousness that happens to wish to end another life or treat it as already non-human, but for the human subject one wishes to annihilate. One cannot kill the *other*, Levinas says, for it is precisely the other who “invests” me with the arbitrary but ineffectual freedom to kill (TI 84, 198). It may well be one’s potentially humiliating dependence on the other—on every other without exception, whatever they may be or whatever they may have done—that leads the autonomy-loving self to feel murderous.

Throughout all that follows, the reader needs to bear constantly in mind that Weil no less than Levinas sees evil as a *practical* problem. It is not merely an abstract concept standing for the way we deny reality to others. When Weil uses the word, evil is almost always an act or thought we should avoid or a negative state of affairs we need to address positively by practical action. She never suggests that evil is not real, and it is certainly a mistake to read her as giving us a theodicy of some kind,⁴⁶³ although at times she can misleadingly give that impression, as in the following:

Perhaps everything which is evil has another aspect, which is a purification in the sense of progress towards good, and a third one which is the higher good (cf. higher up). Three aspects to be carefully distinguished, for it is very dangerous for thought and for the effective conduct of life to confuse them. (N 126-27, emphasis in original)

The word ‘perhaps’ is a signal that here she is merely speculating. The caveat makes it clear that the second and third “aspects” are *not* to guide our actions or even our everyday thoughts in any way, however useful they might conceivably be for certain limited spiritual exercises. That Weil is not diminishing the evilness of evil is also evident when she writes that “the same Necessity which makes it so that there is evil, without our being able to hold it against God, also introduces evil into *all* the actions of the most upright man” (N 58, my emphasis). Evil is a *necessary* part of human existence. She is about as far from wanting to explain it away as one could possibly be.

⁴⁶³ As Lars Svendsen does in *A Philosophy of Evil* (Svendsen 2010, 52).

5.6 Evil as Excess: Theodicy vs. Ethics

In “Transcendence and Evil” (1978), one of the few texts in which he deals explicitly with the problem of evil,⁴⁶⁴ Levinas proposes that we think of evil in none of the traditional ways—as the privation of good (Plotinus), as the necessary contrary of good (Leibniz), or as non-being (Augustine)—but instead as pure *excess*, or even the ‘excess-ness’ of *all* excess which he calls “excession.”⁴⁶⁵ Levinas finds this idea in Philippe Nemo’s study of the Book of Job, *Job et l’excès du mal* (1978), of which “Transcendence and Evil” is ostensibly a review.⁴⁶⁶ Nemo’s insight, according to Levinas, is that evil is a fundamental category more basic even than Being itself: evil is the “non-integratable,” the “non-justifiable” (CP 180).⁴⁶⁷ It is whatever cannot be incorporated into a coherent explanation of a world whose ways we learn by acquiring what Nemo calls “technical knowledge.” We note in passing that Nemo’s “technical knowledge” sounds a lot like ways of worldmaking.

For Heidegger, to unconceal the Being of something is to give it meaning, at the very least the meaning of *being*. Being would then seem to give to one’s world the integrity and the justifiability of the meaningful. This apparent contrast between Being and evil would appear to align Being with the Good, or at least give Being some share in the Good. It is true that evil as non-integratability is not simply the sum total of all non-integratable *beings*, for that would make it a being and therefore integrable. It is even conceivable that there might be no one thing in all the world that is wholly non-integratable, for then how could it qualify even as a *thing*? Nothing that *is* can be entirely evil, since at the very least it has the good fortune of *being*. Thus it would appear that every being is good to some extent, if never in an absolute sense. It is just that no being fits anyone’s world perfectly—that is, without some corresponding deprivation, some cost

⁴⁶⁴ Weil, on the other hand, uses the word everywhere.

⁴⁶⁵ The term “excession” also occurs in Levinas’s earlier essay, “Language and Proximity” (1967), CP 119.

⁴⁶⁶ *Job and the Excess of Evil*, trans. Michael Kigel (Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press, 1998).

⁴⁶⁷ In “Useless Suffering” Levinas refers to evil as the “unassumable” (EN 91).

to other beings (my being, in particular, comes at the cost of taking up space and resources that might benefit others less fortunate and more worthy than myself)—and some things fail to fit everyone’s to such a degree that, in their excession, they seem to cause nothing but pain and suffering (certain illnesses, for example). It might seem that nothing forces us to conclude that being itself is evil.⁴⁶⁸

But things are not so simple. “Evil is not only the non-integratable; it is also the non-integratability of the non-integratable”—in Kantian terms, that which makes anything “non-synthesizable” (CP 180, EN 91). Evil is not a thing but a tendency, a *malicious* tendency or propensity of Being to resist all human efforts to totalize the world, as though something mocked our every attempt to make sense of things.⁴⁶⁹ Nemo explicitly equates this ‘something’ with God: the “something which exceeds the world and which is God ... is [both] evil, as an insistence beyond everything that technical thought can render reasonable, [and] good, as an open possibility beyond every failure of technique,”⁴⁷⁰ every failure of our ways of worldmaking. Opposing our ability to acquire technical knowledge of the world are two counterforces: one imposes limits, the other removes them. Together they serve in complementary ways to frustrate every attempt at totalization and control. In less ontological language, Levinas in *Otherwise Than Being* proposes that “beyond the disclosure and the exhibition of the known”—beyond eidetic necessity—“alternate, surprised and surprising, an enormous presence and the withdrawal of this presence” (OB 90): an enormous allowance (‘anything goes’) and a corresponding withdrawal of that same allowance (anything might turn out to be prohibited).

⁴⁶⁸ For an argument, directed against Levinas, that being is not evil, see Didier Franck, “The Body of Difference,” in Bloechl 2000, 17-18.

⁴⁶⁹ “Propensity” is Kant’s word for it, in *Religion Within the Bounds of Reason Alone*. We consider the nature of this maliciousness in the next section. It is worth recalling here Dalton’s reminder that Levinas’s is a phenomenology of tendencies, “of the potentiality toward which the I naturally careens,” not a phenomenology exclusively of being. The “otherwise” that one would describe “is always a movement contrawise [sic] to its natural state even if that movement has always already been introduced” (Dalton 2009, 280n5).

⁴⁷⁰ Nemo 1998, 139.

Weil's distinction between Necessity and Love gives us another approach to this unusual idea. The severe limits imposed by Necessity, which cares nothing for the beings subject to it, have an obverse, Love, which might find an apt expression in Kierkegaard's motto, "God is that all things are possible."⁴⁷¹ But the relationship between the two is hardly straightforward. For Weil, the tendency of most things to resist being read in a manner narrowly conducive to human ends, which we would be inclined to associate with Necessity, is how evil appears to a finite human will. Weil considers this a blessing: "All created things in this world, myself included, refuse to become ends for me. Such is God's extreme mercy toward me. But this itself constitutes evil. Evil is the form that God's mercy takes in this world" (N 495). Here Weil comes very close to saying that God is both good and evil. Later she writes: "God entrusts to evil the work of teaching us that we are not. The desire of creatures [that is, ourselves] to be, and their illusion that they are, stirs up evil; and evil teaches them that they are not" (FLN 218)—a passage striking in its resemblance to Levinas's "God does evil to me to tear me out of the world, as unique and ex-ceptional—as a soul."⁴⁷² Weil then adds, "God takes no part in this elementary stage of teaching." It is not God or the Good that teaches us by means of evil that we are nothing, for that really would be an unacceptable contradiction. Instead, we ourselves are left responsible for our own learning. As Levinas might say, it is part of our "glory" that God leaves such lessons up to our own responsibility, taking no part in them—as in fact the Good could not and remain purely good. If for Weil evil is the "form of God's mercy," it is not less evil for all that. If for Levinas each

⁴⁷¹ See, for example, *The Sickness Unto Death*, Vol. 19 of Kierkegaard's Writings. H. V. Hong & Edna H. Hong, Eds. & Trs., Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1980, 38. Thus Weil would probably agree with the following statement by Levinas in an interview with Richard Kearney: "God cannot *appear* as the cause or creator of nature. The word of God speaks through the glory of the face and calls for an ethical conversion or *reversal* of our nature. ... The moral priority of the other over myself could not come to be if it were not motivated by something *beyond nature*" (quoted in Visker 1999, 265n39, my emphasis). For Weil, Necessity is only one of two inseparable aspects of God; it cannot be isolated from the other aspect without misrepresentation. The other aspect, Love, presents God as creator not of nature but of human beings, whom she tends to describe as if they were the only true 'creatures' in all of Creation. An advantage of restricting the Creation to the creation of human beings, of course, is that it emphasizes their *responsibility* for everything else.

⁴⁷² "Transcendence and Evil" (1978), in *Collected Philosophical Papers*, CP 182. Here Levinas evidently paraphrases Nemo, with clear approval.

person “redeems creation” (TI 104), one does not suffer any less from that creation, but redeems it only through enduring its evil, the evil of one’s own existence. In an interview, Levinas says that “the law of evil is the law of being. Evil is, in this sense, very powerful,” adding that “it is the being that we are, *being itself*, which prevents us from recognizing our ethical duties.”⁴⁷³ In other words, our evil is not due to an inability to read the ethical command in the neighbor’s face, even though Levinas’s critics rightly point out that we find no visible sign of it there. It is due simply to the fact that we are creatures of Being. To *be* is to suffer from blindness to the Good.

We can apply Weil’s idea to Levinas’s discussion of Nemo. For the purpose of driving home to us that we are not ourselves good, both experiences are needed:⁴⁷⁴ God must be able (1) to surpass our every expectation of good, but also (2) to disappoint every hope of holding onto any good for ourselves. Nemo himself explicitly identifies the second with evil. Evil must be random and excessive in order to tear from our grasp even the knowledge we claim to have of the good which shows itself in the order of nature,⁴⁷⁵ for the Good absolutely exceeds anything we can grasp in that way.⁴⁷⁶ This does not mean that evil serves good (theodicy again). It is simply that the universe is not totalizable—as we prove everyday by behaving as though it were and then paying for our presumption by suffering from its consequences. We call this suffering evil especially when we can ascribe it to the actions of others, but more often than not, they are merely behaving in the same totalizing way that we are.

Since we cannot *explain* evil—that is, fit it into a totality—without making the non-integratable integratable, theodicy is irredeemably self-contradictory. Non-integratability does not mean

⁴⁷³ “The Paradox of Morality,” in Bernasconi and Wood 1988, 175, 177, emphasis added.

⁴⁷⁴ The word ‘purpose’ is not meant to imply that this state of affairs is part of a divine Plan. That the dialectic of Good and evil can serve a purpose may legitimately be viewed as simply ‘the way it is’. There is no explanation for it, any more than there is for evil itself.

⁴⁷⁵ What counts as excessive seems to depend on the person. What is evil for one person may sometimes be, for another, not so much evil as an object lesson in human frailty. In Buddhism especially, one can find many stories in which the Buddha teaches the sufferer how he or she may view the evil as an opportunity for (what amounts to) decreation. See Epstein 2014.

⁴⁷⁶ This is why I said above that we should resist the desire to understand—that is grasp—the relationship between Good and Evil. The fact that the Good is a form of excess shows how dialectical that relationship really is. As Levinas noted in an interview, it is “no laughing matter” (see above, p. 147).

that we simply lack the intellectual resources to explain evil; evil is non-explainability itself. Not even God, who created it (Isaiah 45:7), could explain it—not because he lacks the power, but (to use Heidegger’s language) because it lacks the *being* of the explainable. By definition, as it were, evil is beyond explanation. Either evil is real and impossible to explain, or everything can be explained and evil is not real. For if everything can be explained, then God and the human world are perfectly commensurable and harmonious. This would appear to be what Levinas means when he says that “every attempt at theodicy [is] a way of conceiving God as a reality of the world” (CP 181), a way of integrating God with God’s creation. If we deny the existence of evil, then theodicy is easy but it is hard to see why we need ethics; it ought then to be possible to solve all moral problems by appealing to theory and technique, a moral science. But if we say that evil is part of the reality of the world, then while the role of ethics is obvious, theodicy becomes not merely difficult but impossible.⁴⁷⁷ Levinas, however, considers this impossibility to be more than acceptable; it is the very *glory* of humanity, of a humanity genuinely responsible for its actions and for learning from its mistakes, that evil cannot be explained away. Ethics is therefore the reason why it is *necessary* to sacrifice theodicy. This is not the same as saying that evil exists *in order to* give us the opportunity of being ethical (theodicy again). Evil does not exist *for* any purpose. For Heidegger, all things are serviceable for the disclosure of Being. But notwithstanding Heidegger, suffering as evil is without purpose. Otherwise we could explain the unexplainable by its usefulness.

⁴⁷⁷ Cf. the problem of universals: if one denies their existence, ontology is easy but epistemology is hard. But if one claims that universals exist, one makes epistemology easier at the expense of ontology.

5.7 Evil as Personal / The Person as Evil

Job's lament, "Why are you making me suffer? ..." (CP 181) might be *the* universal human complaint. Whether or not it is addressed to God, the desire that good and not evil be done to one is for Weil the indelible mark of the divine in every human soul. As a result, good and evil are never experienced impersonally, in the way that one might casually note a change in the weather. Thus Levinas observes that there is something curiously *personal* about evil; my experience of evil seems always specifically intended for me: "Evil reaches me as though it sought me out, ... as though someone were set against me Evil, of itself, would be an 'aiming at me'" (CP 181). Even inanimate objects can seem to us to 'have it in for us' in particular when they exhibit excessive resistance or obstinacy in some personally unsettling form.

The ultimate personal threat would seem to be death. "Death," writes Levinas, "is a menace that approaches me as a mystery" (TI 235)—a menace to my ability to act, a mystery in being utterly unintelligible. "What is important about the approach of death is that at a certain moment we are no longer *able to be able* [*nous ne pouvons plus pouvoir*]. It is exactly thus that the subject loses its very mastery as a subject" (TO 74). Levinas compares imminent death with a return to infancy, "this state of irresponsibility ... the infantile shaking of sobbing" (TO 72). For Levinas, to return to a state of irresponsibility is to cease to be a subject. No person can ethically *choose* such a state, any more than one chooses affliction, which has a similar effect (FLN 102). Death or affliction always feels like a blow struck by an outside will, whether or not it actually comes at the hands of another person. This is true even when the 'assailant' is one's own ageing or ailing body (TO 73; see Chapter 6 below, p. 422).

Death is an inability to be able, and yet at the same time I am "implicated" in it, as though I myself were at fault for having run out of possibilities and imminent death were the punishment. There certainly can be the feeling of guilt in having wasted so much valuable time. In a controversial passage, Levinas calls death "the impossibility of every possibility, the stroke of a total

passivity alongside of which the passivity of the sensibility, which moves into activity, is but a distant imitation” (TI 235. Cf. TO 70n43). The end of one’s own possibilities (the ability to be able) need not exclude the possibility that one somehow continues on after death. Rudi Visker considers, for example, the disconcerting idea that continuation might be some variant of the *il y a* from which the dead would find it impossible to escape or awake in all of eternity—in other words, death as unmitigated, undifferentiated, perpetual *Being*.⁴⁷⁸ The mention of *Being* reminds us that Levinas is addressing Heidegger’s notion of death as the “possibility of impossibility,” which refers to Dasein’s supposed ability to make the acceptance of its mortality central to its projects (“being-towards-death”). Alfonso Lingis notes (CP x) that Heidegger places the accent on the *possibility* without facing the offensiveness, the threat of imminent non-existence, implied by the *impossibility*—that is, one’s own utter annihilation. For Heidegger, the imminent demise of one human being has little relevance to the guardianship of Being.

What is the meaning of “the impossibility of every possibility”? Normally one is surrounded by possibilities: I can look out of the window, I can leave the room, I can close my eyes and day-dream—or resume whatever I am supposed to be doing at the moment. But death is the end of ‘I can’. With death, possibility *as such* is no longer an option. Levinas makes the striking suggestion that the impossibility of possibility is the crux of one’s relation to the other person. In *Time and the Other*, he writes: “Consequently only a being whose solitude has reached a crispatation through suffering, and in relation with death, takes its place on a ground where the relationship with the other becomes possible. The relationship with the other will never be the feat of grasping a possibility” (TO 76).⁴⁷⁹ In other words, one can relate to others because one is a *sensory* being capable of being seized by something painful, in certain respects utterly foreign, and impossible to anticipate—like death. Similarly, the other is impossible to comprehend (grasp, seize), *as*

⁴⁷⁸ Visker 1999.

⁴⁷⁹ Cf. TI 234: “as though the approach of death remained one of the modalities of the relationship with the Other.” “Crispatation” is a medical term for a muscle contraction. Physical suffering is like a prolonged seizure that overcomes one’s psychic motor apparatus, eliminating possibilities of control.

other, in an intentional act, although one can certainly grasp him *as an object* in one's world. (For Heidegger, apparently, while death is incomprehensible in itself, one can 'grasp' one's own death as the resolute object of one's 'project'. Thus one *uses* one's death rather than *faces* it. Might this be no less reprehensible than *using* the other person as a means, rather than facing him as an ethical end-in-himself? Perhaps equally reprehensible only if facing death somehow involves facing an Other.)

What Levinas seems to mean when he says that the relation with the other requires that one have a relation with death, is that any relation with another as truly other, in which one does not treat them as an object, an appendage to one's world, or as an instrument for the advancement of one's projects, essentially entails negating one's will. The relation with the neighbor *as an other* requires a partial death of the self. Levinas does not mean that, temporally, human beings must first acquire a conscious relation with death before they can relate to another person. The primal experience, an experience with language that is prior to learning how to speak, is the encounter with the *face* that "speaks" (TI 66). Only much later, perhaps with literacy, comes the ability to imagine the future and with it some understanding of the idea of one's imminent end.⁴⁸⁰ Since we relate to others from a very early age, the "relation with death" that Levinas claims is necessary for the "relationship with the other" cannot therefore be a conscious, however vague, understanding of what death is. The claim must instead be that the encounter with the other, like death, is the *frustration of anticipated possibilities*. The other's alterity, in preventing me from knowing what to expect, opens up a gap in my sense of time. I discover that a certain future does

⁴⁸⁰ Very young children do not seem to find death a directly personal threat—one that threatens themselves or their "world." They tend to see it rather as a threat only to those on whom they depend for love and security. Elisabeth Kubler-Ross (*On Death and Dying*) has observed that this appears to be the case up to about the age of three, when the concern for the continued availability of Mother begins gradually to be replaced by a concern for the integrity of the child's own body. Moreover, until age five or so, death is not usually thought of as something permanent. In a literate culture, this change in attitude towards the permanence of death occurs at about the time most children learn to read. "Young children have such a difficult time with death not just because the concept is so utterly abstract for them, but because it is also such an alien one for their imaginations shaped by orality" (Barry Sanders, *A is for Ox: Violence, Electronic Media, and the Silencing of the Written Word*, New York: Pantheon Books, 1994, 16). Not having had very young children myself, I am not in a position to verify these claims through personal observation.

not line up with my present, a future that can only be anticipated by *another* present—that of the *other person*, in an experience wholly private to him. They may have something in mind for me in the future, possibly harmful to me, that I cannot anticipate: thus dawns on me the realization that their future is not the same as my future. This is the *diachrony* Levinas calls “the very reality of time, the absolute impossibility of finding in the present the equivalent of the future, the lack of any hold upon the future” (TO 80). This suggests that a decreative phenomenological investigation of diachrony might open up as a result of an experience such as Isabel Archer’s once she discovered the wholly unanticipated power that Madame Merle held over her own future, and had always held since Isabel’s marriage four years ago. The future I can anticipate as following directly upon my present is not a “pure future” at all, but only the ‘future as present’ *to me*—not time as actually experienced “but my re-presentation” of time (EN 172-3). In encountering the neighbor, this personal future filled with possibilities can seem to fall away for an instant. I find myself bound, even imprisoned, entirely within my own present. What is “traumatic” about this discovery is that the *other’s* future does not proceed from the present I find myself in. Hence I discover that what I am for the other may not be at all what I am for myself. The other person’s meaning—not the meaning I give them, but the meaning they give to the world *and to me*—is not my meaning.⁴⁸¹ But a being whose meaning is not *my* meaning is a being whose world is not *my* world. Since ‘the world’ as I experience it is, in an important sense, supposed to be the only world there is—for as a rule, we do not go through daily life believing that there are as many worlds as there are people we meet—to discover that it not only has limits but that these limits are imposed by the existence of other personal worlds apparently very different from mine, can only bring home to me my finitude and my mortality if I really think about it. Given that our collective worldmaking is *work*, work we need to do (largely unconscious) in order to maintain the necessary illusion that we all live in the *same* world, must

⁴⁸¹ I do not ever really give the *other* meaning. Whatever the other may ‘mean’ to me in terms of my *Sinngebung*, it is not really the other that has this meaning but my ‘version’ or re-presentation of the other.

there not be an awareness deep within us that this seemingly trustworthy world is in fact, for the most part, a highly vulnerable fabrication? Would not our worldmaking necessarily produce a largely hidden *anxiety*?

What all of this seems to imply is that the other represents a primal source of excession.⁴⁸² In particular, the other is an *excess of immediacy*—that is, an excess of *a meaning* that is *not mine*, an excess I am immediately face-to-face with the moment I encounter him.

Consciousness consists in thematizing across a multiplicity, and in thus manifesting being by proclaiming its unity and its identity. But language as a contact touches the neighbor in his non-ideal unity. The neighbor does not show, does not manifest himself. He lacks the horizon of multiplicity in which his identity could be proclaimed, maintained, thematized, and thus revealed. But he lacks what he has no need of. The neighbor is precisely what has a meaning *immediately*, before one ascribes one to him (CP 119).

In speaking to the other, or simply encountering him for the briefest moment, the other's immediacy "skips the stage of consciousness, not by default but by excess, by the 'excession' of the approach" (CP 119). I encounter his immediacy as *other* before I become conscious of him. In his very *otherness*, the other exceeds every possibility I can imagine for him. As an excess of alterity, frustrating my attempt to anticipate or understand him, he becomes to me essentially *evil*, in the sense of *opposed to*, or calling into immediate question, my every attempt at self-justification. We noted earlier that for Sartre the other is a "hole" in my world. In fact the other is a premonition of the *end* of my world as mine, and therefore a premonition of the evil of nothingness, *my* nothingness. Not only is there a transcendence in evil—"the *how* of a break with immanence" (CP 180), as Levinas puts it—but there is also an evil in transcendence. Moreover, this evil, oddly enough, is the *good* of transcendence! The transcendent is not transcendent unless,

⁴⁸² See above, p. 341-42.

to some extent, it appears evil to at least some part of us, the part that resists the otherness of the other in favor of the same. The lament “Why are you making me suffer?” is for Levinas “a glimpse at the Good behind evil” (CP 181). Unless evil takes the form of this “good violence” (OB 43), there can be no subjectivity, no election by the Good, “for the Good cannot enter into a present nor be put into a representation. But being Good it redeems the violence of its alterity, even if the subject has to suffer through the augmentation of this ever more demanding violence” (OB 15).

Another example of Levinasian hyperbole? Or another theodicy? First of all, certainly not a theodicy, since the good violence arises not from a justification of evil but from the very *refusal* of justification that, on Nemo’s reading, characterizes evil. As for the hyperbolic identification of evil and other, Levinas does not exactly say that the other is evil, even if this follows from what he does say insofar, at least, as evil is identified with excession and thus with the excess that characterizes the other and hence spills over into me. Weil, however, actually says it, about myself primarily, and only then about the other whom I encounter, whom I am obliged to love precisely *because* he is evil like myself.⁴⁸³ Every encounter with a sufferer—which is to say, with any person at all—represents for Weil an encounter with the potential for one’s own decreation, a summons to consent to a comparable loss of all one’s possibilities and powers. This loss is for Levinas the meaning of death, but for Weil it is also, when consented to, the meaning of love:

We dislike to see affliction because it compels us to see what it is we love when we love ourselves. It is against nature to love someone who is afflicted. But affliction compels us to do so; because when one is in affliction one is obliged to love an afflicted person or else to stop loving oneself.

True compassion is a voluntary, consented equivalent of affliction. (N 326)

⁴⁸³ See, for example, FLN 123, quoted above (p. 335, 339).

Weil insists repeatedly that nothing succeeds better in bringing about the detachment of the mind from the world—or the detachment from self that is necessary in order to love the other—than the experience of suffering, either in oneself or through witnessing it in another. It is not surprising, therefore, that she finds the archetypal example of the route to wisdom and love through suffering in the book of Job, one of the few books in the Hebrew Bible that she admired. Job is an example of attention looking straight at that which one does not want to see—for her, as we know, the definition of loving the real.

The book of Job is a miracle because it expresses in a perfect form things which a human mind can only think and conceive under the torment of intolerable suffering, but which are formless at the time and which fade away and are irrecoverable when the suffering abates.

The composition of the book of Job is a particular instance of the miracle of attention being paid to affliction.

The same is true of the *Iliad*.

The attention runs away from affliction as it runs away from the true God, and by the same instinct of self-preservation; because both the one and the other oblige the soul to feel its nothingness and to die while the body is still alive.

The only soul that can fix its attention upon affliction is one that has been killed by a true contact with the true God (it makes no difference if, through an error of language, it believes itself to be atheist). (N 327)

Of course there are contradictions here. How can the book of Job express intelligibly things not conceivable except in the midst of great suffering, if they are formless at the time and irrecoverable afterwards? When and in what way would one give them expressive form? Since they presumably *have* been given expression—the book of Job, for both Weil and Levinas, is

proof of it—these questions must be due to the all-too-common error of replacing the task of *listening* with that of *trying to explain*. One should instead respect the “miracle” of the book of Job, its “supernatural” value in Weil’s sense of that word, following her advice to hold fast to its contradictions, using them as intermediaries or *μεταξύ* to the higher truth the miracle represents.

What is more precisely in question here is the problem of how to witness to atrocity. How is it possible for someone to put into words an experience impossible to put into words because it *exceeds* all understanding or belief? How is it possible to give meaning to what appears to be pure meaninglessness—that is, pure evil? The question assumes that meaning owes nothing to evil, to meaninglessness. This assumption, as we are about to see, is itself questionable.

5.8 Evil as the Origin of Meaning ... And of Being ⁴⁸⁴

The frustration of anticipation which mortality and alterity have in common means that both one’s future demise and one’s every encounter with the other are *too much*—each a threat to one’s feeling at home in the present, although obviously in different ways and to different degrees. Admittedly, while the first feeling of excess (death), an excess of meaninglessness, seems more certain to consciousness than the second (for consciousness has ways of dealing with the excess of the other), it is more difficult to give substance to the first (TI 158-59): death awaits inescapably but nebulously ‘in the future’, while the other stands before me quite substantially (so I normally think), already invading my world with meaning prior to any attempt on my part to give him or her meaning. Indeed, in “Language and Proximity” (1967) Levinas claims that the neighbor is the *only* being that does this. Everything else acquires its meaning—that is, achieves

⁴⁸⁴ In some respects, the argument of this section parallels Elisabeth Weber’s in her essay, “The Notion of Persecution in Levinas’s *Otherwise Than Being Or Beyond Essence*.” See Peperzak 1995, 69-76. Weber makes her argument in terms of a loss of one’s sense of time rather than loss of one’s world, but the two approaches are otherwise essentially equivalent.

its unity as an object of experience—through becoming an object of human consciousness, the result of “thematizing across a multiplicity” (CP 119). It achieves its identity through becoming part of a chain of references to other objects. The sole exception is the other person, who in a sense resembles Lacan’s *das Ding*.⁴⁸⁵ The neighbor, responsible for a disruption of one’s world similar to a break in the Lacanian chain of signifiers, is the nodal point that cannot itself be identified but which makes every identification possible—the undisclosable non-being that allows all other beings to be disclosed. One cannot identify anything as *this* or as *that* without assuming an other who could verify the identification at some point. We should not push the parallel with Lacan too far. Levinas’s suspicion of psychoanalysis is due to a conviction that neither the unconscious nor *das Ding* is the other within. They are closer to the *il y a*, which “undoes the independence of the self in which it hides.”⁴⁸⁶ As an excess of being, the *il y a* is also evil.

If I do not give the neighbor the meaning with which she invades my world, as I do other objects, from where does she acquire it? What is the source of the meaning she has simply as *other*? Or as Levinas asks it: “How and where in the psyche in experience is produced the major break capable of accrediting an other as irreducibly other, and, in this sense, as *beyond*? ... How does the difference of an alterity which does not rest on some common ground take on meaning?” (CP 177, translation modified). We already know why these questions occur in an essay on evil: the break with the same that makes an entity *other* is the experience of that entity’s irreparable *non-integratability* into one’s world. It would therefore seem to be similar to the experience of what we often call evil. The meaning of the other, like that of evil, is that she has no meaning; she is not integrable into my world. She ‘is’ otherwise than Being, and moreover, she is this in a way that I invariably find disconcerting, at least to some minimal extent.

For Husserl, as Levinas tells the story, “presence to consciousness is the fact that *this* which takes form in experience is already alleged or understood or identified, hence thought *as this* or *as*

⁴⁸⁵ Visker 2004, 5.

⁴⁸⁶ Visker 1999, 249n28.

that and as present, that is, precisely thought” (CP 110). Accordingly, nothing becomes present to consciousness in any way whatsoever that is not already somehow familiar, or at least *thinkable*. With Husserl we have therefore moved away from the classical idea that meaning is something added to perception, and towards the converse idea that meaning makes perception possible (CP 78). Heidegger’s ontological difference is a further advance in this direction, in that the ontological difference allows a fundamental, *non*-intentional relation between beings and Being. But just as mere presence is unable to reveal something as other, so Being too is not sufficiently ‘other’ than the beings to which it gives rise for it to be the origin of alterity.⁴⁸⁷ The *other* is not an ontological category at all (CP 178).

Levinas upends this phenomenological tradition by making the other a modality of the *ethical* that confronts me with a *responsibility*. Hence he says that the other’s origin must lie in the experience of a radical *break* from sameness or Being. Nemo finds in the violence of this break the origin of *anxiety*—thus generalizing the notion beyond Heidegger, for whom anxiety relates specifically to one’s death and aside from that has only derivative meanings. With Nemo, anxiety is now a reaction to *anything* that would mean the demise of the same, a reaction to *any excess*, or threat of excess, beyond one’s ability to assimilate or comprehend. If this makes anxiety seem like a reaction to death, or a premonition of death in every experience, we are nevertheless not back to Heidegger, for whom the idea of death as an excess, or of alterity as the teaching of the other, would be altogether foreign. Thus Levinas would seem to concur with Nemo when he declares that “to think the other depends upon an irreducible anxiety for the other” (IR 211). We could say that evil, in the form of anxiety, arises at the root of the non-experience of the other as other. This, as we noted above, leads to the conclusion that the other is, in a sense, ‘evil’. We note in passing that the idea of anxiety as the fundamental reaction to alterity—that is, a seemingly ungrounded fear of the other, experienced as evil—accords with Weil’s idea of love as consent to

⁴⁸⁷ Nemo 1998, 147n3

reality, since consent to reality is, at least in part, a matter of facing one's fears, especially those that have no object or ground.

What this presence of 'evil' in the other implies is that *going towards* the other counts as an *ethical* act just because 'going towards'—as opposed to the more natural reaction of avoidance—effects a momentary orientation toward the Good. Any act that neutralizes the meaning of the excess qualifies as ethical in Levinas's sense.⁴⁸⁸ Conversely, we 'go towards' the other whenever we do or say anything that to any degree mitigates the excess characterizing the otherness of the other. Even though momentary, this is the heart of ethics because it signifies a *reversal of orientation*. For a moment, one acts without self-concern; one "plays without winning" (see above, p. 323). It is the act of 'going towards'—more than any consequence of one's intentional acts, however good one's intentions—that produces the temporary mitigation of evil. For that purpose, the simplest act of 'going towards' will do, even so little as speaking to the other out of habit—as little (Levinas says) as the *après vous, Monsieur!* Since in speech I take responsibility for the clarity of whatever I say, however trivial it is, and validate the freedom the other has of giving what I say whatever meaning he needs to give it (OB 47), merely the act of speaking to the other generates in itself at least some small measure of *absolution* in Levinas's sense of that word (TI 102): by recognizing the other's alterity in simply speaking to him, I absolve him from the totalization to which I invariably reduce him. For this reason, pretending that the panhandler or homeless person is simply 'not there' allows some evil to remain in the world that could easily have been dissipated had one done no more than given him a glance and politely declined the request for spare change. The modest act of 'going towards' requires only the very minimum of will. In fact, since willing is the work of consciousness, 'going towards' is itself the will *to have no will*, at least to the extent of recognizing the other as other—that is, as someone beyond the

⁴⁸⁸ Cf. Weil: "That which gives more reality to beings and things is good, that which takes it away from them is evil" (N 8). Does this imply that reducing the excess means giving more reality to things? In any event, such an act is quite likely to be a non-active act: "evil consists in action, good in non-action or in non-active action" (N 127)—that is, action without the 'I'.

comprehension of conscious thought. Going towards the other, doing no more than acknowledging the other's presence, is perhaps the primary everyday means of using the will to 'wear down' the will, as Weil describes "perfect obedience": "In order to attain to perfect obedience, one must exercise one's will, one must put forth an effort until one has exhausted in oneself the finite quantity of the type of imperfection corresponding to effort and to the exercise of the will. ... After that, there is no further use for effort or exercise of the will" (N 364).

Does this not reduce the other to the same? Does not evil only return? Unavoidably. The act of going towards involves language even when I actually *say* nothing, since I am already placing the other in my world and thereby thematizing him. Language enables this 'putting the other in his place', dissimulating the otherness of the neighbor by converting the other's saying, their call to my responsibility, into a said. Consciously undoing the dissimulation might seem to require what amounts to a decreative phenomenological reduction. But as we saw in the previous chapter,⁴⁸⁹ the reduction takes the form of one's becoming conscious of a *responsibility* for the other whose saying one's consciousness has turned into a said. The reduction is a reduction to the basis of consciousness itself, a reduction to *the ethical*. As soon as one becomes conscious of one's responsibility, however, one has again dissimulated the other, requiring another reduction.

Obviously, this is a reduction that is not confined only to phenomenology. "To think the other depends upon an irreducible anxiety for the other" because one does not truly think the *other* unless the experience is responsibility-provoking, in Levinas's sense of primordial response-ability. It is the *other* who induces this response-ability and hence the other is to blame, so to speak, for one's irreducible anxiety for the other. Really to *think* the other consciously would then mean reversing this anxiety into an incessant concern to find the trace of the saying in the said—that is, to 'read' the said as concealing a trace of one's responsibility and then to 'unconceal' it. We can interpret this task as an example of Weil's notion of 'reading' the world, taking it beyond

⁴⁸⁹ See section 4.7 above, "An-Archeology: The Meta-Semantics of the Saying."

the province of phenomenological reduction in the strict sense. But one should not fault a phenomenological method for having an application to ordinary life.

The anxiety induced by the other is universal, part of being a subject, and must be dealt with somehow. It is not out of the question to ascribe to this anxiety a good effect, for without it one would not notice the other *as other* at all. And yet, in “Transcendence and Evil” Levinas calls anxiety “the cutting point at the heart of evil” that receives “its carnal severity” through the *absurdity* of physical suffering. It is, he writes, “a consuming of human identity” in a being that is not only carnal but *incarnated*—in whom pain consumes not only the body but also the soul. For Levinas, anxiety is “the root of all social miseries, all human dereliction: of humiliation, solitude, persecution” (CP 179). Is the word ‘anxiety’ used in two different senses between Levinas and Nemo? Is the irreducible anxiety generated by the other a ‘good anxiety’ opposed to the anxiety at the heart of human suffering, an obvious evil? Both forms of anxiety can be understood in terms of “loss of contact with reality” (N 28), however. This is Weil’s idea of evil. In the case of anxiety for the other, the loss of contact with reality is what Levinas expresses by saying that one is always “too late” for the other. Since conscious contact with anything is always only with the *same*, one always just misses the *other*. The desire to make contact with the other, because it is never entirely possible, must therefore constitute a form of anxiety. On the other hand, the anxiety at the heart of human suffering also involves a loss of contact with reality, since this loss is the very nature of pain. As we noted earlier, affliction has the ability to destroy a person’s world. Is the anxiety the same in both cases? I am not sure the question would be important for either Levinas or Weil. Even if the two cases are contradictory, of more importance is what one *does* with the anxiety in either case. Their relation is dialectical, generating contradictions and making it impossible to be dogmatic about good and evil.

It is to Levinas’s credit, Weil would say, that he does not try to resolve the contradictions, for this makes them available to be *used*. To give another example, from “Meaning and Sense,” Levinas observes that “absurdity consists not in non-sense, but in the isolation of innumerable

meanings, in the absence of a sense that orients them. ... The absurdity lies in multiplicity in pure indifference” (CP 89). It is as though we confronted an unmanageable profusion of disconnected ‘meanings’ that did not care whether we made sense of them or not. This utter *indifference* to our need to make sense of things would seem characteristic of evil if anything is. And yet, out of this unpromising material, the only material it has, the subject manages to assemble the meaningful (CP 80). It looks as though we create meaning (a good) out of something evil. In a similar tone, Weil writes that we have the ability to create (or ‘read’) out of the same material either a just or an unjust action:

No action being either good or evil in itself, but depending on circumstances, at any given moment whatever, through sensory appearances of whatever kind, one can always imagine (read) a situation with respect to which (if only it existed) such and such an action would be just. Later on, one reads differently, but the action has been accomplished. (N 36).

Whether we think an action is good or evil depends on how we read the circumstances. It follows that we should take the greatest care how we read *before* we act as compared to after. Since “it is not given to man to do good; it is only given to him to set aside some evil” (N 55), we must read with a view to acting only in the second way, minimizing the evil, and not as if we had the power to act in the first, imagining that we are acting for the good.

5.9 From Worldmaking Through Time to Proximity

This final section serves as a transition into the next chapter, which will deal with subjectivity as “persecution” by the other and by Being. Persecution is Levinas’s term for one’s own and the other’s vulnerability. In this section we connect the ideas discussed in the present chapter with

Levinas's central notion of proximity, a term he uses for one's primordial vulnerability to every other.⁴⁹⁰ We begin by recalling how, for Levinas, language attests to our dependence on the other for the lucidity of our world, even as we are left in the dark about the other him- or herself.

It is *language* that, at the most basic level for Levinas, identifies objects through a unification of the sensual manifold. Language *proclaims* this as that—hence Levinas calls it “kerygma” (OB 36-37). The neighbor, as we have seen, is an exception: since unification neutralizes alterity, language's role vis-à-vis the neighbor must be entirely passive, a ‘letting be’, a mode of contact that Levinas compares to the sensory: language can only “touch the neighbor in his non-ideal unity” (CP 119). Here Levinas would evoke a directness of contact closer to its object than that achieved by sensibility itself. The neighbor, prior to any linguistic or transcendental synthesis, is *essentially* a being whose meaning requires absolutely *no* intermediary, a being “who has a meaning before one gives meaning to him” (CP 119). It is a meaning primarily exposed or *announced* through conversation, but more primordially through the face, Levinas's metaphor for the signification of one's primordial vulnerability conveyed simply by the human presence. In this indirect way, language proclaims the truly ‘good news’ that the other is near even when the other is the stranger who says nothing and might even seem to constitute a potential threat.

One might think that the archetypal case of experiential immediacy would be our exposure to sense impressions from an object present before our eyes or in direct contact with our skin (OB 61). No mental processing seems necessary to feel warmed by the sun. But for a human being, if not for a lizard sunning itself on a rock, even so direct and elementary an experience as this, in order to become a *conscious* experience, involves “an intentionality, an openness, and thus a distance.” Consciousness must stand back in order to unify, otherwise one does not register the experience as feeling *the warmth of the sun*—as intentional—which of course we do. In the case

⁴⁹⁰ The term *proximity* was introduced in Chapter 1 (pp. 107-8) and has been mentioned occasionally in the intervening chapters. It occurs in Levinas's works as early as the essay “Phenomenon and Enigma” (1957) and will pervade *Otherwise Than Being* (1974) throughout, where it plays something like the role that *distance* plays in *Totality and Infinity* (1961). (But see TO 93-94 for an early occurrence of the two terms as mutually defining.)

of the other, however, Levinas proposes a more immediate ‘reverse intentionality’ in which sensibility *signifies* without the mediation of consciousness. In *Otherwise Than Being* he calls this reversal of intentionality *proximity*. To encounter the neighbor is to be in *direct contact with the ethical*, without the mediation of any concepts.

It is this contact that decreative phenomenology tries to bring into prominence by attempting to eliminate or minimize the interference of the ‘I’. A phenomenology centered on analyzing one’s conscious experience of presence will not do, for one is not *conscious* of the neighbor’s *proximity*. One must instead bracket the conscious self in order to give the ethical relation, which is the only relation to the other, the chance to ‘appear’ through the phenomenologist’s own attention and non-active action.

The “obsessive proximity of the neighbor ... skip[s] the stage of consciousness” (CP 119)—not, of course, because consciousness is unnecessary for relating to the neighbor as other, but because something else has always already intruded, an “excess” or “exorbitance of proximity” (OB 90) that defers consciousness of the other out of respect for alterity. Oddly enough, this excess turns out to be the excess of an “*absence*.” In *Time and the Other*, Levinas explains that “the relationship with the Other is the *absence* of the other; not absence pure and simple, not the absence of pure nothingness, but absence in a horizon of the future, *an absence that is time*” (TO 90, my emphasis). Absence describes a consciousness invariably “arriving too late” to be consciousness of the neighbor *as other*. In ethical terms, one is “always late for the rendezvous with the neighbor” (CP 119) because one has always *already* accepted responsibility for him or her, prior to any decision or experience one can recall. One can only discover a *primordial* responsibility after the fact. The opportunity for taking it up voluntarily has not simply passed, it never existed. We have already seen that something like this absence characterizes the transcendence of God.⁴⁹¹

⁴⁹¹ “To the point of a possible confusion with the stirring of the *there is [il y a]*” (CP 166), as Levinas somewhat enigmatically expresses it. See Chapter 4 above, p. 245, on justice as proxy for an absent God.

While one can be late for appointments now and then, it is rightly considered a fault to be *always* late. Hence it should not be surprising that consciousness (*conscience*), unfailingly late for every other, cannot avoid becoming “bad conscience” (*mauvaise conscience*) (CP 120), as though there were something *evil* in relying on one’s consciousness of the other for what one knows about them—as in fact there is, for consciousness *excludes* alterity. Given what was argued in the previous section, however, it will come as no surprise that this evil has a redeeming effect—not that it constitutes a theodicy, since it leads, not to a justification of evil but to responsibility. That effect is time-consciousness, “a deference towards the absence of the Other” that makes room in the present for the yet-to-come.⁴⁹² Missing the other, as it cannot help doing, consciousness finds itself in a perpetual state of expectation. *Time passes* insofar as consciousness “withholds the demand for fulfillment”—or perhaps we should say, finds itself passively *frustrated* in its demand for fulfillment, as though incessantly and somewhat unpleasantly taken by surprise. This frustration, however, is precisely what gives the future, just as the other, a chance to arrive (DEH 143). When the future does arrive—when consciousness first becomes conscious of an object as (now) *this* or *that*—it is conscious not of the object itself but already only of its “retentional modification.” In John Drabinski’s words, “accomplished intentional consciousness is late to itself,”⁴⁹³ or as Levinas expresses the idea: “Consciousness is senescence and remembrance of things past” (DEH 145). The experience of time is the experience of one’s being ‘too late’ for everything.

Time is therefore consciousness aware of itself as making a world, but a world from which, so far as consciousness is concerned, the other is notably absent *as other*, for the other cannot be incorporated into any totality.⁴⁹⁴ The others we encounter must come from outside the constituted

⁴⁹² De Warren 2009, 267.

⁴⁹³ Drabinsky 2001, 146-7.

⁴⁹⁴ Here we encounter a fundamental difference between Levinas and Goodman as to what lies beyond one’s world. Goodman would say: nothing worth mentioning, because as soon as we mention it we have incorporated it into a modified ‘world’ of our own. Levinas’s ‘beyond’ is not simply the contrary of one’s world. One is responsible for the ‘beyond’ not because it is the contrary of what one constructs, but because

world of consciousness—indeed, from outside of time. Not only is the other absent from my past, present, and future in the diachronic sense that she has her own past, present, and future, but this absence is the mysterious source of my own temporal experience. Without the encounter with the other, it would never ‘occur’ to consciousness, so to speak, to make room in the present for the next moment. So extraordinary a move needs a precedent, and it is the other who, as the original experience of alterity, provides it. “The proximity of the neighbor ... elevates me and, in the literal sense of the term, inspires me” (OB 124). That is, the other breathes into me an excess for which my constituted world proves too small. Consciousness continually finds its constituted present exceeded (OB 38). In thrusting some things aside to make more room, as it were, it finds itself forced outside of itself toward an exterior. Thus Levinas’s metaphor of a skin too tight for itself, is a metaphor for *time*. The ‘too much’ of the proximity of the other, from ‘outside’ one’s world, crowds the ‘same’ that, ‘inside’, still carries the credentials of presence, forcing it into retentive consciousness—hence, time’s passing.

The notion that the passage of time is an effect *the other* has on my sensibility—and hence is beyond intentionality and radically unpredictable—may be verified in the everyday fact that we so easily experience anxiety about the future. Anxiety about anything worldly would seem to follow naturally from the unavoidable proximity of the neighbor as absolute alterity. The other continually throws me off balance, against my will substituting “restlessness” for stability (OB 45). I have to *work* to keep the world familiar, and this inevitably entails the worry that at any moment I might not succeed. Indeed, the other is always there to guarantee that I never completely do—for if I were to succeed in making the world unvaryingly familiar thoroughly totalizing it, time would grind to a halt. There would be no surprise incursions, no openings through which the other could again fill my ‘now’ to overflowing. Everything would have its *place*, the place from which each being would invite its unconcealment, but in which there would

it is the other person, who fails to be part of one’s world in a far more profound sense than this logical failure.

be no *non-place* where I would be able to meet the neighbor. Without a neighbor to approach, I would never become a subject:

As a subject who approaches, I am not in the approach called to play the role of a perceiver who reflects and welcomes, animated by intentionality, the light of the clearing [*l'ouvert*] and the grace and mystery of the world. Proximity is not a state, a repose, but, precisely anxiety [*précisément inquiétude*], a *no-place* [*non-lieu*] outside of any place of rest [*hors le lieu du repos*], disturbing the calm [*bouleversant le calme*] of the non-ubiquity of any being that would become a resting in place—always, therefore, *insufficiently* proximity, like an embrace [*qui se fait repos en un lieu, toujours par conséquent insuffisamment proximité, comme une étreinte*]. “Never close enough,” proximity does not congeal into a structure, except when, represented in the demand for justice, reversible, it reverts into a simple relation. Proximity, as the “closer and closer,” *becomes* the subject [*comme le «de plus en plus proche» se fait sujet*].⁴⁹⁵

The proximity of the neighbor is the reason one must sometimes work just as hard, if not harder, to render the other faceless in order to do them harm. For this is an attempt to maintain control over one’s world to an excess, a degree approaching the paradigm of evil since it goes so far as to deny that I owe my subjectivity, my intentionality, to the other whom I have the intention to kill

⁴⁹⁵ OB 82 / AE 103, translation modified, emphasis added. In particular, I translate *non-lieu* as ‘no-place’ (in other passages, sometimes ‘no-where’), since Lingis’s “null site” sounds (at least to me) too technical and specialized. Levinas’s point surely is that in proximity one has, temporarily, no resting *place* in the network of everyday intentional relations we call society and world—a point about an aspect of ordinary life, often (but not always) hidden, which seems belied by anything resembling technical language. See also OB 48-49, where Levinas describes “out of any locus” (“*hors tout lieu*”) as “no longer dwelling, not stomping any ground” (“*n’habitant plus, ne foulant aucun sol*”), “neglecting one’s defenses.” This could also be translated as “altogether out of place,” that is, *dis-placed*, “homeless,” “utterly defenseless,” etc. It is surely not inappropriate to recall here the destitute with whom we all share a more general “destitution,” namely our vulnerability and mortality, which is indeed a kind of ‘homelessness’ in the world with which we otherwise feel at home. Cf. also TI 138: “The bit of earth that supports me is not only my object; it supports my experience of objects. Well-trampled places [*les lieux foulés*] do not resist me but support me. The relation with my site [*lieu*] in this ‘stance’ [*tenue*] precedes thought and labor.”

—or perhaps simply let die, the latter being at times so frightfully easy.⁴⁹⁶ “Proximity *is the subject* that approaches and consequently constitutes a relation in which I [as ego] participate as a term, but where I [as subject] am more, or less, than a term”: *more* than a term insofar as responsible for the other ‘term’, but *less* that a term when the terms of the relation are understood, in the usual practice, as objective identities, for the other “throws me outside of the objectivity characteristic of relations” in general (OB 82, emphasis and gloss added). The other reveals me to myself precisely in making me responsible for the relation. For this reason, verbs do not suffice to register human experience as both temporal and *relational*. Syncategorematic terms—especially pronouns such as *I* and *we*, *he* and *she*, meaningless except *in relation to* other terms—give witness, in our constant use of them, to the ethical subject as both temporal *and* relational.⁴⁹⁷

Thus the ethical arises continually, ever anew, from out of the annulment of distance created by the disruptive proximity of the other, and from there it overflows into everything else: knowledge, perception, consciousness itself, all of which depend on the proximity of the other for the space to enable worldmaking.⁴⁹⁸ Out of this dependence on the other, claims Levinas, arises response-ability—and with this ability perhaps an inescapable worry, hardly conscious, that I have taken the other’s place in the sun. “Proximity, as the ‘closer and closer’ ... attains its *superlative* [‘closest’] as *my* untransferable anxiety [*inquiétude incessible*]” (OB 82). Only then do I become ‘one’, that is, have an identity of sorts: by *forgetting* reciprocity. One makes the reciprocal relation of justice perfect by ignoring one direction of the attribute ‘reciprocal’.

⁴⁹⁶ See Peter K. Unger, *Living High and Letting Die: Our Illusion of Innocence* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996). Either way, “the perpetrator must strive to forget what is impossible to forget—that he or she is subject to the command not to murder” (Hatley 2000, 88), a command Levinas extends to include Pascal’s imperative not to take the other’s place in the sun (see above, p. 320n435).

⁴⁹⁷ Weil makes a similar observation about relation, typically (for her) in terms of Eastern thought: “To ‘think on the sound made by one hand’—this is to search for the relation between things whose only being lies in relation. This is the case with all things. Buddhist thought is of a Heracleitian turn” (N 406).

⁴⁹⁸ *Thematized* proximity, on the other hand, is already proximity at an ethical distance—and therefore no longer proximity in the sense Levinas means by the word. The moment I am conscious of your spatial proximity, for example, I momentarily forget that you are my neighbor, other, and not just an object. The same happens if (Levinas’s example) all I notice about you is the color of your eyes. Similarly, observation of details is not what Weil means by the important term ‘attention’ at the root of her own ethical thought.

One has no self but the self—more precisely, the subject—that signifies responsibility for the other, signifies not as a sign ordinarily signifies a signified, but as signification pure and simple. Levinas calls this the *signifyingness* of signification, implying that *all* signifying owes its efficacy to the proximity of the other (OB 85). What subjectivity signifies is not an independent self that just happens to be related to other selves, but a mode of meaningfulness permeating *all* meaning-making, one in which the other is always present in the most intimate sense, namely as *creating* one's very subjectivity. Alterity—wherever, whenever, and however one encounters it—is the atmosphere without which subjectivity would suffocate. Conversely, subjectivity—mine, but especially the other's—gives sense (orientation) to all signification whatsoever. It is no exaggeration to say that we owe our existence as conscious selves, as well as everything in our world that has meaning, to everyone who exists or has ever existed, without exception. Thus one should see worldmaking not as a challenge to the idea of external reality, but as evidence that all meaning is subjective: wholly dependent on the subjectivity of *subjects*.

Proximity is not a moral exigency calling only for a moral response; it is the co-incidence of the other with one's experience as a whole, calling forth the ethical, the primordial response of response-ability behind every response. Is the move towards subjectivity 'good' and the opposite move towards separation therefore 'evil'? Actually, the subject cannot do without either one. The oneself recapitulates the move from separation to subjectivity every instant.

In *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas calls physical suffering “the privileged situation where the ever-future evil becomes present,” “the extreme proximity of being [*l'être*] menacing the will” (TI 238). Here, in contrast to later works, “proximity” seems to have the ontological sense of the suffocating *facticity* of suffering. Always more than one could have imagined or expected, in Weil's words suffering is “an uprooting of life, a more or less attenuated equivalent of death, made irresistibly present to the soul by the attack or immediate apprehension of physical pain” (WG 68). The reason Levinas can say that suffering is “privileged” is that suffering is “the first one on the scene” in at least two senses. The primary sense is that of the “incessant exigency”

with which the “good violence” of alterity thrusts itself upon my conscious life even in adversity. Before I ever encounter the other, I have been marked by responsibility for her (OB 86). Any hint of this is painful to a self that thinks of itself as autonomous. The secondary sense is that of the other’s enabling my experience of anything whatsoever. Alterity clears the way for my suffering from world and *Being*, in the sense of *undergoing*. Without the other, there would only be a timeless “separation in contact” that would exclude the a priority of the ethical, of alterity. For the other “does not appear” but is always “*the first one on the scene*”—absolutely the first (OB 86). Kant derived ‘external’ experience from an ‘internal’ process prior to any consciousness of the objects perceived; Levinas now insists that prior even to that process, the other must already have prepared an ethical space in which it can take place. In other words, in order to know anything as what it is, or on a larger scale, to build a world, I need to be *taught* by the unknowable other how to do it (TI 92, 99). In confronting entities whose unfamiliarity I hope gradually to dispel by gaining more knowledge (“familiar anomalies”) I rely on an *absolutely unknowable* and “unfamiliar nomaly.”⁴⁹⁹

If the other’s proximity often seems to present itself as a threat, at the same time it promises an ever-renewed relationship, “a responsibility for the other” that “might be called humanity, or subjectivity, or self” (OB 46). What we call evil is often (if not always) the experience of alterity’s opposition to our efforts at totalization. The only efficacious resistance to evil is paradoxically a *refusal* to act, at least insofar as we *give up totalizing* the world by going toward the other not on our own initiative but as though drawn by a desire we cannot explain. To consent to this passivity is to validate one’s own decreation. The journey through evil to the Good is not a story about an already-constituted subject having a happy ending in another life, but the story of a subject that needs continually to be re-*subjectivized* every moment by encountering the other. One may be tempted to object that evil is worse than I have indicated here, or that the good is better.

⁴⁹⁹ The anomaly is “familiar” because I know it to be an irregularity in my world (see Visker 1999, 252). Anomaly = αν + μαλος (Gr. even, regular). The other person is an unfamiliar “nomaly” because ultimately I do not know her even though she is a regular occurrence in my world.

Levinas and Weil make it clear, however, that evil as excess, present every instant, is already evil enough, *excessive* enough, to make one's ethical task sufficiently clear. One's responsibility, on the other hand, as "the-one-for-the-other ... never an *enough*," is as much "goodness" as one needs in *this* life (OB 138), the only life one has to live here and now. In the chapter that follows we will add to this already dialectically complicated picture of worldmaking and the good/evil dichotomy the further subtlety of Levinas's controversial notion of persecution. This will prove to be the key to making the final transition to the idea that the ethical is *expiation for the other*, a notion to which Levinas and Weil each add their own characteristic nuances. We will then be in a position to apply these ideas to the problems of witnessing to atrocity and the vulnerability of ethics.

6.0 Persecution as Vulnerability

Man has no power whatever, and yet he does have a responsibility. — Simone Weil⁵⁰⁰

Persecution is not something added to the subjectivity of the subject and his vulnerability; it is the very movement of recurrence ... recurrence of the self in responsibility for others, a persecuting obsession.

— Emmanuel Levinas⁵⁰¹

Emmanuel Levinas's claim that the persecuted are responsible even for their persecutors is notorious. Paul Ricoeur is not alone in finding it offensive, citing Levinas's use of the word 'persecution' as an example of his "verbal terrorism."⁵⁰² Hilary Putnam, borrowing a phrase that Levinas, in an interview with Philippe Nemo, himself uses to describe a possible reaction to his ideas, is indeed "scandalized by this utopian ... inhuman conception."⁵⁰³ In that same interview, however, Levinas characterized these ideas as "extreme formulas which must not be detached from their context."⁵⁰⁴ Any consideration of the relevance of Levinas's philosophical work to our understanding of the status of the victims of atrocity and our responsibility towards them would seem obligated to confront his "extreme formula" of persecution. The difficulty would be to discover the appropriate context, in spite of—or perhaps, more precisely, *through*—the very

⁵⁰⁰ "The future corresponds to responsibility, the past to powerlessness. And all that which is to come will become the past" (N 97).

⁵⁰¹ OB 111.

⁵⁰² P. Ricoeur, "Otherwise: A Reading of Emmanuel Levinas's *Otherwise Than Being, or Beyond Essence*," *Yale French Studies* 104 (2004), 82-99: 92.

⁵⁰³ H. Putnam, *Jewish Philosophy as a Guide to Life* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008), 97.

⁵⁰⁴ "Ethics and Infinity," *CrossCurrents* 34(2) (Summer 1984), 191-203: 195-96.

language he employs. For it may be supposed that Levinas's language has an ethical point beyond whatever shock value, accidental or deliberate, it might possess.

The natural objection to Levinas's claim is that, by making the persecuted responsible even for their persecutors, he fails to take sufficient account of the suffering of the persecuted, reversing what seems to be the obvious moral priority of the persecutor's responsibility for the suffering he inflicts. But as we have seen, Levinas uses the word responsibility in a different sense than the usual one. He would not deny that the persecutor is responsible for the suffering he causes insofar as the persecutor is answerable for his actions. We might call this a *judicial* sense of responsibility. Indeed, Levinas reserves the word *justice* specifically for concern over the other person's responsibilities and not exclusively one's own. He means something different, however, by responsibility as *ethical*, namely the principle, as he sees it, that human subjectivity is defined by the possibility of *substituting* for every other person. In Chapter 1, a case was made for interpreting substitution in Weil's terms as decreation.⁵⁰⁵

Levinas uses the word *persecution* in a similarly heterodox manner, to denote a condition so basic that even consciousness itself is a reaction to a kind of persecution. In light of the conclusions of the previous chapter, the reader will not be surprised to learn that something normally considered *evil* is, for Levinas, at the foundation of all *meaning*. In order to see the point of these ideas, the reader may want to substitute mentally the word 'subjection' for 'persecution'—for *subjectivity* is *subjection* to the other—keeping in mind that, for Levinas, subjectivity is radically responsibility-ridden, *ethical* 'all the way down'. Levinas's point is that

⁵⁰⁵ Giorgio Agamben evidently sees no legitimacy, or at least no use, in making such distinctions. Levinas's failure, according to Agamben, is to have created confusion in ethics by simplistically attempting to introduce into it a purely legal term. See Agamben 1999, 22. This criticism seems to assume that it is never a good idea in philosophy to stretch the meanings of words beyond their customary limits. It is arguable, however, that if such were indeed the rule, philosophy would never have anything useful or interesting to say, for philosophy might even be defined as the attempt to stretch language beyond the bounds of usual sense—implying that it comes very close to poetry, as Eastern philosophy in fact does. Rather than consign Levinas to irrelevance based on his (mis)use of a key word, might it not be better first to seek to understand Levinas's point in doing so, and then to suggest a more appropriate word, if one exists? Does not Agamben, as a philosopher, stretch the limits of language himself?

subjectivity is not just a limitation on one's freedom by the other; it is the 'evil' of persecution. Not only are we responsible *for* every person, even in the extraordinary case in which we are the victim of the other's violence, but there is a sense in which each of us is persecuted *by* (subjected to the will of) every other, and not only by our enemies. This takes the form of a reversal of intentionality, an "inversion of consciousness" (BPW 81) wherein one's intentional grasp of the other, one's comprehension of them even on the most basic level of noticing that they share space in one's immediate vicinity, is anticipated by the other's prior apprehension or appropriation of oneself in the form of a moral demand (see below on the phenomenon of *reflexion*, pp. 397-403). One's encounter with another person is not initially by way of the intentional act of an ego free to make judgments about what it grasps, which it then calls knowledge of 'experience'. One's first encounter with the other is through a pre-conscious call to take responsibility for them, a finding-them-in-my-place (*chez-moi*) that Levinas refers to as substitution, a placing in doubt of one's very freedom. Response-ability, evil, persecution, subsequently become the basis for all of one's 'experiences'.

Another way in which to understand this paradox is to note that for Levinas freedom does not precede responsibility, for freedom is derived from responsibility prior to consciousness, through the other. Hence freedom does not precede persecution either. It follows that persecution (in Levinas' sense) cannot be a violation of one's freedom, since one is free only *because* one is persecuted. Freedom as persecution is a description of Levinas's concept of finite freedom, which we will treat in more detail later in this chapter. Persecution in the guise of finite freedom is not conscious, since it is concomitant with response-ability and the origin of consciousness. Even as the other person does real violence to me, he has a claim on my responsibility older than justice, of which neither he nor I are usually aware. Levinas's controversial assertion that the persecuted are responsible even for their persecutors then becomes the acknowledgement that we are all of us 'persecuting' one another all the time with the demands of responsibility, continually soliciting

one another for a *response* of some kind. To be human is to be an importunate beggar, “hostage” to the other’s largesse.

One might wonder why Levinas feels the need for such extreme language, especially since it appears to dilute the meanings of certain words (persecution, hostage) which in ordinary use are of extreme importance to the problems of justice. Why call the interruption of consciousness by the other “the passivity of a trauma” and then go on to characterize this passivity as “the passivity of being persecuted” (OB 111)? I would argue that it is for two reasons: first, because the greater danger might be in isolating the mechanisms of injustice from those that govern the individual human soul. The latter are the theme of the present chapter. But secondly, Levinas is still working on the root problem with which he began his earlier work *Totality and Infinity*, that of understanding why we need not be “duped by morality” (TI 21) even after the radical trauma and persecution epitomized by Auschwitz.⁵⁰⁶ The Shoah, as no event before or since, has made it starkly evident to many of its witnesses that ethical motivations for acting are as vulnerable as the individual human lives that have tended to rely on them. *Totality and Infinity* was Levinas’s first general attempt to address the worry that we have entered an era best characterized as one in which there are no limits to evil, and hence a permanent state of uncertainty as to the reality of ethics and the point of believing in the Good.

Levinas’s revolutionary approach to this state of affairs is to show that persecution and trauma, radically expanded in sense and scope, are not only at the foundation of human existence but are responsible for whatever has *meaning*—from the meaning that derives from nothing more sophisticated than sensual experience of ordinary physical objects, to the very meaning of ethics.

⁵⁰⁶ This makes *Otherwise Than Being*, contrary to most interpretations, a deeply political work. “Derrida did not comment much on what was guiding Levinas beyond showing himself aware of the fact that *Totality and Infinity* was written against totalitarianism and oppression. ... To be sure, this insight was of itself impressive, given that the term ‘totalitarianism’ appears nowhere in *Totality and Infinity* and the term ‘oppression’ only once, and given that almost all commentators on Levinas miss this dimension of the book, as well as many later ones” (Robert Bernasconi, “There Is Neither Jew Nor Greek: The Strange Dialogue Between Levinas and Derrida,” in *A Companion to Derrida*, Zeynep Direk and Leonard Lawlor, eds., Blackwell Publishing, 2014, 261).

There is, first of all, our inherent vulnerability as beings living in a world that is socially and personally constructed, and therefore capable of being destroyed at any moment by the reaction to excess commonly known as trauma. Levinas extends the meaning of trauma to include every ordinary, as well as extraordinary, encounter with the neighbor. The neighbor continually calls into question one's personal integrity as a self free to decide its relations to others and to itself. As a result, one is held to account, "persecuted" for having usurped the other's rightful place in the world.

Persecution and trauma are inevitable characteristics of human existence as profoundly ethical. Continually "persecuted" by everyone I encounter, and "traumatized" by their accusation and the resulting vulnerability of my world, I become profoundly dependent on the other for constructing a coherent worldview with which we can both live in some semblance of harmony. This reliance on the other, expanded to responsibility for all others, only results in further self-exposure and vulnerability.

It is in the course of the individuation of the ego in me that is realized the elevation in which the ego is for the neighbor, summoned to answer for him. When this relation is really thought through, it signifies the wound that cannot heal over of the self in the ego accused by the other to the point of persecution, and responsible for its persecutor. Subjection and elevation arise in patience above non-freedom. It is the subjection of the allegiance to the Good. (OB 126)

Without others, I could not live with my vulnerability to others. Nonetheless, Levinas maintains, human existence is persecution in the sense that one's neighbor never leaves one free to rest in whatever identity one claims for oneself. Whoever the neighbor is from one moment to the next, they always give one something more to do, and therefore something more to be, than what one

has so far been comfortable with being. Hence I owe my being, as ethical, to every other, not to Being, and thereby discover ethics to be responsibility for persecuted and persecutor alike.

But this does not yet fully answer the question of how Levinas's hyperbolic language benefits our understanding of, and ability to deal with, persecution and trauma in their more usual, more virulent forms. How can thinking of oneself as persecuted in Levinas's hyperbolic sense help one to work for justice for the truly persecuted, the victims of marginalization, torture, and war? As in the case of evil, we seem faced with both 'normal' (ethical, in Levinas's sense) and 'radical' (virulent) forms of persecution and trauma.⁵⁰⁷ But in an almost exact parallel with evil, so I will argue, normal ethical persecution explains radical virulent persecution and suggests how one might deal with it. Under the right conditions, the normal form can very easily and quickly escalate into the radical form. On the nature of this transition, Weil perhaps gives us more explicit clues than does Levinas. Weil is perhaps the more overtly political of the two. But the point of calling both forms *persecution* is that both are founded on the same subjectivity-defining susceptibility to what Levinas calls the accusation of the other: the 'trauma' of an encounter that calls my world, my very being into question. The difference between the normal and radical forms of persecution is the very real and painful difference of *excess* characterizing the difference between good and evil.

6.1 Weil on Necessity and Vulnerability

It is much easier to imagine oneself having a duty to be responsive to another's *suffering* than to imagine oneself responsible for their *deeds*—"responsible for what the others do" and not only "for what they ... suffer" (OB 112)—especially when the other's deeds are evil. It is all the more

⁵⁰⁷ Radical in the sense Kant means in the phrase 'radical evil'. Normal persecution is of course 'radical' in the sense of being more deeply rooted than virulent persecution.

difficult when one is the victim of the other's misdeeds. But for Weil, if not as radically as for Levinas, one is just as responsible for everything the other person *does*, at least insofar as one is able to respond (response-able) *to* their deeds, as one is for alleviating their suffering whenever that is possible. Weil, however, sees very little difference between doing and suffering in at least one respect, which is for her a basic axiom: in whatever one does, one is ruled entirely by Necessity. All of one's *doing*, however freely one may think one acts, is *suffering*, and therefore no more under one's control than the law of gravity. In *Waiting for God* Weil writes:

If we examine human society and souls closely and with real attention, we see that wherever the virtue of supernatural light is absent, everything is obedient to mechanical laws as blind and as exact as the laws of gravitation. To know this is profitable and necessary. Those whom we call criminals are only tiles blown off a roof by the wind and falling at random. Their only fault is the initial choice by which they became such tiles. (WG 75 = SWR 447)

Those who think they obey a will of their own follow Necessity unknowingly and deceive themselves, while those who have begun the process of decreation possess at least a minimal capacity to follow Necessity with some degree of awareness and consent. Here Weil is not only a determinist, she seems to see Necessity as purely mechanical. The powers and talents we attribute to people are impersonally "inscribed in the world" so that power becomes nothing more than "part of reality, [part] of matter (situation of my body in space, mechanical energy which it contains)" (N 48). One possesses the abilities one has only in the same way that a rock on a steep hillside possesses the ability to roll downhill if unimpeded. One has no more reason to be proud of one's abilities and talents than of one's bodily obedience to gravity.

This universe where we are living, and of which we form a tiny particle, is the distance put by Love between God and God. We are a point in this distance. Space, time, and the

mechanism that governs matter are the distance. Everything that we call evil is only this mechanism. God has provided that when his grace penetrates to the very center of man and from there illuminates all his being, he is able to walk on the water without violating any of the laws of nature. When, however, a man turns away from God, he simply gives himself up to the law of gravity. Then he thinks that he can decide and choose, but he is only a thing, a stone that falls. (WG 75)

Since human beings are vulnerable to the core, they are always subject to mechanical Necessity. Perhaps only a self that had become totally decreed, were such a self humanly possible, would be capable of walking on water, but to consider this question as though there were a dichotomy between having “grace penetrate to the very center” on the one hand, and following the dictates of Necessity on the other, is ill-advised for two reasons. First, one is no less subject to Necessity in the first case than in the second, for as Weil says elsewhere, God does not use his power to override the laws of Necessity even for a moment, having relinquished this power in order that things and human beings might simply *be*. It is because one is in the world, and thus never exempt from the laws of Necessity, that one needs grace. But second, to view grace and Necessity as a dichotomy is to view them in terms of ontology and not in terms of obedience. Ontologically, ‘walking on water’ would be an observable fact, a true miracle, as one would be inclined to say. But is the ontological view indeed the best? Viewed spiritually—in Weil’s sense of spiritual, as grounded on obedience—a miracle only generates contradictions. It is a *spiritual* truth for Weil that even someone who walks on water will necessarily obey the law of gravity (N 129), for Necessity is one of the two faces of God. This leaves us with a contradiction. But as we saw in Chapter 2, contradictions are meant to be *used*: they have a spiritual and ethical significance that can enable us to move to what Weil calls a “higher level” of awareness or experience. To read the biblical story of a so-called miracle as an ontological fact—to try to ‘explain it’ whether scientifically or theologically—is to miss entirely the point of taking the trouble to read it. A

higher-level lesson of the contradiction—that is, an *ethical* lesson, leaving one responsible—would be that whether or not the ‘miracle’ occurs, one has no will of one’s own. Learning this is, for Weil, all that matters in any case.⁵⁰⁸

However essential for organizing our knowledge and experience of the world, ascribing abilities and powers to ourselves or to others (and this would include so-called miracles) is misleading for yet another, more deeply ethical reason: it is in reality a deliberate subterfuge we use in order to forget the one thing we have in common with every other person, the vulnerability Weil calls our common human “misery”:

Owing to the fact that the whole soul has not managed to know and accept human misery, we think there must be a difference between human beings, and consequently we fail to be just, either by drawing a distinction between our advantage and that of other people, or else by marking a preference for certain individuals from among other people.

This comes from the fact that we do not know that human misery represents a constant and irreducible quantity and exists in every man in the largest possible form; and that greatness comes from a one and only God, so that every man is identical with every other man.

(N 237)

⁵⁰⁸ How necessary is a will of one’s own anyway? Writes Daniel Dennett: “Are decisions voluntary? Or are they things that happen to us? From some *fleeting* vantage points they seem to be the preeminently voluntary moves of our lives, the *instants* at which we exercise our agency to the fullest [emphasis added]. But those same decisions can also be seen to be strangely out of our control. We have to wait to see how we are going to decide something, and when we do decide, our decision bubbles up to consciousness from we know not where. We do not witness it being *made*; we witness its *arrival*. This can then lead to the strange idea that Central Headquarters is not where we, as conscious introspectors, are; it is somewhere deeper within us, and inaccessible to us. E. M. Forster famously asked ‘How can I tell what I think until I see what I say?’—the words of an outsider, it seems, waiting for a bulletin from the interior” (Daniel C. Dennett, *Elbow Room: The Varieties of Free Will Worth Wanting*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1984, 78). The fact that the “vantage points” are “fleeting” and that the phenomenon in question occurs in an “instant” suggests Kierkegaard’s notion of the instant or “moment” (*Øieblikket*, the “twinkling of an eye”), central to his theory of time-consciousness in *The Concept of Anxiety*. Kierkegaard’s pseudonym, Vigilius Haufniensis, associates the instant with the moment of decision and the biblical “fullness of time.” ‘Existing’ outside of time and consciousness, the instant is the source of both. See Kangas 2007, Ch. 6.

Weil repeatedly uses the word “irreducible” when describing human suffering:

When we lose something, we suffer for a finite length of time. We pass through a finite length of time, a finite amount of suffering (although at the time it seems to us infinite). An irreducible amount; no act of will can diminish it. After which, a bond is severed. (N 210)

To attain detachment, mustn't we also have to pass through that amount of irreducible pain, equal, in the case of each thing, to what we should have to bear if we lose it? (N 211)

Is there not an irreducible constant in the modifications of the soul—which, once recognized, would serve as a criterion so as to do away with the illusions standing in the way of spiritual progress? / E.g. the suffering which corresponds to a severance of one of the bonds attaching to the soul to this world is perhaps irreducible—so that, if one has not exhausted it, this bond subsists in a dissimulated or disguised form. (N 213-14)

My misery is infinite with respect to my will, but it is finite with respect to grace. Thus it can exhaust itself, and perfection is possible. Grace is something infinitely big of the second order. But my misery is, with respect to grace, finite, not infinitely small. It can exhaust itself; but it is necessary that it should exhaust itself. Irreducible quantity. There are equivalences, but no economy of labor is possible. If the slightest bit remains of a human being, that human being is a long way from the state of perfection. (N 249)

The story of Christ is the experimental proof that human misery is irreducible, that it is as great in the absolutely sinless man as in the sinner. Only it is enlightened. (N 235-36)

Here Weil seems to imply that no one has an easier time than anyone else in cutting his ties to the world and to the will. The effort required is a fixed quantity, the same for all human beings, like a physical constant. One can no more diminish the pain or necessity of severing oneself from the illusion of having a will than one can alter the speed of light. Even Christ on the cross was no exception to this rule, otherwise he could not have been the absolute paradigm for human suffering. This assertion will no doubt seem counter-intuitive. But since there is no quantitative measure of the effort to disarm the will, or of human misery, might there be good *spiritual* reasons (as Weil would say), and perhaps good *ethical* reasons (in Levinas's sense), for *assuming* it, or at least for not dismissing it as an ethically or spiritually efficacious possibility?

While it does not excuse the evil-doer, a belief that the evil-doer shares with everyone else the same irreducible quantity of human misery—or the refusal to assume that he does not—should at the very least introduce into one's condemnation of his acts, no matter how atrocious, a certain measure of pity. This gives us a way—perhaps the only reasonable way—in which we can understand ourselves as substitutable even for Eichmann or Himmler. It is not that we would do exactly what they did had we been in their place. It is not clear that such hypotheticals even make sense; what does it mean for *me* to be in *someone else's* place?⁵⁰⁹ It is rather that we have in common with every human being who has ever lived, even the worst, an equivalent share of vulnerability to suffering which 'measures' our immeasurable distance from the Good. If Eichmann can legitimately be described as having been more evil than most people, it is ultimately because he was less able or less willing to consent to his vulnerability. Conversely, the less one is willing to accept the fact that one is irreducibly vulnerable, the more likely it is that one will take advantage of the vulnerability of others by forcing them to do one's own share of suffering, as one sees it. This is in fact Weil's alternative definition of evil: an evil act is one that has for its purpose the deliberate reduction of one's own suffering at the expense of another

⁵⁰⁹ We are not, of course, speaking here of substitution, which is finding the other in one's "non-place." It is precisely because I am *not* in the other's *place* that I find him in a *non-place* within me. See p. 299 above.

person's.⁵¹⁰ Note that what makes an act evil according to this definition is not its result in terms of suffering produced, but the evildoer's *intention* to avoid *his or her own suffering*. While this seems to accord with the popular but dubious view that an act can be truly evil only if the intention is evil, an essential difference lies in *what* is intended: not 'evil' (this begs the question) but the avoidance of suffering. And this seems quite right. If the amount of human misery is "irreducibly" fixed, as Weil expresses it, then of course any attempt to reduce it is an illusion. Might this in fact be what she means by the irreducibility of suffering—that it just does not make sense to quantify it, as we essentially do by trying to diminish our suffering at another's expense? The quantity that one supposedly avoids simply goes underground, as it were, only to surface again in oneself in some other form (N 214). For Weil, this is the lesson of Job.

The refusal to accept one's own vulnerability seems to be a universal human failing, which the National Socialists were far from unique in endeavoring to turn into a virtue.⁵¹¹ As Susan Derwin suggests, the Nazi innovation was to *industrialize* the projection of their own vulnerability onto a fixed subset of humanity who became their victims.

The Nazis' victimization of the Jews and others, though "justifiable" through explicitly and intentionally dehumanizing metaphors, was underwritten by an intolerance of a fundamentally human condition of vulnerability whose only 'solution' was the *production* of victims who were made to embody that condition and whose destruction promised release from it.⁵¹²

By avoiding their allotment of suffering at the expense of producing greater suffering in others in a systematic way, all that the Nazis were really doing was proving that the most depraved person

⁵¹⁰ An attempt at the reduction of one's own suffering at the expense of someone else implies a reduction of one's sense of reality, hence it is equivalent to Weil's definition of evil we gave earlier.

⁵¹¹ Cf. Agamben 1999, 77-78.

⁵¹² Derwin 2012, 13-14, emphasis added.

is substitutable for the most saintly or innocent. First of all, both the depraved and the saintly inevitably and unceasingly follow Necessity in everything they do; there is absolutely no difference between them in that respect. But secondly, one's irreducible "misery"—that is, one's vulnerability before Necessity, or one's *mortality*, as Levinas often calls it—ultimately defines each person without exception by one and the same attribute: the desire that good and not evil be done to one.

For now, we note that Weil's notion of Necessity sheds some light on the perennial problem of the extent to which we can or should identify with those who do evil. Strictly speaking, there is no contradiction between (1) Primo Levi's observation that the concentration camps were a "gray zone" where "no group was more human than any other"⁵¹³—which Agamben quotes alongside of David Rousset's "Victim and executioner are equally ignoble; the lesson of the camps is brotherhood in abjection,"⁵¹⁴ and then goes on to declare, with regard to the impossibility of passing judgment in the gray zone, "It is about this above all that the survivors are in agreement"—and (2) Levi's comment: "I do not know, nor does it interest me much to know, whether in my depths there lurks a murderer, but I do know that I was a guiltless victim, and I was not a murderer," to which he adds that to confuse the victim with the murderer "is precious service rendered (intentionally or not) to the negators of truth."⁵¹⁵ On the one hand, under the right conditions, any victim, however innocent, can turn ignoble in the effort to survive, for Necessity uniformly makes the whole human race a "brotherhood in abjection." In this sense, we are no different from any of those in the concentration camps. On the other hand, it is also true that only some of us are murderers or the victims of murderers in the strict sense, and that it is of the greatest importance to maintain the distinction as a matter of justice. What we may find hard to

⁵¹³ *Conversazioni e interviste* (Turin: Einaudi, 1997), 232, quoted in G. Agamben 1999, 17.

⁵¹⁴ David Rousset, *Univers Concentrationnaire* (Paris, 1947), 588. Also quoted in Agamben, and in Arendt 1994, 453n156.

⁵¹⁵ Levi 2017, 36-37. Levi is responding to film director Lilian Cavani's assertion that "We are all victims or murderers, and we accept these roles voluntarily. Only Sade and Dostoevsky have really understood this." See Derwin 2012, 50n8.

accept is the possibility this suggests, that the difference between becoming a murderer and becoming a victim may be accidental. But what we call ‘accidental’ is the result of Necessity and therefore, according to Weil, determined. We call it accident or chance only because we are ignorant of the cause. This justifies Lilian Cavani’s claim that “we are all victims or murderers” if she means that we are such *potentially*. She was wrong, however, to attribute the distinction to voluntary choice without qualification—for a better way to do it, recall Weil’s metaphor of the tiles (p. 375)—and Levi perhaps had every right to take offense. Yes, at some point Levi made a choice, many choices, but it was not that of becoming a victim. Or a murderer, at least as far as anyone—including, by his own account, himself—has been able to tell. As dependent on Necessity, the irreducibility of suffering is simply a description of *being*.

Weil considers it one of the more profound teachings of Christ that insofar as God is Necessity, Love has an impersonal deterministic side. In *The Need for Roots*, after acknowledging that the idea of divine Providence as “personal” is well known from the Gospels, she writes:

But the conception of an impersonal Providence, and one in a sense almost analogous to a mechanism, is also to be found there. “That ye may be the children of your Father which is in heaven: for he maketh his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sendeth rain on the just and on the unjust ... Be ye perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect” (Matt. v, 45, 48). Thus it is this blind impartiality characteristic of inert matter, it is this relentless regularity characterizing the order of the world, completely indifferent to men’s individual quality, and because of this so frequently accused of injustice—it is this which is held up as a model of perfection to the human soul. It is a conception of so profound a significance that we are not even today capable of grasping it; contemporary Christianity has completely lost touch with it. (NR 259-60, translation slightly altered)

For Weil, the lesson of the scriptural verse she quotes here is not metaphysical, having to do with ‘the way things are’ independently of us—or ontological, having to do with being and non-being. It is instead what she calls a “supernatural” insight pertaining to the “perfection” of a “human soul.” She means that it pertains to knowing what is worth desiring. Weil makes an implicit distinction between desire for the Good, which longs for something unattainable without concern for the question of its existence or nonexistence, and the ordinary desires which Levinas calls *needs* and which make sense solely within the modality of satisfaction or failure of satisfaction.⁵¹⁶ The only *real* object of desire for Weil is God or the Good, since all else is nothingness. Even when we ‘desire’ things that are harmful, yet in truth are nothing, our desiring makes them seem truly good to us and therefore puts us at least indirectly in touch with the Good. This implies that we can be mistaken about *what* is good—and invariably are—without forfeiting our ability to know the difference between ‘good things’ and *the* Good. It is just that we rarely make the distinction present to ourselves. Weil is claiming that we all have the ability to distinguish between ‘good things’ and the Good, despite the fact that we often dismiss the idea of *the Good* as abstract and useless when we hear the phrase in conversation. But perhaps we dismiss it in part because, as with the saying and the said, we sense that it is impossible to *speak* of the Good without betraying it. For “all that we conceive in the mind is imperfect, as we are, and what is imperfect is not the good” (N 491).

Weil directly challenges the common assumption that love is incompatible with indifference.⁵¹⁷ If one asks how Providence can be loving and indifferent at the same time, she answers that the indifference of Necessity is the only thing that can truly *detach* us from the false

⁵¹⁶ Recall that Weil’s use of the word desire is not as consistent as Levinas’s. She does not always make a sharp distinction between need and desire.

⁵¹⁷ Although one does find examples of it, in life and in literature: “Later on, when, in the course of my life, I have had occasion to meet with, in convents for instance, literally saintly examples of practical charity, they have generally had the brisk, decided, undisturbed, and slightly brutal air of a busy surgeon, the face in which one can discern no commiseration, no tenderness at the sight of suffering humanity, and no fear of hurting it, the face devoid of gentleness or sympathy, the sublime face of true goodness.” Proust, *Swann’s Way, Remembrance of Things Past*, tr. C.K. Scott Moncrieff (New York: Random House, 1932-34), 62.

objects of our love—which is to say, from every object in the world. The indifference of Necessity, especially when it takes the form of the ‘evils’ of death, disease, and natural disasters, makes it impossible to love the Good except *through and beyond evil*. This, for Weil, is the highest form of love humanly possible. To love anything in this way is to love God, even if one claims to be an atheist.

Therein lies an irreducible form of evil, without compensation. We must never seek an external compensation for evil in some form of good which balances it, whether or not the evil and the good be linked together by a bond of necessity. For in this way we deprive ourselves of the most precious use to be made of evil, which is to love God through and beyond evil as such.

We must love God through and beyond evil as such; love him through and beyond the evil that we hate, while hating the evil; love him as the author of the evil that we are in process of hating.

Evil is to love what mystery is to the intelligence. Just as mystery constrains the virtue of faith to be supernatural, so likewise does evil act in regard to the virtue of charity. And to try to find compensations, justifications for evil[,] is as harmful for the cause of charity as it is to try to expound the content of the mysteries on the plane of human intelligence. (N 340-41)

It must be borne in mind that despite the fact that everything good in this world is by Necessity mixed with evil, there is an “infinite distance” between the two faces of God, Necessity and Love (N 400 and many other passages). This infinite distance has its parallel in Levinas’s absolute distinction between Being and the Good, the ontological and the ethical. For Levinas, the two terms in each pair are absolutely irreducible to one another.

For Weil, the determinism of Necessity, because it serves Love, reveals itself as resistance to our will, even to the extent sometimes of threatening our very existence. When Weil writes that “all created things in this world, myself included, refuse to become ends for me” and calls this “God’s extreme mercy toward me” (N 495), her intent is to ratify the fact that all things continually resist my attempt to find in them, and not in God, the good that I desire. This, for her, is the work of grace, reminding me that the good is nowhere to be found in this world. The Good, Weil says, is “nonexistent” (N 220). It is not a *being*. Regarding Weil’s claim that the Good does not exist, Lissa McCullough asks and answers the natural question:

In what sense, then, can the good be real for a human being if it does not exist? How does this nonexistent good, this plenitude of nothingness, have value—even absolute value—as more real than anything that exists? Weil’s response to this question is deeply dialectical: *the reality of the good is created in and through the reality of the desire for it*. The good “exists” for desire precisely *in* the desire for it, as the absent object of desire: good as ‘nothingness’. “This nothingness is at least as real as we are ourselves. For our very being itself is nothing else than this need for the good. The absolute good lies wholly in this need” (N 491).⁵¹⁸

We have already touched upon the reality of the good as the object of desire in Chapter 1. We can therefore express Weil’s idea by adopting Levinas’s language, with a slight change in meaning, in the following way: the face that God shows us as Necessity ‘persecutes’ us in order to force our love in the direction of its only legitimate object. Persecution is how Necessity looks to a creature that habitually seeks the good everywhere but in the right place, in the love of (that is, the desire for) the Good itself. McCullough explains how for Weil this is simply an expression of a basic fact of life: “We exist as an incarnation of the creator-creature contradiction, which is a contradiction between the good and the necessary: we are finite creatures, ruled by necessity,

⁵¹⁸ McCullough 2014, 64, emphasis in original.

whose desire for infinite good is bereft of its object by the very fact of our being finite creatures.”⁵¹⁹ If the true good is infinite, then anything at all that prevents us from mistakenly seeking the Good in what is finite should be considered an effect of grace, provided that what prevents us is not an experience so violent that it kills the desire for the good in us altogether. It may be that grace is only known as grace by its close proximity to the evil of one’s own destruction, as though grace were a good coming about through one’s just barely avoiding the greatest possible evil. Weil’s dialectic between finite creature and infinite good corresponds to Levinas’s version of Descartes’ definition of infinity, according to which infinity is the sole idea whose ideatum exceeds the idea itself. We can say that for both Weil and Levinas, the idea of the Good is the sole idea whose ideatum exceeds in goodness every human idea of goodness itself, and in particular everything in the world human beings call good.

For Weil, the desire for the good is the only human reality, “our very being itself” (N 491). It is identical in every human being, hence we might call it another “irreducible”. A human being just *is* this desire for the good and essentially nothing more. Since the desire for the good is a measure of one’s vulnerability, we can say also that human being just *is* vulnerability, a vulnerability infinitely greater than that of anything else in this world (the vulnerability of which would be derivative) and equal only to the vulnerability of the Good itself, the vulnerability of ethics. Since every good on this earth is necessarily accompanied by some evil, the desire for the good always involves deprivation and suffering—as it were, persecution by Necessity. What Weil does not explicitly do, of course, is to trace this suffering, and hence one’s vulnerability, to one’s dependence on the neighbor for one’s very subjectivity. Nevertheless, Weil probably would not be scandalized by Levinas’s contention that all one’s relations with the neighbor, in fact one’s very self, are grounded on what he calls persecution, one’s vulnerability to being called into question by every other.

⁵¹⁹ McCullough 2014, 61.

6.2 Levinas on Vulnerability and Persecution

Levinas's radicalization of persecution occurs late in his work. We do not find any earlier use of the word with quite the sense it has in *Otherwise Than Being* (1974), except in the essay "Substitution" (1968), precursor of Chapter 4 of *Otherwise Than Being*, where it suddenly plays a central role. Clearly Levinas's introduction of the idea reflects a major change of emphasis, even if it does not signal a change in theme.

Levinas's notion of persecution is in part an answer to Derrida's critical essay of 1964, "Violence and Metaphysics,"⁵²⁰ in which Derrida accuses Levinas of inconsistently using ontological language to describe the beyond Being of the ethical. In *Otherwise Than Being*, Levinas in effect responds that if, as he had been arguing since the 1930s,⁵²¹ one is invested by an unsatisfiable desire to escape from Being, it is because in some sense one is *persecuted* by Being itself, a persecution that would likely subvert the very attempt to leave ontological language behind. That there is a way to leave it behind is implied in Levinas's notion of the *saying*, which might be defined as the trace in every said of pure human vulnerability, the fact that every said, quite apart from its content, begs for a response—essentially, a response to the other's (and one's own) vulnerability. The danger Being poses is precisely its inordinate usurpation or *persecution* of the ethical by concealing the saying in the said. If the ontological *said* invariably betrays the ethical *saying*, philosophy's continual task is to find a way to "*reduce*" the said to the betrayed saying, perhaps through no more than simply making one aware of the saying behind the said. Even this little, however, is easier 'said' than done. For since the saying has no content, of what would one become aware?

The answer, of course, is *the vulnerable other*. We have been arguing since Chapter 4 that it is one's *self* or 'I' that obscures the saying in the said—consciousness deploying Being in spite of

⁵²⁰ Derrida 1978, 79-151.

⁵²¹ The idea first appears in the long essay, *On Escape* (1935).

itself, for it is really Being working through consciousness, as Heidegger is no doubt justified in insisting. A decreative removal of the self would make clear not Being but one's response-ability to the other, clarifying in the only way possible what the saying 'says' by giving one something to *do*. And there is *always* something to do with (and out of) respect to the other. Decreative phenomenology is the search for clarity by means of an "intersubjective reduction."⁵²² It analyzes the said starting from the axiom that both the other and oneself are more deeply vulnerable than one knows. For this reason it brackets everyday assumptions about the *ways* we are vulnerable. These assumptions, our so-called knowledge about 'life' and about the other, dissimulate the other inasmuch as it is precisely such knowledge based on one's being-in-the-world that conceals the saying, the other's (and one's own) fundamental vulnerability.

It follows that whatever 'conclusion' decreative phenomenology reaches is unavoidably provisional. In fact, it may consist of nothing more than the ability to ask the questions that would otherwise not "come to mind"—questions as simple as "What are you going through?" The process is decreative in refusing to anticipate answers or settle for more than interim conclusions, a relentless self-skepticism that goes all the way to abdicating one's self and its desire for positive knowledge. Out of respect for an other whose otherness must be preserved at all costs, one empties the mental void the other represents by disallowing every supposition consciousness manufactures to fill it. The point of leaving the void empty is to respect the priority of the Other over Being and knowledge, *even at the cost of achieving no clear phenomenological 'result'*.⁵²³

The ontological perspective is a Western pathology, according to Levinas, an everyday as well as philosophical obsession we must free ourselves from in order to see the point of the ethical.⁵²⁴ In the West, philosophy breathes the very atmosphere of ontology, referring everything to Being.

⁵²² See DEH 163-64 = GWCM 26-28.

⁵²³ On the privilege accorded to knowledge in the West, see DEH 153-54 = GWCM 15-17.

⁵²⁴ Despite this critique of Western philosophy, Levinas showed little or no interest in the possibility that Eastern thought might offer alternatives. Some Eastern perspectives which appear promising are suggested in Kalmanson and Mattice, eds., *Levinas and Asian Thought* (Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press, 2013).

Obscuring the ethical, Being endangers ethics as something infinitely more valuable from Levinas's perspective, but also infinitely vulnerable and in need of protection. The ethical itself, and not only the subject it makes subjective, is the victim of an *ontological* violence, persecuted by a hegemony of Being. The subject therefore has a responsibility not only to the other human being, but also to response-ability itself. As one does not respond to anything, however, except through the *other*, the principal issue is not 'thou' vs. 'it', important as that is, but more fundamentally 'other' vs. 'being'. There can be no question of 'thou' without first answering—that is, responding to—the question and *questioning* of the *other*.⁵²⁵

The first mention of persecution in *Otherwise Than Being* occurs very early, in the section entitled "Sensibility." As sensibility is a form of passivity, Levinas will describe even sense perception as though it were *persecution* by the objects of sense. One must keep in mind that for Levinas, sensibility always also means sensitivity to the other person:

Vulnerability, exposure to outrage, to wounding, passivity more passive than all patience, passivity of the accusative form, trauma of accusation suffered by a hostage to the point of persecution, implicating the identity of the hostage who substitutes himself for the others: all this is the self, a defecting or defeat of the ego's identity. And this, pushed to the limit, is sensibility, sensibility as the subjectivity of the subject. It is a substitution for another, one in the place of another, expiation. (OB 15 / AE 18)

Here we encounter several key terms—passivity, accusation, hostage, substitution, expiation—all of which Levinas associates with persecution in *Otherwise Than Being*. For the present, however, we concentrate on *vulnerability* as essentially *vulnerability to the other*. Levinas's thesis is not the predictable claim that all vulnerability is vulnerability to what is other than oneself in some sense,

⁵²⁵ See Levinas's essays on Buber in PN and OS.

but that *for human beings* every experience of vulnerability derives its meaning as vulnerability from one's exposure to another language user who is response-ability-provoking. It is through susceptibility to being affected by an other that one discovers oneself to be someone susceptible to change, vulnerable to danger, open to the new. The human other is the origin of alterity. If we agree that to be vulnerable is to lack protection against what has the potential to disrupt the status quo of one's life—primordially, the status quo to which Levinas in *Totality and Infinity* gives the name "enjoyment"—then originary to the human experience of both vulnerability and otherness is the interruption produced by the appearance and approach of *the other person*. That is, if vulnerability means to be *trauma*-prone in Levinas's special sense of the word, then it is a condition for the experience of vulnerability that the 'trauma' initially be produced through one's persecution by the other in Levinas's special sense of the word persecution. And since every experience implies a vulnerability to alterity, it follows that persecution is the condition enabling experience of anything whatsoever. Finally, since persecution is also an evil, and evil a form of persecution, we arrive once again at the conclusion of Chapter 5, that evil is at the root of all meaning, even of ethical meaning. But *all* meaning is ethical meaning, if we are right that it is derived from the encounter with the other, the act of responding to a language-using other.

Vulnerability—hence persecution, as we have pointed out before—is prior "to my freedom," prior "to the present and to representation"—that is, prior even to (self-)consciousness. Entering life already in the immediate presence of others, if at first conscious of them only in the most primitive sense—the sense in which any animal with a nervous system is conscious—I am not only vulnerable, I am already responsible, required to respond. For the others use language and talk to me even before I myself learn to speak. From the very beginning I am already "offered without any holding back," hence 'persecuted'. As prior to any initiative, there can be no explanation for this response-ability. It is simply "the anarchy of the Good" (OB 75). That is, my involuntary self-offering reveals the Good to have no ground or reason. Here again we find that

the Good is utterly vulnerable not by accident but in essence, beyond protection of reason—yet another indication of evil’s reach, hence the ease with which we dismiss the Good with a capital G as something meaningless (see above, p. 383-86).

“In the having been offered without any holding back, it is as though the sensibility were precisely what all protection and all absence of protection already presuppose: vulnerability itself” (OB 75). Certainly sensibility is vulnerability to one’s physical environment, vulnerability to Being. But the claim here is more surprising: simultaneous with this sensibility that all sentient beings share, human vulnerability is “imagination and symbolism.” Vulnerability is *mediated by language* (OB 62). Levinas is declaring that even at the level of ‘pure’ sense perception, insofar as one is conscious of *what* one perceives, one is called to responsibility for the other, called to *respond* to the other. Even at this level, human experience is language-driven, hence presupposes the give-and-take of invitation and response. Sensibility itself is ethical. What I experience is always what I can share, or qualify as what seems un-shareable, traumatic. But in any case experience “signifies (proposes and orders)” (OB 36) wholly in relation to *other experiencers*.

No doubt with Heidegger in mind, Levinas writes: “The disclosed qua disclosed overflows itself as a *symbol* of this in that; it is *identified* in the this as that” (OB 62, emphasis added). Since identification requires language, there is no pure experience of Being or of beings unmediated by language, any more than there is sense perception unmediated by language. Human experience is “from the first claimed and said.” To see things *for what they are* (as we usually say) is not possible without imagination and symbolism.⁵²⁶ “As discovery and knowing, sensible intuition”—even in its most primitive form, whatever that might be for self-conscious human beings—“is already of the order of the said: it is an ideality. ... An individual inasmuch as it is known is already desensitized and referred to the universal in intuition” (OB 62). Since

⁵²⁶ A newborn therefore does not see things ‘as they are’—in fact, does not see *things* at all, but only finds itself in a “blooming buzzing confusion.” Even this is not quite right. What does ‘finds itself’ mean here? Language is stretched to the limit when the topic is what precedes language.

language pervades intuition, and intuition is necessary for the awareness of vulnerability, *all human vulnerability is lived as language*, in community with others.⁵²⁷ We are never vulnerable in isolation. Vulnerability is a *shared* experience which necessarily enjoins us to responsibility.

In my response to the other, my vulnerability as “exposure” or “openness” to their alterity is announced in the mere fact that I *say* something, the bare phenomenon of addressing them, whatever may be the content of what is said (OB 15). To present oneself before another in any manner at all, even when there is nothing more than the prospect or possibility of speaking—that is, to be present only in the minimal sense of occupying space close by—this, for Levinas, is already to offer one’s *self* to the other, to present oneself as immediately available to be placed in question. One cannot approach another person, or allow them to approach, without presenting oneself as ready to respond to their “saying,” even if they say nothing. The message of Levinas’s metaphor of the face, which we characterized earlier in a preliminary way as the enigmatic signification of basic human vulnerability and inscrutability, is that of one’s “secondariness” with respect to the other, in which the ego “loses its priority” (DEH 164-65 = GWCM 28). Vulnerability as exposure or openness to being called into question, Levinas tells us early in *Otherwise Than Being*, is *substitution* for the other, experienced as a self- or ego-negating *shared* vulnerability.

Substitution, at the limit of being, ends up in saying, in the giving of signs But this saying remains, in its activity, a passivity, more passive than all passivity, for it is a sacrifice without reserve, without holding back, and in this [it is] non-voluntary—the sacrifice of a hostage designated who has not chosen himself to be hostage, but possibly elected by the

⁵²⁷ The intuition meant here, of course, is already at a fairly high level compared to the ‘experience’ of lower animals and human newborns: to refer “to the universal in intuition” means to categorize, classify, name. But are not all non-human animals vulnerable? Of course they are—from a human point of view. Human beings are not vulnerable only from the point of view of other humans, however, but experience *themselves* as vulnerable. We have no idea of how other animals ‘experience themselves’, or whether the notions of ‘experience’ or ‘self’ make sense for any animals other than ourselves.

Good, in an involuntary election not assumed by the elected one. For the Good can not enter into a present nor be put into a representation. But being Good [*mais Bien précisément*] it redeems the violence of its alterity, even if the subject has to suffer through the augmentation of this ever more demanding violence. (OB 15)

Why only *possibly* elected? Mainly because the Good is not something that can be known, a possible object of consciousness. Nor can one *represent oneself* as certainly elected by the Good, for that would imply that one could represent the Good to oneself. The Good cannot be represented, for it “goes beyond being” (OB 15). For that reason, the Good is experienced as a form of *persecution*. In the very experience of alterity, according to the reading of Levinas presented here, the Good reveals me as fundamentally vulnerable, “persecuted”—“under accusation” (OB 25), accused of not loving enough, of not being open enough to the disruption of the other—hence, responsible not only for the neighbor but for the Good itself. The Good, so Weil would remind us, is itself *other*, since I am other than the good. And yet, the Good is as vulnerable as I am, with the very same vulnerability that I share with the other. This is because, so far as I can know, the preservation of the Good is my responsibility and no one else’s. Only I can desire it in the midst of alterity’s assaults on me, which despite the pain of which they are capable of giving, are a “good violence” if they nonetheless call forth my desire for the Good (OB 15, 43). Neither the other person’s response-ability nor responsibility ‘in general’ is my concern. If the Good is frail, I must think of it as frail with *my* frailty. Here again we are reminded of Levinas’s favorite quote from *The Brothers Karamazov*, ending with the paradoxically self-effacing claim, “I am more responsible than any of the others.”

Let us back up from *Otherwise Than Being* a few years to what seems to be an important indirect reference to persecution, one of many passages in which Levinas emphasizes the connection between human vulnerability and ethical responsibility. Comprehending what is

meant by persecution in any sense of the term, whether in Levinas's or in the ordinary everyday senses, clearly depends on having an understanding of the nature and extent of human vulnerability. The invulnerable cannot be persecuted. Were we to see that for Levinas the scope of the word *vulnerability* far exceeds its usual sense, we might be less scandalized to discover the same about *persecution*. The essay "No Identity" (1970), however, appears at first to raise more questions than it answers. Having reminding us that vulnerability is a relationship with the other prior to rationalizations in terms of cause and effect, Levinas writes:

Vulnerability is obsession by the other or an approaching of the other. It is being *for another*, behind the *other* of a stimulus. This approach is not reducible to the representation of the other nor to consciousness of proximity. To suffer from another is to have charge of him, to support him, to be in his place, to be consumed by him. Every love or every hatred of a neighbor as a reflected attitude presupposes this prior vulnerability, this mercy, this 'groaning of the entrails' [Jeremiah, 31:20]. Already on the level of sensibility the subject is *for the other*: there is substitution, responsibility, expiation.⁵²⁸

Placing to one side, for the moment, the initially troubling claim that suffering *from* another person does not just entail, but *is essentially* taking responsibility *for* him ("having charge," "supporting")—troubling, certainly, if one thinks of all the usual and unusual forms of physical, mental, or emotional suffering human beings inflict on one another—what is also surprising here is Levinas's definition of vulnerability. On the face of it, "obsession by the other" and "approaching of the other" would seem to denote very different things, the one bordering on the

⁵²⁸ CP 146-47, emphasis in the original. Levinas's footnote to this passage informs us that 'mercy' is to be associated with the biblical *Rakhamin*, "which is translated as mercy, but contains a reference to the word 'Rekhem,' uterus; it is a mercy that is like an emotion of maternal entrails." The entrails referred to in Jeremiah 31:20 are those of God who has compassion on Ephraim. Cf. OB 196n22: "Substitution operates in the entrails of the self, rending its inwardness, putting its identity out of phase [*déphasant son identité*] and disrupting its recurrence." The relevance of the terms substitution, inwardness, *déphasant*, and recurrence will be discussed in more detail later.

pathological, the other so vague and general that it is difficult to imagine its relevance. Neither obsession nor approach is normally what we think of first when we hear the word ‘vulnerability’, however true it may be that a person obsessed with something is vulnerable to its influence, and the approach of a threat makes one’s vulnerability evident. Finally, both obsession and approach seem to call for some causal explanation. But obsession, approach, and something he calls the “reflective attitude” are three of Levinas’s most important concepts. The last is mentioned explicitly only once in his work, although the idea is often present.

Vulnerability, writes Levinas a little more clearly in the same place, is “the aptitude ... ‘to receive blows’”—that is, the aptitude to be shamed, even to the extent of “an unendurable and harsh *consent* that animates the passivity” (CP 146).⁵²⁹ In a primary sense, one is powerless to resist the other, defenseless even against his mere presence, whatever he may or may not be doing to or for oneself, whether good or harm. The other always arises in spite of myself, and generally I find it impossible to resist. Non-resistance is the essence of ‘being-with’. One is “uncovered” (denuded, exposed, “like a bleeding wound”), “delivered over”—and, we might add, made “hostage” (a word Levinas does not use here, although it occurs frequently in *Otherwise Than Being* in similar contexts). A “relationship” without cause, unsought and inexplicable, utterly unpredictable in its particulars, vulnerability is the basis for all human relationships. In any human relationship, however fleeting, the self is *revealed* to have no permanent, unassailable boundaries—Levinas will later compare this to revelation in the religious sense of the word—and indeed, the self is defined by this permeability, by the fact that the other is always already “within” in some sense (OB 69). One’s walls were breached in the making: the self is the expression of one’s being continually under a state of siege from the first human contact. The word *obsessed* in fact originally meant *besieged*.⁵³⁰ Discovering that it has no place of its own, the self finds that it can be “in [its] place” in no other way than as *displaced* (CP 146), already

⁵²⁹ Emphasis added. Levinas quotes from Lamentations, 3:30.

⁵³⁰ In English, this meaning became obsolete circa 1640. The word is the same in French.

substituted for the very neighbor who obsesses and occasionally *oppresses* the self. In *Otherwise Than Being* Levinas refers to this displacement as the self ‘being out of phase with itself’ or *diastasis*, and emphasizes its temporal dimension. Displacement by the other signifies the temporal discontinuity produced by alterity, which forces the self to reidentify itself every moment and is therefore responsible for one’s sense of time, “the diastasis of the identical and its recapture or reminiscence, the unity of apperception” (OB 29; cf. 34, 36, 162).

To be a self is “to be consumed by” the very person one is in turn always trying to consume—that is, assimilate into one’s world—a point Weil makes, in terms as hyperbolic as Levinas’s, in a passage we studied in the previous chapter (p. 336). Edith Wyschogrod also finds such language characteristic: “For Levinas, when focused upon the other, the subordination of the object, a necessary condition for cognition and perception, constitutes an act of primordial violence, as if objectification of the other were virtually an act of ingestion.”⁵³¹ We cannot help cannibalizing one another. It follows that one must consent to being eaten by every person whom one meets. Evidently one must be ready not only to be besieged but to be devoured—pursued, *persecuted*, by cannibals! Of course, one is never ready for this. The sense (*sens*, direction) of the other’s alterity is that one is always caught by surprise.

Levinas’s notion of the “approach of the other” is no less paradoxical than his association of vulnerability with obsession. It makes sense that one is vulnerable when a particular threatening other is physically near, but in fact *every* other, as other, is both infinitely near, or ‘proximate’ in the sense of *proximity* explored at the end of Chapter 5, and at the same time approaches from infinitely far insofar as their otherness is not measurable by any conscious representation. It is the simultaneous infinite proximity of what is infinitely far, the imminence of what is utterly foreign, which is threatening. Obviously the other does not always approach by traversing physical space. Nor does “going toward” or “approaching” for Levinas necessarily signify an intentional act, as

⁵³¹ Wyschogrod 2006, 35.

does one's drawing near in order to acquire knowledge or do good or harm. *Intentionality*, in either the everyday or the phenomenological sense, is not involved in the approach of the other—a pure approach, almost pre-phenomenological, without intent or goal. *Almost* pre-phenomenological, for decreative phenomenology can reveal it indirectly. The other's approach prompts, 'from on high' as it were, a non-voluntary abdication of the self that results in one's finding oneself welcoming the other's interruption in spite of the cost to one's tranquility. To reinstate its tranquility the self must "recapture" or remember itself again, over and over in a continual act of self-re-fashioning (OB 29, 196n22). This process of reconstituting is available for phenomenological analysis. By contrast, the approach of the other signifies the expiration (opposite of inspiration, breathing-in⁵³²) of a small part of one's vulnerable self. The self is naturally reluctant to give up even this little, hence the sense of threat.

A further clue to Levinas's understanding of vulnerability as obsession and approach may be found in the phrase *reflected (réfléchir) attitude*,⁵³³ which, to my knowledge, occurs nowhere else in Levinas. One meaning it may have is that love, hate, and other "attitudes" necessarily *reflect back on oneself* from their object in much the same way that touching another person immediately results in one's being touched in the very same act (EN 111-12). Every intentional *activity* inexorably dissolves into a deeper or 'older' *passivity*, a passivity having its grounds prior to all activity, a pre-original passivity that prevents one from acting without being acted upon, no matter how easily one thinks one forsakes or forgets the act. It is as though passivity and not activity were the rule in human relations. Action would then only represent a momentary and

⁵³² For the metaphor of breathing, see OB 181-82.

⁵³³ 'Reflexive' is another possible translation, given Levinas's frequent emphasis on the reflexive in French, as in OB 8: "The outside of itself, the difference from oneself of this unicity [of the ego, "incomparable unicity" (*unicité*, unicity)] is non-indifference itself, and the extraordinary recurrence of the pronominal or the reflexive, the *self* (*se*)—which no longer surprises us because it enters into the current flow of language in which things show *themselves*, suitcases fold and ideas are understood [les choses *se* montrent, les bagages *se* plient et les idées *se* comprennent]." See also OB 125 ("reflection and its *figures*," "total reflection"). Levinas's important term *non-indifference* denotes the experience of an unbridgeable difference or separation from others that one cannot help but try to bridge—paradoxically, only by respecting the very difference between oneself and the other that makes bridging it both impossible and desirable. Levinas equates it with love in an interview reprinted in *Is It Righteous To Be?* (IR 50).

ultimately futile attempt to escape from the relentless return, like an ocean wave, of the primordial passivity characterizing the subject's inescapable subjection to the other. Simone Weil's entire essay, "The Love of God and Affliction" (SWR 439-468 = WG 67-82), is an argument for the idea that the truth of the human condition lies in its vulnerability to affliction; this most extreme form of passivity underlies everything a human being does or experiences. For Weil, salvation—not a word Levinas favors, although he states at one point that there is "no shame in seeking" it⁵³⁴—consists in accepting the inevitability of affliction and in nothing else. Weil's idea deviates from Levinas mainly in that he would ascribe the ultimate source of this vulnerability entirely to the encounter with the human other, one's neighbor, whom one needs to welcome. For Weil, vulnerability seems to be primarily the result of subjection to impersonal Necessity and calls for one's consent.

A reflected attitude in this sense would be, to borrow a phrase from James Hatley, a "touching that rebounds upon a touching that would forget itself."⁵³⁵ In *subjectivity touching subjectivity*, so to speak—whether it happens accidentally and without thought or, at the opposite extreme, with deliberate intent of inflicting violence on the other or even destroying her as a subject—one cannot act on the other in the same way that one acts upon an inanimate object, as when pushing an obstruction out of one's path. To touch the other, to communicate with her, is not only, or not simply, to invite a response in the conventional sense, but also to *suffer*, in the general sense of *submitting to*. What one submits to is one's being "put in question [*mise en cause*] by the alterity of the other," not only upon responding to her but "even before the intervention of a cause [*avant*

⁵³⁴ OB 59. Cf. "But it is still out of my responsibility that my salvation has meaning, despite the danger in which it puts this responsibility, which it may encompass and swallow up ..." (OB 161).

⁵³⁵ James Hatley, "Persecution and Expiation: A Talmudic Amplification of the Enigma of Responsibility in Levinas," *Philosophy Today*, Spring 2006, 80-91. Describing a situation in which I unjustly receive a blow from someone who insists that he is "untouched" by his violence toward me, Hatley writes: "How might I help him who strikes this blow to become aware of his own impotence to forestall the *torsion of his touching*, a touching that cannot remain untouched in its touching? ... It is extremely important that I consider the uncanny power of this secondary blow, of that touching that rebounds upon a touching that would forget itself" (86, emphasis added)—no less uncanny because so easily denied, apparently, by the one who according to this logic cannot help but feel it.

l'intervention de la cause], before the appearing of the other" (OB 75 / AE 95)—before one has a chance to form an impression of her, before giving her a representation as part of one's thematization of the world. This would be the ethical-metaphysical sense of Weil's observation that when someone asks 'Why?' about their affliction at the hands of another, they are not usually satisfied with causal explanations of the other's apparent power over them—that is, explanations that place the other within the power of the victim's conscious understanding—for the victim is all too likely to have a premonition that their own vulnerability is 'older' than such explanations and causes, a more ancient cry simply for justice.

In the following passage, the phrase "gnoseological adventure" refers to the ordinary, everyday work of totalizing, which turns the other, whom we initially encounter as something like a foreign country, into an object of knowledge: familiar, domesticated, *thematized*, if thematized only to subvert its own thematization, calling one into question, on the very next encounter.

At the height of the gnoseological adventure everything in sensibility [*sensibilité*] means intuition, theoretical receptivity from a distance (which is that of the look [*le regard*]). But as soon as it falls back into contact, it reverts from *grasping* to *being grasped* [*du saisir à être pris*], as in the ambiguity of a kiss.⁵³⁶ It reverts from the activity of being a hunter of images to the passivity of being prey, from being aim to being wound, from being an intellectual act of apprehension to apprehension as an obsession by another who does not manifest himself. On the hither side of the zero point [*En deçà du point zéro*] which marks the absence of protection and cover, sensibility is being affected by a non-phenomenon, a being put in question by the alterity of the other, before the intervention of a cause, before the appearing of the other. It is a pre-original not-resting-on oneself [*ne-pas-reposer sur*

⁵³⁶ Presumably insofar as kissing (active) can sometimes merge ambiguously into being kissed (passive). Levinas's point seems to be that the ambiguity is essential to the phenomenon. If one tries to remove it, say by thinking about what one is doing, then the entire phenomenon essentially disappears.

soi], the restlessness of someone persecuted [*l'inquiétude du persécuté*]... (OB 75 / AE 94-95, emphasis and hyphens added to the translation, as they appear in the original French)

For Levinas, this state of affairs, as opposed to our experiences with inanimate objects, uniquely characterizes human social relations. One cannot walk away from another person without taking something of the other with one in the shape of an alteration of oneself. This is what Levinas refers to when he says that the encounter with the other makes it impossible for me, like Odysseus, to “return home”—that is, to return *to myself* as the self I previously knew myself to be. Something, however minimal, will have been altered. In particular, I can never remain the same, unaffected, once I have expressed even the slightest resistance to the other person’s alterity. The source of one’s hypersensitivity to the other, both Levinas and Weil would insist, is one’s fundamental vulnerability, the passivity one owes, first of all, to one’s having been created, to one’s having been thrown into a world one did not choose to enter, from who-knows-where, having responsibilities that one can trace to no remembered past (as Levinas would say). But in addition, one owes one’s hypersensitive vulnerability to the fact that all one’s acts directed upon others rebound upon oneself. This happens in numerous ways, but most pervasively insofar as the relation to the other, through *discourse*, is the source of one’s own world. Because one’s acts affect the other, the other becomes a part of oneself (and vice versa), part of the world of meanings with the help of which one makes sense of things and in that way defends oneself against the intrusions of alterity—among which, ironically, is the very same intrusive excess of alterity, the very neighbor, upon whom one depended for one’s worldmaking in the first place.

A second but clearly related meaning one could give to Levinas’s phrase “reflexive attitude”⁵³⁷ is suggested by a passage early in *Otherwise Than Being* where Levinas introduces his main idea that the ethical is not a “modality of being”:

⁵³⁷ As I prefer to translate it from now on. See above, p. 397n533.

Can substitution and goodness in turn be interpreted as a “movement” or a modality of being’s essence? Would it yet move in the light of being? But is the sight of a face in the light of being? Is not sight here immediately a taking charge? The intention *toward another*, when it has reached its peak, turns out to belie intentionality. *Toward another* culminates in a *for another*, a suffering for his suffering, without light, that is, without measure, quite different from the purely negative blinding of Fortune which only seems to close her eyes so as to give her riches arbitrarily. (OB 18)

While not explicitly mentioned here, a *reflexive* movement from active com-prehension or grasping (Heidegger’s *erfassen*) into a passive being-grasped is suggested in the transformation of the *toward another* of intentionality, in which consciousness constitutes the ‘other’ in “the light of being,” into the *for another* of ethics, in which the other aims at me. My intentional comprehension of the other person does not end in the appearance or role I constitute for him in my world. Instead, some of it is reflected back to me from the other as the *reverse intentionality* of the other’s moral claim on me, a trace of the saying that was betrayed in the said of my comprehension. The betrayed saying does not disappear but returns in a trace that *betrays the intention of my speaking* in the sense that it has *already addressed* me, without my being aware of it, in the face of the other, and I have *already responded* in the said I thought was entirely the product of my own intent. This response, in the form of the saying behind my said, is not conscious, for the saying can have no content. Since the saying, as pure response-ability without conditions, is free of any context or content, its claim on me is absolute, for it *absolves* itself of whatever content I believe myself to have conveyed in the said. It is because of this reverse intentionality that Levinas calls one’s responsibility asymmetric. Most of this is summarized in the following passage:

To maintain that the relationship with the neighbor, incontestably set up in Saying, is a responsibility for this neighbor, that *saying is responding to another*, is to find no longer any limit of measure for this responsibility, which “in the memory of man” has never been contracted, and is found to be at the mercy of the freedom and the fate, unverifiable by me, of the other man. It is to catch sight of an extreme passivity, a passivity that is not assumed, in the relationship with the other, and paradoxically, in pure saying itself. The act “of saying” will turn out to have been introduced here from the start as the supreme passivity of exposure to another, which is precisely responsibility for the free initiatives of the other. (OB 47, translation slightly modified)

Then comes the reference to reverse intentionality:

Whence there is an “inversion” of intentionality which, for its part, always preserves[,] before deeds accomplished[,] enough *presence of mind* to assume it. There is an abandon of the sovereign and active subjectivity, of undeclined self-consciousness, as the subject in the nominative form of an apophansis. (OB 47, emphasis in the original French)

The reversal is a reversal of declension: from the nominative subject of an assertion expressed to the other as object, one becomes an accusative object of the other’s claim on oneself. One’s freedom is called into question. One “abandons” the autonomous self-consciousness behind the nominative, suffers a dispossession that signifies an ultimate passivity before every other in which the slightest action directed toward another, even the action of assuming indifference to them, is reflected back on oneself *from* the other as a call to a very different ‘action’: the *ethical* response *to* the other. One’s active assertion is transformed ‘against one’s will’ by the ‘trauma’ of the encounter with the other into one’s passive response-ability, which then perhaps initiates another act on one’s own part that absolves the other of their reflexive response, and perhaps

absolves oneself temporarily—only for this second act to be transformed into passivity in turn by a new reflexion back from the other. I do not initiate any of one these transformations and cannot hijack them for my own purposes, since by the time I am aware of what is happening, on the rare occasions when I notice, the transformation in question has always already occurred. Decreative phenomenology can describe this process, but perhaps only in retrospect by reconstructing it step-by-step from memory.

It is owing to one's constitutional vulnerability that one suffers from an infinite sensitivity to all that is other. The French word *sensibilité*, rendered in the passage quoted earlier (OB 75) as 'sensibility', may also be translated 'sensitivity' depending on the context. What Levinas intends by the word is often *both* the sensibility associated with sense perception *and* our (ethical) sensitivity to the other. In fact, his surprising claim is that the first is derived from the second. It is the awareness of alterity that is primary in human beings. The unique nature of human sensibilities, despite the great physical resemblance human sense organs have to those of non-human animals, is owing to this. Unlike other animals, at least as far as we know, human beings from a very early age are responsible even for what their senses tell them—response-able to the other. The key to seeing this lies in the word 'tell': human beings use language (discourse) to construct a world out of whatever 'data' (an archaic term) the senses convey to them. They *tell* each other, in innumerable ways, what the world is like. Thus, everything our senses tell us about different objects has already been filtered through language. That is how things appear as *different* objects of the *same kind*. The senses *tell* us things because one's fellow language users have already told us something about those things in telling us about the world. If that were not the case, we would not have recognized them as objects at all. "The appearing of a phenomenon"—that is, as *this* rather than *that*—"is already discourse" (OB 104). Human beings cannot experience a *world* of phenomena and objects without talking about it—that is, without

worldmaking—or, if they are still in the infant stage, at least inchoately trying to communicate, prior to spoken language, a primordial version of this experience.⁵³⁸

Levinas in effect claims that vulnerability is more basic than Being. In human experience, Being is always shareable Being—*Sein* is really always *Mitsein*⁵³⁹—identified as ‘what it is’ solely through language (OB, Ch. 1)—and therefore, reciprocally, Being is encountered as already having been disclosed *by other language users*. As a result there are *beings*, identifiable as what they are in a world of beings, only because there are language users who are not only in-the-world but also *created* to be open, unguarded, and *susceptible* to what is other—that is, specifically to *one another*.⁵⁴⁰ What Heidegger calls the unconcealment of Being is therefore, as the search for meaning,⁵⁴¹ a response to one’s own fundamental vulnerability. If vulnerability goes this far, this deep, then it is less surprising that something one might want to call persecution accompanies even the most ephemeral contact with what is other. But persecution suggests passivity, about which more needs to be said. In the following section, we see that without the passivity that results from subjection to the other—which is to say, without being ‘created’ responsible—one cannot be ‘elected’ to the Good. Since one cannot bring about the good intentionally (for one has too little control over Necessity), one must be *elected* to the task—that is, brought to it passively by way of one’s decreation.

⁵³⁸ It should be emphasized that Levinas does not himself make reference (at least to my knowledge) to such genetic concerns as how awareness of objects originates in a developing infant. It would in fact be a misunderstanding of his work to imagine that he must have had such psychological concerns in mind, or that considering them is necessary to making sense of his thought.

⁵³⁹ On *Mitsein* see SZ 113-30.

⁵⁴⁰ “Susceptible” is an important term in Levinas’s discussion of what he calls “finite freedom” (see below).

⁵⁴¹ Recall that in *Making Sense of Heidegger: A Paradigm Shift*, Thomas Sheehan argues that the disclosure of Being is Dasein’s attempt to find (or create) meaning.

6.3 Creation as Passivity and Election to the Good

Weil traces human vulnerability back to God's withdrawal at the creation: "God does not send sufferings and woes as ordeals; he lets Necessity distribute them in accordance with its own proper mechanism. Otherwise he would not be withdrawn from creation, as he has to be in order that we may *be*" (N 403). God's withdrawal in order to let beings be, reminiscent of the Kabbalistic notion of *tsim-tsum*, necessarily leaves the created being utterly vulnerable. Whatever may be true of beings and Being in general, vulnerability is the inescapable price of *human* being. Vulnerability, not the call of Being, creates the need human beings have for meaning, that is, for the disclosure of beings as *this* or as *that*, recognizable objects in a world reassuringly stable, as was shown in Chapters 3 and 5. To escape it would be to escape not only being but meaning itself. Human being is *vulnerable* being, without limit—*absolute* vulnerability.

Weil expresses the limitlessness of human vulnerability as the "infinite distance" between the creature and the Creator.⁵⁴² One need not have recourse to the creation story, however, to gain a sense of the absoluteness of one's vulnerability. It is revealed in every human relation. However much you may learn about other people, however successfully you may think you have integrated them into your world, there will always remain something important left out that they can teach you about themselves—and about yourself and your world—which will force you to revise your version of both. It is for this reason that Weil urges us to view each person as an entire world unto him- or herself, a unique "conception of the universe" (N 24). How can one expect to assimilate the other's world into one's own when it is inescapable that under the right conditions, every other has the ability to teach one something that would *shatter* one's own world? The other has this ability not as a power he or she enjoys, hence one need not think that it is exercised maliciously. The other has the potential to shatter one's world merely insofar as worlds are *absolutely* vulnerable. In the context of vulnerability, absolute means: having no defenses that

⁵⁴² See, for example, N 253, 298, 342, 379, 400, 486, etc.

cannot be breached, whether purposely or by accident. Specifically, it means: dependent for our defenses on the very other who can threaten them. When this vulnerability and this dependence are combined with the fact that our understanding of the world is always incomplete, and that in an important sense the other is *wholly* beyond our understanding, conditions are ripe for a failure of some part of our worldview. It is only a matter of time, or of waiting and attention—provided one has the will deliberately to bring the difference represented by the other’s world fully to bear on one’s own, to the extent that this is possible.

These claims can be verified phenomenologically using the decreative techniques outlined in Chapter 4. Bringing the other’s world to bear on one’s own is in fact a good description of what decreative phenomenology does. Given that consciousness must work constantly to maintain the continuity of its world-versions, it should be possible, merely by relaxing that effort, to force some of the weaknesses in a version to show themselves—for every version has weaknesses. For example, one might deliberately seek out conversation with someone whose views are antipathetic to one’s own, not in order to try to refute them—this would only serve to reinforce the worldview, one’s own, the vulnerability of which it is one’s goal to reveal—but in order to give them the opportunity to call one into question. No doubt some people deliberately place themselves in risky situations for similar reasons.⁵⁴³

The idea of creation *ex nihilo* is an important one we will often encounter in both Levinas and Weil in this chapter and the next. Given its role in decreation, we are not surprised to find it in Weil’s later work. Levinas, however, usually maintains a strict separation between philosophy and religious thought, going so far as to use different publishers for his philosophical works and his Talmudic studies. When he does introduce ‘religious’ terms or concepts in his philosophical writings, they never signal an appeal to ‘religious authority’ in an argument—something that

⁵⁴³ An example of a philosopher who did this, apparently, is Michel Foucault. See also the story “Fantastic Night” by Stefan Zweig. The character Joseph Grand in Camus’ novel *The Plague* performs similar, less risky experiments on himself, such as sitting in a dentist’s waiting room all day for no reason.

would be quite inconsistent with Levinas's methodology, his philosophy, and even his Judaism.⁵⁴⁴

Why then are they so often present? My own belief is that Levinas uses religious terms as metaphors in a manner similar to his use of such ordinary words as *face* and *persecution*. They are indications of Levinas's attempt to refer to something deeper than philosophy or even religion, defying or inordinately resisting language and thought. Whether or not one is offended by the occurrence of such words as 'God' or 'Creation' in a philosophical work, the reader who encounters them in Levinas must remember that they are metaphorical uses, unique to Levinas's philosophical vocabulary. Certain rough equivalences are possible. 'The Good' is usually substitutable for 'God', 'inspiration' stands for the other's invasion of my Being, and 'glory' refers to the privilege accorded human beings of having responsibility for the neighbor and even for the universe as a whole.⁵⁴⁵

'Creation *ex nihilo*' is Levinas's standard metaphor for absolute passivity. But 'creation' substitutes for a number of other important ideas: the groundlessness (an-archy) of human being, the fact that human being (as actually experienced, not as viewed intellectually 'from nowhere') has no beginning or original principle that can be incorporated into a totalizing story; the paradox that in human existence, dependence is coupled with freedom (TI 293) and evil with having a relation (Desire) to the Good (TI 104); the concept of a multiplicity ("society" or pluralism) immune from totality (TI 104-5); and the human capability to receive a revelation (TI 89). Creation *ex nihilo* is one of Levinas's most important philosophical metaphors.

The previous chapters have argued that *being*, *world*, *experience*, and *consciousness* all make sense only as shareable with other people, hence involve responsibilities which have their ground in response-ability, the ability-*qua*-obligation-to-respond to the other. All of these concepts are therefore fundamentally *ethical* in Levinas's sense of that word. For the time being, let us

⁵⁴⁴ Studies devoted to the influence of Levinas's Judaism on his philosophy are all too abundant.

⁵⁴⁵ For a discussion, see Jeffrey Bloechl, "Theological Terms in the Philosophy of Levinas," in *The Oxford Handbook of Levinas*, ed. Michael L. Morgan (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018, online).

summarize this idea, a little more concretely, by saying that response-ability is a personal obligation *to maintain the sense of all of that is*, not only for oneself but also *for all others*, refraining from any action that would make it more difficult for my neighbor to make sense of things. It should not be necessary to remind the reader that language, in the broad sense we gave the word in the previous chapter, plays an indispensable role in carrying out this obligation.⁵⁴⁶

Needless to say as well, the capacity or obligation to *maintain the sense of all that is*, for oneself and for all others, is related to the problem of facing one's vulnerability to losing one's "trust in the world" (*Weltvertrauen*), the possibility of a radical loss of meaning. How does one do justice to this vulnerability, acknowledging it and not trivializing it, especially in those who, in the extreme circumstances they faced, *did* in fact lose their trust in the world—who consequently, in a certain sense, lost a portion of their humanity (or all of it, according to some)? For Levinas, at least, these questions can be answered only if one acknowledges a self so "passive" in spite of its undisputed ability to act in human affairs that it cannot help but be "persecuted" by every person it meets, at every moment.

This explains Levinas's predilection for the creation metaphor. It is an understatement to say that creation implies passivity on the part of the 'creature'. There is arguably no greater passivity than that of being created, a passivity "on the hither side of" all other forms of passivity, a passivity without principle or past, "anarchical" (OB 113). It is therefore no accident that Levinas finds a remnant or "trace" of the passivity of creation in every encounter with another person (OB 104-5). Nor is it surprising that this fundamental passivity is something that a consciousness engaged in constituting its world would find it natural and convenient, if not in fact necessary, to deny.⁵⁴⁷

⁵⁴⁶ TI 173-74. Goodman's broad sense of language seems to be Levinas's sense: "when an existent has *presented* himself and come to the assistance of himself, not only verbal signs but all signs can serve as language" (TI 182).

⁵⁴⁷ See Levinas, "From Consciousness to Wakefulness," DEH 162 = GWCM 25-26.

It is perhaps here, in this reference to a depth of anarchical passivity, that the thought that names the creature [*la créature*] differs from ontological thought. It is not here a question of justifying the theological context of ontological thought, for the word creature [*créature*] designates a signification older than the context woven about this name. In this context, this said, is already effaced the absolute diachrony of creation [*la création*], refractory to assembling into a present and a representation.⁵⁴⁸

In using the word creature rather than creation, Levinas may intend to emphasize the contrast between passive subject and active Dasein. Both Levinas and Weil often call the created human being simply “the creature.” In fact, Weil tends to restrict God’s act of creation to the creation of human beings, practically suggesting that even for her, the rest of creation can be considered the product of human “worldmaking” in Goodman’s sense (Chapter 5). Thus Weil, like Levinas, appears to make a distinction between the other, who cannot be a product of our worldmaking, and everything else, which can and is—as is suggested in Genesis by the fact that beings other than man were not distinguished from one another until man gave them names (Gen. 2: 9-20). Unlike other beings, the creature *is not*—is not to be considered a being—if ‘the creature’ refers specifically to the ethical subject that differs from the rest of creation in being capable of sin. Needless to say, if one is *created* as responsible then one will no more be able to explain *why* one is ‘responsible’ than explain why one ‘is’. To be created is therefore the ultimate expression of one’s non-being—the necessary obverse of the infinitude of the Other.

But if creation *ex nihilo* necessarily *implies* a passivity which is perhaps absolute, can this be compatible with what is called ‘free will’? And if not, if Levinas in effect denies free will in favor of some form of determinism, as Weil does, how much room can this leave for the possibility of anything we would want to call ethics? Have we sacrificed ethics in order to preserve the ethical?

⁵⁴⁸ OB 113 / AE 144-45, translation modified: Lingis has ‘creation’ rather than ‘creature’.

I am not aware that Levinas anywhere addresses the question of free will and determinism directly. Weil does so, more or less explicitly, in her idea of Necessity.

Necessity. We have to see things in their true relationship and ourselves, including the purposes we bear within us, as one of the terms of that relationship. Action follows naturally from this.

Rock lying in the path along which we are hurrying. We don't want to, we refuse to accept the fact that it should be there; we rush forward and start pushing it. We exhaust all our strength in order to make believe that the rock isn't there. Or else we contemplate it, ourselves, our desire to get by; the rock lies there, but it isn't everything. This pause renders indirect action and the lever possible. He who pushes often succeeds; if he doesn't succeed, once he is exhausted, the rock seems to him an absolute, impossible to thrust aside. For him who makes use of the lever, even if he doesn't succeed, the rock is not an absolute; he thinks he would have succeeded if ...

Man escapes from the laws of this world but the space of a flash of lightning. Moments of pause, of contemplation, of pure intuition, of mental void, of acceptance of the moral void. It is through such moments that he is able to approach the supernatural. (N 156)

Seeing things "in their true relationship and ourselves ... as one of the terms of that relationship" means becoming aware of and accepting the dictates of a Necessity whose impersonal laws govern the entire universe. For Weil, everything that happens in the world is under the rule of Necessity. That this is true without exception is a state of affairs she thinks is to be welcomed, not deplored, for it means that in moral dilemmas one need only see things as they look when one practices the genuinely self-negating activity of attention, thus seeing them as obedient to Necessity, apart from oneself, and it will almost always become clear what one should do. If it does not, then one should refrain from acting and instead continue to refine one's attention and

wait. In order to decide what to do, Weil advises that “we should pay attention to such a point that we no longer have the choice” (N 205). We deceive ourselves if we imagine that we can do anything that is not completely determined by the laws of Necessity. “If we suspend the filling-up activity of the imagination”—which continually seeks to read the world in a manner favorable to our autonomy and self-interest, filling the moral void (Chapter 2) by feeding our desire for empowerment and freedom from boredom and pain—and instead we “fix our attention on the relationship between things, then a necessity becomes apparent which we cannot help obeying. Until then we have not the notion of necessity, nor the sense of obedience” (N 155, translation slightly modified).

The distinction Weil makes here is not the expected one between having a choice of action and not having such a choice. It is the distinction between acting *without* the knowledge that one has no choice and acting *with* that knowledge. Because the Necessity that rules the universe is but another side of Love, consenting to Necessity is simply acting in accordance with Love.⁵⁴⁹ Despite her aversion to Nietzsche,⁵⁵⁰ Weil’s love of Necessity is not unlike Nietzsche’s love of fate if one interprets the eternal recurrence pragmatically as a thought experiment, a way of understanding oneself *as* one’s past—the past, of course, having an unqualified necessity all its own (N 334-35).⁵⁵¹ It is easy to imagine her praying for eternal recurrence, should that be God’s will.

Illusory choice. When we think that we have the choice, it is because we are unconscious, compassed about by illusion, and we are then but toys. We cease to be toys when we lift ourselves above illusion right up to Necessity, but then there is no longer any choice; a

⁵⁴⁹ That is, one can see any particular thing as either an expression of Necessity or as an expression of Love. This idea, that one can view things “in a sort of ‘double-exposure’” instead of having to choose between mutually exclusive ways of viewing them, has a parallel in Eastern philosophy. See Nishitani 1982, 52, 93-94, on seeing things in the “mode of being” of “life *sive* death, death *sive* life.”

⁵⁵⁰ She claimed that she had a *physical* aversion to reading him.

⁵⁵¹ See Alexander Nehamas, *Nietzsche: Life as Literature*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1985.

certain action is imposed by the situation itself, clearly perceived. The only choice left is that of proceeding upward. (N 57)

The problem, Weil implies here, is thought: *thinking* that we have a choice. Here she explains it in terms of consciousness and unconsciousness, but the important point for her is always that in a situation where we need to make a decision, action will take precedence over (totalizing) thought only with the self-abdication of the one who is to act. The idea is similar to Levinas's idea that the ethical precedes the ontological: one learns of the command, learns what the command *is*, only in obeying it, not by trying to think it through first.

Refusing to accept the rule of Necessity is as futile as refusing to believe in the five-hundred-pound rock that blocks one's path. With regard to one's freedom to act, there is almost nothing in this world, according to Weil, that is not analogous to that rock, which does not care in the slightest for our plans. The sole exception, she says, is another human being, whose resistance is of a different order altogether.⁵⁵² Since the entirety of creation, upon which we must rely in order to carry out any plans at all, is wholly under the rule of Necessity, we are never justified in blaming circumstances when things fail to go according to our plans. So inexorable is this rule for Weil, that when we are starving we are not even to ask God for bread:

There are three things that one must not do. Ask God for natural bread. It is for blind necessity to supply it or refuse it, as chance may decree. Ask him to intervene in a sphere reserved for the exercise of the creature's will. And desire social prestige, which belongs to the devil. (N 348)

⁵⁵² Levinas is more explicit about this exception than Weil. The *face*, he writes in "Freedom and Command" (1953), "is what resists me by its opposition and not what is opposed to me by its resistance" (CP 19).

The only escape from Necessity is consent. This means accepting a world devoid of oneself and of one's desires, and hence empty of any necessary fulfillment of those desires. Only then does one catch sight of the moral imperative that assigns one as responsible, not only for the other person but for the entirety of creation. The creation then becomes less the provider of one's personal needs than the medium through which one learns of the *other's* needs—and of the means through which one can provide for them, if Necessity grants one the opportunity. Since it is not a product of the will, the moral imperative of this service is solely a matter of grace, a gift of Love, in conjunction with Necessity, hence Weil calls it “supernatural.”

For both Weil and Levinas, the grace of one's election by the Good—that is, one's creation—eliminates the need to insist on the reality of one's moral freedom.⁵⁵³ The existence of one's moral freedom is an ontological issue that simply does not arise when the immediate need is to mitigate the suffering of one's neighbor, a fellow “creature”. The moral task does not require one to know anything about the reality of either a moral sense or moral freedom, nor does it hinge upon explanations in terms of historical forces or unconscious drives. These issues, Levinas maintains, can distract and weaken attention to one's singular responsibility for the other. However interesting in themselves, or even relevant to a general intellectual understanding of human moral existence, they have no bearing on the *fact* of my responsibility for the other. The latter, if I am properly attentive to the other's immediate situation, will dictate clearly enough what needs to be done without regard for what is known by science or history. Levinas writes:

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

⁵⁵³ Since one's election by the Good is a continuous action of grace, it is possible to think of creation itself as continuous. See Levinas's discussion of Malebranche in *Existence and Existents* (EE 73-74). Levinas and Weil are very likely to have run across the idea of continuous creation in the works of a contemporary French philosopher, Louis Lavelle (1883-1951).

the relationship in which the other is a neighbor, and in which before being an individuation of the genus *man*, a *rational animal*, a *free will*, or any essence whatever, he 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 man, who would thus be capable of replacing me. (OB 59)

In this situation, the situation underlying all human situations, my freedom seems to consist in the freedom to do nothing more than what obviously needs doing: whatever the present moment demands—literally *demands* as though “the persecuted one” were persecuting *me* with its continual ‘You must do this!’ Freed of the weight of unnecessary complications (usually supplied by oneself), one acquires *the freedom to have no choice* in what one does, the freedom that frees one to be compelled by the Good. If at a given moment nothing compels me to act, then my task is to concentrate my attention until I am compelled by only *one* ‘choice’, the one choice dictated *by the other* in the present state of affairs. This will happen only when I see, not the other assimilated into my familiar world of what I ‘know’ about people, but the foreigner and the stranger precisely *as* foreign and strange.⁵⁵⁴ When Levinas writes that “it is not as freedom, impossible in a will that is inflated and altered, sold or mad, that subjectivity is imposed as an absolute,” the freedom he is referring to is the illusory freedom of autonomy in contrast to the freedom we have been describing, which he calls “finite freedom.” The elusive and illusory freedom of autonomy is not available to the victims of affliction. Hence it cannot be the basis for one’s selfhood unless we are to say that the afflicted have no selves. By contrast, subjectivity “is sacred in its alterity with respect to which, in an unexceptionable responsibility, I posit myself deposed of my sovereignty”—that is, sacred with an alterity that “inspires” me to choose not to

⁵⁵⁴ Or it happens when one sees the unlimited vulnerability of the other—their ‘nothingness’, their state of being suspended over a void—which is one’s own state. This is not ‘knowledge’ of the other, but a result of substitution which forecloses knowledge that would make familiar and ‘same’.

have the ‘freedom’ of a sovereign self who is preoccupied with making choices for itself. Only insofar as one is vulnerable and available to the other *as stranger* does the other become truly neighbor and fellow human being: “Paradoxically it is qua *alienus*—foreigner and other—that man is not alienated” (OB 59). Only in relationship to the other *as truly other* does one become a self. In Levinas’s hyperbolic terms, it is only as persecuted that one shares with the other, who is also persecuted, the genus *human*.

This means that Weil’s practice of attention gives us precisely what we need in order to be in community with the afflicted. The afflicted know they have lost their freedom. If we offer up our freedom to the practice of attention, then in respect of freedom we join with them. Attention will then lead, according to Weil, to non-active action. This, she says, is certain.

6.4 Finite Freedom as Freedom for Non-Active Action

For both Levinas and Weil, the Good is ‘present as absent’. This does not mean that the Good is elsewhere. That the Good is ‘nowhere’ Weil explicitly suggests when she claims to have “no idea” whether the Good exists or not (FLN 315-16). Much less does she assume that the Good is all-powerful or ultimately triumphant in any way. This is undoubtedly the main reason her theology emphasizes the Crucifixion over the Resurrection. It is not that Weil disbelieved in the Resurrection or thought it less important. It is simply a distraction. In her view, the Crucifixion, “the visible image of the innocent God” (N 234), already represents as much divine redemptive ‘power’ as we need to know about.⁵⁵⁵ On the other hand, we have nothing to do with the Resurrection this side of death: “Resurrection. When we have felt the chill of death—unless we make haste to forget it, or it leaves us numbed—we pass on beyond, and this universe itself becomes a draught of immortality” (N 61). Resurrection is for Weil the extreme limit of her idea

⁵⁵⁵ See McCullough 2014, 115.

of the universe as “another body to my soul” (N 19). Resurrected, one would be reborn as the entire universe.

It is worth pointing out parenthetically, at this juncture, that Weil’s notion of eschatological time often seems more Jewish than Christian:

In a sense (but in what sense?) original sin, the expulsion from the earthly Paradise, the Passion, and the Resurrection *are continually taking place together each moment*.

But in another sense (in what sense?) they are historical events; for they are realities, not only in heaven, but on earth. And there is no other kind of reality here below except what takes place at a given spot, at a given moment. (N 539, emphasis added)

The two senses, she would say, are contraries to one another, each impossible without the other. While the historical sense is necessary in order to convey the story, the first (more Jewish) sense reminds us that the story is, or ought to be, encountered continually in every moment. The continual encounter is what faith amounts to for Weil. By contrast, to look forward to witnessing in some distant future the glory of God as represented by his resurrection would for Weil be an example of what Dietrich Bonhoeffer called “cheap grace,” an invention of the imagination.

For Levinas, too, the Good is nowhere. Hence, the trace (see Chapter 2) is not a calling card the Good leaves behind as it passes by on its way back to some Platonic heaven. We saw in the previous chapter that there can be no guarantee that the Good exists at all. For both Levinas and Weil, the Good is no less vulnerable than the human being who loves it or fails to love it. Better than a guarantee, however, is finding oneself “committed to the Good in the very passivity of *supporting*,” taken “hostage” by the Good (OB 122). That is to say, it is better to be responsible for the ethical in all its vulnerability than to have a guarantee that the ethical will be preserved in spite of us, for the first option is truer to the ethical than the second, which leaves us without

accountability or obligation. Responsibility for the ethical *is* the way, the only way, in which it can be preserved. It is not a task only for the rare and few, but something “to which the subject is destined, which he cannot evade without denying himself” (OB 122), for it is every subject’s subjectivity. That is: the ethical *is* responsibility for the ethical. To be responsible for every other is to be responsible for responsibility in spite of not having freely chosen it, and vice versa.

The uncertainty of the Good means that one cannot rely on ‘values’ as the ultimate motivation for acting, however important they might be in carrying out the work for justice. One is responsible as much for one’s values as for the other whose justice supposedly depends on them. It is in fact one’s responsibility to the other that gives value to values, which are nothing otherwise. But nothing gives value to the Good, and the Good is not a value. Given one’s vulnerability, one cannot even count on one’s ability to maintain a faith in the value of *loving* the Good. That this faith is the most vulnerable of all things was the lesson of Auschwitz. Fortunately, the relationship to be maintained goes the other way: it is not my faith in the Good that is required—an intentional move from me to the Good—but only the Good’s assignment to me of the work of justice, a move “from the Good to me” (OB 123). Values, on the other hand, cannot assign anything, since we make them up ourselves; they are our responsibility in a different way than is the Good: the difference between values and the Good is the difference between justice and the ethical, being and otherwise than being. I can act intentionally in the interest of the others’ freedom, respect, welfare, or whatever value I choose. But in no way but non-intentionally can I truly act in the interest of the other’s *good*—which shows that motivation by the ‘right’ values is never guaranteed to bring about the slightest good, although one hopes, of course, that it will. Post-Auschwitz despair over the reality of the Good—over “the death of God” said to be revealed by the Shoah—betrays an ignorance of the impulse the Good already works upon us, as does our pretense of acting for the good on the impulse of belief in certain ‘values’.

The death of God perhaps signifies only the possibility to reduce every value arousing an impulse to an impulse arousing a value. The fact that in its goodness the Good declines the desire it arouses while inclining it toward responsibility for the neighbor, preserves *difference* in the non-indifference of the Good, which chooses me before I welcome it. (OB 123)

In one respect, the difference the goodness of the Good preserves is the infinite distance between me and *the Good*, a distance reflected in the fact that the Good must choose me rather than vice versa. This suggests comparison with Weil's notion of non-active action. One's freedom does not consist in the ability to act upon one's love of the Good, or even simply to do the other person some small good. The Good must "decline" these intentions, for otherwise the Good, contrary to fact, becomes something we can *know*. One must instead act without intending to act: that is, one must allow the Good to determine the act in complete independence of one's will by giving all one's attention to the situation and the others involved in it and then waiting for the appropriate action to become *automatic*. In Chapter 2 we noted that not only is the work of justice a form of non-active action, but conversely, and more basically, non-active action is the very work of justice. Only non-active action respects the other's alterity: it is the only action that genuinely treats the other as other—that is, preserves the infinite distance between me and *the other*. This is the other respect in which the goodness of the Good "preserves difference." It will turn out that non-active action is the very image of *finite freedom*.

The finitude of finite freedom is not due simply to "the necessity by which a will to will finds itself in a given situation which limits the arbitrariness of the will" (OB 123). In particular, the finitude of finite freedom is not the finitude of one's being-in-the-world (Heidegger), nor is it the finitude of one's worldmaking capabilities (Goodman). Notwithstanding that these are very real limitations on real possibilities, human freedom is *essentially* limited by one thing alone, the

infinitude of one's responsibility for the other, which renders pointless the usual general question about possibilities: 'What does my freedom in fact leave me free to do?' In one sense, *nothing*—that is, nothing I can decide upon in advance, since my responsibility, already determined by the other's situation and revealed to me in my very act, eliminates the need for a 'will' independent of my obligations. My obligations have a will of their own! In another sense, it leaves me *everything*, in that all of creation becomes the object of my care (OB 116, 122), all of Being, in a sense far transcending Heidegger's notion of *Sorge*. The problem of free will becomes an intellectual luxury when the act that freedom's absence would allegedly render morally doubtful is precisely the *one act* that one cannot help but do right now, if one has been paying attention.

It is axiomatic for Levinas that only the ethical can limit the ethical. The obvious corollary, that finite freedom can limit the ethical only if finite freedom is itself ethical, is less obviously an *ethical* corollary, not a metaphysical or logical one. This means simply that as a subject (subject to the *other*) it is my *obligation* to ensure that the ethical is never dissimulated as something limited by what is not the ethical. The finitude of finite freedom is therefore not the deprivation of a greater freedom that would be preferable, but the freedom of a finite subject chosen by the infinitude of the ethical, hence able to do exactly what is required of it to preserve the ethical. Since the ethical that limits the ethical is *justice*, the obligation to preserve the ethical is simply the practical work of justice. Finite freedom is the minimal freedom one needs in order to be just, always exactly as much freedom as one has—a perfect correlation of freedom and necessity that we can be forgiven for attributing to the Good that Weil calls grace. Is post-Auschwitz despair over the reality of ethics then answered merely by continuing the work of justice? Yes. What Weil and Levinas prove is not that there is a guarantee of success but that this itself is enough.

Perhaps, however, one's concern is not for one's moral freedom in light of an impersonal determinism, or for the point of ethics in the light of the Shoah, but for one's freedom simply to *exist* in the face of oppression, tyranny, or extreme affliction. In an early essay, Levinas takes

note of a popular assumption often made in such cases: “A rational being can, to be sure, risk death in refusing an absurd order,” he assumes, “but it is said that it is enough for him to accept death to remain free.”⁵⁵⁶ Death being the ultimate price, the willingness to accept it would imply that one is free no matter how great one’s suffering. In that event, notwithstanding Weil’s claims to the contrary, there would seem to be no danger to one’s freedom or ‘soul’ even in the midst of extreme affliction, provided that one is willing to *believe* oneself free by accepting death. But as Levinas immediately points out, not only does unbridled tyranny have the power to threaten freedom of thought,⁵⁵⁷ but it is not even clear that thinking (‘knowing’) oneself to be free suffices in order to *be* free. Is not the real affliction of tyranny the fact that it can seep into every pore of life? Could it not lead us to think that we are free when we are not?

A deeper problem with the popular assumption is that it relies for its strength on *willed belief* in one’s own freedom. It assumes the very freedom of will that not only tyranny but the other calls into question: one’s will to be *for oneself*, since here it is not the *desire* for freedom but the *belief that one is free* that is presumed to be efficacious. But the for-itself is opposed to the for-the-other of responsibility, and it is the latter, Levinas maintains, that makes one a subject for whom freedom is something that can matter. Moreover, the for-the-other of responsibility is so imperious that it extends even to responsibility for “the faults and misfortunes” of the oppressor who threatens one’s freedom. The for-itself is already marked out and set aside for-the-other, destined to be concerned for the other’s justice prior to concern for one’s own. Choice or consent aside, one is always already “chosen” for the Good by the Good. Of greater moment than the freedom to choose between doing X and doing Y—or thinking X and thinking Y—is the freedom to respond to Z, where Z is the very person in one’s presence, even though that be one’s oppressor:

⁵⁵⁶ “Freedom and Command” (1953), CP 15.

⁵⁵⁷ Suppose the “absurd order” were that one choose seven of one’s fellow concentration camp inmates to be immediately executed, and that if one refused, *fifty* would be immediately executed in reprisal.

To be without a choice can seem to be violence only to an abusive or hasty and imprudent reflection, for it precedes the dichotomy [*couple*] freedom/non-freedom, but thereby sets up a vocation that goes beyond [*au delà*] the limited—and egoist—fate of him who is only for-himself, who washes his hands of the faults and misfortunes that do not begin in his own freedom or in his present. It is the setting up [*instauration*] of a being that is not for itself, but is for all, is both being and disinterestedness. (OB 116, translated altered)

To be “for all” means more than to be free for one’s being-towards-death while at the same time (as though by accident) being among other similar beings (*Mitsein*)—who perhaps hold cheap both one’s life and one’s death. Creation seems to be implied in the word *instauration*. One is not free *for* anything except as already chosen (created) to be *responsible for* the others with whom one shares existence. This is the sense according to which Levinas claims that we are free for all others. The responsibility I have for the person standing before me is inseparable from the responsibilities of justice. As a subject, one is guaranteed (by definition of *subject*) all the freedom one needs to be one-for-the-other. The only question, our concern in the chapter which follows, would be whether one can lose one’s subjectivity, one’s destiny as elected by the Good.

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? 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. (OB 122)

What Levinas calls the “necessity that the Good choose me first” is the ‘other’ side (*not* the opposite) of one’s subordination to Necessity in Weil’s sense of the word. To realize that one is

chosen by the Good is to encounter the face of God which Weil calls Love—precisely what she means by grace. As chosen by the Good, one is elected both to *being* and to *non-being*, for “being and disinterestedness” (OB 116, above) are contraries, paralleling Necessity and Love—reading disinterestedness (or dis-inter-ested-ness, as Levinas often writes it) as ‘not-among-being-ness’. One is elected to be for-the-other, but as a for-itself that does not remember having started out as for-the-other. Naturally the for-itself rebels. To welcome one’s election by the Good is to accept “an election in persecution” by no less than the other (OB 56), a lesson the Good teaches of one’s nullity as an autonomously acting for-itself. It is not so much that one is “free to accept” persecution, as that one has been chosen by the other to be free *of* oneself in order to be free-*for*-the-persecutor.⁵⁵⁸

Goodness is not only “older than choice” (OB 57), it is also older than Being. That is why the Good can enter into one’s own Being only from ‘outside’ of Being. This too can seem like persecution. Thus the Good makes use even of the everyday evil of one’s “persecution” by the process of ageing. To the elderly, ageing can indeed seem like a relentless persecution, as though one were under a constant state of siege not literally from outside but from within one’s own body. If ageing marks a human being with the physical signs of her necessarily involuntary submission to Necessity—perhaps in the most profoundly personal way possible—for Levinas it is also, unexpectedly, the sign that one is not in thrall to synchrony, the linear time that brings one under the mastery of Being and seems to rule the temporality of ageing. Ageing is instead a sign that one is available for service to the Good: open to the otherness of the other because open to one’s own diachrony or dephasing with respect to every other. In ageing, the other who can teach one is not only the neighbor but also, in a sense, one’s own body. It is as though one were too late for one’s youth, much as one is always too late for the neighbor for whom one is responsible:

⁵⁵⁸ That is, free of one’s ego. Levinas occasionally uses the phrase ‘the oneself’, with the definite article, to denote the contrary of the ego, the ethical subject, chosen by the Good. See especially, OB 103-8.

The subject said as properly as possible (for the ground of saying is never properly said) is diachrony itself. In the identification of the ego, there is the ageing of him whom one will never “find there again” [*que l’on «n’y reprendra» jamais*]. It is the diachrony of an election without identification, an election that impoverishes and denudes, a goodness that demands. (OB 57, translation slightly modified)

Here Levinas, in a subtle Proustian analogy, compares election by the Good to submission to Necessity in its most intimate form, that of ageing, and indicates how we are to understand the seeming contradiction: the poverty of self, due to loss of one’s youth, is the same experience of self-abdication that makes possible an election that does not identify one as elected, the only determination of self that has reference to the ethical. One is indeed “chosen,” but chosen *for the other* against one’s inclination to hold onto oneself, the for-oneself of consciousness. The subject elected by the Good does not become *conscious* of its infinite obligation to the other, it does not “take up a position with regard to its goodness,” for it would then “know itself to be good, and thus lose its goodness” (OB 57). Instead, the persecuted subject is forced to forego all positing, all self-positioning, all aspiration to determining *for itself* what it is to *be* relative to other beings and to Being. This would be a purely passive dis-position, that is, a dis-placement of oneself from existence for-the-self to existence for-the-other. It requires a diastasis, a placing oneself out of phase with oneself which is like a displacement of time. The state Levinas describes here is clearly decreative. As Weil might put it: insofar as it empties itself of all traces of the for-itself, the subject experiences a removal of the self as an obstacle to God’s seeing the reality not only of the neighbor but of the neighbor’s world, which is just as precious to God as one’s own. Neither Levinas nor Weil believe that one should expect a world other than this one, an eschatology, except in the Jewish sense that it occurs every instant. It is enough to devote oneself to—or rather, to find oneself assigned, that is, responsible to—the *other’s world*.

Ageing is but one aspect of the Being which is Being-in-the-world. In an interview, Levinas explicitly associates what he calls the “order of being” with unyielding law ... and with “evil”:

What matters to me in responsibility for the other is, as it were, an engagement which is older than any deliberation we can remember and which is constitutive of the human. It is evident that there is in man the possibility of not awakening to the other; there is the possibility of evil. Evil is the order of being pure and simple, and on the contrary, to go toward the other is the breaking through of the human in being, an “otherwise than being.” I am not at all certain that the triumph of the “otherwise than being” is assured. ...

Reciprocal actions and reactions, compensation for forces expended, the regaining of an equilibrium, whatever the wars, whatever the “cruelties” that take cover in that indifferent language that passes for justice; such is the law of being. No illness, no exception, no disorder, that is the order of being. I have no illusions; most of the time, things happen according to [the law of being], and probably will again (IR 175; cf. Weil’s definition of evil in Chapter 5).

If we associate the law referred to here with the law of Weil’s Necessity, it would evidently make God the source of evil. But we have already seen, in Chapter 5, how this is possible.

6.5 Maintaining the Sense of All That Is

Levinas goes so far as to call election by the Good one’s appointment to the task of “supporting the universe.” Supporting the universe is another side of one’s responsibility; it is supporting all “the others.” Hence it is not something one chooses. One “finds oneself” chosen, “committed to the Good in the very passivity of supporting” (OB 122). In the following passage,

the first sentence is Levinas's reading of Heidegger as maintaining that the world 'is' only for a being, namely Dasein, that gives it being through language, 'telling' (*reden*) things apart from one another.

It is as resting on a self, supporting the whole of being, that being is assembled [*se rassembler*] into a unity of the universe and essence is assembled into an event. The self is a *sub-jectum*; it is under the weight of the universe, responsible for everything. ... The for itself signifies self-consciousness; the for all, responsibility for the others, support of the universe. Responsibility for the other, this way of answering without a prior commitment, is human fraternity itself, and it is prior to freedom. (OB 116)

It is true that making sense of the world is something one does for-oneself—this is what Levinas appears to mean by “signifies self-consciousness”—but it expands beyond self-comprehension (comprehension of and by the self) to become a weight, a responsibility beyond all measure.

To support the universe is a crushing charge, but a divine discomfort [*Supporter l'univers—charge écrasante, mais inconfort divin* (italics in original)]. It is better than the merits and faults and sanctions proportionate to the freedom of one's choices. 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. (OB 122 / AE 157)

To find oneself “committed to the Good” means, for Levinas, to find oneself created without any memory of ever having made an autonomous decision for the Good. The “very passivity of supporting” therefore cannot be anything but the ultra-passivity that realizes the Creation every moment through one's relations with others—that is, through telling the world to others.

Weil, too, in effect says that responsibility for the universe is better than freedom of choice, but while she does not make the ethical nature of this preference as explicit as Levinas does, she is more direct in describing the result, the nature of the relation one then has to the universe. Sometimes, as we have seen, she expresses this as one's becoming "transparent" so that God can view the world from one's perspective. But another favorite metaphor of hers is that of the blind man's stick. She comes back to it again and again.

One should identify oneself with the universe itself. Everything that is less than the universe is subjected to suffering [being partial and consequently exposed to outside forces].

Even though I die, the universe continues. That does not console me if I am anything other than the universe. If, however, the universe is, as it were, another body to my soul, my death ceases to have any more importance for me than that of a stranger. The same is true of my sufferings.

Let the whole universe be for me, in relation to my body, what the stick of a blind man is in relation to his hand. His sensibility really no longer resides in his hand, but at the end of the stick. (N 19, brackets in original)

Weil's notion of self-nullification, familiar to us by now, suggests how one might 'use' the universe as "another body to my soul" in order to make the enigmatic Other visible—or, as Weil would likely state it, in order to allow God to see the other (and the universe) through me (N 358)—just as the blind man uses his stick in order to make 'visible' an otherwise invisible sensible world. As with Levinas's "supporting the universe," sensibility becomes paired to responsibility: one cannot simply *observe* the other, one must also *serve* him, in order truly to see him. Conversely, in serving the other one learns things one can learn in no other way, much as Weil found that harvesting grapes proved instructive in ways that her intellectual work did not (see

above, p. 203). If having a body, visible and (to coin a word) *vulner-avail-able* to my neighbor, translates immediately into responsibility for them, so much the more will this be the case if the entire universe becomes “another body to my soul.” Weil notes that suffering “makes us lose the universe”: “we know that it continues to exist ... but we are not sure about it. It is a question of becoming such that we *are* sure about it” (N 19). This might refer to one’s need to overcome an all-too-common ignorance that “things and beings exist.”⁵⁵⁹ The best remedy for one’s blindness to others is decreative: to “identify oneself with the universe” (N 19) by nullifying one’s *self*-identity, for which chance suffering, unsought, often proves helpful.

Weil rings many variations on the theme of the blind man’s stick, one of the more striking of which is the following:

Each human being: genie in a bottle. The bottles move about, meet, touch, knock against each other (without doing any harm to the glass, which is unbreakable, but to the being who is inside), according to the confused impulses communicated from the inside.

Art of moving about in the bottle: like apprenticeship to a trade. To make of it an instrument, a tool, a blind man’s stick. (N 46)

This may be the one case where, against Heidegger’s explicit warning, Being-in-the-world might legitimately be viewed as analogous to being-in-a-container! The lesson of this metaphor, which I will state here in Heideggerian terms filtered through Levinas, could be that one should learn to ‘use’ the *facticity* of one’s Being-in-the-world—the unavoidable need to know the “art of moving about in the bottle”—to allow the for-oneself to be supplanted by the for-another.⁵⁶⁰ One’s self-interested perspective is transformed into a strictly other-interested perspective in which the *other*

⁵⁵⁹ Letter to Bousquet, quoted in Vetö 1999, 171n60. See above, p. 62n95.

⁵⁶⁰ One does not *use* one’s *being-in-the-world*—this, by Heidegger’s own definition of the term, is impossible—but one uses the *fact* that one is in-the-world. The *using* occurs at a higher level than the *being*.

is not only the other person but the entire “universe.” This does not happen through one’s own intentional act, but on the initiative of the other. Despite one’s self, one is decreed into the universe and substituted for the neighbor.

Weil does not provide an interpretation of the fact that the different bottles knock against each other, but there is a passage in Levinas which suggests how she might have. Levinas observes that “the proximity of the neighbor in its trauma does not only strike up against me, but exalts and elevates me, and, in the literal sense of the term, inspires me” (OB 124). One breathes in (literally inspires) the call to responsibility that makes one an ethical subject. Thus Weil could have elaborated on her idea by explaining that it is a good thing that there are a lot of other bottles around to bump into, even if it makes life constantly jarring, because this continual interaction with others is the ‘atmosphere’ we need to breathe in order to become subjects.

The one thing with respect to which one cannot have the relationship of a blind man to his stick, according to Weil, is the *other person*, to whom one should relate as to another Being-in-the-world like oneself. One should think of the other as tentatively constructing an entire *other-world*:

[W]e should have with each person the relationship of one conception of the universe to another conception of the universe, and not to a part of the universe. A man standing ten paces away from me is something separated from me by a distance (ten paces), but also another point of view under which all things appear. The relationship between me and another man can never be analogous to the relationship between the blind man and his stick, nor to the inverse relationship either; that is why slavery is contrary both to nature and reason. (N 24)

Here Weil comes very close to defining something like the notion of ethical distance we find in Levinas: a distance that paradoxically expands the more we bring the other close by becoming involved in their trials and sufferings. The paradox serves to prevent us from bringing the other close in the way Heidegger says distant objects are brought close in *de-severance*, by incorporating them into one's referential totality (SZ 105-11).

As we have seen, Weil claims that in any given situation grace takes the form of one's being granted the ability to conceive clearly what needs to be done for the other who is present (N 111), an ability that results from the "supernatural" process of self-emptying she calls *attention*. Thus the grace Weil associates with the face that God shows us as Love 'chooses' the subject to be responsible for the other in a manner analogous to Levinas's 'election' by the Good. The difference between the One who does the choosing (God or the Good) and the one chosen (me) is for Weil the difference between that which remains always in the nominative (God) and something whose primary declension Weil unquestionably, if not explicitly, assigns to the accusative (me): "God is so much subject that considered as object he still remains subject, and considered as relation to the object he still remains subject. ... We distinguish between 'I' and 'me'; but the 'me' of God still remains 'I'. Under all possible aspects, he is always that which says 'I'" (N 357-58). One cannot do anything *to* God or *for* God. Weil does not quite say that what distinguishes the human from the divine is that the human always *begins and ends* in the accusative—under accusation, as Levinas will express it—but she does say that only the divine has the privilege of remaining forever nominative, and certainly she would agree that God is the only one who, in the form of the Good, has the right to accuse. Weil repeatedly stresses that God is the only 'actor' that is truly active. Our own activity is deceptively ours; in reality it is God's, where (from our point of view) God takes the form of either Necessity or Love, depending on the degree and nature of our consent. It is not I myself, but always God who loves the neighbor *through* me as the medium. Thus I am never *really* an 'I' but only a 'me', in this instance as the

object of the preposition ‘through’. This is *always* the ‘case’ for Weil, even when my activity is simply that of paying attention:

The real aim is not to see God in all things; it is that God through us should see the things that we see. God has got to be on the side of the subject and not on that of the object during all those intervals of time when, forsaking the contemplation of the light, we imitate the descending movement of God so as to turn ourselves toward the world. (N 358)

One “imitate[s] the descending movement of God”—that is, the incarnation—by immersing oneself in whatever needs to be done in the moment, thus acting for the other rather than for oneself. As is clear from the continuation of this passage, Weil does *not* think that we should forsake the world altogether in order to ‘see’ God, and even less in order to serve the *other*:

We must not go to the help of our neighbor for Christ, but through Christ. Let the ‘I’ disappear in such a way that Christ, thanks to the intermediary formed by our soul and body, himself goes to the help of our neighbor. We must be the servant who is sent by his master *to give a particular help to a certain particular person* in distress. The help comes from the master, but it is addressed to the person in distress. Generally speaking, ‘for God’ is an unsuitable expression. *God must not be put in the dative*. (N 358, emphasis added)

Without exception, God is to be put in the nominative: not an object, whether direct or indirect, not a possession (genitive). Perhaps sometimes a vocative, but that would be the sole exception. Note, by the way, how much Weil’s emphasis in this passage is on the particular, the ‘finite’.

Finite freedom therefore “animates” a will that, forever in the accusative, has its fundamental ground in *passivity*. This may seem to be no will at all, as one usually defines will, since passivity

is generally taken to imply *lack* of freedom. In the ordinary view, a will that is always *compelled* to act is a contradiction. But in Levinas, it is solely the neighbor, and not my will, that “exalts and elevates” me, as though drawing me up from a height, by way of the demands they make on my freedom. By contrast, my freedom must evidently be represented by that which is *below*—hence it is *finite*.⁵⁶¹ The neighbor breathes into me an inspiration deeper and older than all my will or powers, from an exterior fundamentally *other* than myself and therefore not in any way that *begins* in me or *belongs* to me. What we tend to call freedom, having in mind a free will, is only a byproduct of this inspiration, not its original basis or essence, and it is not as ‘free’ as we think. Freedom is not to be sought independently of the obligations the other “inspires” me to fulfill, notwithstanding that I tend to answer this inspiration against my will. Rather, dependence on the other is the very sense in which human freedom remains *inescapably* finite. My freedom is limited to precisely what suffices to approach the other while, at the same time, paradoxically, preventing me from being in the other’s way:

I have got to withdraw in order that God may be able to enter into contact with the human beings whom chance places in my path and whom he loves. My presence shows a want of tact, as if I were to find myself between two lovers or two friends. / What does it matter what I have in the way of energy, gifts, etc.? I shall always have more than enough for passing out of sight. / To cease to be, out of love. (N 364).

Weil suggests that it is the overwhelming facticity of the neighbor, their supreme otherness, that eliminates the need for energy and gifts beyond what the situation immediately requires. This holds true especially when it comes to learning about another person. Either what I know is based

⁵⁶¹ “Freedom and Command” (1953). See CP, 15-23, esp. 15. My freedom is in fact *created* by the other’s demands. For the metaphor of height, see for example TI 67, 77, 79, 86, 171. We have not said much in this work about Levinas’s metaphor of transcendence as height, a metaphor common enough, preferring instead to emphasize his later idea of proximity, the paradoxical and hence more suggestive idea of transcendence as *nearness*.

on imagination, or it is knowledge that leads to action so immediately that I do not have a chance to ignore it, distort it, or turn it into the same.

The privileged role of the intelligence in veritable love comes from the fact that the nature of intelligence consists in this, that it is something which becomes obliterated from the very fact that it is exercised. I can make an effort to make my way toward truths, but when they are there before me, they *are*, and I have nothing to do in the matter. (N 364)

For Levinas, removing oneself from out of the way amounts to recognizing that the neighbor always has priority and takes the initiative. Always already summoned, one requires only enough freedom to respond to the other's call. Far from being a reduction of an already existing freedom, this obligation to respond is the very opening of freedom's possibility, without which one cannot so much as *have* an ego that worries about its freedom. There is no pre-existing psyche which then learns to will and thus comes to desire a *free* will.

Does the other intrude against one's will? The question makes no sense if the self owes itself, and its will, to the other's inspiration. There is no will prior to that event. Levinas calls inspiration something that happens to one "without complacency" (OB 124). In a sense it does occur 'against one's will' in that it happens in spite of my practice of smoothing over alterity, of always making the other the same, which is the essential operation of consciousness. But without the other, there would be no alterity for a consciousness to smooth over, no resistance against which it could become a subject, no consciousness at all, and no passage of time. To experience alterity is to be chosen by the Good, and for that all that is necessary is the presence, even the mere thought, of the other. Thus the in-spiration of the other, my 'breathing in' of alterity, "preserves *difference* in the non-indifference of the Good, which chooses me before I welcome it" (OB 123). Whatever difference one finds within the same, I owe to the other, whose alterity is preserved in me not by

my thematizing it, a willful act, but in the responsibility it gives me for him or her. This makes it difficult if not impossible to be indifferent to the neighbor, as difficult as trying deliberately to ignore the person who is standing right beside one. “However indifferent one might claim to be, it is not possible to pass a face without greeting it, or without saying to oneself, ‘What will he ask of me?’ Not only our personal life, but also all of civilization is founded upon this” (IR 184). *Consciousness*, too, is founded upon this.

Responsibility, the “non-indifference of the Good,” forecloses any attempt to explain altruistic behavior in terms of natural “tendencies,” the unconscious, or “divine ‘instinct’” (OB 124). Because the Good is not a being or an object (i.e. in the accusative), intentionality *toward* the Good is “ontologically impossible.” That is why one should not say that the Good “exists.” If altruism has any explanation, it is an explanation in terms otherwise than Being, for it does not obey Being’s logic. It must be an explanation in which the said not only and inevitably betrays the saying, but is always again rescued by another saying, in an unending cycle reminiscent of the relentless return of skepticism: the saying is always “refutable, but it returns” (OB 168).⁵⁶² ‘Doing good’—an oxymoron in making the good intentional—follows the contradictory, paraconsistent logic of ethics as persecution. The freedom that belongs to responsibility “breaks the unrendable essence” and overthrows the imperialism of Being from which all explanations derive their force, and does so through no power greater than the mere fact that there is always something more *to say*.

Thus freedom is “an anarchic liberation” that “emerges, without being assumed, without turning into a beginning, in inequality with oneself,”⁵⁶³ that is, in suffering from the other who puts consciousness out of phase with itself. This liberation without origin or basis is nothing other than *sensitivity* to alterity in every guise, whether that of the constant little surprises of sense perception that form our experience of the physical world, or that of its primary and primal form,

⁵⁶² See Chapter 2 above, section 2.6.

⁵⁶³ OB 124.

“the suffering and vulnerability of the sensible as *the other in me*” (OB 124-25), the effect simply of there being other persons. Sensibility (*sensibilité*) has for Levinas a very wide scope, encompassing everything from bodily sensitivity (*sensibilité*, the same French word) to emotional sensitivity to another person. Even the inanimate world resists at every instant my attempt to *identify myself* on my own cognizance, the continual flux of change forcing me continually to reassess my standing vis-à-vis the “outside.” This state of affairs is arguably responsible for the human experience of the passage of time. Granted, the constant readjustments we need to make almost always occur automatically and unconsciously, for otherwise we could hardly function. Nevertheless, if very early in life we learn how to read the world efficiently on our own, we only learn it through being taught by others. Learning to read the world is learning how to deal with alterity, and the first experience with alterity is with other persons, for only vis-à-vis the other does there develop a self that knows about an ‘other’. I need the other to tell me not only what there is in the world but to teach me what *I myself* am—to help me learn to “read” even myself. The ‘who’ question, as Levinas notes early in *Otherwise Than Being* (OB 23-31), is not an ontological question but an ethical one. Moreover, it precedes the ‘what’ question, according to the paraconsistent logic of persecution. Any ‘what’ can strike our senses *consciously* only because we have been struck beforehand by the strangeness of alterity, personified in a ‘who’.⁵⁶⁴ Every ‘what’ question is therefore grounded on, and enabled by, the fact that there is always beforehand or simultaneously a ‘who’ question. In this way, through the priority of the other person, ethics precedes questions of being and will, thereby leaving us free to consider without distraction such mundane matters as how to deal with hunger and illness, the weather, or the rock that obstructs our path.

Late in *Otherwise Than Being*, Levinas characterizes consciousness as “the act of rendering present anew and of collecting the dispersion [of experience] into a presence, and in this sense

⁵⁶⁴ Thus setting us on the way toward fashioning our own personal ‘who-ness’, that is, the ego, which is really a ‘what’, a conglomerate of attributes, habits, remembrances of things past, etc.

being always at the beginning or free. ... [C]onsciousness is representation, beginning, freedom” (OB 165). Levinas’s work can be understood as proposing another, deeper kind of freedom, not that of always being able to start anew, but a freedom limited by a past that consciousness cannot recollect, an “immemorial” past in which the self was assigned to a responsibility “prior to” consciousness. This is a strikingly *limited* form of freedom, as consciousness understands it, but it is inevitable that consciousness should understand it thus. To consciousness, it may even seem a form of *persecution* and not freedom. A contradiction in terms: one’s freedom is persecution, persecution by responsibility. Conversely, responsibility turns out to be anything but limited. Its unrelenting infinitude is in fact what gives it the character of being persecutory. Could it be that the ultimate proof of both its persecuting nature and its infinitude is that responsibility for the universe means that one is responsible for every atrocity, every act of violence, even when one is a victim oneself? We take up this question in the next chapter.

7.0 Expiating the Disaster

God has expiated creation, and we who are associated in it expiate it also. — Simone Weil⁵⁶⁵

*All the suffering and cruelty of essence
weighs on a point that supports and expiates for it.* — Emmanuel Levinas⁵⁶⁶

When Levinas characterizes the burden of the subject with the words, “all the suffering and cruelty of essence weighs on a point that supports and expiates for it” (OB 125), the “point” referred to is the self, the subject made response-able to (and by) every other. Recall that “I’essence” is Levinas’s word for *being* (or *Being*, *Sein*), the verb form of *being(s)*, *Seiende(n)*. If the “truth” of Being “is produced only in veritable conversation or in justice” (TI 71), then *all* the suffering of Being throughout history, whatever I know about or can know about, is *my* responsibility, since the truth of Being is produced as my response-ability to others. Therefore even the “disaster” of Auschwitz weighs on me as a responsible subject. This would follow from Levinas’s radical asymmetry of the ethical which, as non-ontological, has reality for me alone (“I more than all the others”). Moreover, from the definition of subject it follows that Auschwitz would be my responsibility even if I myself were the victim of atrocity, or conversely, even though my life were as far removed from the experience of such violence as it is possible to be. The weight of suffering for which the subject expiates is of the same ‘magnitude’ for everyone

⁵⁶⁵ N 80.

⁵⁶⁶ OB 125.

since, as unquantifiable, it has the infinitude of *personal* responsibility, with all the attributes of uniqueness: whatever I do, there is always more that I, and no one else, could do.

Is it *possible* to expiate another person's affliction when it is beyond imagining, or *reasonable* to expect one to expiate the cruelty of one's own concentration camp persecutor? To answer by appealing to the Christian belief that we do so vicariously through Christ is to miss the point of the question, notwithstanding Levinas's frequent receptiveness to a Christian idea. In the present context, the question refers back to the problem of whether we are duped by morality. The question cannot be answered ontologically, but only ethically, by taking up a certain responsibility.

Admittedly for Levinas, expiation serves mainly as another synonym for substitution. That may explain why we find no separate analysis of expiation in any of his works. And yet, the word has connotations that substitution does not have, leaving us uneasy in a different way than that in which substitution for the other might. This may be the reason Levinas hesitates at first to use the term, calling it "perhaps ... bold and premature" (OB 14). Nonetheless, he includes it as the culmination of a list of his usual tropes for substitution early in *Otherwise Than Being*:

Vulnerability, exposure to outrage, to wounding, passivity more passive than all patience, passivity of the accusative form, trauma of accusation suffered by a hostage to the point of persecution, implicating the identity of the hostage who substitutes himself for the others: all this is the self, defecting or defeat of the ego's identity. And this, pushed to the limit, is sensibility, sensibility as the subjectivity of the subject. It is a substitution for another, one in the place of another, expiation. (OB 15)

What does it mean to say that subjectivity is expiation for the other's sufferings? Does Auschwitz weigh on every subject because that is just what it means to be a subject? If so, then the answer to

the question ‘How do we respond to the victim?’ would be that we respond in spite of ourselves, simply as subjects. But what can it mean to say that expiation is what I am always already doing as a subject? Does this not dilute the meaning of the word to insignificance? And even if we are able to make sense of a universal expiation, the subjectivity on which it is allegedly grounded hardly seems guaranteed. There are conditions under which one might lose one’s subjectivity. One might be compelled by forces beyond one’s knowledge or strength to deny one’s very subjectivity or even suffer its total destruction. How does one relate to this extreme vulnerability of what is most intimate to the self? If Levinas does little more than equate substitution with expiation in passing, perhaps reading him through Weil might help us find some explicit answers to these questions.

7.1 Weil (and Levinas) on Expiating for the Other

At first we seem to find Weil discussing only expiatory suffering for one’s own evil. One’s suffering becomes expiatory when one discovers that one is guilty of having brought it upon oneself:

Punishment. It is the evil which ‘I’ of such and such a date do to ‘I’ of such and such a later date. Thus, if I have so much bread to last Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday, and I eat it all up on Monday, the ‘I’ of Monday makes the ‘I’ of Tuesday and Wednesday go hungry. But if on Tuesday what has urged me towards evil is still inside me, it is ‘I’ who do evil to ‘I’ at one and the same time. I can be unaware of it. If [on the contrary] the root of the fault has disappeared (*μετανοειν*, to change heart), the evil that I suffer on Tuesday is exterior; it is innocent suffering. When I suffer the evil inflicted by me without knowing it, it is infernal

suffering. When I set about knowing that it is inflicted by me, it is expiatory suffering. When I have changed, it is innocent suffering. (N 230-31, gloss added).

This does not yet appear to cover the situation Levinas describes in OB 125 and OB 15, in which expiatory suffering is suffering for the *other's* sufferings and not for one's own. Weil herself is not always clear about the difference, if it is indeed a difference for either Weil or Levinas. In substitution, the distinction between self and other is already ambiguous—subject to what might be called a dialectic of suffering. Insofar as one is always already substituted for the other—vulnerable with the same vulnerability that characterizes every person—the other's reasons for suffering are potentially one's own, and vice versa. To notice another person's pain,⁵⁶⁷ whether or not one is able to respond by providing relief, is automatically to become conscious of one's substitutability for the other, at least with regard to vulnerability to pain. But vulnerability to pain may turn out to be the very basis itself of substitution.⁵⁶⁸ To notice the other person's affliction is automatically to become conscious of one's response-ability—one's ability to respond to, and therefore potentially suffer with, the other. You and the other are reduced momentarily to a common denominator. Decreation depends on a similar reduction, expressed in terms of one's nothingness before the moral void.⁵⁶⁹

We have noted that both Levinas and Weil understand the entirety of Creation (the “universe”) as the responsibility of each person. Both also take it for granted that human suffering is an integral part of that Creation. For Weil this means, not that one must love the Good in spite of the suffering of others, but that one must try to love the Good *through* their suffering—that is, love

⁵⁶⁷ As Elaine Scarry points out in *The Body In Pain* (Scarry 1985, 12), the other's suffering can be extremely hard to notice. Its invisibility in others is in fact, according to Scarry, an essential part of pain's painfulness.

⁵⁶⁸ As, not coincidentally, one's vulnerability to pain is certainly the basis of the sinister exploitation of pain (for example in torture).

⁵⁶⁹ N 210, 211, 213-14, 249, 235-36. Like physical pain, the pain the self feels in decreation is not, of course, quantifiable. To the self, it seems like death (FLN 217, 328), hence it is experienced as without bound, 'infinite'. On the 'measurement' of physical pain, see Scarry 1985, 7-8.

the Good by accepting all of Creation, even the excesses we call suffering and evil, as equally constituting created *reality*.

To manage to love God through and beyond the misery of others is very much more difficult than to love him through and beyond one's own suffering. When one loves him through and beyond one's own suffering, this suffering is thereby transfigured; becomes, depending upon the degree of purity of that love, either expiatory or redemptive. But love is unable to transfigure the misery of others (with the exception of those who are within the range of one's influence). (N 255)

The love that loves "through and beyond the misery of others" is clearly a love that suffers *with* the other's suffering. It is difficult for two reasons. First, one must love the Good in spite of evidence that the Good is nowhere present.⁵⁷⁰ Since Being is presence, one must love the Good as *beyond being*. And second, love "through and beyond the misery of others" is difficult because it rarely is able to provide compensation or relief for the sufferer. This compels one to face the reality of pain in its starkest form. If the sufferer is someone one knows, with whom one happens to have sufficient rapport to offer effective emotional support, or if the relief of this particular kind of suffering happens to fall within the province of one's medical or psychotherapeutic expertise, then one may be fortunate enough to bring about a diminishing of the actual pain. Simply enabling the sufferer to give voice to their pain, or having the ability to give voice to it oneself, can often suffice to alleviate it to a considerable extent.⁵⁷¹ But even this is often not possible.

⁵⁷⁰ "It is impossible for God to be present in creation except in the form of absence" (N 419). "It is appropriate that unconditional desire be directed to an unconditional good, a good that by virtue of its perfection is absent from the world, and this is what Weil refers to in speaking of God" (McCullough 2014, 67).

⁵⁷¹ Scarry 1985, 6-11.

Loving the Good through and beyond the suffering of those halfway around the globe or those lost to history, or those who are victims of unimaginable affliction—facing the reality of their suffering in spite of their physical, temporal, or conceptual remoteness—would seem by contrast to be nearly impossible. “True enough,” Weil notes, “our neighbor is he whom we come across stripped and wounded on the roadside, not he whom we do not come across. And yet ...” Weil breaks off without finishing the sentence, but she does immediately observe that “the author of the *Iliad* succeeded in loving God through and beyond the misery of others” without making any exception: that is, without excluding those lost to history as opposed to its heroes (N 256).⁵⁷² Clearly Weil believed that the impossible was somehow possible—perhaps even that loving the Good through and beyond the suffering of others might be something that in some sense we are always already doing. In that case, Homer’s creative genius only made conscious use of an ability we all possess.⁵⁷³

Weil compares the difficulty of loving the Good through the sufferings of others to that of accepting one’s own suffering when it approaches the extreme of affliction she calls the “laceration-point”—the point at which one’s suffering becomes “quasi-infernal” (N 255-56). Presumably this refers to the point at which pain transcends understanding. If infernal suffering is suffering from the evil of which one is *culpably* ignorant of being the cause, then quasi-infernal suffering would be the suffering that is simply beyond one’s understanding quite apart from its cause. Great physical pain as a child experiences it would be an example of quasi-infernal suffering. The existence of such pain is a notorious obstacle to loving the Good, Ivan Karamazov perhaps being the most famous example in literature of despair over this obstacle.

⁵⁷² “But who knows the whole extent of the empire of might and at the same time despises it? (T. E. Lawrence, the liberator of Arabia, was one but he is dead) and perhaps some Christians very near to saintliness, but seemingly few. And yet this double understanding is perhaps the purest source of love for God. ... First of all, it is the very inspiration of the poem of the *Iliad*, and sheds light upon almost every one of its parts” (Weil, “The ‘Symposium’ of Plato”, IC 116-17).

⁵⁷³ Perhaps poets are more likely to make such use of this ability. We consider another example below.

More than any other, quasi-infernal suffering involves “the consciousness of myself *qua* nothingness”—that is, the consciousness of being nothing in comparison to the Good, or of the Good itself seeming to be unreal and therefore nothing. The latter is the very opposite of *joy*, which Weil defines as consciousness of the Good itself, “consciousness of that which is not me *qua* human being.” In Levinasian terms, joy forgets its own existence in contemplation of what is beyond being, while suffering cannot forget its own existence—in fact, it is precisely the experience of one’s existence as unbearable. Joy and suffering, Weil claims, are “two correlative aspects of the same thing” (N 291). In joy, the experience of one’s nothingness is positive, while in suffering it is (usually) negative. The contrast is reminiscent of the Kierkegaardian dialectic of faith and despair, the uncertainty of God’s presence experienced as positive and as negative, respectively. The qualification ‘usually’ seems to be necessary for Weil, for whom the relationship between joy and suffering is mysterious, to say the least.

Thus suffering in affliction and compassion for others are all the purer and more profound the better we are able to conceive the fulness of joy. Of what does suffering deprive him who is without joy? ...

Transcendent joy: one cannot (perhaps?) attain to it through the sensibility except by extreme and pure suffering.

To know with all my soul that I am nothing. The joy of being nothing.

In order to find reality in suffering, the revelation of reality must have come to one through joy. Otherwise life is nothing but a more or less evil dream.

One must manage to discover a still fuller reality in suffering, which is emptiness, nothingness. (N 290, 291)

Since the Good is the only reality and the self is not the Good, it follows that the self is not real—it is essentially nothing—and that deep down we know this. When our knowledge of it is consciously realized for whatever reason, most patently through experiencing pain or affliction, “there is spiritual laceration. I can well forget my existence, but not think of myself as being nothing” (N 291). If the mind is forced to think this impossibility, it almost certainly rebels, as it did in Ivan Karamazov. But to represent God as a sovereign power against whom one can rebel is to refuse to face the absence of God. This is the same as refusing to face the moral void within oneself and therefore the nothingness of the self.⁵⁷⁴

Even someone of perfect faith, such as Job, can approach the very brink of despair through experiencing his nothingness. The difference between Ivan and Job is that the latter, in arguing with God, wants to maintain the relationship. According to Weil, all that saves Job from despair in this situation, and separates Ivan from grace, is the final “transfiguration” of suffering into love.⁵⁷⁵ Before that happens, however, “there is one irreducible moment when [suffering] has not yet been transfigured, when it is quasi-infernal, and when nevertheless we must love. This is the laceration-point.” Depending on what it means, Weil’s next sentence may be highly significant in the present context: “We always remain exposed to this laceration when considering others” (N 256). By this Weil could mean that we are never free to dismiss the very real possibility that the next person we meet might be suffering inwardly from the severest affliction (laceration). While this is certainly true, more likely she means that we ourselves are susceptible to laceration when considering any other person, for she immediately observes that the other need not be someone we actually meet. Thus not only is it possible that we might at any moment run into someone in Job’s situation, but we ourselves are exposed to something like his suffering merely by

⁵⁷⁴ On the “moral void” see above, p. 439, and below, pp. 456, 463, 520, 529.

⁵⁷⁵ “The only man who feels all the bitterness of affliction, completely and at the center of his soul, is the man who tries, like Job, to continue to love God in the depth of affliction. If he ceased to love God he would not suffer so much. Prometheus was the same. In this state the soul is lacerated, nailed to the two poles of creation: inert matter and God. This laceration is a copy, within a finite soul, of God’s creative act. Perhaps it is necessary to pass through that in order to emerge from creation and return to the origin” (FLN 328).

contemplating the reality of human suffering in any of its forms, assuming we do so with attention and do not try to screen it from ourselves through explanations or consolations.

The fact that very rarely do either of these forms of encountering the laceration point actually happen to us in everyday life—in ourselves and in those we meet—need not diminish the force of the argument, since Levinas gives us an even deeper reason for our being always exposed to something like “laceration” with respect to others: the laceration point is the point at which one is continually on the threshold of one’s substitution for the other—that is, decreation, the experience of the other’s disruption of one’s world, which Levinas interprets as subjectivity-producing. Subjectivity is the result of a recurring identity-crisis (or faith-crisis, insofar as the existence of the Good becomes questionable) resulting from constant reminders of one’s “secondariness” with regard to the other (GWCM 28). While the crisis can certainly occur consciously through the experience of one’s own or another’s suffering, Levinas sees it as a pre-conscious effect of the *Other* in every instant. After noting that “the one in the-one-for-the-other in responsibility” signifies “my uniqueness as a respondent, a hostage” to the other, Levinas makes the connection with expiation:

The condition of being hostage is not chosen; if there had been a choice, the subject would have kept his *as-for-me* and his exits from the inner life [*le sujet aurait gardé son quant à soi et les issues de la vie intérieure*], whereas his subjectivity, his very psychism [*psychisme*], is the *for-the-other*, and his *very bearing of independence consists in supporting the other—in expiating for him*. (OB 136 / AE 173-74, emphasis in the French, translation slightly modified)

To “keep one’s as-for-me” is to control one’s exposure to others, to manage one’s own “exits” to the ‘outside’ where the other is. It is to determine for oneself when and how one will take

temporary leave of the “inner life” of enjoyment in order to venture forth into an admittedly uncertain world, confident nonetheless that one can always return home again even if one happens to confront the wounded man by the roadside. But such a venture, carried out in one’s own way and in one’s own time, is impossible. To be-in-the-world is to be implicated in relationship with all others constantly, unable to guarantee exits or returns. One cannot be-in-the-world at all without finding oneself in a relation of suffering-with- or being-for-the-other, a relation that challenges the existence of one’s freedom to ‘come home again’, as did Ulysses, from all of one’s ‘adventures’. In other words, purely and simply, one cannot *live* without *expiating* continually for every other.

Is this the same thing as showing *compassion*? Levinas would probably not call it compassion, for reasons we summarized earlier: the word suggests a conscious projection of one’s own understanding onto the other, rather than substitution for the other in self-forgetfulness.⁵⁷⁶ But as we saw in Chapter 3, Weil gives compassion an unorthodox Levinasian inflection, reducing the ability to feel compassion to the ‘mere’ acceptance of the reality of one’s own and the other’s suffering. One cannot feel compassion for the sufferer without an awareness that their suffering is in some sense (potentially, at least) also *one’s own*. Conscious compassion requires attention, attention demands self-abdication, and the dethroning of the self then makes room for one’s suffering with—that is, expiating for—the other. This forces one, if one is to go on loving the Good, to consent to the existence of affliction as part of Necessity. All suffering—certainly all affliction, which for Weil always has a physical component (SWR 439-40 = WG 67-68)—is suffering from Necessity. Since the other’s affliction is due to Necessity, the same Necessity dictates that one would not escape the other’s suffering were one in a position similar to theirs. But more to the point, one has no right to ascribe the other’s suffering to Necessity, as in all

⁵⁷⁶ On compassion, see above, p. 222n325.

honesty one must do, without being willing to take it upon oneself unconditionally.⁵⁷⁷ The result is that one cannot love Necessity, one of the two faces of God, without accepting the inevitability of the other's suffering *as effectively and simultaneously one's own*. In expiating for one's own suffering, one expiates for the other's, and vice versa. They are in fact the *same affliction* from two different perspectives.⁵⁷⁸

The deeper the other's suffering, the more one must leave one's self behind in order fully to register its depth, to whatever extent this may be possible. Thus taking leave of the self is for both Levinas and Weil the essence of expiation as suffering-along-with. Here a paradox arises. One cannot genuinely witness the suffering of another unless one makes it one's own by actually sharing it or at least relating it to one's own suffering in some way. Otherwise it does not register as *suffering*, for it is doubtful that one can view affliction with dispassionate objectivity and truly see it as *affliction*. But at the same time, the other's pain, as private, is absolutely foreign and therefore emphatically *not* one's own. Indeed, pain may be the most private experience there is. That being the case, it would seem impossible that the other's suffering could become one's own suffering.

The 'solution' that both Levinas and Weil come up with is nonetheless to suffer the other person's suffering—not by viewing it ontologically, but by converting it in oneself to one's own responsibility for every other. The contradiction between the other's suffering and one's own is 'resolved' by allowing it to stand—but only resolved insofar as consciousness, the for-itself, yields to ('suffers') its contrary, responsibility, the-one-for-the-other—a 'suffering' which essentially reduces the problematic self to the nothing it is (OB 110, N 272, FLN 244). The

⁵⁷⁷ Not intentionally seeking it, however. Weil is very clear that one is never to *seek* affliction.

⁵⁷⁸ For Weil, the line between suffering and compassion dissolves completely in the special case of redemptive suffering: "In a being who is sufficiently pure to participate in the Redemption, physical pain is felt directly, immediately as compassion. It is compassion which lacerates the flesh; or rather, the only effect the laceration of the flesh has is to transfix the soul with compassion" (N 507). In other words, in redemptive suffering the sufferer's pain, whatever its cause, immediately becomes compassion for the other, and conversely, any compassion the redemptive sufferer feels for the other is immediately felt as pain.

contradiction or *tension* between one's own suffering and the other's suffering must be *experienced*, not imagined away, if one is to realize the difference between the ontological question (Cain's 'What is the other to *me*?'), which concentrates attention on oneself, and the ethical question ('What are *you* going through?'), understood not as an ontological question about the other's state of being and its points of resemblance or difference compared to one's own, but as putting into question the other-obscuring reign of one's own self. Not refusing the ethical question is *suffering the contradiction itself*—the exact form that suffering-along-with-the-other takes. Here is where suffering-with becomes suffering-from. That is why Levinas says that the suffering other *persecutes* me. Any contradiction is an offense to reason, but as Weil reminds us, one maintains one's respect for reality precisely by respecting its contradictions. This is equivalent to respecting the otherness of the other. The last thing the sufferer wants to hear is 'I know what you are going through' if this appears to mean that the sufferer is being reduced to the sympathizer's thematization of 'reality'. Conversely, if the sufferer senses that one is giving her one's attention, then this in itself can be therapeutic, as we noted earlier, and in any case, as Weil also reminds us, is the sole prerequisite to noticing whatever else the sufferer needs from one. In everyday life, respect for the contradictions of reality with regard to the other's suffering would take the form of a refusal to be discouraged from loving the Good in spite of suffering's evil, or disappointed by one's own reversals of fortune—that is, by Necessity. Aspiring to an *indifference to self*, one would acquire a *non-indifference to the other*, despite oneself.

"Contradiction experienced right to the very depths of the being," writes Weil, "means spiritual laceration" (N 414), that is, suffering with and *for* the other—in Weil's terms, decreation, in Levinas's, substitution. It is therefore not surprising that Levinas continually emphasizes a similar paradox: "The more I return to myself," as the 'I' of consciousness always tries to do, writes Levinas,

the more I divest myself, under the traumatic effect of persecution, of my freedom as a constituted, willful, imperialist subject, the more I discover myself to be responsible; the more just I am, the more guilty I am. I am ‘in myself’ [*«en soi»*] through the others. The *psychism* is the other in the same, without alienating the same.⁵⁷⁹

As always with Levinas, guilt, persecution and trauma are apparently hyperbolic metaphors for an orientation that one does not take up intentionally. Levinas is describing a form of involuntary *self*-transfiguration—really self-abdication—comparable to that which Weil associates with the expiation of one’s own suffering, but with a very different emphasis. Subjectivity, writes Levinas, “is the null-place [*non-lieu*, literally non-place or no-place] in which inspiration by the other is also expiation for the other, by which consciousness itself would come to signify” (OB 145). For Levinas, expiation is as basic to subjectivity as substitution. Weil’s emphasis is not on subjectivity but on “compassion,” the ability to go on loving the Good in spite of the reality of one’s own and the other’s suffering. But when she is read with Levinas, compassion begins to resemble Levinas’s “inspiration by the other” which takes me outside of myself *from within* myself—that is, insofar as I discover the other as fellow sufferer in spite of myself, not making the discovery through my own “exits” (impossible anyway). It is only by means of this ‘inspired’ transformation of substitution/decreation that I am able to see the other as truly *other*.

Subjectivity *happens* as a result of an in-spiration, a breathing into me of the other, by the other, something over which one has no control. One becomes a subject, subjected to the other, not by learning to control one’s “exits” but by finding oneself involuntarily throwing open one’s doors to the winds of alterity.

⁵⁷⁹ OB 112, translating *psychisme* as *psychism*, not *psyche* as Lingis does. The word *psychisme* seems to have a special meaning for Levinas, not unrelated to *psyche* (breath). See Introduction above, p. 30. Levinas often uses metaphors of breathing in connection with his idea of *prophecy*, the in-spiration by the other that makes one a subject (see OB 181-82).

One could also understand “inspiration by the other” as something like a disruption or invasion of one’s personal space. Reversing our usual understanding of the appropriate response to persecution, Levinas insists that the persecution for which I am responsible prior to any other responsibility—that is, the persecution to which I must respond first, not with retaliation but with acceptance—is the “persecution with which, *before any intention*, [the other] persecutes me” (OB 166, emphasis added). This is the challenge that the other presents, in innumerable ways, to my ability to respond. The challenge is integral to human existence. Responsibility for the other who persecutes me will sound offensive to our ears until we note Levinas’s qualification that the ‘persecution’ occurs “before any intention” on the ‘persecutor’s’ part. Not only is it unintentional, it is prior to any conscious relationship between the two of us. Persecution, as Levinas means the word, is originary to all human relations—including the relation of persecuted/persecutor in the usual sense of the words. Levinas’s hyperbolic language is an attempt to thematize (imperfectly, as all thematization must) an ethical signification that worldmaking consciousness works very hard to suppress in the interest of maintaining its autonomy—for, in effect, the other continually demands that I justify my freedom to make him or her part of my constituted world. This challenge—being called into question by the other—is precisely what constitutes the other’s persecution from the point of view of consciousness. And yet, the signification prior to meaning which, when said, takes on the meaning ‘suffering for the other’ is so basic that, as response-ability, it is the non-conscious foundation of consciousness itself—that “by which consciousness itself would come to signify,” in spite of itself, its nonvoluntary acknowledgment of the other. This is something of which we necessarily cannot be aware, much less would be inclined to label with an extreme term such as persecution. But if the *basis* for the other’s demand that I justify my freedom—including my freedom to ignore their pain—*precedes* my conscious ability to reason and to give justifications, as Levinas claims, then from the point of view of conscious reasoning this basis will appear to be an imposition, unreasonable, even violent. Hence persecution is not an

inappropriate word for something that challenges so invariably the freedom (as we tend to see it) one has to make sense of the world.

The basis for the other's demand that I justify my freedom does not come only from outside. It is already within me as the "inspiration by the other" (OB 145) that Levinas sometimes calls the other within. This is how expiation for the other—consenting to one's persecution by the other in Levinas's sense—can be the pre-conscious basis both for ethics and for worldmaking consciousness. That is what Levinas means when he says that "the self as an expiation is prior to activity and passivity" (OB 116). Or, as he puts it a little later on, "expiation coincides in the last analysis with the extraordinary and diachronic reversal of the same into the other, to the point of substitution as a hostage" (OB 146). Expiation for the vulnerable other is substitution, and therefore also decreation. We shall see later that Weil herself directly corroborates the equivalence of decreation and expiation.

7.2 Attending to the Other's Vulnerability

Expiating for the other's suffering—either identical with, or closely related to, concern for the other's vulnerability—naturally takes the form of a concern for justice. To shift to others or to God one's responsibility for seeing that justice is done on behalf of the victim is, for Levinas, to reduce oneself to something less than fully human (EN 94), to miss one's calling as response-able. There is always a possible course of action, a response, on behalf of the sufferer—at the very least, that of *giving him or her one's undivided attention*. Subsequent to attention, one then acts only insofar as the appropriate action becomes unmistakably clear, as Weil assures us it always will, even if it is only to continue giving the sufferer one's attention. Failing to do that much—but can any more than this justly be expected of anyone?—denies one's subjectivity, that is, one's fundamentally human *ability-to-respond* to the other.

This is what Cain denies, in effect, when he asks, “Am I my brother’s keeper?” Essentially he disallows something absolutely basic, much as one denies the Good by insisting on a *reason* for loving it. The origin of basic concern for the neighbor—which Levinas calls *non-indifference*—is in one sense one’s response-ability to the other person’s vulnerability. As an anthropological fact, the origin of neighbor-concern admittedly remains a mystery, one that reason may never be able to penetrate simply because it is of a piece with the necessary ambiguity of the ethical (OB 156). Concern for the neighbor, like the ethical, is outside the domain of science. It arises from an anarchical past beyond reach of—or on the hither side of—time, space, and rational explanations. Its basis is not ontology; rather it is the ethical which in turn is the basis *for* ontology.

But the relationship with a past that is on the hither side of every present and every representable, for not belonging to the order of presence, is included in the extraordinary and everyday event of my responsibility for the faults or the misfortune of others, in my responsibility that answers for the freedom of another, in the astonishing human fraternity in which fraternity by itself, conceived with Cain’s sober coldness, would not explain the responsibility between separated beings it calls for. (OB 10, translation slightly modified)

According to Levinas, “rabbinical commentary” does not consider Cain’s question to be insolent but simply a point of information or a confession of ignorance. Cain simply does not know the answer. But this is for the culpable reason that he “has not yet experienced human solidarity” (DL 20). Since the sacrifices of Cain and Abel took place in time (“it came to pass that they were sacrificing”—Gen. 4:3), Cain must already have shared in the human sufferings that come with mere temporal existence (N 321), at the very least ordinary anxiety induced by the future. He would have experienced the vicissitudes of possibility—perhaps unsure on this occasion whether God would accept his sacrifice. Hence Cain should have been aware that he shared the world with

equally vulnerable neighbors—reason enough to suspect that one might have at least some responsibility for their suffering or for its respite.

But is it really so easy to become aware of one's own vulnerability, not to mention the other's? Have we not noted that there is an experiential abyss separating one from one's neighbor's pain— notwithstanding that, according to Weil, one's own suffering is essentially substitutable for anyone else's? When Levinas views these questions from the "ethical perspective," however, he discovers another sort of abyss altogether, one that does not cancel the experiential abyss but instead reduces its importance.

In this perspective there is a radical difference between *the suffering in the other*, where it is unforgiveable to *me*, solicits me and calls me, and suffering *in me*, my own experience of suffering, whose constitutional or congenital uselessness can take on a meaning, the only one of which suffering is capable, in becoming a suffering for the suffering (inexorable though it may be) of someone else. (EN 94, emphasis in original)

I am responsible for alleviating "the suffering in the other" to the extent that this is practical, but beyond that I can do nothing to make the other's suffering a transforming experience for them. By contrast, *it is incumbent on me* to make my own suffering self-transforming, letting it "take on a meaning" as suffering for the other's suffering. The 'abyss' Levinas therefore finds is that between *two forms of responsibility*: the responsibilities of justice (to alleviate the *other's* suffering), which are finite, and the response-ability of the ethical (viewing the other's suffering as my suffering), which is infinite insofar as it is "not measured by commitments" (CP 149), hence never leaves me free to call it quits, to imagine, as Cain seems to have, that now I have gone far enough in 'substituting' for the other.

Similarly, Weil says that my suffering, when I understand it as sharing in the other's suffering and therefore as effectively suffering out of love for the other as someone who is as vulnerable as I am, "is thereby transfigured; becomes, depending upon the degree of purity of that love, either expiatory or redemptive" (N 255)—that is, either suffering for the sufferings of the other, and only then for my own suffering as shared, or a suffering that cancels the other's suffering in some way probably unknown to me. However similar my suffering might seem to be to the other's suffering considered ontologically—that is, in terms of its meaning within a referential totality—the other's and my own are separated by an immense gulf, an *ethical* gulf, in terms of what I, as opposed to the other, am obligated to do about it.

One thing Weil says one cannot legitimately do about it—and this may well come as a surprise—is to *offer consolation*. What the sufferer seeks, Weil claims, is not consolation but simply respite. If in witnessing the other's suffering I am powerless to provide the relief they hope for, then at least I need not ignore their petition for relief by turning their suffering into something of less consequence through a consoling explanation—thus, in turn, obscuring what I or someone else might in fact be able to do. At the very least, explanations dull the need for giving the other one's attention—the only thing that, according to Weil, leads to effective practical action. "We mustn't have any consolation—any consolation which can be represented to the mind." There may be an "ineffable consolation," Weil suggests, which "descends" (N 211)—it is not clear what she means by this—but one should not wait for it or speculate about its nature. This alone precludes any attempt to *explain* one's own or the other's suffering. "To explain suffering is to console it," rather than to love the Good through it; "therefore it must not be explained. Whence the eminent value of the suffering of the innocent" (N 229). This last remark, no doubt something of a shock, can only mean that the 'value' of such unexplainable suffering is that it *has no value* in itself—that its only value lies in teaching us that it has no explanation, thereby directing us to the real task—for if it did have value we could then explain or justify it in terms of its value.

Innocent suffering is an excess, an evil that exceeds every possibility of serving a purpose, except insofar as one learns through it to love the Good more deeply. But the only way to love the Good through the suffering of others is to share in their suffering. Explanations do not bring one closer to this goal; quite the opposite. For Levinas as for Weil, this is the only meaning suffering can have, with the following important difference: that in what he calls expiatory suffering, Levinas finds not only a way to love the Good but also the origin of human subjectivity. Expiation is substitution, substitution is expiation. The meaning or value of one's own suffering, he writes in "Useless Suffering," is thus

the only one of which suffering is capable, in becoming a suffering for the suffering (inexorable though it may be) of someone else. It is this attention to the suffering of the other that, through the cruelties of our century (despite these cruelties, because of these cruelties)⁵⁸⁰ can be affirmed as the very nexus of human subjectivity, to the point of being raised to the level of supreme ethical principle—the only one it is impossible to question—shaping the hopes and commanding the practical discipline of vast human groups. This attention and this action are so imperiously and directly incumbent on human beings (on their *I*'s) that it makes awaiting them from an all-powerful God impossible without lowering ourselves. (EN 94)

Notice the emphasis Levinas places on *attention*. What, then, is the *action* he refers to? It can only be the action, whatever it is, that becomes clear when one gives one's attention to the other.

Levinas claims not only that one's own suffering is meaningful when it becomes "suffering for the suffering ... of someone else" but that this is the *only* real meaning it can have. Things have meaning only for a self, but *the self* (as opposed to the ego) *exists only insofar as it is in*

⁵⁸⁰ Is Levinas searching for the right phrase? Might his first choice (of the three options) have been the right one? Might it in fact be *through* these cruelties—as Weil would say, "through and beyond"?

communication with the other. It never has the option of living in isolation. The self is forced back to the other simply by the necessity of finding things meaningful, which it does through worldmaking as the work of language. This incessant return to the other, the basis of subjectivity, prevents one from remaining closed up within the world of one's own consciousness—a 'world' that would be impossible in any case without the other. The incessant return to the other is what Levinas means by *recurrence*, a major theme of *Otherwise Than Being*. We will consider it in the next chapter. The term also occurs in the essay "No Identity" (1970), where Levinas distinguishes between the ego, which can exist in isolation, and the self, which cannot. Thus it is not the case that the self first exists and only then becomes responsible for other selves, but rather the self comes into existence precisely through responding to the others. Levinas calls this "an impossible recurrence" because no matter how often the self returns to itself, no matter what it does to (re)establish its own identity as represented by the ego, the other undermines the attempt in the very next instant:

There is a divergency between the ego and the self, an impossible recurrence, and impossible identity. *No one can remain in himself*: the humanity of man, subjectivity, *is* a responsibility for the others, an extreme vulnerability. ... It is not a question of a subject assuming or escaping responsibilities, a subject constituted, posited in itself and for itself as a free identity; it is a question of the subjectivity of the subject, its non-indifference with regard to the other in a responsibility that is unlimited for not [being] measured by commitments, to which assumptions and refusal of responsibilities refer. (CP 149, brackets and emphasis added).

The "divergency" Levinas points out here is between the ego or *for-itself*, on the one hand, which seeks to assimilate every experience into the world that consciousness constitutes, and the self or "oneself" on the other, which, according to Levinas, is strictly *for-another* and is "older than" the

ego (IR 175). The disruption of the ego-world by suffering (or by anything else—but we could define suffering broadly enough to include all disruptions or “impingements,” to borrow Winnicott’s term for events that force one to react ‘defensively’)⁵⁸¹ forces the self, not back to chaos or nothingness (unless the suffering is so great as to constitute extreme affliction), but to the *neighbor*, if only for respite, but in any case to the edge of the moral void, the limitless vulnerability one shares with every person one meets. Suffering both isolates one in one’s pain and places one in company with all sufferers.⁵⁸² But it is perhaps not surprising that suffering forces one back to what is prior to or *other than* the comfortable and familiar. What is surprising and new—new to philosophy as well as new in a fundamentally originary sense in that it relates to an an-archical beginning, a beginning prior to all beginnings—is Levinas’s idea that one’s being forced back from one’s immersion in the familiar world in order to confront alterity, *in whatever way this takes place*, is always a return from the ego (the same) to the other *person*. One’s subjectivity consists in nothing more than one’s substitutability for the other, one’s vulnerability to being continually disrupted by their alterity. What suffering seems to do is to accentuate this process, reducing one to the nothingness-of-self one has in common with every other person: more evidence that substitution is expiation.

But perhaps the reader would like something more concrete in the way of evidence. For this I turn to an example from the 19th century, unexpectedly encountered in a recent work on the Holocaust. To be forced back to others can be disconcerting, even traumatic, but often (at least in a sensitive nature) merely humiliating. Such is the case of the English poet John Keats, who describes in a letter to a friend an experience that illustrates remarkably the appropriateness of

⁵⁸¹ In Winnicott’s object relations theory, an impingement is an event so disturbing that the child must develop its own defense in the form of a “false self” to protect the child’s “true self”. Normally the true self relies on the *other* for protection: usually the mother who provides it with a safe “holding environment”. Impingement may be accompanied by “an unconscious assumption (which can become a conscious hope) that opportunity will occur at a later date for a renewed experience in which the failure situation will be able to be unfrozen and re-experienced.” This resembles current theory on trauma (pp. 295-96 above, 464-65 below). See D. W. Winnicott, *Through Pediatrics to Psychoanalysis* (London, 1978), 191-92, 281.

⁵⁸² There may be an important exception to this fraternity, in the *Muselmänner* or so-called ‘walking dead’ of the concentration camps. We consider the *Muselmänner* in a later section.

Levinas's language of persecution in describing such disruptions, as well as the fact that they are invariably the result of being around other people: "It is a wretched thing to confess," Keats wrote, "but it is a very fact that not one word I ever utter can be taken for granted as an opinion growing out of my identical nature. ... When I am in a room with People if I ever am free from speculating on creations of my own brain, then not myself goes home to myself: but the identity of every one in the room begins so to press upon me that I am in a very little time annihilated"⁵⁸³ Now it is probably accurate, as Giorgio Agamben seems to assume in relating the story, that the others press upon Keats because, as a poet, he is more sensitive than most people to different perspectives on the world. In that event, could not the original impetus behind Keats' fascination with others' worlds have been his recognition that universally every *other* represents a disruption of one's *same*? To this might well have been attached a simple concern for the vulnerability of his neighbor, for Keats seems to have been a compassionate man.

What exactly is it that is annihilated here? Weil, making a distinction between the ego and the 'I' which Levinas does not make, observes that in extreme affliction the 'I' can be annihilated even while the ego remains more or less intact. Recall that decreation is the process of allowing one's 'I' to be destroyed from within, as it were—that is, by one's own consent. This, Weil says, is infinitely preferable to its being destroyed from without before one has time to consent.

What happens to those whose 'I' has been destroyed from without by affliction? One can only imagine in their case a total destruction in the style of the atheistic or materialistic conception. The fact that they should have lost their 'I' does not mean to say that they have cast aside all egoism. On the contrary. Certainly this happens sometimes, when a dog-like

⁵⁸³ Letter of Keats to Richard Woodhouse, October 27, 1818. It is quoted in Agamben 1999, 112, incorrectly cited as a letter to a John Woodhouse. A similar confession by Paul Celan suggests that this experience could be a source of poetic inspiration: "I am still a bit tipsy, intoxicated, stupefied from all the encounters and conversations; also from the words that the moment gave me [*die der Augenblick mir eingab*]" (letter to Hanne and Hermann Lenz, quoted in James Lyon, *Paul Celan and Martin Heidegger: An Unresolved Conversation, 1951-1970*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006, 77).

devotion is developed. But at other times the inner being is instead reduced to a state of naked, vegetative egoism—an egoism minus the ‘I’. (N 337)

The distinction Weil makes here, between the ‘I’ and the ‘egoism’, is related to the one she makes between “supplementary” and “vegetative” energy. Supplementary energy is the energy of autonomy, the energy we acquire from the desire, for example, to achieve a certain objective or to advance ourselves with respect to others—the *imagination* (N 221). It fuels the motivation of the ‘I’ which Weil usually, and Levinas always, equates with the ego. If this energy is taxed beyond one’s limits as an autonomous achiever, then vegetative energy takes over, the unconscious energy of the drive simply to stay alive (N 255, 495). New arrivals to the concentration camps were very quickly deprived of their supplementary energy by violence, shameful treatment, and the chaotic environment. The loss was not total and permanent, however, except perhaps in those who, eventually emptied of every shred of supplementary energy by malnutrition, became the apathetic walking dead of the concentration camps, who Primo Levi tells us were known as the *Muselmänner*.⁵⁸⁴ For Weil, the way to perfection consists not in carrying out a task by means of one’s supplementary energy, but in faithful perseverance to the point beyond the availability of supplementary energy, at which one begins to use up vegetative energy (N 354). One then becomes like the sun, which maintains itself and does its good simply by burning itself out.⁵⁸⁵

Is Keats describing himself as such a self-less ego? Not likely. Or as an egoless self? It is true that he speaks in the same letter of his “poetical Character” having “no self—it is everything and nothing—It has no character.” He goes on to declare that he “has no Identity” because he is “continually filling in for, and filling, some other Body,” presumably the bodies of the people whose worlds he tries to imagine. Agamben interprets what he calls Keats’ “shameful

⁵⁸⁴ See Levi 1996, 90. We consider the *Muselmänner* in a later section of this chapter.

⁵⁸⁵ I have taken this image from Don Cupitt. See, for example, his *Solar Ethics* (London: SCM Press, 1995).

experience” of self-annihilation as his giving in to “a full and unrestrained impossibility of responsibility that involves every act of speech and that situates the would-be poet in a position even lower than that of children” (Agamben 1999, 113). This seems to equate Keats’ inability to go home to himself with a refusal to assume the responsibilities of adulthood. Hence, Agamben cites Rimbaud’s striking comment about his own early poetic career: “I could not continue,” wrote Rimbaud; “I would have gone mad and, what is more ... it was evil.” But rather than imputing to poets a culpable lack of responsibility bordering on childishness or even madness, should we not consider whether Keats’ “shameful” confession might signify an awareness more acute than most people’s of human vulnerability? When he says that he is without a self, could he not have meant that he had discovered that his ‘I’ has no real existence? Agamben does note later that to refer to oneself as ‘I’ is indeed a kind of self-annihilation, a “desubjectification” he calls it, since one shares the word ‘I’ with everyone else.⁵⁸⁶ For Levinas, one is a subject not because one has established an identity *capable of* responsibility, prior to meeting up with the other, but because human identity is determined solely by the fact that the other *identifies one* as responsible, against one’s will, as it were—or even before one is conscious of having a will.⁵⁸⁷ As we noted in Chapter 4, conscious awareness of this *ethical* precondition of human consciousness can in fact constitute a kind of madness, a sensitivity to the “absurdity” of human existence.

Being forced back to others is substitution. Hence decreation must also in some sense be an annihilation of the for-itself *for others*. It is indeed akin to the ‘madness’ of the inspired poet who, in some cases at least, finds his inspiration not in losing himself in what is other than himself, in the sense that Levinas means by “participation”, but in a self-abdication instigated by the other, so that the other’s *otherness*, with all that this entails in terms of one’s relations with him or her, might become visible—or at least, more likely to question one. Letting go of the self, for Weil,

⁵⁸⁶ Agamben 1999, 116.

⁵⁸⁷ “As an exception, and by abuse of language, one can name it me or I. But the denomination here is only a pronomination; there is *nothing* that is named *I*; the I is said by him that speaks. The pronoun already dissimulates the unique one that is speaking, subsumes it under a concept” (OB 56).

amounts to recognizing the nothingness of one's own self—essentially decreation. Could this letting go be a kind of expiation, making amends by removing the self that, in every person, obscures the other? Even without equating substitution and expiation, the connection between expiation and decreation is not hard to make, if only because expiating for the other means granting the full reality of their suffering. For if Weil claims that without “supernatural” help one can expiate only for one's own sufferings and not for the neighbor's, nonetheless expiation for oneself, when actually practiced, *necessarily* develops into expiation for the other. This is because the supernatural help Weil has in mind is the same as that required for the ego's decreation: the ability (that is, the *gift*) to consent to the *suffering* involved in expiation, whether it is for oneself or for the other. The decrelated self, the ego-less self—in contrast to the self-less ego or “egoism minus the ‘I’”—is a self wholly response-available-for-the-other simply in realizing its own nothingness. This ego-less self is “older than” the ego, since its only reality is the Love that created it, a Love ‘prior to’ Creation. The decrelated self is the self that has been reduced, by the action of Love, to the infinitesimal particle of divine Love which is all that remains when everything belonging to the I, created *ex nihilo*, is recognized for the nothingness that it is. Because one does not decreate oneself but accepts decreation as a gift, and because decreation is the only goal Weil thinks worthwhile, the gift of decreation is all the meaning she feels she needs to give to the notion of supernatural help. It follows from this that wherever Weil speaks of supernatural help, she is essentially referring to decreation. Decreation is what all “supernatural help” looks like to the person who receives it.

Equivalently, decreation is the ability “to let necessity act within the self”—that is, to undergo the “renunciation of personal will” (N 258). It is “to bear the weight of the entire universe. It is to throw away the counterweight. By emptying ourselves, we expose ourselves to the full pressure of the surrounding universe” (N 229). Because it requires renunciation of the will, the real weight of “supporting the universe” (as Levinas also calls it) is *ethical*. Its “counterweight” in the

balance that measures just action is the 'I' or ego. Sin, as Weil defines it, is letting someone else bear the weight of the measure of suffering one has been assigned, the exact degree of suffering corresponding to the support of the universe one is uniquely destined (that is, given the capacity by the laws of Necessity) to provide. Or rather, it is *attempting* to shift this weight to the other, since if Weil is right that the same "irreducible quantity" of suffering is irrevocably allocated to each person (N 210-14; see above, section 6.1), then whatever success one believes one has in transferring one's share of it to others is an illusion. One only trades present suffering for later suffering, while possibly introducing into the other who momentarily suffers in one's place a level of suffering he or she is not presently able to bear.

In Levinasian terms, decreation "extradites" (OB 142) one to the ethical authority of the other, placing one under the authority of the other's call to response-ability. But to think Weil through Levinas complicates matters (although not unnecessarily), since this thought can occur on either of two levels. On neither level, however, is one free to *choose* extradition. One is always already chosen, merely through being in the presence of others. Thus on the pre-conscious level, simply to encounter the other is to consent to one's decreation at least in the instant of the encounter. Here Levinas's description of what happens in the instant provides a phenomenological basis for Weil's belief that the human self is nothing more than voluntary consent to its own nullification out of love for the Good. In the instant, consent means the desire for the other that produces the movement of time. Decreative consent, at its most basic, is the origin of one's subjectivity, the reason that one is the-one-for-the-other (OB 56-57), giving up the for-itself despite itself, every instant.

It must therefore be on another level, that of consciousness, that Weil can claim that insofar as the decrelated self consents to its decreation, even on just one occasion, it is forever safe from soul-destroying affliction (N 337). On this level, free consent is the only real choice one has:

The destruction of the 'I' is the one and only free act that lies open to us. ... We possess nothing in this world except the power to say 'I', because fortune can deprive us of everything else in the world—even our character, our intelligence, our loves and our hates; but not the power to say 'I'; unless it be as the result of extreme affliction. There is nothing worse than extreme affliction which destroys the 'I' from without, for then one is no longer able to destroy it oneself. (N 337)

If one has given one's conscious consent to the destruction of the 'I' even just for a moment, then allegedly that suffices: "However short a time one may have begun the process of destroying the 'I', it is enough to enable one to prevent any affliction at all from doing one harm" (N 337). In every ordinary sense of the word 'harm', this is obviously false. But if, even for one moment, one is able to "refuse to countenance" the struggle that the ego invariably makes against decreation, even when decreation is forced on one from outside, then one is saved from the sole harm that matters to Weil: that of being 'decreated' against one's will and therefore not out of love for the Good. "For the 'I' will not allow itself to be destroyed by external pressure without a severe struggle. If one refuses to countenance such a struggle out of love for God, then the destruction of the 'I' does not take place from without, but from within" (N 337). One is then safe from the only harm to which the ethical self (as opposed to one's 'I') is vulnerable. All that remains of the self is an infinitesimal particle of love for the Good. The *oneself*, the-one-for-the-other, the self able to attend and to give, is then immune from all harm.

Levinas suggests how this might work in terms of substitution as someone incarnated, since it is one's incarnation that makes giving possible, whether one gives the gift of one's attention or is able to lend actual relief to the other's suffering.

It is the subjectivity of a man of flesh and blood, more passive in its extradition to the other than the passivity of effects in a causal chain, for it is beyond the unity of apperception of the *I think*, which is actuality itself. It is a being torn up from oneself for another in the giving to the other of the bread out of one's mouth. This is not an anodyne formal relation, but all the gravity of the body extirpated from its *conatus essendi* in the possibility of giving" (OB 142).⁵⁸⁸

For the body to be "extirpated from its *conatus essendi*" means for it to be torn from its struggle against decreation. One's substitutability for the other signifies not only the nullity of the self before the moral void, reflected in the emptiness of self and world as it is experienced in affliction, but also the pure availability of the self-with-a-body that can give to the other who is afflicted at whatever cost to itself. In other words, as long as one is substitutable for the other, one is secure from every attempt to destroy the I from without.

By way of summary, let us note that Weil understands the value of expiation to be primarily the "destruction of evil" (McCullough 2014, 115): "no action destroys evil, but only the apparently useless and perfectly patient suffering of it" (FLN 218). She means all evil, not just one's own. As does Levinas in this context, Weil emphasizes the importance of passivity (or "passion") over action. It is by the conceptually simple but often very difficult, will-negating, non-active action of *attention* that one can expiate the other's sufferings. Since only in this way does the other in fact become real, this is how one must acknowledge the other's suffering—which is the minimum that one ought to do for them. In Weil we therefore find a connection between *persecution* and *expiation* independent of Levinas's hyperbolic identification of the two. One expiates the sufferings of others by giving them one's attention—attending to their vulnerability. If one consents to the 'persecution' of one's will that this requires (and perhaps also

⁵⁸⁸ See also OB 118, 126-27. For other instances of "extradition" used in this sense, see OB 144, 149.

to persecution at the hands of people who misunderstand one's efforts, who mistake one's non-active action for a reprehensible lack of real concern), then one destroys some of the evil in one's own and the other's suffering, at least to the extent that one moves a little in the opposite direction from that of transferring to the other person one's irreducible quota of pain, something we do habitually and which for Weil is the definition of sin. Levinas's analysis of substitution lends to Weil's ideas a phenomenological justification founded on one's pre-conscious desire for the other and the abdication of the willful self.

There remains the critical question of what we are to do about circumstances so hostile to attention, so 'world' shattering, that attending to the other's vulnerability, or even one's own, seems to be impossible. Before we take up this question, we need to give further consideration to Levinas's important concept of the *command* and its potential connection with the possibility of giving testimony to one's own or the other's affliction.

7.3 The Testimony of the Command

It is reasonable to assume that one can testify only to what makes sense enough to be expressed in words. But in that case there can be no witness to something that itself destroys the possibility of its making sense. Since, as we shall see, the concentration camp environment does exactly that, it becomes questionable whether there could be a genuine witness to such an *anti*-experience, a witness to the destruction of the very possibility of experience. The only genuine witnesses of the Shoah would be those who did not survive, or those who, having survived, were left utterly mute. This paradox has been noted by Primo Levi and Giorgio Agamben, among others.

The problem is not confined solely to the Shoah. Other forms of suffering are often inarticulate in a similarly tragic way. Trauma, for example, has been characterized in general as

the reaction to an event that one did not have the capacity to experience at the time it occurred because one was unable to fit it into one's world, to connect it with one's past or with any expectation of one's future. Hence one returns to it over and over again—in dreams or hallucinations, for example—in the hope of eventually finding a way finally to live it through as an experience.⁵⁸⁹

That severe pain is similarly beyond verbal expression is notorious, an inexpressibility that in the case of torture can have serious political and psychological consequences.⁵⁹⁰ Perhaps there is a sense in which all suffering is inarticulate, the inability to express what is essential to the experience of suffering being precisely what makes the experience insufferable. No matter how articulate one may be in describing certain details related to the experience that brought on pain, the experience of pain itself, whether the pain is physical or mental, is as incommunicable as one's unique perspective on the world.

Having the ability to describe one's suffering to someone who seems to understand is often already to be free of the worst of it. Conversely, an inability to describe it only compounds the suffering. Weil observes: "those who most often have occasion to feel that evil is being done to them are those who are least trained in the art of speech. Nothing, for example, is more frightful than to see some poor wretch in the police court stammering before a magistrate who keeps up an elegant flow of witticisms" ("Human Personality," SWR 316 = SWA 53). Those who experience torture or incommunicado detention, deprived of the ability to express their suffering to anyone, tend to experience unimaginable loneliness. Hence the importance to victims of political violence simply of knowing that someone on the outside is aware of their situation—one rationale behind the letter-writing campaigns of organizations such as Amnesty International.⁵⁹¹

⁵⁸⁹ See, for example, Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience*, and Felman and Laub, *Testimony*.

⁵⁹⁰ Scarry 1985, 12.

⁵⁹¹ In the final pages of *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, Hannah Arendt notes the priority totalitarianism gives to maintaining in the individual an endless experience of utter isolation and loneliness (Arendt 1994, 474-79).

Can the inarticulateness of suffering sometimes be overcome after the fact, even in the case of affliction that has the power to destroy the sufferer's world? Is it possible, under the right conditions, for *someone*, not necessarily the sufferer, to testify subsequently to such an anti-experience? Or is testimony forever impossible because the experience destroys the very possibility of communication? If the shared world you and the other create out of language is essentially the same world that extreme affliction shatters, and if, deprived of that world, the said is deprived of meaning, or even destroyed altogether, then there would seem to be little hope of authentic testimony to extreme affliction. Unless it lies not in the said but in the *saying*. But what kind of testimony would that be? What would it mean for the saying to *give testimony* of one's suffering independently of the said?

Ideally, testimony (*témoignage*) is a relationship in which a sympathetic and attentive listener is willing to involve him- or herself, to the extent that this is possible, in the suffering of the one who gives testimony, not treating their suffering as an indifferent object of knowledge.⁵⁹² Earlier we decided that if one is not altogether indifferent to the other's suffering, then one can hardly help but suffer *with* them to some extent. By contrast, to treat suffering 'objectively' is to place oneself at a distance from it—hence from the sufferer. Theories of trauma that seek to explain it as "attributed" to an event by social convention or as "collectively constructed" would appear to be guilty of the latter.⁵⁹³ One denies, or at least fails to take into account, the sufferer's *proximity*, as Levinas means the word: the fundamentally human paradox that we are 'neighborly' to every human being—in fact, substitutable for them—even as they are infinitely far from us in terms of living in a personal world inaccessible to us. Of course, proximity in this sense is not something of which one is ever conscious. It happens 'too soon' for that (OB 84). But this does not mean that proximity is not an important form of testimony in itself, testifying to the fact that language is

⁵⁹² Felman and Laub 1992, 57.

⁵⁹³ For example, J. C. Alexander, "On the social construction of moral universals: The 'Holocaust' from war crime to trauma drama," in J. C. Alexander, et al., *Cultural Trauma and Collective Identity* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2004), 196-263. For a critical discussion of such theories, see Laub and Hamburger 2017, 70-72.

already pure relationship, nor does it mean that proximity is not in need of active preservation, for we will see later that it can be diluted and even destroyed. As the fundamental expression of our vulnerability before the other, proximity is just as vulnerable as anything else human.

Levinas's notion of the *saying* is meant to capture the idea that we communicate the fact of our vulnerability (hence proximity to the other) in every use we make of language. As opposed to the said, the saying is pure signification of vulnerability, communicating vulnerability on the hither side of all content and meaning. One can try to cover up the vulnerability communicated in the saying—the very thing that makes one a subject able to address the other—by addressing him or her in a manner that is intended to demonstrate superiority or power. One can even identify it as one's mission in life to do this, for power takes many forms. More generally, worldmaking itself covers over human vulnerability by replacing the mystery and reserve of the other with the meaning-from-my-perspective which becomes the meaning of the said. In this way the said, by its very nature as said, necessarily denies one's proximity to the other.

It seems, then, that the saying cannot *communicate* vulnerability, and hence verify proximity in any ordinary sense of the word communicate, without depending on the said, hence betraying itself in order to be 'heard'. In terms of what the saying is intended to convey, this would be questionable testimony to say the least. But so far we have mentioned nothing about the role of responsibility, or rather its absence, in the attempt to cover over one's vulnerability. Might *responsibility*, as Levinas means the word, constitute the testimony of the saying? Levinasian responsibility is inseparably bound to attention in Weil's sense, and attention, in contrast to covering over one's vulnerability, is capable if anything is of a conscious address to the other that recognizes the other's otherness. As the deliberate deferral of the *desire for meaning* and coherence free of contradiction, attention holds itself back from the tendency to turn whatever is present into a meaningful story. In this way it acknowledges and makes genuine contact with the enigmatic and contradictory other *as other* and not as more of the same. This is not to discount

the importance to the treatment of trauma of reconstructing a narrative that heals the fragmentation brought on by the experience of suffering.⁵⁹⁴ Nevertheless, the success of such a reconstruction clearly depends on a prior ‘understanding’, beyond the question of a coherent narrative, of the fractured experience of the sufferer. For this, the ‘counter-narrative’ practice of attention seems to be primary.

The moment of pure attention that acknowledges the other’s otherness—analogous to the moment of pure consent that saves decreation from becoming destruction—is therefore an absolute prerequisite for listening to the testimony of the afflicted, since it alone respects the paraconsistent logic of suffering, the impossibility of witnessing to it through a narrative free of contradiction. The best psychoanalytic work with trauma victims, writes Andreas Hamburger,

acknowledges the disturbed autobiographical narrative and intentionally exposes itself to the uncertainty, the overwhelming fuzziness of memory, in which both the survivor and the testimonial witness find themselves. ... [Testimony] acknowledges and connects itself to the presence of the past as a contradictory, fragmented process, drenched in silence and parried by defensive maneuvers on both sides, by the survivor as well as the interviewer.⁵⁹⁵

This is reminiscent of Lacan’s advice that in psychoanalysis, “what counts, when one attempts to elaborate an experience, is less what one understands than what one doesn’t understand,”⁵⁹⁶ except that neither Levinas nor Weil would be comfortable with the role Lacan assigns to the unconscious in this process. Lacan’s advice can nevertheless serve as a watchword of decreative phenomenology: what counts is less what one clearly comprehends than what seems to resist comprehension absolutely.

⁵⁹⁴ See Laub and Hamburger 2017, 57.

⁵⁹⁵ Laub and Hamburger 2017, 74.

⁵⁹⁶ Quoted in Cathy Caruth, ed., *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), 203.

For Weil, as we have noted before, the central question attention raises is not ‘What am I going to do about you?’—that is, ‘How am I going to understand you as part of my world?’—but ‘What are you going through?’ This question *invites* the other’s testimony and, ideally, announces a willingness to listen without prematurely forcing their testimony into a coherent story. It could, however, still sound to us too much like a request for information, a presumption that the sufferer has something to impart in words. Not only are words (the said) not always possible, but I would like to suggest that there might be something of greater importance than words in the ‘message’ of the *saying*. What we are looking for here is some way in which *responsibility* testifies.

According to Levinas, the saying, wholly apart from what is said, *commands*. Critics often point to the obvious fact that most of the time one is not aware of anything like a command on encountering another person. The observations below will address this issue indirectly, but a major reason for considering Levinas’s notion of command in the present context is that invariably the testimony of Holocaust survivors, and survivors of atrocity in general, takes the form of a literal command: *do not forget*. What is it that we are not supposed to forget? Whatever the conscious intention, what is not to be forgotten must ultimately reduce to a recognition that each of us is vulnerable, no less vulnerable than the victims whose testimony we are hearing. Acknowledgment of one’s vulnerability is undoubtedly a motivation behind Primo Levi’s well-known preamble to *Survival in Auschwitz*. Addressing “You who live safe / In your warm houses ...,” it ends:

I commend these words to you.

Carve them in your hearts

At home, in the street,

Going to bed, rising;

Repeat them to your children,

Or may your house fall apart,
May illness impede you,
May your children turn their faces from you.⁵⁹⁷

That is, may you suffer from the vulnerability you saw in others but failed to attribute to yourself. This, I would like to suggest, is less a curse than a prophecy: if you forget that at any moment you could lose everything, then you will experience the inevitability of adversity as a curse and not as a reminder. For the misfortunes Levi names all might fall short of soul-destroying affliction, hence one could consent to them. In that case they represent God's grace (as Weil would say) in one's decreation, however much one is justified in deploring them and wishing they had not happened.

Acknowledging one's vulnerability is not simply an intellectual exercise, but depends on recognizing vulnerability in the other. For Levinas and Weil both, we do not truly know ourselves unless we know ourselves to be substitutable for every person, including especially those who appear most vulnerable. The reminder that one can substitute in this sense *even for the one who has lost his world and hence his ability to speak*, I will argue, is implicit in every saying. Every address, not just the explicit command not to forget, expresses in the saying the *implicit* command that one not forget the limitless vulnerability one shares with every other. The address need not do this in terms of its content—in fact, the content can never do the saying justice—but simply in its being the address of one human being to another. The mandate—the *responsibility*—that one not forget that human vulnerability has no limits, that absolutely nothing human is invulnerable, therefore lies at the heart of the testimony of every victim of atrocity—a testimony that consequently does not require expression in words, since vulnerability can easily show itself in the inability or refusal to speak.

⁵⁹⁷ Levi 1996, 11.

It will be objected, of course, that one no more hears a reminder of one's vulnerability in the word spoken by the other than one hears a command. But at various points in what follows, I will argue that what one is *conscious* of 'hearing' from the distant shore that represents the other depends more on oneself, on one's own response-ability, than on anything the other does or says. For the other's command is an *asymmetrical* ethical injunction to real-ize (make real) one's response-ability to the other, motivated by *one's own* vulnerability. As the very proximity of the other, the other's command does not give me time to "think about it" (OB 84). Refusing to think it away, as with an explanation or an excuse, is the essence of decreation.

The force behind the command implicit in the saying is the ethical event Levinas calls *illeity*, the otherness of the other experienced as the resistance the other makes to being thematized or 'placed' in my world.⁵⁹⁸ Clearly this resistance *witnesses*, in effect, to the other's vulnerability, her desire for independence from my totalizing. It does so not by presenting me with another thematization, of course, but in the very *signifyingness* of the other's saying, which signifies nothing more than the saying itself, prior to the said:

The Saying without the Said of the witness signifies in a plot other than that which is spread out in a theme, other than that which attaches a noesis to a noema, a cause to an effect, the memorable past to the present. This plot connects to what detaches itself absolutely, to the

⁵⁹⁸ "A neologism formed from *il* (he) or *ille*," *illeity* "indicates a way of concerning me without entering into conjunction with me" (OB 12 / AE 15: "*l'illéité ... indique une façon de me concerner sans entrer en conjonction avec moi*"). Although *illeity* therefore "lies outside ... the thematization of objects," it seems that a trace of *illeity* can spread through persons to things—especially, but not exclusively, human artifacts—giving to them a derived personal otherness, a 'desire' for independence that is reminiscent of Heidegger's idea of Being's separate destiny. While this might explain the tendency to personify the impersonal—from machines and hand tools, to storms and geographical features—the more important point for Levinas would be that there is only one 'kind' of alterity: alterity experienced as personal. Whatever seems other, in any way at all, derives its seeming *otherness* from our experience of encountering other persons. The term *illeity* occurs apparently for the first time in "Phenomenon and Enigma" (1957). It is not found at all in *Totality and Infinity*, returning only with *Humanism and the Other* (1972) and *Otherwise Than Being*, at which point the close relationship between *illeity* and proximity first emerges. For the relation of *illeity* to Levinas's notion of the 'third', see Chapter 4, p. 246.

Absolute. The detachment of the Infinite from the thought that seeks to thematize it and the language that tries to hold it in the said is what we have called *illeity*.⁵⁹⁹

Here, for once, Levinas puts it a little too mildly perhaps. The other does not just “detach” herself from my thought but *commands* me to take responsibility for her independence, even as I am left wholly outside her world. She declares her independence precisely by revealing it to be vulnerable and in need of my protection in the form of my respect for her otherness. If her independence were not so vulnerable she would not need to declare it, hence *illeity* signifies that the other’s vulnerability extends to the very foundations of her subjectivity. Paradoxically, it seems that we depend on one another for our independence from one another’s thematizing.

It is for this reason that *illeity* signifies not only the other’s independence from me but also my *proximity* to her. It is because the other is vulnerable to the influence of whatever I do or say that my proximity corresponds exactly to the other’s desire not to be thematized. In Weil’s terms, this means that my relation to the other is first and foremost an unconscious function of the other’s desire that good and not evil be done to her. The command signified in the saying is in effect a solicitation from the other that I be conscious of this desire. Since it can be the provocation for my non-active action, one might characterize the saying as the purest expression of the other’s otherness on which I am capable of acting.

Neither a being nor an attribute, *illeity* is an *event* that takes place between me and the other—or more precisely, the *trace* of that event (“a way of concerning me”) that utterly lacks ontological certainty, for otherwise the other could then be brought “into conjunction with me”

⁵⁹⁹ OB 147 / AE 187-88, translation altered (“*Le Dire sans Dit du témoignage signifie selon une intrigue autre que celle qui s’étale dans le thème*”), A few lines earlier, *passé son commencement* is mistranslated as “passes its command.” The Infinite “passes its commencement”—that is, bypasses my history in diachrony, having committed me to the other in a past that is impossible for me to make present in memory because memory, as a form of consciousness, is precisely my response to the other’s command.

through an application of reason.⁶⁰⁰ Consequently, the other's command does not come from any place or any time within my world at all. "I am obliged without this obligation having begun in me"—it has its own commencement—obliged *prior* to, on the hither side of, consciousness, "as though an order [had] slipped into my consciousness like a thief, smuggled itself in," or "as though [the command] were formulated before every possible present, in a past that shows itself in the present of obedience without being recalled," hence an order I learn of only through obeying it (OB 12-13; cf. OB 148). Since the command does not occur in time, one can neither "await" it nor "welcome" it, for it is never heard as something expressible independently of oneself, but is only known in one's obedience "before it is formulated" (OB 13). A favorite example of Levinas's is the Jewish woman in Vassily Grossman's novel *Life and Fate* who approaches a half-starved German soldier at the end of the war intending to curse him, and instead unaccountably finds herself giving him the bread she was about to eat herself. How can it be denied that this woman must have been moved, however unconsciously, by another person's simple human vulnerability? That the other's vulnerability unconsciously moves one even when the other has the power to take advantage of one's own vulnerability is what Levinas means by his controversial claim that one is responsible for—that is, *to*—even one's persecutor.⁶⁰¹

Because it comes from outside in the sense that it always ultimately results from an encounter with an other, one 'suffers' from the command at least in the minimal sense that one undergoes the experience without having intended to. In fact, one comes to know about the command of the saying, if one does, *only through* suffering from it—if merely from a perhaps barely conscious awareness that one has always already betrayed it by turning it into the said. Weil helps us to see why suffering is the only way one can be conscious of the command. Knowledge, in the general run of things, contributes to self-aggrandizement, while the command—*transcendent* according to

⁶⁰⁰ Cf. OB 161-62. Levinas's metaphor of the blinking light that one only thinks one *perhaps* saw, even after its repetition, applies to the event of illeity.

⁶⁰¹ This might explain why concentration camp survivors often 'recall', against all possible evidence, having once met in the camps a "good SS officer" who seemed to feel sorry for them. See, for example, Laub and Hamburger 2017, 55-56.

Levinas simply because it comes from the Other who calls from a “height” (TI) or from “within” (OB)—is on an altogether different level from the self, beyond reach of conscious knowledge. At any given level, Weil says, no knowledge of a “higher” level is possible except in the form of suffering (N 84).⁶⁰² Weil considers the actual experience of physical, mental, or emotional suffering to be practically the only guarantee one can have that one possesses anything one would want to call genuinely transcendent ‘knowledge’. It is more accurate to say that one does not so much possess such knowledge as suffer from it.⁶⁰³ Weil’s idea that one moves up a level only through adversity, that the result is not knowledge in any ordinary (that is, self-aggrandizing) sense but only self-abdication, has its counterpart in Levinas: it is his notion of *persecution*. Moving up a level is not something one can do willfully, even though one can prepare oneself for it by learning to consent to one’s vulnerability. If dropping down a level is not usually difficult, one can only be *forced* to move up, for this is in the direction opposite to the gravitational pull of consciousness. Discourse, the medium through which knowledge usually becomes conscious, is superseded here by decreative hermeneutics. One does not acquire knowledge in the form of positive enlightenment, but instead finds oneself subjected to a continual self-critique that amounts to self-negation. One moves upward by going downward, in the sense that, to consciousness, moving up a level looks like debasement. Hence consciousness invariably resists.

To learn that one is (or was) subject to a command in the presence of the sufferer is therefore to learn through affliction that one is substitutable for the afflicted. This happens whether or not one follows through on whatever it is one believes one was ‘commanded’ to do. Not obeying the inner voice of conscience, taking the other person’s bread or refusing to share one’s own, was all too common in the experience of Holocaust survivors. This may be why they so often felt shame for having survived (Levi 2017, 66-68). Whenever we speak of obedience in what follows, therefore, the reader needs to bear in mind that the failure to obey is always also an option. One

⁶⁰² See Chapter 2.

⁶⁰³ Or finds it an ordeal. See the quote from Levinas (IR 97) below, p. 516n652.

can first become aware of a command not only in obeying it but also through the realization of having *failed* to obey it.

But is not the command a command simply to “approach” the other, as Levinas says, which moreover, as not conscious, *cannot* be specified by any particular task? Does not the command depend on its *not* being a command to do some particular thing? It is true that this is how Levinas understands it from the point of view of the ethical, but there can be no question that in actual practice *obeying* the command does often take the form of concrete action, as in the case of the Jewish woman in Grossman’s novel. The difference between the ethical command (in Levinas’s sense) and an ordinary command is that the latter comes from ‘outside’. When one becomes conscious after the fact of having *had no choice* but to do whatever one has *already done*—or of having missed an opportunity that one now knows *with certainty* that one should have acted on⁶⁰⁴—the command seems to come not from outside, from the other, but from within oneself, from the other within, perhaps as the voice of conscience—although it is something more basic than that. In *Otherwise Than Being*, Levinas calls this paradoxical circumstance the “reversion of heteronomy into autonomy.” The encounter with the other (hetero-nomy) is transformed into my ‘autonomous’ obedience to a command that seems to come from *within* (or from ‘nowhere’) even where it is motivated by an exigency *outside*. Hence obedience is *always* prior to actually hearing anything from outside that could be called a command in the ordinary sense. For this reason, whenever Levinas uses the word obedience, the reader needs to hear it not in the usual sense of conscious compliance to an order or to a moral principle, but as a metaphor for the fact that a human being becomes a subject—that is, becomes subjected to or “obedient” to the “passing of the Infinite” in the other’s illeity—only because he or she is *always already* the “hostage” of the other’s proximity—of the “height” (TI) or the depth (OB) from which the other commands:

⁶⁰⁴ How is it possible for the command to have been unavoidable if one obeys it, and yet if one does not obey it, to regret not having done it? Another paradox we should “let stand,” as Weil says? The ‘command’ is not an ordinary command, but follows the paraconsistent logic of the ethical. See Chapter 2.

Obedience precedes any hearing of the command. The possibility of finding, anachronously, the order in the obedience itself, and of receiving the order out of [*à partir de*, starting from] oneself, this reverting of heteronomy into autonomy, is the very way the Infinite passes [*la façon même dont l'Infini se passé*].”⁶⁰⁵

From another angle, the distinction made here is between the ordinary command—spoken and potentially subject to many interpretations (“heteronomy”)—and the ‘Here I am’ (*hineni* or *me voici*) that speaks in one’s own voice (or actions) as an unmistakable obligation and after the fact (or act) might be expressed in one’s saying ‘I had to do it’ (“autonomy”), but more often is simply the effect of *whatever one says or does*. Everything I do, every word that I express, says to the other, ‘Here I am, available.’ Hence, as we noted much earlier (see above, p. 83), response-ability might usefully be rendered ‘response-availability’. The reverting from heteronomy into autonomy is therefore itself always after-the-fact, always prior to anything one thinks of doing, making the latter always ‘too late’. It is a paradigmatic case of the reflexivity of “reflected attitudes” (CP 147) discussed in the previous chapter: the appearance of the other, who refuses integration into one’s conscious world, immediately reflects back on me as a “command,” but not in the form of a reminder of some moral law that perhaps I and the other have both been taught. The reverting of heteronomy into ethical autonomy is an event that characterizes all experience of alterity for a human subject, the fact that every attempt to thematize otherness is vulnerable to refutation immediately, and independently of any explicit principles of interpretation or behavior that we may have absorbed from the culture we share. The reverting of heteronomy into autonomy is the hither-side’s perpetual answer to the other’s demand not to be thematized, one’s automatic response to illeity. The other’s gift of this autonomy is all the autonomy one is allowed—just as, for Weil, one’s consent to Necessity is all that one is allowed of willful action.

⁶⁰⁵ OB 148, translation slightly altered / AE 189. Lingis has “passes itself,” but *se passé* might simply be the intransitive verb “passes” as in the phrase “passes by, leaving a *trace*”. The word ‘passes’, occurring frequently in this context, suggests evanescence. Levinas seems never explicitly to clarify its meaning.

This consent is the first step toward decreation, or perhaps it is decreation itself, since consenting to receive one's autonomy as a gift from the other amounts to substituting for them—or, equivalently, letting them substitute for oneself.

The reverting of heteronomy into autonomy takes place every instant, with every reverting of the saying into the said. As soon as I speak to the other, or act in any way based on assumptions about her—that is, in any way at all—I both thematize the other's presence in terms of language—that is, find a place for her in my world, something I cannot help doing continually—and at the same time announce 'Here I am', whether or not I make the announcement explicit. I announce my availability to the other in spite of the fact that my said, whether explicit or implicit, must in some measure obscure her alterity, the very thing that commands my availability as said. Regardless of its content or its motivation, the first message the other 'hears' in the said, even before he or she can process its content, is the *saying*, one's unspoken 'Here I am'. Decreative phenomenology is based on the premise that some trace of the saying always remains in every said, a sign-without-a-signified of the "passing" of the Infinite that makes itself known otherwise than as the noema of a noesis (OB 88). This is the difference the ethical makes in decreative phenomenology, which reveals what it reveals through the very process that makes one a subject. Hence it is never solely a matter of disinterested looking.

A decreative reduction can theoretically uncover a trace of the ethical in anything phenomenology investigates—including Being in every form that Being takes, not excepting extreme affliction, injustice, and violence. The 'signs' or traces of the Infinite are everywhere, hence the most basic (non-)phenomenon driving decreative phenomenology is perhaps that of the reflection that operates in "reflected attitudes," in that it demonstrates the infinitude of *responsibility* in Levinas's sense of that word: response-ability as commanded in every human word and act. It commands obedience even in the person who thinks he rebels against it, for in order to convey its message of *hineni*, the saying simply uses the very words one speaks—or,

leaves unspoken and understood—whatever their intended content. This suggests that the saying in its infinitude might make use even of the mute silence of the victim of atrocity whose world, and with it the very possibility of speech, has been destroyed. Thus we finally come back to our original point of departure.

Have we answered any of the questions with which this section began? Can the inarticulateness of an affliction that comes close to destroying the sufferer's world ever be overcome? Perhaps not always through articulation in speech, but it may be overcome if the other impresses upon me my own vulnerability. For that, she might be the most articulate witness I will ever have, provided I consent to this 'message' by attention to the sufferer's inarticulate or silent call. The sole guarantee of the other's proximity is her illeity, the effect the other has on me as continually provoking response, as 'infinite'. If I do not 'hear' the call to respond, more than likely the fault is mine. Note that the emphasis here is not on the general question of whether the extreme inarticulateness of affliction can be overcome by the afflicted—however important a question that may be, say in the treatment of trauma—but the question directed to me by the other, concerning *my* response to this one particular sufferer, the ethical fact that the other's suffering is always *my* responsibility.

Given one's limitless vulnerability, can one ever legitimately take the position of judging that a being does not require a response because it has passed beyond the ability to receive it? The question is an ethical one about self-judgment, not an ontological question about the existence of a certain state of affairs in the other person.⁶⁰⁶ It is not: does there exist a human being here? Instead, it is: have I done everything possible to allow whatever is here to speak to me? It is not so much the traditional phenomenological question, Have I really *looked*? or, What have I really seen? as it is the decreative phenomenological command-as-a-questioning, which characterizes one's own decreation: Have I given the other my full self-abdicating attention?

⁶⁰⁶ It is therefore a different question from that which sometimes confronts us, of whether or not to continue extraordinary medical means for keeping a hospitalized loved one alive.

7.4 The Decreative Reading of the Disaster

Must the other be physically present in order to hear the other's command? Certainly not, for the other's claim on me often makes itself felt long after the occasion on which it first had an impact on my life, or may be felt from a source halfway around the world. In any case, whether or not the command is heard may depend less on the other than on me. Might it then be possible to learn of the command simply through reading someone's written testimony? Can the *relationship* testimony requires be present in reading a text? Perhaps something close enough to it can, if one's relationship to the text involves attention, but only if the text to which one gives one's attention is experienced somehow as 'other', as almost like another subject. We are brought back to the question of how it is that we can have the idea of something *other*, which we considered a few chapters ago (section 3.5): "How does it happen that there is subjectivity in being? [more literally, "from where does subjectivity enter into being?"] Why is the silence of a breath held back produced in the bustling of the totality?" (CP 70).⁶⁰⁷ How do we explain the otherwise inexplicable phenomenon that consciousness restrains itself, holds itself back as though it were holding its breath, interrupts the momentum of the continuity that language sustains in worldmaking, in order to let alterity upset that continuity even for a moment? Why refrain even for an instant from constituting everything as familiar? *Why allow the other?* In Chapter 3 these questions were rhetorical. To ask in all seriousness why there needs to be anything other than oneself in one's experience of the world is to assume that subjectivity's work of constituting that world—

⁶⁰⁷ "D'où viendrait la subjectivité à l'être? Pourquoi, dans le remue-ménage de la totalité se produirait le silence d'un souffle retenu?" (EDE 213). The term *remue-ménage* in this context could almost suggest William James' famous "blooming, buzzing confusion." For one could ask (as Levinas does not, for good reason), concerning the primal experience of otherness at the beginning of life: how does it happen that the infant gets the idea (so to speak) that there are *others* in its chaotic world? One answer might be: it cannot help but 'get the idea' because for the infant, at least on some accounts, *alterity is all there is*. Human experience, from the beginning, just *is* the experience of the Other, and the infant has no experience of a world, as something it organizes out of all this confusion, except with a great deal of help from the Other (and from one Other in particular, of course). But can there be *alterity* without *selfsameness* by contrast? Which comes first? The answer can only be that they develop together: one gradually identifies as a self insofar as one reacts to the Other. Reaction becomes response.

impossible without human language—takes place independently of the other. As though the totality of Being just so happened to disclose other human beings; as though the others were only accidental features of a world one could just as easily have made sense of without them!

For Levinas, of course, the reverse is true. Rather than the subject finding Being and the totality already ‘there’, it is Being that is proposed by subjectivity, through language, and it is the totality that is “produced” in the subject with the help of the community of all subjects—not the other way around as Western philosophy has always more or less maintained. It is the invasion of one’s personal space by the other that provides not only the linguistic material but even the inspiration for one’s worldmaking. The “breath held back” was a foreign breath to begin with, inspired by the other. My conscious world is indeed my own creation, but only as my response-ability, a *response* to the other. In responding to my neighbors I acknowledge that they are world-makers like myself, not simply extra features of that world. Indeed, from the beginning they are the *inspiration* behind my worldmaking through unceasingly bringing a breath of exteriority into the private “inwardness” (*intériorité*) of my relatively unimaginative, pre-worldly “enjoyment” (*jouissance*).

There is no reason why we cannot ask the same questions about the otherness of a text. What leads us to hold back from interpreting a text in such a way that it does little more than corroborate our present version of the world, reinforcing the ‘same’? Is it not true that, at least sometimes, we deliberately approach a text with the anticipation that it might force a revision of our understanding of the world in some way, perhaps even temporarily upset the world’s equilibrium? There is a danger, of course, that *anticipating* the potential a text has to change one’s views will necessarily obscure its very otherness. It is for this reason that some texts are deliberately constructed to frustrate one’s anticipations, in order to clear the way for an

experience of their otherness. Modern literature has often made a point of this, for example.⁶⁰⁸ It remains a question, however, whether this comes close to the effect the other has. Can a text be traumatizing? Can it have a face?

In her late “Essay on the Concept of Reading” (1941), Weil considers how reading a text can sometimes bring about a radical change in how we ‘read’ the world—and concomitantly, read the other.⁶⁰⁹ She begins by noting how reading bad news in a letter or newspaper can “seize us in the same way as the stronger sensations” such as a loud noise or a punch in the stomach (LPW 22). Conversely, the reason a philosopher like Descartes can wonder whether an external world exists is that we have an intuition that all we know about the world is what we ‘read’ in it, and we continually find that our readings are faulty and need to be revised—as when we mistake a tree along a lonely road at night for a man, to give the classic example Weil herself resorts to here (LPW 23). When it occurs, the feeling that the evidence of our senses is “irrefutable,” Weil says, is largely a function of our world-reading habits (LPW 24). While the reading we give to sense impressions is usually immediate, it is often nonetheless a reading that reflects meanings we have adopted unquestioningly apart from the evidence of the senses. To give one of her examples: in war, enemy combatants and sometimes civilians are read immediately as ‘someone to kill’, with predictable results. “Thus meanings,” Weil continues, “which if looked at abstractly would seem to be mere thoughts, arise from every corner around me, taking possession of my soul and shaping it from one moment to the next in such a way that, to borrow a familiar English phrase, ‘my soul is no longer my own’” (LPW 25). This in spite of the fact that “the mind is not forced to believe in the existence of anything.”⁶¹⁰ What one reads is therefore experienced as *other* in some sense, although to varying degrees that perhaps depend more on habit, desire, or fear than on the

⁶⁰⁸ A very recent study of one such trend in modern literature is Shane Weller, *Language and Negativity in European Modernism: Toward a Literature of the Unword* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019). Authors considered include Franz Kafka, Georges Bataille, Samuel Beckett, Maurice Blanchot, Paul Celan, and W. G. Sebald.

⁶⁰⁹ For Weil’s concept of ‘reading’ the world, see above, section 4.4.

⁶¹⁰ N 308. See above, Chapter 5, p. 307.

text itself. As yet I make no claim, however, that the otherness of a text is anything like the otherness of a person.

Nor is it clear yet whether we should even want it to be. For one thing, reading, as a conscious activity, whether of a text or of the world, always ultimately becomes an effort to turn the other into the same. Depending on what is read and the reader's circumstances, this will either be routinely easy or an ethical challenge (as when reading bad news). Weil seems right about the power of words: words can be experienced as calling one into question almost as powerfully as might the neighbor. In fact, it is not clear that the derivative *experience of* the neighbor's calling me into question—not their actual 'call' of course, which according to Levinas is prior to experience—always already depends on language in some way. The perhaps rare occasions on which we happen to be struck by the uncanny *otherness* of a person might be possible only insofar as we actually hear the other *speak*—or *fail* to speak. (This, by the way, might explain Kierkegaard's declared preference, had he been confronted with the need to choose one or the other, for the sense of hearing over the sense of sight.⁶¹¹)

We have seen how for Weil one's response to the other, which for Levinas is essentially passive, is refined with the help of attention into an *active* passivity she calls non-active action. Might there be a way to read a text in a similar manner, an *actively passive* reading that would give the text a chance to become 'other' to the reader? If there is a specific practice one could call non-active reading (for it is possible that all reading is of one kind) then it may suggest a way to read certain texts so that what we read might serve as testimony of another person's affliction.

This would not be easy. In particular, the outcome of such a reading would not depend entirely on the text—on the skill or sincerity of the author, for example—but perhaps to a greater degree on the reader. I read a text as a testimony of affliction not simply because it is a transcript of an interview with a survivor of Auschwitz, for example, but more to the point, because I *allow*

⁶¹¹ I do not recall where this confession occurs in Kierkegaard's works.

myself to read it that way, to be altered by it in some manner. At least, I will do this if I indeed read it as *testimony* and if testimony is a *relationship* to an other. Almost any text might be read in this way if one can imagine one's being changed by it personally. It then becomes a *metaxu*. If such a reading is truly open to the other, it would require self-abdicating attention, a *decreative* reading.

Conversely, Weil observes that “war, politics, eloquence, art, teaching, all action on others essentially consists in changing what they read”—that is, the way in which they ‘read’ the world. Hence her passionate concern for truthful writing was only a reflection of a greater responsibility she thought she had to society at large.⁶¹² With respect to writing, she says, concern for its effects on others naturally introduces questions of “technique” and “value.” Thus, in the concluding paragraphs of her essay, Weil returns to her earlier wonderment over the fact that otherwise meaningless marks on paper (more generally, the physical elements of any medium) not only have meaning but are capable of shattering the reader’s world. Her example is that of a religious text one believes true even though one has never read it, having only heard it preached on—it being sufficient, one thinks, that God has read it (having wrote it). The assumption would be that here, at least, there is no need to apply a scale of values; one need only *believe*. Admittedly, the assumption violates logic if we understand reading to be a strictly worldly activity; God does not need to read, for the good (Levinasian) reason that it is of the essence of reading that one take responsibility for what one reads, as Weil herself points out:

Texts, whose appearances are characters, take hold of my soul, then abandon it and are replaced with others. Is one worth more than the other? Is one truer than the other? Where does one find a norm? Thinking a text to be true even though I am not reading it, that I

⁶¹² See, for example, *The Need for Roots*, NR 22-27, 36-39. Some of her suggestions for enforcing this rule are not only impractical but seem reactionary to an extreme. For example, she advocates the formation of what would essentially be media police and a corresponding judicial structure, charged with uncovering instances of untruthful writing and prosecuting and punishing writers if the untruths were easily avoidable.

have ever read it, assumes that there is a reader of this truthful text, which is to say, it assumes God. But as soon as we do that, there is a contradiction, for the concept of reading does not fit our concept of God. Even if it did, it still would not let us order our readings of texts according to a scale of values. (LPW 26-27)

That is, we would still not be exempt from having to evaluate them ourselves. Because reading is a human activity, not something God needs to do, we must learn a method of reading (and writing) “for adults” (as Levinas might say). Response-able adults do not leave the task of evaluating the otherwise meaningless marks that make up even a holy text to some Ideal Reader who (in the text itself?) has left us the appropriate “scale of values,” but they take the task upon themselves, as part of their response. Of course this creates a large *human* problem of values and therefore of ethics. “Posing the problem of value ... around the concept of reading,” Weil writes, “puts it in relation to truth and beauty as well as to the good, and it is not possible to separate them. ... We do not know how to think these things as one, and yet they cannot be thought separately” (LPW 27). From that perspective, what Weil calls the “problem of value” is the deepest human problem there is. At this point Weil’s essay regrettably breaks off unfinished (see the editor’s note to LPW 21), leaving us to speculate on where she might have taken her theme from there.

Or how Levinas might have continued in a similar or different vein, approving or critical. The correct “optics” for reading a testimony of affliction, he would perhaps say, is one that places the other, the witness to atrocity, above (TI) but also deeper within (OB) the reader herself, making it possible for the reader to substitute for the witness ‘within’. But this is essentially the idea behind what Weil calls attention. The ‘text’ we should think of as ‘true’ above all other texts is the *other*, our neighbor or the witness to affliction—the one ‘text’ of which, Weil might agree, God is the only reliable reader—that is, the one ‘text’ that only the Good is good enough to read justly,

without reading into it anything extraneous, such as the reader's personal prejudices. In order that God may, through us, 'read' this text without interference, we must remove the interfering 'I' with its ideas about 'others'. There is every reason to think that, even in the case of the most extreme affliction, God and the afflicted, the Reader and the read, will have their own secrets to exchange (N 422). Dare we believe otherwise? As though God were interested only in *our own* secrets! Or as though the other were transparently clear to us. However inevitable the day-to-day need to 'read' other people, an awareness that every person, no matter how destitute or intellectually limited, has secrets of inestimable worth too precious for one's own ears would seem indispensable if one wanted to do justice to their testimony of affliction. The idea that each person is a 'sacred text'—that is, a text which it would be sacrilegious to want to *understand*—accords with Levinas's definition of 'religion' as any treatment of the other that does not seek to reduce them to a totalization. Of course, for Levinas, none of this is discordant with his appreciation of the unique significance of religious texts in the usual sense, such as the Torah in his case.

The primary obstacle to learning the necessary optics for reading the testimony of someone's affliction is our tendency to read any 'text', including the world as a whole, in such a way that, as Weil puts it, whatever we happen to desire appears good, rather than reading it so that the Good appears desirable. Most of us who live in comfort will read the testimony of the destitute, for example, so as to minimize if not nullify our responsibility for their condition. Our seeing the continuation of the life we already live as being a good takes precedence, in effect drowning out the evidence otherwise. Reading so that the Good appears desirable amounts to reducing one's will to the pure and simple desire for the Good without turning the Good into an object. Unfortunately, what we call reading for the 'meaning' of a text too easily takes the first form: aware of doing so or (more likely) not, we decide on the meaning that makes the things we desire appear good. We read in a way that validates what we think we already understand. If we aim for

the second form—reading so that the Good appears desirable—then in a sense we are no longer reading for the ‘meaning’; our reading becomes simply a desire for the Good. This is what Weil means by letting God read the ‘text’ without our interference. A common form of interference is therefore the seemingly innocent desire to ‘understand’ what we are reading. Weil thinks that at least when ‘reading’ the other, we should wean ourselves from this desire. We do not have within us the capacity to understand either the other or the other’s good, since our capacity for good is infinitesimal by comparison with the other’s infinitude. Weil considers physical pain to be almost the only circumstance that can force one without fail to realize that, far from being a repository of good or even of some understanding of the good, one is truly nothing more than the desire that good and not evil be done to one. “Here below,” she observes in her long essay on the love of God and affliction, “physical pain and nothing else has the power to chain down our thoughts; provided that we count as physical pain certain phenomena which, though difficult to describe, are bodily and are strictly equivalent to it; in particular, for example, the fear of physical pain” (SWR 440).⁶¹³ Only through a negation of the self and its *conatus essendi* comparable to that experienced in physical pain does reality, defined as that which is other than the self, genuinely come into view. With one’s thoughts “chained down” so that they cannot interfere, one’s vision sufficiently clears (if the pain is not too great) for one to be able to notice that the other, like oneself, desires only that good and not evil be done to them, placing one in communion not only with one’s immediate neighbor but with all other vulnerable—that is, *all*—human beings. This, perhaps, was the discovery that Father Zosima’s brother made, leading him to declare that he was “responsible for the others, more than all the others” (see above, p. 192). We note here, for future reference, that having one’s thoughts chained down might be equivalent to facing the void.

Can one always give preference to the other’s desire for good, no matter how far they seem to have departed from the human? Can one do so even in the case of those whom affliction seems to

⁶¹³ Cf. Levinas: “Physical suffering in all its degrees entails the impossibility of detaching oneself from the instant of existence. It is the very irremissibility of being.” (TO 69).

have transformed into things, as Weil describes the defeated in her essay on the Iliad? For affliction can be so severe that it evidently destroys any possibility of desiring the good. Such questions treat the matter ontologically, in that one's view of the other takes the form of considering their state of *being* as something independent of one's own. The ethical alternative would be to let one's view of the other depend instead, as Weil would express it, on how one *reads* him or her, shifting the burden of responsibility to oneself. Reading the other as *other*, whatever we decide that means here, is possible only if one removes one's 'self' from out of the picture. As Levinas points out in his essay on Paul Celan in *Proper Names* ("De l'être à l'autre," *Noms Propres*, 59-66) and elsewhere, this requires a self-abnegating responsibility for the other in which one's identity is seen to depend on *substituting* for him or her. Celan is a unique case: a Jewish poet of international renown and an admirer of Heidegger's work, trying to express in German his acute suffering over the loss he experienced in the Shoah. Might Celan's accomplishment have been in part to show us the way to a decreative reading of his poetry, and hence of all literature inspired by the Shoah?

Levinas's essay, which begins by quoting Celan's famous assertion that there appeared to him to be no difference between a handshake and a poem, might well have been motivated by the suspicion that Celan's work was unknowingly (since not based on a reading of Levinas) an attempt to develop a poetry of the *ethical* in Levinas's sense of that word—more precisely, a poetic practice that would make each poem a unique invitation seeking an encounter with a reader who would be its unique responder. Ideally this would set up something like an ethical relationship between poet (or poem) and reader.⁶¹⁴ The poem would be a message in a bottle ("*Flaschenpost*")—in Celan's case, a bottle having survived a long journey over the impossibly rough seas of the Shoah—which might with luck wash up on some other person's remote

⁶¹⁴ I know of no evidence that Celan ever read Levinas. He did, however, read closely several works by Heidegger and met with him in 1967—a meeting Levinas was told "changed [Heidegger] deeply" (PN 174n1). Apparently Heidegger was relieved not to have been rejected or denounced, while Celan was deeply disappointed that there was not the slightest hint of apology for Heidegger's National Socialist involvement.

“heartland” to be picked up and read.⁶¹⁵ A poem could, in a kind of reflection of the ethical relation, be both a “going towards” and a “being for” the other.⁶¹⁶ In a sense, of course, this would be as ‘impossible’ as a handshake. Writes Levinas in *Existence and Existents*: “To shake hands with a friend is to express one’s friendship for him, but it is to convey that friendship as something inexpressible, and indeed as something unfulfilled, a permanent desire” (EE 35). If Celan is saying that a poem aims to be as unique as a person—or at least as close to this as it is possible for a work of art to be (but what would ‘close’ mean?)—then he would likely expect a reading that would entail a certain obligation or response-ability on the part of the reader, grounded on the awareness of the poem’s impossibility, a respect for the poem’s ‘desire’. In other words, the point would not be for the reader to ‘understand’ the poem, to solve its riddle, thus knowing ‘what it means’—in short, for the reader to ‘get something out of’ the poem, presumably for him- or herself.⁶¹⁷ Instead it would be to experience what the poem insistently demands from the reader, however often it is read. Celan’s startling answer is that it demands *company*. “The poem unmistakably shows a strong bent toward falling silent. ... The poem,” he says, “is lonely.”⁶¹⁸ The question would be whether a poem, or any work of art, could sufficiently stand in for a person to have the right to demand from the reader anything like the responsibility Levinas means by the ethical.

For Celan on Levinas’s reading, a poem, like a person, has no reference other than itself. The poem is “*dire sans dit*,” saying without said, as Levinas puts it: a “sign which is its own sign: the

⁶¹⁵ Speech on accepting the Bremen Prize (1958), in Celan 2001, 396.

⁶¹⁶ Celan 2001, 408-9 (Meridian speech).

⁶¹⁷ Writes J. M. Cameron: “It is not the job of the translator to make what is obscure clear but to give us an equivalent obscurity. I once heard a man say that a certain modern translation of Paul Celan’s letters made them understandable for the first time. I thought this a dubious compliment and a misconception of what a good translation is for” (“Poet of the Great Massacre,” *The New York Review of Books*, January 18, 1990). Surely the same might be said about the “job” of a commentary? But in that case, the commentary Celan’s poetry calls for really does resemble Midrash, which does not unify but multiplies meanings.

⁶¹⁸ “Das Gedicht ist einsam.” Celan 2001, 409.

subject making a sign of this making of a sign to the extent of making itself wholly sign.”⁶¹⁹ The poem is “ambiguity without a mask,”⁶²⁰ an attempt to create a sign of the real by refusing to ignore reality’s defining contradictions. Weil, as we have noted, views self-abdication as necessary even simply to see reality. To be open to reality’s contradictions means to be willing to give up something of the familiar rationality of one’s world. Given Celan’s personal suffering as the child of Holocaust victims, this might well be the import of his remark that “Wirklichkeit will gesucht und gewonnen sein.”⁶²¹ Levinas makes a similar comment on a line from Celan’s Meridian speech, which he first quotes:

the poet speaks [now quoting Celan] “in the angle of inclination [*inclinaison*] of his existence, in the angle of inclination from which the creature expresses itself ... [W]ho traces it (who traces the poem) reveals himself dedicated to it.” Singular de-substantiation of the ego! Making itself completely sign, it is perhaps [nothing but] that.”⁶²²

In a footnote, for at least the second time in his works, Levinas refers the reader to Weil’s prayer: “Father, tear from me this body and this soul in order to make them your things, and let nothing else subsist of me eternally but this tearing itself” (PN 176n16 \ NP 189n15; cf. OB 198n3).⁶²³ This is immediately followed in Levinas’s text by a passage worth quoting in full because of its striking resonance with Weil’s ideas:

⁶¹⁹ NP 59, my translation: “signe qui est son proper signifié: le sujet donne signe de cette donation de signe au point de se faire tout entier signe.”

⁶²⁰ Celan’s phrase, from an interview, quoted in Samuels 1993, 31.

⁶²¹ “Reality wants to be sought and won.” Quoted in Samuels 1993, 31.

⁶²² NP 62 (cf. PN 43), my translation and gloss: “le poète parle *dans l’angle d’inclinaison de son existence, dans l’angle d’inclinaison où créature s’énonce ... qui le trace (qui trace le poème) se révèle à lui dédié*. Singulière dé-substantiation du Moi! Se faire tout entier signe, c’est peut-être cela.” In John Felstiner’s translation, the passage from which Levinas quotes runs: “he speaks from the angle of inclination of his very being, his creatureliness. ... The poem is lonely. ... Whoever writes one stays mated with it” (Celan 2001, 409).

⁶²³ See Chapter 1, p. 106 above. This line from Weil must have made quite an impression on Levinas, who quotes it twice although he is otherwise very critical of her.

A gesture of recognition of the other, a handshake, a saying without a said—these things are important by their attention! “Attention, like a pure prayer of the soul,” of which Malebranche speaks, in so many unexpected echoes from Walter Benjamin’s pen: extreme receptivity, but extreme donation; attention—a mode of consciousness without distraction, i.e. without the power to escape through dark underground passages; full illumination, projected not in order to see ideas, but in order to prohibit evasion; the first meaning of that insomnia that is conscience—rectitude of responsibility before any appearance of forms, images, or things. (PN 43)

Attention is all about responsibility to reality, just as Weil says.⁶²⁴

Returning to Levinas’s version of Celan’s remark from his Meridian speech: *inclinaison* (*pente*, as opposed to *inclination* or *goût*) is not something the *créature* decides on intentionally, any more than a star intentionally inclines itself at a certain angle above the horizon. It is the nonintentional orientation of the speaker, simply as speaker. In other words, the angle of inclination is the saying rather than the said, an object not of comprehension but of *attention*. It does not make clear either an object or a project, but serves to prevent the reader from evading the other’s alterity (NP 62-63). In the Meridian speech Celan implies that the *Flaschenposten* are not so many artistic productions to be appreciated for their artistry as they are invitations. Invitations to the otherness of the other? Perhaps to a reading of the poem in Weil’s sense of reading the other. But how does one do that? Is it possible to read a text not for what is *said* but for the *saying*, the saying in the said?—and if it is, can only some texts be read this way, and if so, what gives them that privilege? Or does it (as I hinted above) depend principally on the reader? Celan’s poetry—condensed, often impenetrable (although not affectedly so), always

⁶²⁴ The “dark underground passages” might be a reference to contemporary fascination with the unconscious, which Levinas considered a dangerous distraction from the ethical awareness of the other.

interrupting itself—seems to want to prevent the reader from incorporating it too quickly into his or her *same*, perhaps for the same reason Holocaust survivors throw obstacles in the way of interviewers who try to rephrase their testimony (testimony to what defies comprehension!) in everyday terms that listeners will find easier to understand.

Out of respect for the saying, one cannot read the other with the desire for a coherent picture. “Coherence,” Levinas maintains, “dissimulates a transcendence, a movement from the one to the other, a latent diachrony, uncertainty, and a fine risk” (OB 170). To seek coherence above everything else is to avoid the hazards of the ethical relation. According to Weil, it is to avoid reality. Facing reality was the point of Celan’s work if anything was—a reality filled with pain and loneliness to be sure—but his work would not have been possible at all had not the human company of language, specifically the German language, survived the Shoah—somehow managing to transcend the evil of its despoilment at the hands of the perpetrators of disaster, although not without the cost of a certain *silence*:

It, the language [*Sprache*], remained, not lost [literally, unlost, *unverloren*], yes in spite of everything. But it had to pass through its own answerlessness, pass through frightful muting, pass through the thousand darknesses of deathbringing speech [*Rede*]. It passed through and gave back no words for that which happened; yet it passed through this happening. Passed through and could come to light again, “enriched” by all this.

In this language I have sought, during those years and the years since then, to write poems: so as to speak, to orient myself, to find out where I was and where I was meant to go, to sketch out reality for myself.⁶²⁵

⁶²⁵ Bremen speech, Celan 2001, 395-96.

That the poetic witness to Celan's attempt at self-orientation itself consists of interruptions and silences suggests an attempt to 'say' *other*, to convey pure vulnerability in the form of the vulnerability of language. Concealing or eliminating these interruptions—giving the language more of a voice—would suppress contact with the other and conceal the other's immediacy and alterity, destroying the intended 'alterity' of the poem. The failure of interpretation is the poetry's success. Like a person, it refuses totalization while continuing to invite rereading and new failures of interpretation. The "disaster" itself, the *total interruption* which was the Shoah, would have to be read in the same way, otherwise the catastrophic is missed. It is obscured, perhaps deliberately, by attempts to establish its 'meaning'. One concentrates, for example, on Nazi cruelty at the expense of seeing the parallels between the concentrationary universe and present-day society.⁶²⁶ Or one 'remembers the Holocaust'—perhaps by reading books or watching movies—precisely in order to forget it, that is, to forget the demand it makes on one's own responsibility. Forgetting what is supposed to be unforgettable is in fact very easily done, just as "lack of acknowledgement" is a common reaction to trauma.⁶²⁷ One will do almost anything to cover up acute disruptions of one's 'safe and same'. In the Meridian speech, Celan announces his intention to write only a poetry of interruptions: he will refuse coherence, remember what he would rather forget, do justice to what he cannot help betraying. A poetry that seeks company, not understanding.

Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, early in his book on Celan—*Poetry as Experience* (1986)—declares that at least certain of Celan's poems "*necessarily* escape interpretation; they forbid it. One could even say they are written to forbid it. That is why the sole question carrying them, as it carried all Celan's poetry, is that of meaning, the possibility of meaning."⁶²⁸ The meaning of Celan's poetry is that it places in question the very possibility of a poem having meaning after the

⁶²⁶ This term for the concentration camp environment or anything resembling it was first introduced by the Holocaust survivor David Rousset in his book *L'Univers concentrationnaire* (1946), English translations: *A World Apart*, trans. Yvonne Moyse (1951), *The Other Kingdom*, trans. Ramon Guthrie (1982).

⁶²⁷ Laub and Hamburger 2017, 68.

⁶²⁸ Lacoue-Labarthe 1999, 13.

disaster. Lacoue-Labarthe goes on to call this “a transcendental question ... that inevitably takes away, as Heidegger found with both Hölderlin and Trakl, all forms of hermeneutic power, even at one remove: for example, envisioning a ‘hermeneutics of hermeneutics.’” This may be true, but I would argue that Celan’s poetry can nonetheless lend itself to a *decreative* hermeneutics. Hardly characterizable as “hermeneutic *power*,” this is more like a hermeneutic *abdication*. If Lacoue-Labarthe is right that Celan deliberately resists interpretation, then a respectful reading of his poetry would refuse every attempt to understand it. One might indeed try various interpretations—there are good reasons for doing so—but only to reject them. Decreative reading continually interrupts itself, distrusts itself, like Midrash, like Celan’s poetry. The idea would be to preserve the *reticence* of a saying that resists being converted too quickly into the said, as Levinas reminds us in a rare reference to poetry late in *Otherwise Than Being*:

Language would exceed the limits of what is thought, by suggesting, letting be understood without ever making understandable, an implication of a meaning distinct from that which comes to signs from the simultaneity of systems or the logical definition of concepts. This possibility is laid bare in the poetic said, and the interpretation it calls for ad infinitum.
(OB 169-70)

Poetry as ongoing interpretive dialogue: this might be said to have been Celan’s programmatic theme as laid it out in the Meridian speech. In much the same vein, Lacoue-Labarthe refers to the poem’s attempt to convey the *singularity of experience*, only in the next breath to question the very possibility of its doing so. First he poses it as a problem of language, in particular the peculiarly personal language of poetry that he denotes “idiom”:

The question I have called that of idiom ... asks not just about the “text,” but about the singular *experience* coming into writing; it asks if, being singular, experience can be

written, or if from the moment of writing its very singularity is not forever lost and borne away in one way or another, at origin or en route to destination, by the very fact of language. This could be due to language's impossible intransitivity, or to the desire for meaning, for universality, that animates voices divided by the constraint of a language that is itself, in turn, only one of many.⁶²⁹

In Levinas's and Weil's terms, we might call this the problem of somehow 'reading' the saying in the said—although the saying, which unlike the said is indeed silent if only because it is prior to consciousness, is not exactly an experience. But then Lacoue-Labarthe questions the possibility of this "silent experience":

Is there, can there be, a singular experience? A silent experience, absolutely untouched by language, unprompted by even the most articulated discourse? If, impossibly, we can say "yes," if singularity exists or subsists despite all odds (and beyond empirical considerations, the presence of a witness ... or of someone else who knows), can language possibly take on its burden? And would idiom suffice for the purpose—idiom of course different from the facile "crypting" or refusal to reveal one's point so terribly endemic to the "modern"? These questions pose neither the problem of solipsism nor that of autism, but very probably that of solitude, which Celan experienced to what we must justly call the utmost degree.⁶³⁰

The solitude referred to is that of the Holocaust survivor who finds himself living among people who either cannot or do not want to know what he has been through. Lacoue-Labarthe does not answer the question of whether there actually can be a human experience "untouched by

⁶²⁹ Lacoue-Labarthe 1999, 15.

⁶³⁰ Lacoue-Labarthe 1999, 15.

language,” but the relevance to the problem of witnessing to the Shoah is obvious. It is the question we will address in the next section: can one witness to an ‘experience’ not only which one has not had oneself, but which is impossible *as an experience* because it defies coherence—an absolutely traumatic experience?

A decreative reading cannot help but ‘interpret’ and supply a ‘meaning’. It cannot help but “fill the void,” as Weil expresses it—that is, allow it to be filled. What is crucial, in respecting either the otherness of the neighbor or the ‘otherness’ of a work of art, is not to let the void remain filled for so long that the status quo disengages the process of re-imagination, of cultivating a skepticism of one’s ability to comprehend, of forcing consciousness to re-fill the void again and again. For the meaning of the void just *is* that it cannot be filled.

7.5 The Testimony of Silence

From many signs it would seem the time has come to explore the space which separates (and not only in Nazi Lagers) the victims from the persecutors, and to do so with a lighter hand, and with a less turbid spirit than has been done, for instance, in a number of films. Only a schematic rhetoric can claim that that space is empty: it never is, it is studded with obscene or pathetic figures (sometimes they possess both qualities simultaneously) whom it is indispensable to know if we want to know the human species, if we want to know how to defend our souls when a similar test should once more loom before us, or even if we only want to understand what takes place in a big industrial factory. (Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved*, 29)

Their life is short, but their number is endless: they, the *Muselmänner*, the drowned, form the backbone of the camp, an anonymous mass, continually renewed and always identical, of non-men who march and labor in silence, the divine spark dead within them, already too empty to

really suffer. One hesitates to call them living: one hesitates to call their death death, in the face of which they have no fear, as they are too tired to understand. (Levi, *Survival in Auschwitz*, 90)

The Muselmänner were the concentrationary victims degree zero.⁶³¹ The Nazis had ideological reasons for creating them, but aside from those reasons, the Muselmänner were of no practical use. The concentration camps, however, were laboratories for experiments in exploitation. If the Nazis had needed minimally able-bodied men and women for labor, they would have found a way to create victims of degree one or two as necessary: units of labor rather than human beings. But the lowest degree remains the essential one, in that the Muselmann reveals exactly what is being exploited: the extreme vulnerability of every human being. The problem we will consider in this section is whether the Muselmänner still bear witness to their condition *as human beings*, for some have argued that they represent the borderline between the human and the non-human, if they have not actually crossed the line.⁶³² I will argue that *any* testimony depends as much on the ‘hearer’,⁶³³ even second- or third-hand, as on the bearer of the testimony. I will *not* show that the Muselmänner still have some property or attribute of humanity. That would be to view the matter ontologically. Instead, the intent is to discover what an *ethical* answer would be like to the question: *to what do the Muselmänner testify and do they still testify as human beings?*

⁶³¹ The origin of this concentration camp slang term, literally ‘Muslim’, is a mystery. One theory is that it refers to the fact that these inmates had become so physically weak that they could not stand, and therefore were often found in a kneeling position resembling a Muslim at prayer. Another explanation is that their attitude of total resignation seemed comparable to the extreme fatalism stereotypically attributed to Muslims.

⁶³² On this, see Agamben 2002, 48ff. Agamben does not agree with the assessment that the Muselmänner had crossed a line into the non-human, which he characterizes as an attempt “to allow at any cost for the distinction of what, in the camps, has become indistinguishable: the human and the inhuman” (58).

⁶³³ I use this term for you and I who hear (or read) the testimony—in this case, learn about the Muselmänner. While this makes us witnesses in a sense, it is obviously in a different sense than the Muselmann is a witness, if that can even be said of him (which is the question here). Thus, it might be confusing to refer to you and me as *witnesses* in the same context in which we discuss the ‘witness’ of the Muselmann.

According to Levinas, the paradox of testimony considered solely as a form of discourse is that its most significant ‘message’, the *saying*, has no content at all; it is an *event*. As opposed to the *said*, the saying is beyond language. In the saying, discourse has a ‘meaning’ apart from and prior to—“on the hither side of”—the meanings of whatever words it might employ, or fail to employ. This prior ‘meaning’, more primordial than Heidegger’s meaning of Being, has its ultimate source in the *vulnerability* of the witness. Indeed, one could say that the ‘meaning’ of the saying *is* the fact of human vulnerability itself, a meaning so fundamental that out of it every other meaning develops, for only a vulnerable subject needs things to be meaningful, and meanings are vulnerable to change. Human vulnerability needs continually to seek meaning and its ratification from neighbors, and only a subject capable of using language, however minimally, can produce or ratify this elusive meaning. In discourse, the *said* is the meaning, while the *saying* serves as witness to “the subjectivity of the subject that makes itself a sign”—a sign of its own vulnerability. Paradoxically, it is a sign that “bears witness to the glory of the Infinite” (OB 151), for the glory of a vulnerable human subject consists in the fact that the subject “supports the universe” as a world-maker, a creator of meaning. From an ethical point of view, the need for worldmaking arises because the subject is vulnerable to, hence “infinitely” responsible to, every other worldmaking subject. Thus the glory of the Infinite is nothing more nor less than the subject’s vulnerability as ethical.

The ‘ultimate’ testimony would therefore be the testimony of the *saying* apart from any *said*, a testimony on the hither side of meaning and language—a testimony to vulnerability in its *purity*, so to speak, in its “goodness despite itself.” Explains Levinas: “the passivity of the one”—that is, of the oneself⁶³⁴—“its responsibility or its pain, do not begin in consciousness—that is, do not begin. On the hither side of consciousness, they consist in the pre-original hold of the Good over it, always older than any present, any beginning” (OB 57). In other words, one is responsible,

⁶³⁴ On the oneself (*le Soi meme*) or ethical subject, see OB 103-8. We review below what we said about the oneself in Chapter 1. *The One* is Levinas’s term for the singularity of the oneself as singularized by the call to responsibility of the other, chosen in a unique way by the Good (OB 56-57).

hence vulnerable—or vulnerable, hence responsible—precisely because one is always within the diachronic embrace of the Good. What does this mean? It is the opposite of what one might have expected. Are we not vulnerable because, from moment to moment in the synchrony of time, we are exposed to evils of one kind or another? This, however, is just another way of saying the same thing. That the oneself is called by the Good outside of time *is* precisely the reason it is vulnerable to evil within time.⁶³⁵ But as the-one-for-the-other called by the Good, the oneself is revealed to be vulnerable in a different and deeper sense than that of ordinary conscious vulnerability to evil. As called by the *other*, it finds its identity continually brought into question from a source beyond consciousness. Consciousness *identifies*, but for Levinas, one's "uniqueness" as called to responsibility is not something we are able to identify consciously. Thus he says that the subject, the *oneself* as he will call it, "is without identity. Not an identity, it is beyond consciousness, which is in itself and for itself. For it [that is, responsibility] is already a substitution for the other" (OB 57). Responsible beyond consciousness and thus even beyond empathy, which depends on consciousness, one is *ethically* interchangeable with every other person, not excepting the most severely and tragically deprived. The oneself is interchangeable and at the same time unique—this is the paradox of the human as ethical—interchangeable as substitutable, unique as responsible in a way that no one else is in the exact same position to be, but in any case without an identity in the sense in which we usually mean the word, that of possessing a 'core self' that remains stable through time. Insofar as the self manages some form of stability, it necessarily betrays the always disruptive other whose disruptions make one *response-able*—that is, *a oneself*.

What is this "Good" that removes from me my "identity"? In an immediate sense, of course, it is the other, whose goodness consists precisely in the fact that he or she continually calls me into

⁶³⁵ And, perhaps, vulnerable to evil as Being, hence to evil *as time*, in Heidegger's sense of 'time'. See Chapter 3 above, p. 213, especially note 310. For Levinas time is the relation with the other, but as we have noted, the other herself is *outside* of time. Time as the relation with the other is therefore a mixture (as Weil says) of both good and evil, like everything else on earth.

question. This calling into question, as we saw in Chapter 2, defies ordinary logic. Hence we can say that the Good, tolerant of both paradox and doubt, is the refusal to countenance the egological struggle for coherence and the “assembly” of being against decreation,⁶³⁶ a *refusal* of “the present [as] essence that begins and ends, beginning and end assembled [*rassemblés*] in a thematizable conjunction ... the finite in correlation with a freedom.”⁶³⁷ As diachrony, the Good is the refusal of the *logos*, of the fully coherent and clearly rational story (“the finite in correlation with a freedom”) as the standard for testimony (OB 11). The Good is the refusal of the urge for certainty, the refusal even of certainty as to its own existence. The Good is *inherently* subject to doubt, and not just because of the Shoah. For the Good is never itself present, since the present is constituted or “assembled” by an ego, a consciousness or ‘I’ that unites the present with the past and future into a worldmaking story—necessarily abandoning the other *as other*, turning them into the same. The Good not only does not need the certainty that depends on consistency with whatever story consciousness tells; it has an aversion to it. There is no danger, therefore, that the Good will forsake a being simply because that being experiences the loss of its world, as in trauma or extreme affliction. Not only is this loss purely ontological (not to depreciate the harm this can do to the ethical self), but the worry is a purely ontological worry about being and having, and therefore not on the same level as the responsibility that brings with it deeper worries of a non-possessive kind.

To witness to the Good or to goodness is to acknowledge that the Good has always already vanished (“passed”), oblivious to my will and to Being’s history. It leaves behind at most a trace that has so little claim to *being* that its existence is always inherently suspect. In fact, the Good must absent itself from every narrative adventure without exception—even from that of religion, which remains tied to Being in spite of (or because of) the attempt to give voice to the ineffable. There is no experience of, hence no story of the Good. For that reason, just as Weil says about joy

⁶³⁶ Recall that “assembly” is Levinas’s term for meaning-creation as ontological.

⁶³⁷ OB 11 / AE 14, translation slightly modified and brackets added.

(N 179, 268), one can be thankful for the Good without feeling the slightest need to experience it oneself, to describe it, or even to be certain of its existence.

In sum, the “goodness in the subject is anarchy itself” (OB 138) in its having no origin that can be conjoined with the present and made part of a life chronicle. This is not because the Good lies too far back to be recovered to memory, or because it is yet to come in a future beyond anything consciousness can imagine. Goodness is not temporal at all but *the very fact of proximity*. The approach of the other “is goodness, without knowledge or blindness, beyond essence” (OB 137). The contradictory phrase—“without knowledge or blindness” [*sans savoir, ni aveuglement*]—ought to remind the reader of the “open-eyed ignorance” we discussed in Chapter 3 (section 3.3). This was defined as acknowledging only the pure Good even while one is aware that all good is invariably mixed with evil (OB 177; N 57). Open-eyed ignorance would seem to be the closest thing in a human being to purity of vision, to an optics having a view of the other wholly free from the interference of the ‘I’. Purity of vision is not, of course, incompatible with its own vulnerability. Weil reminds us that

purity is not invulnerable to pain, but eminently vulnerable to it. It is absolutely invulnerable *qua* purity, in the sense that no violence can render it any less pure; but it is eminently vulnerable in the sense that every attack on the part of evil makes it suffer, that all evil which touches it passes into it as suffering. (N 508)

The evil that touches purity passes directly into suffering without inspiring a desire for revenge or compensation. That is, purity converts evil into good, not by performing good works with the idea of diminishing the evil, but solely by *refusing to refuse the suffering*. It is not at all clear that there

is any other way of converting evil into good than the way Weil describes in this passage: by suffering from it.⁶³⁸

Here, however, there might be reason for concern: not that one might lose one's world or that the Good might forget that one exists, but that in some extreme situation, one could cease to desire the other's approach, or even (if it is not the same thing) cease to desire that good and not evil be done to one. This would seem to be the case with regard to the Muselmänner. If the Good has not forsaken the Muselmänner, is it still possible that the Muselmänner had forsaken the Good?

If all testimony testifies indirectly to one's vulnerability inasmuch as every said is the betrayal of the saying, and if as a result the purest testimony would be the witness of the saying apart from the said, pure vulnerability itself, then the purest testimony we have of the Shoah might well be the testimony of those who had apparently become *vulnerability* and nothing else: the inmates of the concentration camps known as the Muselmänner, the walking dead who appeared to have given up all motivation and hope. For those who witnessed them, the Muselmänner seem to have represented the absolute nadir of indifference towards one's fate. Their testimony, if it can be called a testimony, would consist in what they 'knew' without this knowledge being present to them, much less communicable. The Muselmann's answer to Weil's question, "What are you going through?" would have been silence, incomprehension. Does so spare a testimony, amounting to the testifier's mere existence, if it can be regarded as an existence, deserve to be called testimony at all? Or might the power of this testimony be, not so much its meagerness as precisely its absolute *nullity*, testifying to vulnerability through the ultimate vulnerability of all human testimony itself? This would be testimony to the originary meaning of discourse, the saying as vulnerability itself, testimony to (and at the same time, testimony *of*) the pure *act* of

⁶³⁸ One proof of which, at least for a Christian on Weil's view, ought to be the fact that God himself, in the person of Christ, did no more.

speaking, irrespective of what, if anything, is actually said. The mere capacity for language already in itself conveys the counter-command or reverse intentionality (“*l’inversion de l’extase intentionnelle*,” OB 192n24 / AE 110n24) of the saying—perhaps even when, having once had that capacity, one has lost it.

Purity of suffering (which need not mean the suffering of the pure⁶³⁹) would then be the willingness always to present oneself to the other as *this* vulnerable, offering no excuse, never wishing to pass oneself off as invincible in the least respect. If vulnerability is the very subjectivity of the subject—not even something one possesses, but one’s *possession by* the other, an obsession—then purity of suffering would be the acknowledgement that, merely as a human being, one is all one’s life a potential Muselmann, substitutable even for the very lowest of the low. It is not merely that the circumstances which would reduce one to such a state are never, as Primo Levi reminds us, so far away as one assumes. The potential ‘Muselmann within’ is infinitely closer than that: the one characteristic that defines one’s subjectivity unconditionally. Thus the Muselmann represents a ‘black hole’ at the center of human existence—at the center of every human existent—an inconvenient truth about human being-in-the-world that opens up like an abyss at one’s feet in every encounter with the other, whether one notices the abyss there or not. As Weil says, “I may lose at any moment, through the play of circumstances over which I have no control, anything whatsoever that I possess, including those things which are so intimately mine that I consider them as being myself. There is nothing that I might not lose” (SWA 70). Human vulnerability is this infinite susceptibility to total loss, of which the Muselmann is, in a sense, the purest witness.

But does not the Muselmann actually witness to an affliction so extreme that it destroys the alleged witness’s faith in, or awareness of, any meaning whatsoever? Were that the case, we might be tempted nonetheless to decide that the Muselmann had crossed the line from humanity

⁶³⁹ The situation of Christ on the cross.

to non-humanity. If, however, we are to believe Weil—in this case a big if—the chances of reaching such an extremity depend solely on whether or not one has already begun the process of decreation:

However short a time one may have begun the process of destroying the ‘I’, it is enough to enable one to prevent *any affliction at all* from doing one harm. For the ‘I’ will not allow itself to be destroyed by external pressure without a severe struggle. If one refuses to countenance such a struggle out of love for God, then the destruction of the ‘I’ does not take place from without, but from within. (N 337, emphasis added)

Whether a person has or has not “begun the process of destroying the ‘I’” from within is impossible to observe from outside, hence we cannot assume that there were not Muselmänner who had already begun the process at some point in their lives. For Weil this would suffice. Who if not the Muselmänner were harmed by the tortures of the concentrationary environment? And yet Weil tells us that if one begins the process of decreation, that alone is enough to “prevent any affliction from doing one harm.” We now know what this extraordinary statement means. If one is on the way towards eliminating the ‘I’, then nothing can do the ‘I’ irreparable harm if it helps one along that way. Hence the Muselmänner were immune to harm because they had virtually no ‘I’ left to be harmed—but only provided that at some point they had voluntarily consented to the nothingness of their ‘I’, that is, their own decreation. This is of course a large proviso, but however large, it cannot be proved one way or the other in the case of any given individual. It would appear that we therefore have no reason not to give anyone, even the lowest of the low, the benefit of our assuming it.

If the meaning of my very existence is my vulnerability, and this meaning depends on the possibility that without fail I would become a Muselmann under certain extreme circumstances,

then the Muselmänner would have to remain a source of meaning for me. There is therefore at least one meaning the Muselmann, without intending to (since by definition a Muselmann might have no conscious intentions) always conveys, perhaps the most profound meaning of all: that of my essential vulnerability. Hence the face, contrary perhaps to one's initial impression, would seem to be a witness no power can annihilate, not even the concentrationary universe. The appearance of loss of self would only heighten the other's ability to disturb my present. The immunity of the face to destruction—however powerless this immunity is to prevent one's physical demise, since one's immunity depends precisely on one's inescapable physical and psychological vulnerability—guarantees that even the Muselmann is a witness conveying a meaning. Unless, perhaps, everyone were to become a Muselmann. The latter, of course, is not beyond the realm of possibility, for that is in fact the lesson of Auschwitz.

Thus, in the midst of one's vulnerability, one possesses a certain invulnerability—as a witness to the purity of the Good through the nothingness of the 'I'. Moreover, the Muselmann's witness to human vulnerability makes him a source of meaning for me despite his extreme destitution—or perhaps *because* of it. Still, this apparently positive result seems to be threatened by what Levinas calls an “insurmountable ambiguity” of human existence. Are we not forgetting that one has a *body*? Levinas notes that “the incarnate ego, the ego of flesh and blood, can lose its signification, be affirmed [sic] as an animal in its *conatus* and its joy” (OB 79)—or, in the case of the Muselmänner, presumably, in their total loss of *conatus* and their misery. This would presumably mean the loss of their subjectivity. In other words, there would seem to be a danger still that a person could be reduced to something like an animal without a face, able to convey no more meaning than any other object. This was after all the intent of the concentration camps. One cannot therefore deny the possibility that it was successful without discounting the extent of the victims' loss.

Levinas's response is that not only does one not need a guarantee against such a loss, the ego's continual vulnerability to losing its signification as the one-for-the-other, its danger of descending to the nonhuman, *is* the very condition of human existence as vulnerable. The "insurmountable ambiguity" of one's existence as human is itself indispensable to one's signification as *ethical*. In effect, the loss witnesses to the very thing that was 'lost', provided of course that there is someone left to interpret so enigmatic a witness.

But this ambiguity is the condition of vulnerability itself, that is, of sensibility as signification: it is in the measure that sensibility is complacent in itself, is "coiled over upon itself," "is 'I'," that in its benevolence for the other [*bien-veillance*, its *watching out* for (the other's) *good*] it remains *for the other*, *despite* itself, non-act, signification *for the other* and not *for itself*. (OB 80 / AE 100, original emphasis, translation slightly modified)

Or alternatively, to compound the ambiguity—legitimately, I believe, in the spirit of Levinas, but now reading him through Weil—it is in the measure that sensibility is infinitely *beyond* complacency, as it is in the extremity of affliction when the self has shrunk to a dimensionless point and become a non-ego whose forced self-abnegation would suggest the ego only by its absence—it is in this measure that nonetheless, *in its total passivity*, sensibility remains signification for-the-other. The implication would be that not even the concentrationary universe, however devastating it might prove to the ego or the *self* enclosed within it, can entirely efface the face for the one still capable of 'reading' it. The ethical question, in other words, is not whether the Muselmänner were still human, but whether I remain human enough to read the witness of the Muselmänner.

Does the Muselmann witness to anything human? Yes, to that which is most fundamentally human, one's absolute vulnerability. And perhaps only the afflicted have the 'right' to witness to

it, much as the persecuted are the only ones in a position to witness to their persecutors as “pitiable” (OB 111). Does the Muselmann provide this witness only by ceasing to be human? No, since he proves he is still human insofar as he witnesses. All that is required to verify the fact of his witness is my own decision to hear it and allow it to call me into question. If I am called into question by the Muselmann—and it would seem that merely entertaining the question of the Muselmann’s humanity proves in itself that this has happened—then it must follow that the Muselmann essentially has a *face*, at least for me, even over the intervening decades.

It is Weil who provides us with some observations that could perhaps lead in a preliminary way to a phenomenology of the kind of witness that the Muselmänner provide.

7.6 Elements of a Phenomenology of the Concentrationary Witness

In *Otherwise Than Being*, Levinas recalls the final scenes in Homer’s *Odyssey* in a context—that of clarifying the meaning of human identity—which suggests that Ulysses might be comparable to a Muselmann coming home from the camps. Levinas reminds us that, while Ulysses’ dog, unlike the strangers who have taken over his house, recognizes his “identity” despite his disguise “under false exteriors,” the canine nose (*flair animal*) cannot sniff out its master’s “signifyingness” (*signifiance*) for the other (OB 81 / AE 102). The dog has no awareness of the *face*, which is recognizable only by a human sensibility. Thus Penelope’s suitors, as trespassers and interlopers, would certainly sense in the returning Ulysses, however insignificant a figure he might represent for them, not his “identity” as Ulysses of course but, more significantly if for reasons they could not yet guess, someone who is unpredictable in a way that only a human being can be. Unpredictable *and* vulnerable, unpredictable *in* his vulnerability. To the dog, the face could have no such ethical meaning. Were the Muselmänner still accessible to others in the way that Ulysses was to the suitors, or had they, beneath the ‘incognito’ of extreme

destitution brought on by life in the camps, crossed the line into the non-human? I claim that the answer to this still-too-ontological question has more to do with those who meet them or hear about them than with any attribute of the Muselmänner themselves. The possibility would therefore remain that however successful the torturer in reducing a human being to a vegetable, he has no control over how *others* will read his ‘success’.

There is ample evidence that everyone in the concentrationary environment, inmates and camp functionaries alike, made a concerted effort to shun the Muselmänner. Why would they bother to do this unless *they themselves* considered the Muselmänner to be at least minimally human, and thus only ‘non-human’ in a way that still suggested what it meant to be human—in fact, suggested that the Muselmänner were no more vulnerable than they were themselves? Especially when we consider that the other inmates did indeed recognize in the Muselmänner the state in which they would likely find themselves within a few weeks or months. The show of trying to ignore another *person* would seem to prove that the ignored still has an ethical hold on the one who tries to ignore him and therefore *still has a face*—is still capable (but is it not obvious?) of disrupting the ‘same’ in a way that only a human being can. Is it possible to *dis-regard* something whose essence is precisely to claim one’s regard? To endeavor to ignore another human being is precisely *not* to ignore him as a human being, however psychologically destructive one’s ostracism might prove to the object of scorn, of whom one says ‘Ignore him! He is not worth thinking about.’

Weil’s favorite example of the difficulty of ignoring something one deliberately sets out to ignore is that of being told *not* to think of a polar bear. At first you find it impossible to comply. The command, ‘Don’t think about it!’—whether spoken to oneself or by someone else—immediately brings ‘it’ to mind. More significant in the present context, even if it is yet another psychological commonplace, is the fact that trying deliberately to ignore something, far from this

being a sign that it has no significance, often indicates that one is obsessed by it but has no desire to give it the self-questioning *attention* it calls for.

‘Not to think of the polar bear.’ Any thought whatsoever which imposes itself, which returns again and again ... can serve as polar bear—if it is a thought of such a kind that one wants to set it aside, and not on the contrary to ponder it more deeply.

Thus pain, humiliation, blows to self-esteem, wounded feelings—all vain sufferings can, by their very vanity, serve as polar bear, which represents a manner of using them. (N 59)

With anything we are afraid to think about deeply but cannot help but bring to mind, there is a tendency to use the recurring memory as a distraction from deeper reflection. The fact that, for example, we consciously remind ourselves not to think about an experience of humiliation—our own or another’s—only proves that we are obsessed by an inability to deal with the humiliating experience, perhaps because it conceals an unpleasant truth about ourselves or someone we care for. We may even bring the episode to mind deliberately for the purpose of dismissing it, again and again, thus demonstrating, quite ineffectually—but to whom if not ourselves?—that it means nothing to us. This seems to be the idea behind Weil’s suggestion that “obsessions are necessary in order to be set aside ... ; that is why one creates an obsession by saying: ‘Don’t think of the polar bear.’” Telling oneself over and over again ‘Don’t think about it, it was nothing’ is preferable to “pondering it more deeply.” Weil concludes these observations with the statement that “the wrenching of the soul which accompanies the ceasing to think about something is the prototype of good” (N 59). Ending a cycle of behavior designed to prevent genuine thought is the prototype of good because loving the good *means* directing one’s full attention to the real that one would perhaps rather not think about at all.

The same may go (with qualifications) for the seemingly very different case of recurring memories, nightmares, and hallucinations due to trauma. Their meaning, according to one view, is that one is trying to experience the traumatic event—the event one missed experiencing because it was too disorienting for consciousness to process—for *the first time*.⁶⁴⁰ If one wants to “set aside” the entire experience, this may be because one fears that confronting it will produce “breakdown,” that one *cannot* assimilate the event into one’s world without it destroying the only world one lives in. One fears the breakdown of one’s normal defenses against breakdown—that is, against the other.⁶⁴¹

Similarly when confronting someone suffering from extreme affliction, one may fear the breakdown of one’s usual defenses against reminders of one’s vulnerability. In the case of the Muselmänner, one might defend oneself against this fear by continually telling oneself that they are not worth bothering about—all they do is complain, they do not respond if you try to talk to them, you cannot bargain with them for an extra piece of bread, etc. But simply to say these things about a person is to acknowledge not only that they are human but also that one *cannot* ignore them. In his notion of proximity, Levinas attributes this impossibility of maintaining one’s distance, of “moving away” (OB 87), to the irreducible non-indifference of responsibility that makes us ethical subjects.⁶⁴² Proximity is not a nearness with respect to the possibility of meaningful conversation or useful exchange of information or mutual aid. “Consciousness, which is consciousness of a possible, power, freedom, would then have already lost proximity properly so called, now surveyed and thematized, as it would have already repressed in itself a subjectivity older than knowing or power” (OB 83). Simply to expect something from someone, or conversely to expect nothing, is to make a (futile) attempt to set a limit on their proximity. Community with the neighbor is not based an economy of exchange, however important this may become later.

⁶⁴⁰ For this theory of trauma, see especially Caruth 2016.

⁶⁴¹ Winnicott, “Fear of Breakdown” (1963), in Winnicott 2011, 197-208.

⁶⁴² On non-indifference, see OB 70-71, 82, and above, pp. 108, 450.

The required relationship is neither the other's initiative nor is it even reciprocal. Instead, "community with him begins in my obligation to him" (OB 87).

To shun someone is to exercise a power that not only, like all powers, one could lose in an instant, but actually *is* lost the very moment it is exercised. This is proved by the fact, reiterated throughout the present work, that the other never ceases to disrupt one's consciousness and thus call one's powers into question, and that the other does this through one's very own words and actions. For most of us, only good fortune, or blind chance, prevents these disruptions from ever at any time becoming so great that we find ourselves unable to recover our self-possession. Nonetheless, human subjectivity amounts essentially to vulnerability to precisely this potential loss. From day to day it takes the form of the 'crisis' of the neighbor's *proximity*, in Levinas's sense of a relation beyond consciousness that deprives one of the security of totalizing self-control. Perhaps no neighbor is in a better position to make that crisis momentarily conscious than the Muselmann.

That the Muselmann cannot *affirm* (literally, make firm) his subjectivity in any way is not due to his *in-firmity*; it is the very condition of being a subject. In this he is no different from anyone else. One cannot, by consciously positing a "negation" of the universal category "subject," attest to one's singularity as an individual human being. This negation is not what either the Muselmann or the one who witnesses him requires in order to be affirmed in his or her positive integrity. The subject is the result of an entirely different individualization: that of response-ability to suffering. Hence Levinas writes that "the obsession by the neighbor is stronger than negativity. It paralyses with the weight of its very silence the power to assume this weight" (OB 84). That is, the silent testimony the other gives us of his singularity-in-spite-of-all-appearances does not *need* to be verified, much less heard, since we are *obsessed* by it from the beginning, to the extent that it is in fact the reason we are conscious. "Even the philosopher that speaks of it,

over and beyond the universality in which the subjectivity that is *said* appears, remains a subjectivity obsessed by the neighbor” (OB 84). What the phenomenologist can do is to find the place in his or her experience, wherever that might be at any given time, at which conscious knowledge breaks up before the encounter with the neighbor.⁶⁴³ Invariably there is such a ‘place’, otherwise the other is ultimately nothing but the same. The circumstances that happen to make breakup evident will depend on the persons involved, but arguably there is no situation in which breakup is more assured than in the presence of the afflicted. The afflicted is the quintessential *non-lieu* (no-place) that witnesses to the ethical subjectivity of the subject. Who will deny that affliction more than anything else arouses fear and disgust, hence represents what is perhaps the supreme ethical challenge for both those who undergo it and those who witness it? The idea that breakup of one’s cognitive control is experienced in the difficulty of compassion was something Weil certainly appreciated.

Weil goes so far as to claim that “compassion for the afflicted is an impossibility” (SWR 441). Hence we often turn away from the one suffering affliction, or else turn on him with violence:

Men have the same carnal nature as animals. If a hen is hurt, the others rush up and peck it. The phenomenon is as automatic as gravitation. Our senses attach to affliction all the contempt, all the revulsion, all the hatred which our reason attaches to crime. Except for those whose whole soul is inhabited by Christ, everybody despises the afflicted to some extent, although practically no one is conscious of it. (SWR 443)

In the case of involuntary revulsion, as in that of deliberate avoidance we discussed earlier, there is indeed an obsession, but it is a very different obsession from the psychological scenario in which one is obsessed by what one desires to forget. The sense in which one is obsessed by the

⁶⁴³ See Chapter 4 above, pp. 238, 260-61, 284.

other, “persecuted” (in Levinas’s sense) by the other as though one were under a state of siege,⁶⁴⁴ would perhaps compound the obsessive animosity toward the afflicted that Weil describes here. One might naturally develop an unconscious resentment to being “persecuted” by the persecuted who, out of weakness, as one sees it, have given up the very same struggle one is perhaps afraid of giving up all too soon oneself. “According to the law that what man despises is also what he fears resembles him,” notes Agamben, “the Muselmann is universally avoided because everyone in the camp recognizes himself in his disfigured face.”⁶⁴⁵ To demonstrate that the Muselmann had not ceased to be human, we would need to show that he was in fact capable not only of being persecuted but of “persecuting,” that he still could be an “other” to his neighbors. If Agamben is right, there can be no doubt that this was indeed the case.

Even the Muselmann, we have seen, bestows meaning. As a bestower of meaning, one is both vulnerable and invulnerable. On the one hand, one can do nothing to prevent oneself from being a source of meaning for the other. One is *invulnerable* to all efforts to turn one into something utterly meaningless—and it *does* take effort, a way someone seizes or “takes on” the present (EE 23)—for these efforts in fact recreate one as meaningful in one’s alleged meaninglessness. Levinas’s claim that murder is impossible (TI 47) is based on this futility of ridding oneself of the other as a source of meaning. The other is a world-disrupting singularity no matter how one remakes one’s world in order to exclude him—for otherwise, one would not try to exclude him. On the other hand, the oneself and the other are invulnerable only in their *vulnerability*. It is our vulnerability that makes ratification of meaning necessary at the same time that it makes us invulnerable as sources of meaning. I depend on every other person for meaning, and for the same reason every other person depends on me. As long as I *want* to find the world meaningful, I *cannot help but* find meaning in the Muselmann. But if that is the case, then Agamben is right to say that “we will not understand what Auschwitz is if we do not first understand who or what the

⁶⁴⁴ As though from the other within. ‘Obsessed’ originally meant ‘under siege’ in both French and English.

⁶⁴⁵ Agamben 2002, 52.

Muselmann is” (Agamben 2002, 52). In fact, we will not understand ourselves. Something is conveyed even by the Muselmann, only it is never conveyed in a *said*, since the Muselmann does not speak. It would then have to be the trace of another witnessing: the message without content of the mere face of the other, which witnesses simply to the other’s vulnerability.

Witnessing to one’s vulnerability is what Levinas, in another of his surprising turns of speech, calls “religion.” For Levinas, this word denotes any relation with the other that works against one’s totalizing him.⁶⁴⁶ Clearly any such relation would have to begin with acknowledging one’s own vulnerability. The Muselmänner are therefore *religious* witnesses! It is a witnessing which, far from verifying (the being of) an experience or event, such as a miraculous healing or a vision,⁶⁴⁷ does not verify *being* at all but only an *ethical self-exposure*. Thus a phenomenology of human contact, when exposed to the Muselmann in whatever way it is, would uncover something less pertinent to understanding the *other*, who in any case remains beyond understanding, than to understanding *oneself*. What it would uncover is one’s primordial ethical response, as vulnerable, to the other’s vulnerability.

Earlier we observed that there is no danger of the Good ever forsaking a being that has *lost* its world. This is because one’s world is the world of consciousness, and the Good is not present to consciousness. For Levinas, we know about the Good only through what he calls “religion,” and even then only indirectly. Human language in service to religion witnesses to human vulnerability and *hence* to the glory of the Good, which in any case, on this earth, takes the form of concern for every other human being as vulnerable like oneself. Concern for the neighbor is something Levinas believes we should find much more surprising than we do, especially given the popular scientific view that we live in a universe directed by impersonal forces. Why should one organism

⁶⁴⁶ See, for example, TI 40, OB 168.

⁶⁴⁷ As Kierkegaard shows, even the miraculous is problematic—in fact, especially so. Contrary to a popular notion, those who were present at Christ’s miracles did not have an easier time of believing his claim to be sent by God than we do in hearing or reading about it secondhand. The firsthand witness would be called into question as much, if not more, by an experience which (by definition) must be impossible to fit rationally into one’s world. If anything, their reaction to the ‘miracle’ would be more *traumatic* than ours.

care about another beyond what is necessary for its own survival or that of its kin? (For that matter, what is really meant by *care*?) And yet it is evident that many people do exactly that every day. Attempts to explain this phenomenon scientifically are generally unsatisfying—and in any case futile if the ethical is indeed beyond Being. In fact, the ethical dictates that there is good reason why we should not even desire an explanation, since insofar as we think we have found such a reduction to ontology useful we are in a danger of missing the neighbor in need by making the ethical goal look like something that it is not.⁶⁴⁸

What connection does Levinas's notion of religion have with its more common forms? Levinas claims that if we try to "state the meaning borne witness to" by language itself—if we try to put the nonverbal witness to the other's vulnerability into words—then one word above all comes to mind: the only word "that does not extinguish or absorb the saying" in being said. This, he claims, is the word 'God'. The word 'God' intends to *say precisely that the saying itself cannot be said*. But it has this meaning only so long as it is used with a proper respect for its meaningfulness, its fulness of meaning beyond all meaning—that is, for its *meaninglessness* relative to the world of meaning we construct. It follows that if one thinks that one communicates something through the use of the word God, one takes it in vain. But if the word does not communicate anything, then what purpose does it serve? An obvious and simple answer is: it reminds us that not everything is 'meaningful', that some things are *beyond meaning*. Its referent is the fact that it has no reference.⁶⁴⁹ One uses it, Levinas declares, because it "subdues the subversion worked by illeity" (OB 151), softens the shock of the other even as it reminds us that the other is shocking. Since language is a function of consciousness, all words to some extent mitigate the blow of alterity. The word God is like a veil over a purity too pure for the optics of knowledge—namely, pure *otherness*—a veil so effective that it veils its own veiling, as it must if

⁶⁴⁸ Thus Heidegger's notion of care, however important to our understanding of being-in-the-world, is of questionable relevance to the practical problems involved in caring for another *person*.

⁶⁴⁹ Along these lines, compare the discussion of evil as excess in Chapter 5. One might say that the word God is intended to refer to an inexpressible excess that mitigates every excess.

it is to do more than conceal the other in the same. The latter is what happens whenever we apply attributes to what is beyond the meaningful. To say that God is good, forgiving, great, or anything else, is to cause the word God to betray itself—as Weil, too, makes clear. For her, God “is not a being to whom good is attached as an attribute, but is absolutely pure good in itself” (N 383). “All affirmations with regard to God are, in their true sense, negations” (N 357). Nonetheless, Weil points out, one cannot help but apply attributes. “God is the Good. He is neither a thing nor a person nor a thought. But in order to grasp him we have to conceive him as a thing, a person, and a thought” (FLN 299). If, as Levinas says, “the glory of the Infinite shuts itself up in a word and becomes a being,” it does so in order that we may use phrases such as ‘God is ...’ (good, forgiving, great, etc.) even though, in so doing, we invariably make God into something we can handle conceptually, and thereby into a betrayal of the other, which it would then be philosophy’s job to “reduce.”

Because the witness, the saying, is the fact of one’s vulnerability, one’s vulnerability can only be referenced negatively, but not as in negative theology, which by simply negating an attribute (saying that God is not a being, for example) leaves intact the relation to the attribute. Just as the divine has no relation at all to Being, so the human has *no relation at all* to invulnerability, only the paradoxical one mentioned earlier: the invulnerability of one’s vulnerability. Invulnerability is not the ideal or the perfection of the human, nor even something we should aspire to, knowing that it is unreachable, as an impossible but still meaningful goal to be approached asymptotically. On the contrary, the witness one gives to one’s vulnerability is expressed not in contrast to the absence of vulnerability, but “in proximity, responsibility and substitution” (OB 151)—by action rather than by word, but by an action resistant to being described because it is also a passivity, like the action Weil calls “non-active action.” *An action whose sole testimony must be silence.* Thus it *cannot* be the case that there is any particular kind of action that is appropriate for the

expression of vulnerability, as though there were an ‘art’ to expressing it,⁶⁵⁰ for in that event there would be something one could relevantly express in a *said*. Just as the “refusal of presence” is not simply the denial of God’s ontological existence,⁶⁵¹ so this refusal of action is not the denial of action altogether, in favor of doing nothing. It is action *transformed*, as Levinas says: “converted into my existence as present, that is, as a hostage delivered over as a gift to the other” (OB 151). I act not so much by *doing* as by *being*—or rather, by a doing that goes beyond being or non-being, as though space and time had collapsed into a wholly *other* dimension, an *alter*-dimension of the non-experience of the other’s interruption. Or perhaps instead we should label it not an experience or non-experience but an *ordeal*, a trial or even an *affliction* suffered silently, reflected in the exigency of whatever squarely-faced ethical dilemma presently calls one to task.⁶⁵² For only in silence, listening for the testimony of silence in the other, can one hear this call. We might also view the transformation as the result of the intersection of one’s space-time continuum with the diachronic interruption of the other’s. The other thereby witnesses to the fact that every instant has both its transcendent *beyond* and its immediately proximate *hither side*. The beyond and the hither side are two dimensions of a single transcendence, hence only apparently distinct. Neither dimension can be separated from the other, much less integrated into the totality of past-present-future. Contrary to what the reader might expect, the beyond and the hither side do not take us further from the concrete, from the other and his or her world, but ‘infinitely’ closer. They are, in fact, our only route to the other as other *within* this world. In particular, as I hope to have shown in this section, they bring us, somehow, closer to the Muselmann.

⁶⁵⁰ Celan’s disparaging of poetic ‘art’ in the Meridian speech is perhaps motivated by this desire to ‘express’ vulnerability, impossible loss, the absence of God, in the only way they can be expressed—artlessly.

⁶⁵¹ A denial that leaves God altogether too *present*, God overtly *related to* the ontological and thus made a part of, *bound to*, one’s language-defined world. Cf. OB 195n11.

⁶⁵² “I prefer the word ‘ordeal’ (*épreuve*) over ‘experience’ (*expérience*),” Levinas explained in an interview, “because the word ‘experience’ expresses always a knowledge of which the I is master. In the word ‘ordeal’ there is at the same time the idea of a life and of a critical ‘testing’ which exceeds the I which is its scene” (IR 97). One can hardly help but think of Abraham and Isaac, especially as Kierkegaard tells the story in *Fear and Trembling*, or Nemo’s reading of the Job story as the ordeal of suffering an excess.

In a footnote in *Otherwise Than Being*, Levinas makes an explicit connection between the testimony of silence and the religious (and political) in their usual senses. The hither side, he says, is reached by a “withdrawal, a reclusion” that aims for anything but worldly triumph through “spiritual powers” from “outside the world.” By contrast, “triumphs and failures presuppose personal freedom, and, consequently, an I endowed with political and religious sovereignty or political principality” (OB 195n11). Politics and religion in this usual sense are inimical to the ethical. Similarly Weil claims in her 1934 essay, “Reflections on the Causes of Liberty and Social Oppression,” that in the present age, the hope of achieving political or social reform by the use of power in anticipation of triumph has been revealed to be an illusion.⁶⁵³ Echoing this sentiment in *Otherwise Than Being*, no doubt with Hegel in mind, Levinas writes that “one can seek to seat the religious on a philosophy of the unity and totality of being called Spirit, and to this unity which ensures the efficacy of God in the world, sacrifice transcendence, despite the inversions of the totality into totalitarianism” (OB 95). “On the hither side of that,” Levinas continues in the footnote we quoted from above, “the I is itself, does not belong to Being or history, is neither an effect at rest nor a cause of movement.” Instead the I “is a movement of the ego into itself, outside of order,” a movement that, “from the plenum into the plenum,”⁶⁵⁴ leads to a region in which all the weight of being is borne and supported in the other” (OB 195n11), a region every bit as concrete as the world of being—in fact far more so, since it requires a weightier and therefore more particular *commitment*, namely a commitment in response to *this* suffering other, and not consolation, whether existential or religious in the usual sense.

⁶⁵³ *Oppression and Liberty*, 110-13. Henceforth OL.

⁶⁵⁴ “*Du plein dans le plein.*” This appears to be a reference to the “anguish” which “is not the existential ‘being-for-death,’ but the constriction of an ‘entry inwards,’ or the ‘hither side’ of all extension. It is not a flight into the void, but a movement into fullness [*une allée dans le plein*], the anguish of contraction and breakup” (OB 108). In other words, a movement from the physical world of extension (one kind of fullness) to a different and deeper ethical fullness that is both on the hither side of, and simultaneously beyond, the first.

7.7 Inversions of Totality into Totalitarianism

Thus, in all spheres, thought, the prerogative of the individual, is subordinated to vast mechanisms which crystalize collective life, and that is so to such an extent that we have almost lost the notion of what real thought is. The efforts, the labors, the inventions of beings of flesh and blood whom time introduces in successive waves to social life only possess social value and effectiveness on condition that they become in their turn crystalized in these huge mechanisms. The inversion of the relation between means and ends—an inversion which is to a certain extent the law of every oppressive society—here becomes total or nearly so, and extends to nearly everything. (Simone Weil, *Reflections Concerning the Causes of Liberty and Social Oppression* (1934), OL 104-5)

In the concentration camps, according to Hannah Arendt in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, the process of turning a human being into a thing involved three stages.⁶⁵⁵ First comes the elimination of what she called the *juridical* self, through eradication of all legal rights, in which the victim is left without hope of justice. Second to be destroyed is the *moral* self. One is left with no ability to cope with one's environment in terms of one's usual moral categories—for example, one is forced to make impossible choices, such as which of one's children to save from being sent immediately to the gas chambers. Finally came the destruction of the “individual”, the annihilation of what one might call the *spontaneous* self. About the state of spontaneity, Arendt observes that it is “the one thing that still prevents men from being made into living corpses.” By adopting a “persistent stoicism,” one can survive domination for a time, in a sense, by “taking refuge in this absolute isolation of a personality without rights or conscience.”⁶⁵⁶ Arendt may be referring to the strategy sometimes called “doubling”, a deliberate mental detachment from the body that is suffering or has suffered.

⁶⁵⁵ Arendt 1994, 447-57.

⁶⁵⁶ Arendt 1994, 453.

With such expedients, however, one cannot withstand violence against oneself indefinitely. “The experience of the concentration camps,” writes Arendt, shows “that human beings can be transformed into specimens of the human animal, and that man’s ‘nature’ is only ‘human’ insofar as it opens up to man the possibility of becoming something highly unnatural, that is, a man.” The last remark suggests that, if the conditions favorable to becoming human are so rare, it might be fundamental to human “nature” that one’s humanity is at any moment all too easily destroyed. “Man” is the animal characterized by the peculiar habit of seeking a relationship with others of his kind that, ironically, exposes him to greater vulnerability to others. He does this, according to Arendt, in order simply to “give birth” to something new. In other words, it is essential to human creativity that it leave the creative person all the more vulnerable. This, for Arendt, is the defining characteristic of all genuine human action, which elsewhere she denotes by the term *natality*.⁶⁵⁷

After murder of the moral person and annihilation of the juridical person, the destruction of the individuality is almost always successful. ... For to destroy individuality is to destroy spontaneity, man’s power to begin something new out of his own resources, something that cannot be explained on the basis of reactions to environment and events.⁶⁵⁸

The annihilation of spontaneity creates “the only form of society in which it is possible to dominate man entirely,” the “the concentrationary universe.”⁶⁵⁹ For Arendt, this defines totalitarianism, a society in which people are reduced, in Weil’s phrase, to “human material” (NR 48). This legacy of the Shoah need not, however, take overt form, much less that of the concentration camp. In the present day, one sees it in government and business planning, in the reduction of people to units of labor and units of consumption. Losses in “human material” due to poor working and living conditions, in the first case, or cost-cutting manufacturing methods that

⁶⁵⁷ See, for example, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), 9, 177-78, 247.

⁶⁵⁸ Arendt 1994, 455.

⁶⁵⁹ Arendt 1994, 456.

result in unhealthy or potentially dangerous products in the second, are written off as collateral damage just as impersonally as one would take into account a decline in demand or a temporary shortage of raw materials.

The spontaneous self “without rights or conscience” is a “sterile form” of human individuality that Arendt claims is “the hardest to destroy.”⁶⁶⁰ It seems comparable of the last remnants of what Weil calls supplementary energy, just prior to its transformation into the more basic vegetative energy required simply to maintain one’s biological existence (see above, p. 458). Weil’s example of this transformation is that of being forced to do meaningless labor for hours on end. She compares the experience to the encounter with the moral void, “when there is nothing external to correspond to an internal tension” (N 147)—that is, no purpose or goal to compensate for the exhausting effort. In a rare explicit reference to the concentrationary universe, Weil gives the example of the “torment in a concentration camp, consisting of moving a stone from B to A, then from A to B, then from B to A again, and so on during the whole day. Very different from the same effort expended in the course of work” (N 147). For Weil, as we have seen, the void can serve a purpose, but only in an individual’s spiritual life: “We must eliminate the void as far as possible—and that is little enough—from social life, for the void is only of service to grace, and society is not a society of the elect” (N 148). The loss of spontaneity is therefore not, as Arendt appears to suggest, an unmitigated evil. What makes it evil, as distinct from the gift of decreation, is having it forced upon one from outside without one’s consent.

It might be thought that once all supplementary energy is gone, a vegetative state such as that of the *Muselmänner* takes over, but this is not necessarily the case. Weil in fact *recommends* the removal of supplementary energy in favor of vegetative, for this is a description of decreation. What, then, is the difference between these two ‘vegetative’ states, that of living death and that of

⁶⁶⁰ Arendt 1994, 453. This seems to contradict Arendt’s remark quoted in the previous paragraph, that “the destruction of the individuality is almost always successful,” although she also says that “when destroyed [the spontaneous self] is most easily repaired.”

decreation? Decreation, of course, is also a kind of ‘living death’: the death of the ‘I’. The difference between the two must lie in the *use* one makes of one’s supplementary energy relative to the ideal state—one’s ‘motives’, and hence, in turn, the attitude one takes to supplementary energy in general. For, to some extent, human action cannot do without motives—otherwise we would indeed become Muselmänner—but Weil says that motives are always a product of the imagination and therefore suspect.⁶⁶¹ All motives are *self*-oriented to some degree. The correct application of one’s supplementary energy must therefore be similar to Weil’s recommendation for the use of the will, which the reader will recall (Chapter 1) was to *eliminate the will*: one must use one’s supplementary energy to become someone who ideally has no need of supplementary energy but acts solely in accordance with the ‘motivation’ supplied by attention cultivated out of love of the Good. Ideally, one should have no conscious motives for acting, but act because one cannot do otherwise—act in much the same way as an emerald is green.⁶⁶² This, of course, is the idea behind non-active action. In the limit, the use of supplementary energy to make supplementary energy unnecessary not only eliminates the will, it reduces the ‘I’ to ‘nothing’. And yet, it is the result of what Weil calls “pure compassion,” which she associates with joy (cf. above, p. 221-23, 445).

One also wears down the ‘I’ through joy accompanied by an extreme attention.

Pure compassion should make one more capable, and not less capable, of pure joy.

And how is that?

Once one has understood that one is nothing, the object of all one’s efforts is to become nothing. It is with this end in view that one accepts to suffer, *it is with this end in view that one acts*, it is with this end in view that one prays.

O God! grant that I may become nothing. (N 291-92)

⁶⁶¹ Vetö 1994, 63.

⁶⁶² FLN 129. See Chapter 1 above, p. 61.

By “nothing” Weil means a state in which the ‘I’ has wholly disappeared. In the end one becomes *nothing more than* an unconscious instrument of Good. “Wearing down” is the process of decreation. Nevertheless, just as all good on earth is mixed with evil, the process of decreation (which is itself non-intentional, in the sense that it is not something intentionally pursued) is always accompanied by some use of the supplementary energy that acts from motives, for the latter is characteristic of everyday life. This reliance on motives, however, leaves one vulnerable to idolatry, for in order to be efficacious, motives must “seem constant and solid” to the self that needs them, and the imagination will do almost anything to give them this necessary but ultimately counterfeit reliability.⁶⁶³ In a late notebook entry, Weil observes that

Thoughts are fluid, they are swayed by fantasy, passion, fatigue. But work has to be carried on persistently, for many hours a day, every day. Therefore motives are required which are proof against the instability of thoughts, that is to say, against *relation*; in other words, what is required is absolutes, or idols.

The only alternative is the supernatural bread, every day.

Therefore, in the Cave the idolatrous passions are a necessity.

What is needed is to find the least bad idols. (FLN 160)

In everyday life, Weil implies, one cannot avoid idolatry. The key is to know that one’s idols are idols and be able to look at them dispassionately enough to decide which ones are worth keeping for the time being, in some form or another, and which ones are not.

Since the right use of one’s supplementary energy, one’s spontaneity, is essential to being fully human, an oppressor who makes use of its deprivation in order to reduce human beings to

⁶⁶³ Vetö 1994, 64.

‘things’ endangers their humanity at its very root. Weil’s emphasis on the spiritual use of deprivation might seem narrowly religious but for the fact that decreation, as substitution, is fundamental to what it means to be human. It is Levinas who shows us how general Weil’s analysis really is.

The spontaneous self is the self that can say ‘I’, that can do and say things it is free to think of as its own actions and its own thoughts—a self that enjoys, at least from its own perspective, a certain measure of autonomy. More generally, spontaneity is conscious action, which Levinas sometimes refers to as the “naïve spontaneity of the ego” (OB 91) or “egoist spontaneity” (TI 43, 83-84). (See Chapter 1 above, p. 70-71). It is the worldmaking self—that is, the self of meaning-making. The total elimination of spontaneity in this sense, which seems close to Arendt’s, would presumably result in a total loss of all appreciation of the meaningful. But more essential than meaning, Levinas maintains, is the responsibility that makes one a conscious subject able to seek meaning in the first place. The world of which one is conscious is the world of meanings that one constructs with the help of the *others* with whom one has always already made contact on the hither side of consciousness and its naïve spontaneity. Can the oppressor make use of this relation between meaning and otherness to destroy one’s very proximity to the other? Does the reach of the concentrationary universe extend, via the destruction of meaning, to the hither side of consciousness, to what is at the same time beyond consciousness?

Everything depends on seeing the approach to the other as ethical rather than ontological. Proximity is not a state of being. One does not approach the other (in Levinas’s sense) by reducing a physical or mental distance. Metaphorically, *approaching* has more the import of one’s opening the doors of one’s home to a guest, although here the opening need not, and usually does not, take place consciously. In allowing one’s home ground to be invaded by an ‘other’ presence, one forms a relation “without allergy” (TI 303) to his or her otherness—equivalently, one finds the other *already within*. Thus, in an important sense, approaching or

going towards the other means *going* nowhere. Instead one remains unfailingly at one's post, to employ a metaphor Levinas borrows from Plato's *Phaedo*⁶⁶⁴—that is, always where the other can find one, on the *hither side* (*au deçà*) of, and at the same time *beyond* (*au delà*), the self. One does not *go* anywhere in order to approach the other because to go somewhere is to represent to oneself a conscious goal, and insofar as one represents anything to oneself, one excludes the other to some degree—in this case consigning her to a place in one's world relative to wherever it is one wants to go. It makes no difference that one has in mind doing some good for the other by approaching her in this conscious way; insofar as one represents her to oneself as part of one's world, one nonetheless fails to see her.⁶⁶⁵ The other makes one a subject by *singling one out* for responsibility, not overtly in the everyday world, but in the only place where this is truly possible, in the no-place or *non-lieu* where one's defenses are inherently weak if they exist there at all: on the *hither side* of all one's defenses, in the only 'place' in which one can become "that single individual" Kierkegaard extolled, provided we can assume that Kierkegaard essentially meant a subject in need of the other for meaning.

Levinas's metaphor for this largely unconscious process is breathing: in-spired (in-spirited) by the other (inhalation), one ex-spires or decreates the 'I' (exhalation). The atmosphere one breathes is, consciously, the world of worldmaking insofar as one shares it with others; but on the *hither side* of this and *beyond* it (*au delà* and *au deçà*), is the ethical atmosphere in which one *breathes in* alterity. Could the concentrationary experience be that of finding the atmosphere so thin (or so opaque, to shift metaphors) that one can no longer recognize otherness in it? What exactly would that mean? I will eventually propose an answer in terms of Levinas's concept of

⁶⁶⁴ "In condemning suicide, at the beginning of the *Phaedo*, Socrates refuses the false spiritualism of the pure and simple and immediate union with the Divine, characterized as desertion" (TI 48). "The allegory which the mystics tell us—that we men are put in a sort of guard post, from which one must not release oneself or run away—seems to me to be a high doctrine with difficult implications" (*Phaedo* 62b).

⁶⁶⁵ Worldmaking has an unavoidably selfish dimension. One 'makes a world' primarily for *oneself*—and even when one expressly makes it for the other, as when we say that we want to make the world a better place for future generations, too often this still means incorporating the other into one's same. The cure for being too wrapped up in one's world is not expanding its boundaries but allowing, *desiring*, the other person to question it both *from outside* and *from within*, hither and beyond.

proximity, but first it is useful to introduce another metaphor Levinas does not explicitly use, a metaphor for the ‘space’ in which the proximity of the other ‘occurs’ as an event.

Responsibility is the ‘air’ the subject ‘breathes’, giving it ethical life just as the earth’s atmosphere gives physical life to the body. The subject is the “constriction” or, “in the etymological sense of the term, the anguish” or *tightening* of the ego, “this in-itself of the oneself” (*l’angoisse de cet en soi du Soi-même*) that *breathes in* Otherness and *breathes out* of itself its confinement within the Same.

This anguish is not the existential “being-for-death,” but the constriction of an ‘entry inwards,’ or the ‘hither side’ of all extension. It is not a flight into the void, but a movement into fullness, the anguish of contraction and breakup. This describes the relation in which a subject is immolated without fleeing itself, without entering into ecstasy, without taking a distance from itself, in which it is pursued into itself, to the hither side of rest in itself, of its coincidence with itself. (OB 108)

The *non-lieu* in which all of this happens is certainly not that of physical or temporal space per se, but an ethical or *vocative space* (my metaphor, not Levinas’s) across which the other *calls* to me, whether or not I can see or hear her in a physical sense, and whether it happens now or is something I only later recall as having already occurred. It is space as *peopled*, the space of “proximity —approach, neighborhood, contact” (OB 81). “What distinguishes thought directed toward a thing from a bond with a person is that in the latter case a vocative is uttered: what is named is at the same time what is called” (EN 7 = BPW 7-8). Vocative space is the space I create in myself or in my world for the other without being conscious of doing so (OB 82-83). It includes ordinary space insofar as the latter “belongs to the sense of my responsibility for the other [*l’espace appartient au sens de ma responsabilité pour l’Autre*]” (OB 197n22 / AE

152n22). You and I could be standing next to one another and yet be inhabiting very different vocative spaces depending on what others happen to ‘be’ for each of us. When the rich man says he ‘dined alone’ he could mean it quite literally, even though servants came and went continually while he ate and one of them stood beside him the entire time. No one ever notices the gardener. ‘Who was at the party?’ ‘No one.’

Vocative space both separates us, in Levinas’s sense of the word *separation*, and unites us, in the “human fraternity outside any preestablished system” that characterizes “the *for* of the-one-for-the-other ... a *for* of total gratuity, breaking with interest” (OB 96-97).⁶⁶⁶ It is the space through which the Infinite passes, leaving the trace of a relation more primordial than anything we can incorporate into the space-time continuum that goes into the making of our individual worlds. Behind and prior to representable space—not in the sense that ontologically it is *another* space, but in a metaphorical sense that refers to a being’s dependence on the ethical for its meaning—this is the space to which Levinas refers when he maintains that “the everywhere of space is the from everywhere of faces that concern me and put me in question” (OB 197n22 / AE 152n22). Physical space has meaning only insofar as I find the other there. What I call vocative space is the *ethical meaning* of physical space (or anything analogous to physical space) in the sense that all things ‘spatial’ serve two opposite but complementary ethical purposes. The first is to create the distance between oneself and the other necessary for the work of justice which is that of letting the other be, thus allowing one to take part in the Creation (“support the universe” is how Levinas phrases it). The second purpose of the ‘spatial’ is to make it possible to approach the other by reducing one’s distance from him or her, physically and metaphorically. *Where* would we find the other if it were not for vocative space? It is impossible to say which comes first in the life history of an individual human being, vocative or physical space. In any event, such genetic questions are beside the point when it comes to the ethical. Vocative space does not position one

⁶⁶⁶ On separation, see the Introduction above, p. 51.

‘in the world’ but orients one with respect to the *other’s* world while at the same time evolving within oneself as one’s always-already-about-to-be-breached “inwardness” (*intériorité*, OB 48), sometimes called the ‘inner’ world. For whether or not I consider another as being *in my company* may depend less on the outward circumstances of our meeting than on the other in me. That his servants are not company for the rich man is due primarily to his habit of not allowing their mere presence to call him into question. Consequently, vocative space is not measured in terms of the near and far of the physical world, but instead is the ‘space’ of *au deçà et au delà*, a radically *intérieur* ‘here’ more intensely *here* or *hither* (*au deçà*) than any ‘near’, and at the same time a ‘there’ more exceedingly *there*, *thither*, or *beyond* (*au delà*) than any ‘far’ of which one can be conscious.⁶⁶⁷

Vocative space can be cultivated and enlarged. It can also be degraded and even destroyed, as happened in the concentration camps, which might have been specifically designed for that purpose. The destruction of vocative space is what actually happens in the event Arendt describes as the destruction of the spontaneous self. Even though vocative space is not simply the space-time continuum, the human constraints of space and time can be exploited to degrade it. One can, for example, isolate people from one another—literally, as in solitary confinement, or more subtly by forcing them to focus so obsessively on personal survival and safety as to forget concern for those around them. Overcrowding can just as effectively destroy vocative space. As we have noted, justice requires a certain distance between oneself and others. These techniques remain in use to the present day as a legacy of the concentrationary universe.⁶⁶⁸

Vocative space is vulnerable to disruptions of ordinary space first of all because, according to Levinas’s broad interpretation of sensibility, it is in ordinary sense perception that the ethical

⁶⁶⁷ *Au deçà et au delà* would normally be translated ‘hither and yon’ or ‘hither and thither’. *Au deçà* in particular means ‘this side of’, ‘near’, ‘short of’, or ‘just below’ (as in ‘short of the truth’, ‘just below the poverty line’). Translations such as ‘prior to’ or ‘beneath’ all too easily obscure Levinas’s meaning.

⁶⁶⁸ Overcrowded displaced-person camps, high-speed assembly lines, and advertising that encourages a narrow focus on personal consumption, all isolate people even from their immediate neighbors. Already in the 1930s, Weil noted this tendency of the “collectivity” to isolate people. And of course, Arendt, Orwell, and many others, have observed that totalitarianism breeds loneliness.

penetrates the “splendid indifference” of ontology (OB 96). Sensitivity to anything is first of all sensitivity to otherness, which we learn from the other person. The alterity of things, inasmuch as this constitutes the meaning things have, is a lesson one learns from others. It requires language. This is proved by the familiar fact that one does not ‘see’ certain things at all (differences in paintings, in musical performances, in trees or rocks) until one has been taught *how* to see them by an expert. Sensibility originates in vocative space prior (logically) to characterizing experience in terms of the space-time continuum. Every *thing* has meaning only within the vocative space that makes all meaning possible and therefore transcends the space-time continuum that ‘contains’ that thing.

The destruction of vocative space would thus be experienced not, in line with the Cartesian tradition, as a greater clarity about non-human ‘reality’, but as the displacement of the reality of the *other* by the anonymous “rumbling” of the *il y a*, the retreat of faces before uniform, faceless, pure Being. What the other teaches me is not metaphysics or ideology, notwithstanding that I need the other in order to learn what’s what in the world. Prior to anything else, what the other teaches me—or more accurately, *reveals* to me prior to the vulnerability and responsibility that makes me a subject capable of being taught—is *otherness*. To be isolated from the intrinsic proximity of the other is in effect to be trapped in pure being, entirely surrounded by the nightmare world of the *il y a*. Is there anything in Weil that might correspond to the *il y a*? What comes closest must be the pure absence of Good she calls the *moral void*, the absence that allows there to *be* anything at all. In a sense, to speak mythically, the *il y a* is the ‘raw material’, the pure withdrawal of Good, out of which God created the world. The extreme concentrationary experience would be that of finding oneself cast back into this primeval fog, a non-world drained of everything that makes the world meaningful, trapped in a homogeneity uninterrupted by the slightest difference. Of course, to *experience* anything is already to be minimally freed from this homogeneity. There is no pure experience of the *il y a*. Might the Muselmänner have approached

the boundaries of human experience in this way? Since we do not have their testimony—since the *il y a* is precisely what is beyond testimony—one can only speculate.

What is missing in the concentrationary universe, therefore, is the ‘space’ required for the very proximity of the neighbor. This culminates in the extreme isolation of the Muselmänner. But is it possible for *proximity* itself to vanish? Since proximity is the most basic relationship to the other, what can this mean except that I have no relationship at all to the other as other, only a ‘relationship’ to him or her as a being like any other being. In that case, the space in which one finds the ‘other’ would truly be that of physical space. We have argued all along that even this ‘relationship’ with a being—an artificial relationship, in the root sense of being an *artifact* human beings create for themselves, as part of their worldmaking—is dependent on the ethical relationship of responsibility *to* and *for* the other. In some sense, therefore, it must be proximity itself that makes possible the loss of proximity, since there is no experience without proximity.

As other, my neighbor is beyond all comprehension, beyond all grasping by consciousness, absolutely impossible to thematize without leaving out everything important, namely the other’s absolute difference from a being. This unconditional requirement is precisely what makes him or her *other*. Hence my relationship to him cannot, without denying his otherness, be a relationship to a *being* which just happens to have the attribute ‘human’. It is certainly possible to have such a relationship to the ‘neighbor’, but this would be only one step away from completely dehumanizing him. For the final step, it would only be necessary to drop the insincere designation ‘human’ and substitute a synonym for ‘object’ that explicitly reduces the neighbor to one’s thematization of him. The concentrationary universe may be defined as the environment in which everything without exception is available for reduction to someone’s theme. In other words, as Arendt puts it in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, it is where “everything is possible.” What is not thematized specifically to be destroyed would be preserved only because, for the time being, it proved useful in the dominating totality to thematize it for some other purpose. Part of the horror

of the concentrationary universe seems to have been that one could never be certain whether X would still be X tomorrow, or would have become (officially) Y.⁶⁶⁹

Vocative space does not survive thematization. “When [the approach] becomes conscious, that is, thematized,” Levinas observes, “the indifferent approach destroys this kinship [i.e. “the non-indifference or fraternity of proximity”], like a caress surprising itself to be a palpation, or recovering possession of oneself” (OB 82). Vocative space must remain a mystery, the object of a desire that is never completely satisfied, for it does not have its meaning in satisfaction but in *fraternity*. “This being caught up in fraternity which proximity is we call signifyingness,” a signifying that signifies nothing but itself (OB 83). Hence everything one says about it is a betrayal. The phenomenologist can speak of vocative space only indirectly, perhaps employing a decreative hermeneutics interpreting its potential for being destroyed, but in any case approaching it only through attention to one’s response-ability to the neighbor who is present within its current boundaries, insofar as the other’s needs become evident. Analogously to traditional phenomenology, it is a matter of *seeing*, but where the necessary optics is ethical. In vocative space, the other signifies as other solely in my *response*, never as a theme. If I lose the ability to respond, then the other must vanish from my world, leaving nothing behind but Being. Things would only *be*; there would be nothing left that called for a response. We cannot rule out the possibility that under the appropriate circumstances, such a loss could result from the systematic attempt to bring all things under the dominance of a controlling theme. This could happen not only at Auschwitz but also in an Orwellian society in which it was considered natural to expect anything of value to be capable of being *said*, of being expressed in the current newspeak. Under these circumstances, amounting to a *hegemony of the said*, one would be ashamed *not to know*: not to know what is valuable, or not to know how to express oneself about the valuable. Anyone who claimed that they did not *need* to know how to express the value of certain things—who

⁶⁶⁹ One thinks of Orwell’s *1984*—and the present day crisis in politics of the loss of respect for the truth.

claimed, for example, that they could love those things without knowing even whether they existed, much less how to make them into an object of conversation—at best would be labeled as an eccentric, and at worst classified either as mentally ill or as an enemy of public tranquility. It is precisely this refusal of thematization that witnesses to the reality of vocative space.

In any case, at its own pre-conscious level, the proximity measured by vocative space is intrinsically averse to tranquility. Proximity signifies a prior *restlessness* which is not anxious for itself but “goes toward” the other, “forgets reciprocity” in its unconditional fraternity with the neighbor, is unwavering in its “non-indifference.” But if even so basic a restlessness is vulnerable despite its being responsible for the passage of time, it is little wonder that one’s very consciousness of time suffers in the concentrationary universe.⁶⁷⁰ Vocative space accordingly has a temporal counterpart, which we will consider in a moment. It is, of course, diachronic temporality.

In vocative space, the fraternity mentioned above extends even to inanimate objects. Proximity to anything, even in a spatial sense, relies on others having taught one how to distinguish *this* from *that*, what is *close* from what is *far away*, in every sense of these words (OB 82-83). The world, as learned from the other, itself becomes something experienced as ‘other’, even to the extent that it can seem benign or threatening in a *personal* way. This must be the reason that we find it so easy as children to personify *things*, and later do so occasionally as adults—giving otherwise lifeless objects names, sometimes addressing them out loud as though they were alive.⁶⁷¹ It seems that even an inanimate object can come to have something like a face. By contrast, a world in which one had lost all sense of proximity would be uniformly faceless—once again, the image of the *il y a*. Such is perhaps the inert world of the chronically depressed: a world devoid of fraternity.

⁶⁷⁰ On the effects of the concentration camp environment on one’s sense of time, see Sofsky 1997, 82-93, and Elisabeth Weber’s essay in Peperzak 1995, 69-76.

⁶⁷¹ Cf. Winnicott on the “transitional object,” which forms a bridge from the infant’s first other, his mother, to the outside world.

Thus proximity signifies a relation not only to the other but to beings—perhaps the primordial relation—a relation other than ontological. However justly Heidegger may have deplored the loss in the West of any sense of the Being of beings, that loss cannot compare to the loss of proximity that, unlike the loss of the meaning of Being which still leaves beings meaningful in some sense, would drain absolutely everything of all meaning whatsoever. The loss of the meaning of Being is still only the loss of one particular theme, and even if Heidegger were right that it is the most important theme, losing contact with the other means the loss of all themes—or else, perhaps, suffocation by a single all-pervasive thematization. One could not appreciate the meaning of Being in a world without others.

Just as proximity cannot be contained by any thematization, so vocative space extends ‘further’ than any physical space: from ‘hither’ to ‘beyond’.

Proximity is signification not because it would be the aim of any theme, the need, fulfilled or on the point of being satisfied, of another being. The-one-for-the-other in proximity does not form an ontological conjunction of satisfaction. The capacity of being, and of consciousness, its correlate, is insufficient to contain the plot which forms in the face of another, trace of an immemorial past, arousing a responsibility that comes from the hither side [*d'en deçà*] and goes beyond [*au-delà*] what abides in the suspending of an époque.⁶⁷²

Consciousness is incapable of representing either the other or the other's command. One does not have the option of figuring these out first, in order to apply one's knowledge to an understanding that would lead to action, much less to the construction of an ideological system whose

⁶⁷² OB 97, translation modified. “*La capacité de l'être*—et de la conscience, son corrélat—est insuffisante pour contenir l'intrigue qui se noue dans le visage d'Autrui, trace d'un passé immémorial, suscitant une responsabilité qui vient d'en deçà et va au-delà de ce qui tient dans le suspens d'une époque. ...” (AE 123).

concentratory logic would embrace everything—thereby failing to allow room for the other.⁶⁷³ Since the movement of proximity is fundamentally incompatible with every form of total domination, the dominant power is all too likely to erode or even destroy it without knowing what it is destroying. There is no word for what one approaches in proximity, in the vocative space of *a deçà et au-delà*, for it is not a being. Neither being nor non-being, Levinas calls it “an excluded middle”.⁶⁷⁴

“Goes beyond”—that is already to make a concession to ontological and theoretical language, as though the *beyond* were still a term, an entity, a mode of being, or the negative counterpart of all that. An approach is not a representation, however de-theoreticized its intentionality would be, of a being beyond being. Its diachrony is not an insufficiency of an intuition. The trace of a past in a face is not the absence of a yet non-revealed, but the anarchy of what has never been present, of an infinite which commands in the face of the other, and which, like an excluded middle, could not be aimed at. (OB 96-97)

The terms *approach* and *goes beyond* are concessions not only to spatial metaphors, but also to everyday *temporal* language, with its thematization of time as linear. The linear representation of time as past-present-future cannot describe the ethical encounter with the other, since linear time is the temporality of the totalizing work of consciousness and the purpose of consciousness (which is virtually equivalent to time-consciousness) is to mitigate the shock of alterity. Thus, a linearly temporal perspective, insofar as it dominates, cannot but deaden the call of one’s obligation to the neighbor. Up to a point, some tempering of the call is of course necessary, for one cannot respond to the other if there is not at least some distance, temporal and spatial,

⁶⁷³ Arendt 1994, 473. The word ideology occurs not at all in TI, but several times in OB (45, 190n32, 58, 93, 96, 132, 136, 152, 178), usually in contrast with “truth” and “science.”

⁶⁷⁴ See Chapter 2, pp. 130.

between oneself and one's neighbor. Thus we represent our responsibilities as obligations strung out along a stretch of time extending into the future; we space them apart and place a distance between them and the present. On a social level, we organize history itself into a chronology that has meaning in terms of our long-term hopes and ambitions, often based on a single controlling idea—a system of production (capitalism or Marxism, for example) or the evolution of a master race (National Socialism) or anticipation of a future triumph of some kind (religious, political, or technological). People form themselves into collectivities based on such ideologies. The problem with this, Weil notes, is that unlike an individual, and whatever the justice of the cause it pursues, a collectivity has no obligations to others (NR 4). Only an individual can relate to the other as neighbor to neighbor. The formation of a collectivity is consequently often the first step towards deadening human response to those who are vulnerable. In the concentrationary universe, where the collectivity becomes absolutely dominating, this leads to the situation in which the only vulnerability recognized is one's own vulnerability to collective domination. Ultimately one's neighbor comes to be thought of as a representative of the collective, merely another isolated victim like oneself.⁶⁷⁵

In contrast to this, *approaching* the neighbor for Levinas means encountering him as non-representable, hence as precisely *not* defined by a location in space-time, however relevant his physical location and the history of his actions may be in deciding how one is to act in his presence. Corresponding to the paradox of vocative space—"the more I respond the more I am responsible; the more I approach the neighbor with whom I am burdened the further away I am"⁶⁷⁶—there is a temporal paradox: the more time I give the neighbor, the more the neighbor interrupts my time. The other's time can never be integrated with my time but instead continually intersects it as "always 'already in the past' behind which the present delays," always "disturbing

⁶⁷⁵ See Levinas, "Reflections on the Philosophy of Hitlerism," translated by Seán Hand, *Critical Inquiry* 17 (August 1990), 63-71.

⁶⁷⁶ OB 93, translation altered. "Plus je réponds et plus je suis responsable; plus j'approche du prochain dont j'ai la charge et plus je suis loin" (AE 119).

the present” (OB 100) from behind. In other words, “the approach is a non-synchronizable diachrony” (OB 93), a refusal of the other to be integrated without remainder into my personal time and space. It therefore seems that one encounters the other in two times and two spaces: the space-time of consciousness and a diachronic-vocative time-space, traces of which continually disturb one’s repose in space-time.⁶⁷⁷ It is Levinas’s innovative contention that diachronic-vocative time-space is the more primordial of the two, but also the more vulnerable. In the extreme totalization of total domination, it is vocative space, not consciousness of space-time, that disappears first. This seems to have been the implied goal of the concentration camps, with their brutal use of time (fragmentation, unpredictability) and space (overcrowding, constant surveillance) for the purpose of destroying the possibility of social or ethical relations between inmates. In the case of the Muselmänner—perhaps the majority of inmates—the effort to bring this about can easily appear from outside observation to have been a success.

Total domination may be defined as the attempt to destroy vocative space with a view to turning every other into the same, a unit or *thing* defined solely by its space-time coordinates and function in society—that is, by its place in the world insofar as this is defined by whatever thematization or ideology happens to be dominant. The treatment of the Muselmänner by their fellow inmates suggests that where this destruction is seen outwardly to have succeeded, the victims’ isolation from others becomes nearly total, in the sense that even their fellow inmates, themselves potential victims of the very same destruction, treat the Muselmänner as the non-entities that total domination considers them to be. Thus Arendt remarks on the profound loneliness which is engineered into all totalitarian societies. It is self-perpetuating: living in isolation from others accentuates one’s tendency to define one’s neighbors by the social roles instilled by the dominating ideology. Hence the oppressed gradually adopt the worldview of their

⁶⁷⁷ Cf. OB 85: “the proximity of me with the other is in two times, and thus is a transcendence.”

oppressors. When vocative space evaporates, so does the boundary between the self and the powers of totalization.

As a result, the other is extremely vulnerable to the integration of her world into the worldview of a dominant collective. This is the great danger of the concentrationary universe. One becomes a part of it before one knows it. If total integration of human beings into a human-made collectivity is possible—and since the Shoah, there is little reason to doubt it—it must result, paradoxically, in the very demise of the human. Total integration—worldmaking or thematization carried to the extreme of becoming philosophically irreducible—is the essence or goal of total domination.

Can we learn to “read” the world in a way that mitigates the totalizing effect of consciousness, notwithstanding the continual need for everyday totalizing? If we can, then the reading must somehow be sensitive to the otherness of the other notwithstanding that all reading is initially a conscious, worldmaking activity that effaces alterity. From a philosophical standpoint, this was the problem Chapter 4 addressed through decreative phenomenology. The key there was the phenomenologist’s conscious ethical commitment to a certain, self-abnegating approach to whatever ‘truth’ was to be revealed phenomenologically. It should be emphasized once again that decreative phenomenology entails a decreative hermeneutics: the ‘truth’ uncovered is never an absolute truth, nor even truth in the Husserlian/Cartesian sense of what becomes clear when one eliminates from consideration everything but what presents itself to the senses at the moment. It is a truth contingent on how the phenomenologist understands herself, and this in turn depends on social and political factors that could have been otherwise than they were, but that need to be taken into account because of the roles they continue to play. In the next section, we will see how this fact suggests that decreative phenomenology, unlike the more traditional varieties, has an affinity with projects such as Foucault’s which seek to analyze how forces of domination work on individuals.

Against the threat of total domination, the present-day task of philosophy might be defined as the relentless reduction, to its ethical roots, of every thematization that gives the slightest hint of extending to total domination.⁶⁷⁸ More generally, a phenomenology dedicated to such a reduction would have the task of revealing what might be called the *ethical cost* of any given thematization, no matter how benign on the surface. Stated less pessimistically, it would reveal the potential for a positive, ethical subversion of the *same* in every (necessarily already thematized) encounter with the *other*. How this might be accomplished in terms of the social and political factors mentioned in the previous paragraph, and its relevance to the problem of the concentrationary universe, will be the subject of the final section of this chapter.

Toward the end of her essay on liberty and oppression, Weil makes a recommendation bearing a resemblance, as far as it goes, to the phenomenological project I have outlined just now. At first it appears to sound a note that may strike many readers as irresponsibly quietist, given that she has previously expressed a belief that total domination—in her words, the power of the collectivity—can be avoided, thus promising a future “less inhuman according as the individual ability to think and act is greater,” therefore a future worth working toward. But then she writes:

Given that once we have fully realized our almost complete powerlessness in regard to present day ills we are at any rate relieved of the duty of concerning ourselves with the present state of things, apart from those moments when we feel its direct impact, what nobler task could we assume than that of preparing for such a future in a methodical way by devoting ourselves to drawing up an inventory of modern civilization? (OL 115-16)

What does Weil mean by an inventory of modern civilization? She first characterizes it in general terms as a task of “moral loneliness,” likely only to produce for the individual who undertakes it

⁶⁷⁸ On the reduction, see Chapter 4.

the misunderstanding and hostility of those around him who seem to have made their peace with the system—or, conversely, of those who believe the system needs to be actively resisted at every turn. Weil then outlines, however briefly, what such an inventory would involve:

It would seem to be a question of separating, in present-day civilization, what belongs of right to man, considered as an individual, and what is of a nature to place weapons in the hands of the collectivity for use against him, whilst at the same time trying to discover the means whereby the former elements may be developed at the expense of the latter. (OL 116)

By “man considered as an individual” Weil means, in essence, human Being fundamentally characterized by the ability to be decreated: essentially what Levinas means by the ethical subject. The collectivity to which she refers is the concentrationary universe of present-day industrial society.⁶⁷⁹ The ethical cost of a thematization is the measure of its usefulness as a weapon in the hands of totalitarian domination.

What is required for such an appraisal, the present work has argued, is a *decreative* phenomenological reduction: the abdication of the conscious self to whatever degree is necessary to reveal the *other* whom consciousness continually betrays. Theoretically, every thematization, every attempt to integrate alterity into a totality—thus allowing one to feel more at ease with it while at the same time leaving one more susceptible to processes of totalization—can be reduced phenomenologically, provided that one has not oneself become so absorbed by the totality that one loses one’s *proximity* to the other. Since the reduction works against the grain of thematization, it will likely reduce one’s ease with the world as well—that is, with society as it presently exists, especially if it is true that this society bears a strong resemblance to the

⁶⁷⁹ Weil describes the latter in some detail in *The Need for Roots*, NR 45-78. She does not use the phrase “concentrationary universe,” of course; it was introduced three years after she died.

concentratory universe. Such a reduction would obviously be anathema to the collectivity that maintains the concentratory status quo. But already, on a microscale, reduction of ease with the world is a necessary prerequisite to approaching the other. It is the essence of human subjectivity. In the next section, we see how this fact can be used to insure that one always has a defense against domination, provided one is not the victim of extreme affliction.

7.8 **Problematizing the Concentratory Universe**

From a practical point of view, and bearing in mind the forces of oppression that exist in this world, can Levinas's subject, a product of responsibility and substitution, always find the freedom to live for-the-other? Granted that living for-the-other is not a choice one makes, but the meaning of one's subjectivity, have we not discovered that there are situations, admittedly extreme, that threaten the very existence of the subject? One's subjectivity is by no means a given—it is no less vulnerable than anything else human—hence even the freedom to be-for-the-other is far from assured. Both freedom and subjectivity are threatened in the concentratory universe.

Critics of Michel Foucault often confront him with a question that in some respects appears to be similar: how does Foucault's subject, to a great extent the product of power relations beyond its control, have the freedom to "live the truth," as Foucault recommended in his final lecture courses at the Collège de France in the 1980s? More generally, how can it free itself from some (but not all) of the power relations that inevitably make it what it is, in order to remake itself into something else? It should be emphasized that what Foucault calls *power* is, very broadly, an ingredient of all human relations, and that for Foucault, the mere fact that one is a product of power relations by no means precludes freedom. To the contrary, he will claim that "power is exercised only over free subjects, and only insofar as they are 'free'," where freedom simply means that the subject is "faced with a field of possibilities in which ... several ways of reacting

and modes of behavior are possible.”⁶⁸⁰ Only when this field of possibilities disappears, when one is no longer a free participant of power relations, does one become a slave. Nonetheless, if some forms of power are violent by nature (as Foucault can hardly deny), and if in the concentrationary universe, by definition, violence against the other is routine, without limit, and often too subtle to arouse anyone’s suspicion, what guarantee is there that at any given moment one has the freedom to live the truth? The question is particularly relevant if it is true that in our day the concentrationary universe has taken on forms much harder to identify than the notorious examples of the mid-twentieth century, the Nazi concentration camp and the Soviet Gulag.

I do not overlook the fact that Levinas and Foucault mean very different things by the ‘subject’. Levinas’s ethical subject is not the social and political subject Foucault endeavors to track through history by analyzing the development of ideas about specific practices and institutions, such as the treatment of mental illness or methods of punishment. Foucault had little interest in the phenomenological approach, and would likely have considered the ‘foundational’ questions that motivated Levinas irrelevantly ‘metaphysical’. But does this mean that Levinas’s ethical metaphysics has no application to what Foucault was trying to do, not even to the project that occupied him at the end of his life, the concern for what he called “care of the self”? Perhaps Weil can provide a bridge between these two very different itineraries. Like Foucault, Weil displayed an explicit preference for social and political questions of freedom and obligation over abstract philosophical problems, but over time she came to ground this work on a religious philosophy that we have seen has unmistakable parallels with Levinas’s phenomenological approach.⁶⁸¹

⁶⁸⁰ “The Subject and Power” (1982), in Foucault 1997b, 342.

⁶⁸¹ This is not to say that Levinas was not motivated by political questions as well. He certainly was. It is just that in his work they tend to be less explicit because he is working on them from the hither side.

For Weil, power is a matter of personal responsibility closely tied to attention.⁶⁸² So much is this the case, that for her whatever power we possess amounts only to chance ‘powers’ granted us by Necessity’s impersonal laws, which we do not exercise but only obey, combined with the capability or ‘power’ to read the resulting effects in a way that renounces self-interest. All other so-called human powers are illusions:

We need to distinguish between two powers, that of finding ourselves or not in a given situation (e.g. standing before a machine, in a prison, with a knife at our throat, or in our hand, with or without money in our pocket, etc.) which depends on us in a certain measure, but only in a certain measure; and that of, when actually in a given situation, reading in such a way or in such another way. (N 24)

According to Weil, “*man has no power whatever, and yet he does have a responsibility*. The future corresponds to responsibility, the past to powerlessness. And all that which is to come will become the past” (N 97, emphasis in the original). Power and knowledge are a “double temptation,” she says, “a degraded image of good” even though the good, in the form of acceptance of reality, is power and knowledge in a limited Baconian sense (N 109). Powerlessness before an unchangeable past, it should also be noted, is a recurring motif in the testimonies of survivors of the Shoah.

Similarly, Levinas most often gives the word ‘power’ a negative connotation. He will say, for example, that the other’s claim on me is the “end to power and emprise” (TI 50), meaning that I am no longer free to go on enjoying the world, exercising my abilities and satisfying my desires without concern for the other. Nonetheless, one can imagine Levinas agreeing that it is therefore

⁶⁸² Weil normally uses the word power for the illusory attribute of the individual person. Force, on the other hand, usually refers to the energy or “gravity” of Necessity, which each individual always necessarily obeys.

the other who has the real ‘power’ over me, continually and invariably forcing me into the ethical relation of response-ability.

Indeed, Levinas in effect problematizes Foucault’s question of how one can live the truth when he considers human freedom to be a product of the unique ‘power relation’ (not an expression he would use, of course) that he calls substitution. In substitution one is passive with a passivity more profound and infinitely weightier in its consequences than the passivity of submission to domination or even to the laws of nature, not to mention obedience to societal norms. Levinas calls it “a passivity more passive than the passivity of matter” (OB 113-14), claiming that only a passivity this extreme makes freedom possible—even so little freedom as is necessary for ordinary communication with others. Communication is the subject of the penultimate section of the central chapter on “Substitution” in *Otherwise Than Being* (OB 118-21). What Levinas says there seems particularly relevant to Foucault’s notion of truthful speaking, which he calls *parrhēsia*, an idea he later expanded into that of truthful living.

Interpersonal communication is often described as an active transfer of thought from ‘inside’ a speaker’s mind to a listener ‘outside’, its uncertainty presumably due to the possibility that, for whatever reason, the listener will fail to receive the thought the speaker wishes to convey. In opposition to this idea, Levinas insists that communication could not begin at all were there not already a deeper connection between me and my interlocutor, a “solidarity” based on my responsibility for him or her that originates in a prior transfer of sensibility or sensitivity (*sensibilité*) that always already occurs *from the other to me*: “Communication would be impossible if it should have to begin in the ego, a free subject,” since, to the ego, every other ego is seen as a “limitation” (OB 119), an alter ego, and not an other who is brother or sister.⁶⁸³ To be open to the other is to be already responsive: *response-able*. Openness to the other, as Levinas means it, is not compatible with being “on the watch for recognition,” even if it is only the

⁶⁸³ See Levinas’s discussion of “fraternity” in OB 82-83.

recognition that one's communication has been understood—for comprehension (*grasping* what has been said), unlike openness, is a matter of cognition. In order for communication to be the work of responsibility and hence of expiation, it must *start with* the other, in a “radical reversal, from cognition to solidarity” (OB 119). If the goal were only the certainty of reception, a perfect transfer of content from monad to monad, then communication would deny the other's transcendence and with it the possibility of real solidarity in proximity. For this reason *all* speech, on Levinas's view, is *essentially* “antithetical to certainty” (OB 120). This is not because the speaker is unsure of the truth of what he says—that the truthful speaker or *parrhēsiast* believes he speaks the truth goes without saying—nor is it simply because his message is of a nature that it is likely to be misunderstood.⁶⁸⁴ Prior to all such considerations, it is simply because he is speaking to another *person*, the always enigmatic other, that human communication invariably remains uncertain—in order that it can be solidarity. Communication that ignores the ultimate impossibility of certainty necessarily totalizes the other, denies their alterity, and fails to be a true community between subjects.⁶⁸⁵

True speech is therefore speech that does not seek recognition but tries only to recognize—that is, respond to—the other as truly other. For Levinas, were he to use the word,⁶⁸⁶ *parrhēsia* as truthful speaking would derive whatever ethical significance it has from the fact that it requires unconditional respect for the listener's alterity. *Parrhēsia* would be a form of *self-abdication* placing a truthful *approach* to the other (in Levinas's sense of approach) above self-interest. It would be the outward manifestation of substitution expressed at the level of conscious human

⁶⁸⁴ As Foucault points out (Foucault 1985b, 4), the Greeks were unfamiliar with the question of how one can know that a speaker possesses the truth—a question quite natural to us. For the Greeks it was enough to know that the speaker was a noble and virtuous man in order to be certain that his truth claims were *in fact true*. It is as though ‘true’ meant solely ‘consistent with the ideals of the virtuous man.’

⁶⁸⁵ That “recognition” in the sense meant here, a desire for certainty, is not of *primary* importance does not mean that communication is not motivated by a prior intent to succeed, anticipating the other's reception of *what* one aims with forethought to communicate, hoping they will interpret it in a way that keeps the conversation going. But this *what* is always secondary to the *whom* one addresses, the addressee whom one must first recognize *as other* in order to do the most basic justice by them in one's communication.

⁶⁸⁶ To my knowledge, the word itself occurs nowhere in Levinas's works.

interaction, apart from whatever message one intended to convey. Thus the risk of *parrhēsia* is not merely the fear that the powerful ruler, not liking the message, may retaliate against the messenger, according to the ancient tradition, but the danger that *parrhēsia* will vanish as a possibility because in speaking to the other person one has acquired the habit of speaking as though to an alter ego or even an object. The opposite of this would clearly be to give the other person one's self-abdicating attention in Weil's sense.

Towards the end of his life, Foucault generalized the problem of *parrhēsia* to that of truthful living, something he considered properly a matter of self-creation. The problem now became how one *lives with* domination in all of its guises. In *The Use of Pleasure*, Foucault defines *subjectivation* (sometimes translated 'subjectification' or 'subjectivization') as "the way in which the individual establishes his relation to [a moral or societal] rule and recognizes himself as obligated to put it into practice"⁶⁸⁷—or perhaps recognizes himself as *not* obligated, in the case of resistance to domination. Foucault was mainly interested in whatever creative possibilities subjectivation had to offer. To become conscious of opportunities for self-fashioning, to meet the challenge of finding a way to 'be oneself' even while under the influence of practices of discipline or normalization one has not chosen, is to *problematize* one's social situation: to make 'who one is' and 'who one could be' a problem. By examining the "history of thought," Foucault hoped to "define the conditions in which human beings 'problematize' what they are, what they do, and the world in which they live" with respect to such 'problems' as sexuality, guilt, and confession, which develop out of the disciplinary practices established by sources of power such as medicine, government, and the church.⁶⁸⁸ The conditions in which human beings problematize their lives would be "linked to a group of practices" or "arts of existence" comprising "intentional and voluntary actions by which men not only set themselves rules of conduct but also seek to transform themselves, to change themselves in their singular being, and to make their life into an

⁶⁸⁷ Foucault 1985a, 27.

⁶⁸⁸ Foucault 1985a, 10.

oeuvre that carries certain aesthetic values and meets certain stylistic criteria.”⁶⁸⁹ Foucault traces this aesthetic goal back to antiquity, but unlike the ancient Greeks, he did not consider it a task only for a select few.⁶⁹⁰ All of us continually ‘subjectivize’ the moral obligations society places upon us, often in ways we copy from other people or from the media, although we tend to add our own style with varying degrees of success and originality.⁶⁹¹ Details of personal style or creativity are among the things that characteristically make otherwise ordinary incidents in the lives of others interesting—and occasionally profoundly illuminating. Human beings seem to be inherently creative. The question is whether they have the freedom to use their creativity beyond whatever limits or standards have been set by the dominant collectivity.

In the 1980s, Foucault had less to say about the power relations people are subject to than about ways they might have of living creatively. This has led to the objection that if creative subjectivation must work on the “ethical substance” supplied by power relations, it is unclear how it gains the distance from the disciplinary practices instituted by these powers that would be necessary in order to make free use of them.⁶⁹² If the subject is *already* the product of the very same power relations it needs to resist, there does not seem to be a foothold from which he or she can stand against domination. Either one uncovers the forces of subjection that make the subject possible, leaving unexplained how the subject can resist them if and when they become dominating, or else one explains subjectivity as the result of methods of subjectivation freely

⁶⁸⁹ Foucault 1985a, 10-11.

⁶⁹⁰ In a late interview he lamented that “in our society, art has become something that is related only to objects and not to individuals or to life” (Foucault 1997a, 261), and that cultural history has steered our patterns of thinking about art in the direction of relegating it to the special province of “artists.” Or it has channeled it in directions that assume that self-creation must be founded on some objective notion of a ‘true self’, which is not at all what Foucault means, as he explains in the same interview.

⁶⁹¹ On how people use patterns of behavior they find represented on television for essentially this purpose, thus policing themselves to conform to a standard of social acceptability, see the now classic paper by Mark Crispin Miller, “Big Brother Is You, Watching,” in *The Georgia Review* 38(4) (Winter 1984), 695-719.

⁶⁹² Foucault 1997a, 263-4. See, for example, Visker 1995.

borrowed from outside the subject, leaving unresolved the question whether these methods are in fact imposed as subjection.⁶⁹³

The objection assumes that the only ethical substance one has to work with are power relations on the social level. For Foucault, who seems to have had no use for the concept of transcendence, the social level is all there is, and he clearly believes that one needs to face this down-to-earth truth squarely. But we have discovered in the course of the present work that for Levinas and Weil, transcendence with respect to the *other* is already emphatically down to earth. Levinas argues that subjectivity is first of all a product of substitution, and substitution might be described in Foucault's language as an *originary* form of subjection, a form of subjection more basic than all other forms and therefore fundamentally different from the varieties Foucault analyzes. It is the same extreme sensitivity to others that both makes human beings substitutable for one another and leaves them vulnerable to subjection on the social and political level. Substitution is not the result of conscious practices or techniques developed by, and applied through, relations of power on a socio-political scale, which produce subjection, hence it would not count as subjection in Foucault's strict sense. Instead it underlies these power relations, and all human relations, but with an effect on the formation of the subject very similar to subjection in that (1) its source, the encounter with the other, is *exterior* to the self, (2) it arrives *unbidden*, and (3) it forces the self to *problematize* a response. As the origin of the subject's freedom, on the other hand, substitution makes possible the subject's ability to be creative, opening up space within oneself for the other, and hence grounds all forms of subjectivation, whatever type of subjection is confronted short of what Weil calls extreme affliction, which she describes as the near or total destruction of the human soul with its ability to give birth to something new. Simply in being a subject, one achieves a form of subjectivation in substituting for the other, for in substitution one acts

⁶⁹³ As Visker expresses it: "either one would have to assert against the Foucault of volumes two and three [of *The History of Sexuality*] that subjectivization entails no experience of oneself as *practical-ethical subject*, but leads only to a non-ethical compliance with obligations, or to see this 'subjection' as a necessary condition of the existence of something like a practical subjectivity and one then forfeits all grounds for contesting it" (Visker 1995, 98).

creatively—that is, against the grain of the ‘same’—in responding to the other. All action based on substitution for the other is fundamentally self-transforming—that is, self-*creating*. Finally, since the object of originary subjection is just the ego that enjoys, it is unnecessary that originary subjection entail already an “experience of oneself as practical-ethical subject”⁶⁹⁴—for the same reason that the mere presence of another person entails no obvious and inevitable conscious *experience* of a call to responsibility. The other has this power over me prior to my being conscious of it, for it is the power to shape the meaning of my life, and in particular of my consciousness, as fundamentally ethical, responsive to the other. Hence what I am calling originary subjection is not dependent on conscious thought, but rather is its very source.

Substitution as fundamental subjection solves a problem Foucault seems to have with regard to the *asymmetry* of power relations. Foucault maintains that power relations are found “in every social field” and that there are desirable as well as undesirable power relations.⁶⁹⁵ But if there is no avoiding the basic fact that any power relation, in order to be recognized as such, involves someone having a certain degree of control over someone else, and if all power relations are unavoidably asymmetric, this makes it awkward to condemn a given power relation as domination only because one side exercises some form of control over the other. Foucault tries to avoid this problem by associating domination with power relations that become “fixed.” Power relations become fixed “when stable mechanisms replace the free play of antagonistic reactions”⁶⁹⁶ experienced, for example, in the constructive confrontation of opposing points of view. Critics reasonably wonder on what basis one has the freedom to step back from those power relations that are becoming fixed in order to resist them, when chances are that these are the very same power relations one has come to depend on for who one is, perhaps unknowingly,

⁶⁹⁴ Visker 1995, 98.

⁶⁹⁵ Foucault 1997a, 292; see also Foucault 1997b, 345.

⁶⁹⁶ Foucault 1997b, 346-47.

and for that very reason shares with a great many of the people around one.⁶⁹⁷ *Fixed* power relations, in other words, would be precisely the ones most likely to become invisible.

For Levinas, however, human freedom has its origin at a much deeper level than that of everyday power relations. In direct contrast to Foucault, freedom presupposes submission to the other's good: I am free insofar, and only insofar as I recognize the 'power' the other has to make me responsible. An 'answer' to the criticism against Foucault, then, is to suggest that the goal of *askēsis*, the practice of self-creation, is originally that of making room in one's worldview for the *other's* self-creation without interference from one's own. The basis for this otherwise inexplicable act of generosity (TI 76) would be the desire for the other that motivates time-consciousness. In affirming the other, one affirms the truth of one's substitution, and therefore of oneself as responsible, something it would seem one is always free to do (provided one is not the victim of extreme affliction) since it is the basis of consciousness itself. The option of turning the other's good into one's own at the social level of daily interaction cannot be co-opted by power relations of domination and refashioned into yet another form of cleverly disguised normalization.⁶⁹⁸ It is *transcendent* in the only important sense of the word for Levinas: as aiming *beyond the self towards the other*. As we will see in a moment, this answer would not satisfy Foucault for a variety of reasons, but if he does not explicitly recognize the transcendence of the other, he might nonetheless agree that the other represents an ultimate mystery, which one might argue is yet another way of saying the same thing. The problem may be that Foucault is still too much under the influence of a Heidegger for whom being-in-the world is primarily a matter of "dealings" (*Umgang*, SZ 66-67) with *things*.⁶⁹⁹

⁶⁹⁷ See Visker 1995, 102ff.

⁶⁹⁸ See Dreyfus and Rabinow, *Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), 201.

⁶⁹⁹ See Rayner, T. *Foucault's Heidegger: Philosophy and Transformative Experience* (London: Continuum, 2007), especially 4, 12.

Consciously living the truth of one's originary subjection—that is, recognizing one's responsibility to the other as a being who is absolutely enigmatic—would therefore comprise *parrhēsia* in its purest, most basic form. Resistance now becomes: working not for one's own self-fulfillment in spite of the system, but for the other's, that is, for justice. From this point of view, living the truth *becomes* self-transcendence. Foucault's political activism on behalf of the oppressed would seem to prove that something like this was *in effect* the essence of his idea of what resistance to domination should be.

It would still be the case that, in Foucault's words, "extensive work by the self on the self is required,"⁷⁰⁰ but since it would be *against* the self (or the *I*) rather than *for* it, the work we have described above seems entirely against the grain of Foucault's approach. Foucault could not be further from Levinas's main idea when he states that "care for others should not be put before the care of oneself. The care of the self is ethically prior in that the relationship with oneself is ontologically prior."⁷⁰¹ Here ethics is clearly subordinated to ontology. Foucault would probably classify Levinas's philosophy as another "theory of the subject" which he would feel the need to reject along with all such theories on the principle of aiming for something more basic: the historical study of how human beings problematize the question of who and what they are, not excluding an account of how they come historically to have certain theories about the 'subject'. Here, where Levinas and Foucault seem furthest apart, is where I think Weil might conceivably provide a bridge. Not necessarily a reconciliation; just a bridge connecting one side of the stream with the other, as it were.

Weil, of course, has a lot to say about freedom and oppression—but unlike Levinas, and very much like Foucault, a lot of what she says is explicitly political or historical.⁷⁰² At the heart of all

⁷⁰⁰ Foucault 1997a, 286.

⁷⁰¹ Foucault 1997a, 287.

⁷⁰² This is not to say, of course, that Weil's knowledge or use of history, often eccentric and tendentious, was above criticism. Nor, as we noted earlier, is it to ignore important underlying political themes in Levinas.

oppression, according to Weil, is the drive for power. She defines power, more narrowly than Foucault or Levinas, as anything that enables a person to do more than one single individual can do. Power therefore requires the cooperation of others, hence must often be preserved by force, with the result that cooperation frequently disintegrates into unwilling servitude. Power always breeds the desire for more power, not only in the master but also in the mastered, who find it necessary to defend themselves against the escalation of power from which they suffer (OL 62-63). In interpersonal relations involving only two (or perhaps a few) persons, Weil claims that it is still possible, however difficult, to allow reason the upper hand and moderate the drive for power. Where larger groups of people are involved, reason seems inevitably to give way to expedience. The real problem, she says, is not personal self-interest alone, but a self-interest that requires the exploitation of others. For Weil, power always involves exploiter and exploited. Foucault, on the other hand, emphasizes the idea of power *relations*, and although he admits that in every power relation “one person tries to control the conduct of the other,” the relations he has in mind are “mobile, reversible, and unstable.”⁷⁰³ Otherwise they cannot be relations between free individuals. One has only to read Weil’s essay on the Iliad, however, to see that she, too, is much more interested in the *relations* between exploiter and exploited than in any idea of power understood as something reified that one person possesses at the expense of another. Repeatedly she shows how both sides in the conflict take on identical roles in turn, caught up in the same irresistible, recurring, self-destructive set of power relations. Power is never something one possesses so much as a label one attaches to certain relations of which one becomes conscious only once one is entangled in them. The only difference from moment to moment is who plays which part, something determined by forces beyond our control (N 24). For Weil, it is solely Necessity that in the end possesses any real power, the power of the force of “gravity”.

⁷⁰³ Foucault 1997a, 292.

As we have noted often before, to see the reality of any particular thing, Weil counsels a decreative kenosis: only by removing the obstacle of the self, with its self-interested preconceptions, can the real become visible. The real, on the other hand, continually subverts the familiar world of the ego-self. It follows that one cannot see *any* power relation for the phenomenon it is without in some way taking responsibility for it in Levinas's sense of response-ability. This means making oneself available to be responsive—especially responsive to the exploited. Moreover, one cannot see a power relation as a relation between others *as others* (and not, for example, as units of labor or units of consumption) unless one brackets one's own claim to power over the phenomenon under study. For Weil, the speciousness of such a claim to power is a foregone conclusion, since every assumption of power over the other, however necessary it may occasionally be in everyday life, obscures the other from view. To be truly responsive to the exploited and thus able to witness to their oppression—that is, available to them in whatever ethical situation they happen to invite one into—it is necessary to undergo a decreative self-abdication of one's claim to *being* in control. In Levinas's terms, one needs to find “a place where the human no longer concerns us from the perspective of the horizon of being, that is to say, no longer offers itself to our powers” (BPW 8 = EN 8-9). That “place” is none other than what we referred to in the previous section as one's vocative space, a “place” not within the horizon of ontology but a kind of ethical space. It is because response-ability requires the abdication of one's own supposed powers in order to heed the other's call that a decreative phenomenological approach to the study of power relations is obligatory.

Removing the obstacle of the self may sound like the everyday process of taking an *objective* view, except that we have already learned from Levinas that there can be no independent, objective view of an ethical relation. What is required instead is that one constantly keep in mind that the reality one is trying to describe *cannot* in fact be described or understood at all without betraying that reality. To remain true to the ethical reality, one must therefore employ the radical

skepticism of decreative hermeneutics. One ‘looks’ without looking *for* anything, leaving empty the space that one might otherwise expect to be filled by comprehension. One practices a kind of *inverted* looking, requiring great discipline, in which one *waits* for something to make contact with one, rather than seeking contact intentionally. The void of incomprehension will invariably fill itself, for consciousness hates a void, but since whatever fills it necessarily betrays the very phenomenon one wishes to understand, one must continually reject (‘decreate’) the appearance of comprehension. According to Weil, this effort of *attention* will continue until something becomes revealed that can no longer be rejected. This happens because the revelation appears on a different plane altogether from that of intentional knowledge, a plane where looking gives way to responding and taking action. Since the ‘object’ of one’s phenomenological investigation is an ethical relation, this ‘phenomenon’ impossible to reject must be a task or a command—even if only that of continuing to concentrate one’s attention and waiting while emptying the void. If the waiting ends, one then finds oneself saying, not ‘So that’s what it is!’—as though welcoming an end to an ontological search—but ‘Here I am!’, responding to a call that invites one into a relationship in an altogether different key from that of intellectual search, the ethical key of what Weil calls non-active action. We covered much of this ground in Chapter 4.⁷⁰⁴ Here let it suffice to give one more example of its application.

To write about war in a way that attempts to expose its realities—as did Weil’s mentor Alain⁷⁰⁵—may therefore, along the lines outlined above, require that one take an ethical stand on present-day conflicts, as Alain also did with the approach of World War II. It cannot legitimately aim for an exhaustive description that leaves out nothing important, for something important is always left out of any *description* of what human beings do to one another. Perhaps for this

⁷⁰⁴ See especially sections 4.1 and 4.3.

⁷⁰⁵ Alain (Émile Chartier), *Mars, ou la guerre jugée* (1921): *Mars, or The Truth About War*, trans. by Doris Mudie and Elizabeth Hill, introduction by André Maurois, forward by Denis Saurat (London: J. Cape and H. Smith, 1930). It was no doubt in part Alain’s influence, on the eve of the second World War, that induced Weil to modify her earlier pacifist views. Alain wrote his book while serving in the trenches in World War I.

reason, Alain does not offer a comprehensive theory of war, but attempts instead to give an honest depiction of its many contradictory aspects without making any effort to reconcile them. I am not suggesting that Alain was a phenomenologist, nor that he is doing anything comparable to what Foucault does with history—although coincidentally like Foucault, Alain insisted that he was not a philosopher. But *if* it would be advantageous to make an attempt at a phenomenology of the experience of war, or on the other hand, a study of the history of the individual's attitudes toward war (*not* a history of military theory) along Foucault's lines, assuming either of these is possible, then a decreative hermeneutic phenomenology may be the only approach that takes into account the contradictions and uncertainties involved. Important to the success of any such a project would be a special vigilance over the language one used. As Elaine Scarry observes with regard to both torture and war, the phenomena as experienced are often kept purposely hidden from view by means of the language commonly used to describe them. The motive for this may well be that, *as it is*, the experience is too contradictory and incoherent, too "traumatic," to be the subject of either ordinary conversation or intellectual thought. Thus the experience of war, truthfully understood as the deliberate attempt to increase, to the greatest degree possible, the *pain and suffering* experienced by others,⁷⁰⁶ tends to be covered over with such phrases as "liberating the oppressed" or "disarming the aggressor," with the unavoidable pain and suffering relegated to the categories of "unfortunate by-product" or "collateral damage."⁷⁰⁷ Emptying the void would take the form of a continual rephrasing of everything one said about war, with a view to avoiding the common terminology with its inevitable tendency to obscure reality—for obscuring reality is the norm.

Foucault has little to say explicitly about what in these pages we have been calling the concentrationary universe, but arguably a great deal to say which is relevant to understanding its

⁷⁰⁶ Should we not say, 'to the greatest degree *necessary*'? But if we are to believe Weil in her essay on the Iliad and elsewhere, there is no possibility of such restraint once one starts down the road of violence.

⁷⁰⁷ Scarry 1985, 73.

present forms and how these have developed over the course of history. Perhaps the foregoing has suggested some ways in which the decreative phenomenology of Levinas and Weil might prove relevant to Foucault's historical approach. In particular, we find evidence that, simply because his approach is unapologetically ontological, Foucault may not have done full justice to the victims of oppression he so deeply cared about. In the current ontological climate, this is perhaps inevitable.

* * *

"Every civilization that accepts being—with the tragic despair it contains and the crimes it justifies—merits the name 'barbarian'." ⁷⁰⁸

The title of this chapter was intended to call to mind the meaning of the Hebrew word *Shoah*. For Levinas, however, the real disaster for which one expiates might not be the Shoah, nor even its concentrationary legacy, but perhaps Being itself. Subjectivity is expiation for the other's sufferings because it is a response not only to the other but to the Being from which every subject suffers. We might even say that, for Levinas, to recognize the other as other *is* precisely to respond to their suffering from Being. Thus for both Levinas and Weil, to be burdened by a responsibility to "support the universe" means to love the Good not in spite of but *through* the whole Being of Creation, expressly including all of its pain and affliction (p. 440). If Levinas sees the ethical as the necessary denial of goodness to *Being*, Weil in effect sees Being as evil simply because the Creation is the withdrawal of Good in order that what is not good may *be*. It follows that one attends to the other's suffering by giving one's attention to the other's reality—that is, by taking response-ability, in all one's dealings with others, for the pain of being-in-the-world. For

⁷⁰⁸ Levinas OE, 73.

Levinas (but not Weil) this fraternity with the other is the very heart of subjectivity. Since the laceration point at which suffering is on the point of becoming “quasi-infernal” (p. 441) is also the point at which one is continually on the threshold of one’s substitution for the other, expiation for the other is the basis of human subjectivity for both Levinas and Weil. What suffering seems to do is to force one back to the nothingness-of-self one has in common with every other person. The poet John Keats’ admission of feeling “annihilated” by others, far from something shameful, seems to have been an example of this experience of one’s nothingness, unusual in its being expressed so explicitly, but perhaps not unusual for a poet of his sensitivity.

With this background established in the first part of the chapter, we were then in a position to concentrate on the problem of how one witnesses in practice to the other’s affliction. This, we decided, had to be a witness to the other’s ethical *command*, the other’s ability continually to call me into question. The *saying* becomes its paradoxical witness, effective precisely in its having no content. What the saying witnesses to is pure vulnerability. Witnessing as expiation becomes a relationship with the other in which one takes response-ability for the other person’s vulnerability by refusing to refuse one’s own decreation. In his essay on Paul Celan, Levinas suggests how a poem could act as a kind of proxy for human vulnerability in search of just such a relationship with the vulnerable reader. Achieving that relationship requires something from the reader as well, a different sort of reading which Weil shows us is applicable not only to literature but to the world as a whole: reading *decreatively* or ‘beyond the self’. One lets the self continually give way to a ‘meaning’ that, like the other, one knows one will never fully understand but that nonetheless claims one’s absolute *non-indifference* (p. 121, 451).

A more difficult case proved to be that of the Muselmänner of the concentration camps, the so-called “walking dead.” We saw, however, that even so extreme an example of affliction can witness to the fact that human subjectivity is founded on vulnerability, a fact central to the preservation not only of the other’s otherness but also of ethics. If one becomes aware of this witness

and bears its burden, then one saves the afflicted other from becoming a thing at least in one's own eyes, thus diminishing some of the evil of being. Ultimately, *attention* to the other's vulnerability may be all that can reasonably be expected of anyone. It is, in fact, more than enough, if Weil is right that if more is possible in the way of material assistance, this can become clear only through such an effort of attention.

Finally, we extended these ideas to witnessing to the concentrationary legacy of the Shoah, as represented today less by the totalitarian politics of terror than by subjection to more subtle but increasingly pervasive forms of 'normal' domination. Here it might have seemed that we departed from the main topic of the chapter, for in these last two sections there was no mention of expiation. But expiation is nothing if not taking responsibility for the suffering of the other, a responsibility Levinas argues is central to who we are in whatever situation we find ourselves. In the concentrationary universe, where the question of 'who we are' becomes more important than ever, even as it is in greater danger of becoming lost from view, the implications of subjectivity as originary expiation turned out to be the complementary tasks of doing justice to the vulnerable neighbor and preserving the very possibility of the ethical. We defined *vocative space* as one's sensitivity to the presence of others around one. Preserving the ethical requires that one keep one's own vocative space open by refusing thoughts and actions that place the other in shadow. Philosophy can then use decreative phenomenology in order, for example, to reveal the ethical foundation of power relations in Foucault's very general sense of that phrase. This might be accomplished with a view to determining more specifically their potential application to the increasingly subtle methods of concentrationary domination.

Reduction of ease with the world is not only a necessary prerequisite to approaching the other, it is the essence of human subjectivity. As non-integrable and irreducible, every encounter with the other invariably leaves me *restless*, at least until I manage to thematize the feeling away, if I can, for occasionally it can make me the victim of major self-questioning or personal upheaval.

Levinas's term for subjectivity as continual self-transcendence is the *recurrence*. As it is the guarantee not only of one's subjectivity but also of one's expiation for the other's suffering—we have argued in this chapter that they are the same thing—the recurrence lies at the basis of every attempt to reduce thematization to its ethical roots. It is also the reason why every finding of decreative phenomenology must be tentative—as vulnerable as everything else human. It seems appropriate, therefore, that in the final chapter we take a closer look at the recurrence, and the resonances this idea has with Weil's thought, as a way of bringing the present study to a suitably indeterminate conclusion.

8.0 Witnessing to the Vulnerability of Ethics

Simone Weil has a reputation for dwelling on the dark and painful side of life. She seems to have more to say about affliction than about its opposite, joy,⁷⁰⁹ and what she does say about joy is hardly ordinary. Early in her notebooks she writes: “Perfect joy excludes the very feeling of joy” We are not a little surprised, since the feeling of joy would seem to be part of the experience, it being commonly assumed that joy *is* an experience. But then Weil explains: “... for in the soul filled by its object no corner is available for saying ‘I’” (N 179). True joy is not consciously felt because there is no ‘I’ around to feel it. Joy is not a self-generated or even self-conscious state, if this means that I can tell myself ‘Joy is what *I myself* am presently feeling.’ Instead it results from the contemplation of what is above oneself, to the necessary exclusion of the self altogether. Joy, the only joy worth having as Weil sees it, has nothing to do with the ego.

Weil goes on to note that, as a result, joy is incompatible with the work of human imagination, which she believes always serves the ‘I’. Hence joy demands that one learn to cultivate not the imagination but *attention*. This requires that we do the very opposite of attaching our ego to what we find joyful. Instead of applying our energy to obtaining or holding on to whatever we find lovely, attaching ourselves to the object that gives us joy, we must free our energies from the ‘I’ altogether and let the joyful take care of itself. Joy will come, if it does, in its own good time. Similarly, for Weil, the beautiful is whatever we *desire* to leave as it is, without wanting to change it or make it our own. Here is one place where Weil’s notion of desire as opposed to want (she does not always make a distinction) comes very close to Levinas’s. In the following passage,

⁷⁰⁹ Although Levinas has even less to say about joy than she has, or about beauty.

the “energy” referred to is that which we might otherwise direct towards making the joyful or the beautiful our own, attaching it to ourselves. By liberating this energy, freeing it from the ‘I’, we in a sense liberate the joy or the beauty, allowing it to *be* independently of us. But however successful this operation, if impossible to carry out intentionally, the ‘I’ always reasserts itself:

We liberate energy in ourselves—then a little more—then again a little more. But it constantly reattaches itself. How are we to liberate it entirely? We have to *desire* that it should be done in us—to desire it truly; simply to desire it—not try to accomplish it; to think on it only. For every attempt in the other direction is vain and has to be dearly paid for. In such an undertaking all that I call ‘I’ has to be passive. Attention alone—that attention which is so full that the ‘I’ disappears—is required of me. I have to deprive all that I call ‘I’ of the light of my attention and turn it on to that which cannot be conceived. (N 179, emphasis added)

The paragraph that immediately follows consists of the single word “Humility.” The liberation of energy to which Weil refers in this passage is the transformation of supplementary energy into vegetative energy characteristic of decreation (see the previous chapter, p. 458). This passage is therefore also a description of decreative phenomenology’s removal of the ‘I’ in order to reveal “that which cannot be conceived,” namely, the other.

A much later entry, in the New York notebook, shows how the elusive nature of joy relates to ethical questions. First of all, there is the following observation, which explains why Weil so easily reverts from consideration of joy to that of pain: “But when we are reduced to the level of vegetative energy there is no danger of killing the good by being aware of it. The soul is entirely occupied with its cry of privation and pain” (FLN 234). In other words, the pain that depletes supplementary energy does not *necessarily* eclipse the Good (although there are certainly extreme

occasions on which it does), at least not if it does no more than distract the 'I' from its attempts to repose in the Good for itself. This is something pain is very effective in doing. In the experience of pain there always comes a point, in one's desire for the Good, when the supplementary energy that enables one to love the Good and to rest content in one's love is used up, for supplementary energy depends on the 'I' insofar as it depends on *applying* oneself. It is therefore limited. When one reaches the point where it is used up, vegetative energy, the energy required simply to 'go on existing', takes over. According to Weil, it is absolutely essential that this transformation take place, since otherwise one's ego remains intact and powerful. But as we saw earlier, the vanishing of supplementary energy in favor of vegetative energy always signifies additional suffering, and suffering quickly becomes anathema to the ego. The key to not letting the suffering supplant joy altogether, leaving one in despair, is to consent to it out of love for the Good. For if one does not consent to the suffering, then one must either renounce the Good or else lie to oneself, telling oneself that the Good is not *really* so exacting.

The one thing that is sure to prevent the lie or the renunciation is one's asking oneself one simple little question, which because it can be endlessly repeated, as children often innocently do, has the power in an adult to make all the answers one comes up with evaporate to insignificance:

When the whole soul is crying "I must have ...!", except for one point in it which replies "Why?" and "I consent to the contrary ...", at that moment one is bearing one's cross. But Christ has said that we must do it every day. How is that possible? Must we put ourselves in a position to suffer to that extent every day? (FLN 234-35)

The answer that follows is equivocal: "Perhaps." Nevertheless, according to Weil, there can be joy even in the power 'Why?' has to return again and again, provided that one consents,⁷¹⁰ where

⁷¹⁰ The logic of this return is clearly that of the skepticism of recurrence (Chapter 2). It is the *other within* who asks the question 'Why?'.

consenting means claiming nothing *for oneself* but the suffering: “When there is intense and pure joy one is equally empty of good, because then all good resides in the object.” One is “empty of good” because the good is not in oneself but outside. One does not *feel* joy so much as one loses one’s ego in it. “There is as much sacrifice and renunciation at the bottom of joy as there is at the bottom of pain” (FLN 235). One does not renounce the Good, but the idea of attaching oneself to anything good, or even to the Good itself.

Needless to say, what we have been describing here is decreation. According to our earlier argument (Chapter 1), it is also a description of substitution.⁷¹¹ Hence, not only the objects that bring us joy, but also other people will inevitably disappoint us in the end if we claim ownership in any way. In fact, Weil’s example of something notoriously susceptible to disappointment is admiration for another person. Ironically, the only defense she suggests against the inevitable disenchantment admiration brings is for one to commit oneself all the more completely to its object, even though this is the opposite of what is ultimately required of us. I must *act on* a commitment to the object of my admiration in order to see the truth I otherwise avoid by limiting my admiration to a mental exercise. This truth that I tend to avoid is the truth that in the end all efforts on behalf of the admired one, if they are no more than that, are in vain.

The only thing that can save one from this danger [of disappointment] is fastidiousness. If I think I see good in Napoleon, how can I not devote some of my energy to him? But if I then come to perceive that he is not good enough for me, the energy I have devoted to him will have been wasted. At this point I have to make a choice. Either to face the loss; or else to disguise it by lying and persuading myself that he is really good enough for me. (FLN 235)

⁷¹¹ Although the loss of the ego in joy might sound suspiciously like the mystical fusion Levinas associates with participation, of which he is always critical, Weil would remind us that the loss of the ego—not of the subject, for one is still subject to the other—leaves us more aware of our neighbor, not less.

It is likewise when we think we have finally discovered the answer to a difficult question. For this is like putting one's trust in something that cannot but turn out to disappoint, if only because we are not omniscient. Necessity does not allow a finite being to put its trust in anything—hence one does not act on the basis of trust in some good thing but on the pure desire for the Good. This is the only legitimate motivation for all our efforts. To place one's 'trust' in the Good in this way is to place one's trust in the void. Desire is perhaps another name for trusting in the void.

It was difficult to be faithful to Christ. It was faithfulness *in the void*. Much easier to be faithful unto death to Napoleon. Much easier for the martyrs to be faithful, later on, because the Church was already there, a force, with temporal promises. We die for what is strong, not for what is weak; or at any rate for what, though momentarily weak, retains an aureole of strength. Faithfulness to Napoleon at St. Helena was not faithfulness in the void. The fact of dying for what is strong robs death of its bitterness—and at the same time of all its value. (N 148)

If we really think we have an answer to an ethical question, such as one of those that have motivated the present study, we are obligated to align our actions with the knowledge we have gained. Sooner or later we will inevitably discover that our all-too-human answer is inadequate to the real difficulties, complexities, and at times mortal challenges of life. One may be tempted to give up the whole business of trying to find answers. This would be a mistake, however, since the inadequacy of the answer is an indication that something else entirely is required, an obligation that by no means precludes seeking answers to ethical questions. This obligation, of course, is faithfulness to the Good, which shows itself as a commitment to decreative attention and then waiting until it becomes obvious what one must do. Treating every question as a perpetually open

question, the answers to which are no less vulnerable than the human being who asks the question, is the idea behind decreative hermeneutics.

Two ethical questions have motivated our decreative phenomenological project from the beginning: the problem of how to witness to the suffering of the victims of atrocity, and the problem of how to acknowledge the effects of extreme affliction on the ethical subject—in particular, the implications that vulnerability to extreme affliction has for human subjectivity in general. The emphasis has always been less on seeking formal answers to these questions than on outlining a practical method for dealing with them that is decreative. Arguably, insofar as they are *ethical* questions, they can *only* have practical, not formal answers. The present chapter will therefore not end in a summary of conclusions, other than highly provisional ones, but mainly with recommendations for *a method of leaving the questions open*, the method of decreative phenomenology. Leaving ethical questions open means allowing the other to remain visible throughout the questioning, refusing to exchange affirmation of the other for confirmation of an answer. Only by continuing to seek does one arrive at the sole relevant certainty: the certainty as to what needs to be done in the situation that presents itself here and now. The method is decreative in that it creates the opening out of the self-abdication or de-creation of the investigator: in order to keep the other within sight, one must remove *the self* that by its very nature obscures alterity. The experience of alterity is not intentional, nor can it be the result of an unconscious, non-cognitively-based practice or *comportment* in Heidegger's sense. Decreative phenomenology is a *making visible* through the removal of the self from out of the way of the other, to the extent that this is possible. Its advantage over traditional forms of phenomenology (Husserlian or Heideggerian, for example) is that it appears to be the only means by which phenomenology can do justice to ethics by maintaining the point of the ethical—the only ethical alternative to an emphasis on ontology that would make ethics either impossible or superfluous. Decreative phenomenology is a phenomenology that respects the need for responsibility in

Levinas's sense of the word. But this hardly guarantees answers. There are, in fact, only two mutually exclusive alternatives: *either* one pretends to have answers to ethical problems *or* one settles for having responsibilities. The options are mutually exclusive. To know oneself as responsible is to forsake answers, other than always-provisional ones, while the illusion of having answers actually makes responsibility impossible: one cannot see the *other* in the question if one imagines that one has found its answer, and to see the other *is* one's first and foremost ethical responsibility, aside from whatever else one might be led to do for the other's sake, assuming there is anything one can do besides giving him or her one's undivided attention.

8.1 The Recurrence of the Ethical

We are now in a better position to suggest why this must be so, why responsibility and knowledge are, from an ethical standpoint, mutually exclusive. The necessarily tentative answer will be in terms of Levinas's important notion of *recurrence*. (In a later section, we will bring the ideas involved down to earth by introducing one of Weil's more striking images.) The reason the ethical endures—the guarantee, insofar as there can be one, that we are not “duped by morality” (TI 21), that with Auschwitz we have not witnessed the end of ethics—is that the ethical is the heartbeat of time, as it were. Stretching the meaning of Levinas's terminology somewhat (but hopefully not to a breaking point), the ethical continually *recurs*.

What Levinas actually says is that the *oneself* recurs (OB 104). Recall that the oneself is Levinas's term for the ethical subject, singularized (as responsible) by the other. “The oneself proper to consciousness,” Levinas writes in the central chapter “Substitution” of *Otherwise Than Being*, “is ... not again a consciousness, but a term in hypostasis” (OB 106). *Hypostasis*, as Levinas explains the word in the much earlier work *Existence and Existents*, is “the transmutation, within

the pure event of being, of an event into a substantive” (EE 71).⁷¹² In the present context, this signifies the emergence of the ethical subject or “oneself” out of the event of its being called to responsibility by the other. The subject acquires ‘substance’ as a self through being called to response-ability by the other. The scare quotes are necessary, since Western philosophy traditionally equates subject and substance, attempting “the reduction of subjectivity to consciousness” (OB 103). The reality, according to Levinas, is more complicated: the subject emerges, but with it also comes into existence the ‘I’. Thus on one level, the one which tradition prefers, the self appears to be the “event of identification” that Levinas equates with “knowledge”: one consciously identifies as the ‘I’ who *knows* (of) ‘others’ (EE 87-88). But on a deeper level, that of the *subject*, one ‘knows’ the other not cognitively but insofar as one is forced to *respond* to them. The real ‘substance’ of the subject that Levinas calls the “oneself” is response-ability. It looks paradoxically as though this substance were an *accident* of the event of the call to responsibility—a good reason, perhaps, for avoiding the language of ‘substance’. If the identity of the self were nothing more than a result of an accident in the usual sense of cause and effect—the result of an event in space-time, and therefore an effect of the play of forces Weil calls Necessity—then the self would not be the oneself but only the for-itself or ‘I’ of the *conatus essendi*. There would be no subject, and no *other* for a subject. Where only Necessity reigned, ethics would indeed have no ground or basis, since the for-itself has nothing to do but *be*—a continual concern for its own interests. For there to be a subject, subject to an *other*, something other than Necessity must rule. Were Weil taking part in this discussion, she would undoubtedly say that it must be God’s ‘other’ side, Love (an idea we do not take up explicitly here), but let us not invite Weil into the conversation quite yet.

If we are to ascribe a sense or point to ethics, the oneself must have a subjective “identity prior to the for-itself [*d’avant le «pour soi»*]” (OB 106 / AE 135), that is, an identity prior to that of the

⁷¹² See EE, esp. 69-71, 82-84, and OB 17-18, 44-45, 85, 106, 155. The term also appears in *Time and the Other*, but not at all in *Totality and Infinity*.

‘I’, and therefore prior to the linear temporality which defines self-consciousness as something that endures and has a history. For this reason, the oneself *cannot* abide identically through time as an entity but must continually re-identify itself anew in response to the other. In other words, the oneself or subject is an *event* in a counterintuitive pre-temporal, hence non-ontological sense, a pure re-identifying-ness which *produces* time-consciousness as its manifestation (EE 88, OB 28-43). The oneself is the event of a continual succession of ‘break up’ and ‘repose’ that responds to the unremitting intrusion of what is not the self, the intrusion of the *other* into the *same*. Levinas calls this event *recurrence*. The ego or I formed as consciousness is continually displaced by the other, only to reassert itself in its effort to ‘make sense’ of the intrusion (worldmaking). But this reassertion is invariably followed again by the intrusion of the other—indeed, the reassertion itself is a response to the other, who thus intrudes in the very response to the intrusion. There is no escaping the other’s continual demand for a response if one is to become the (ethical) subject.

Recurrence is Levinas’s answer to the question: “How in consciousness can there be an undergoing or a Passion [*Passion*] whose active source does not, in any way, occur in consciousness?” (OB 102).⁷¹³ How does consciousness acknowledge the *other* if it exists in order to convert every other into the *same*? That the question itself has been a recurring one throughout the present work is not surprising, since the issue all along has been whether extreme affliction can destroy the *otherness* of the other—that is, destroy one’s own ability to respond to the other *as other*. Our immediate answer is that one responds, and thus acknowledges the other, in the very effort to convert them into the same. In a sense, one witnesses to the otherness of the other every instant, in spite of oneself. This takes place pre-consciously. Consciousness is actually one of its *results*.

⁷¹³ One wonders why Levinas capitalizes ‘Passion’ in these passages. Could he be making a veiled suggestion that the Passion of Christ is the image or prototype of one’s own expiation/restitution *for every other*?

On the other hand, what it means to witness *consciously* to alterity, we have discovered, is that one makes a conscious effort to “reduce” the said to the *saying* it betrays. That is, one tries to make present in some way, to oneself and to the other, the fact that one is always already expiating for one’s injustice to the other *pre-consciously*. We have described in previous chapters how Weil (to whom, still waiting in the wings, we return in just a moment) has given us a method for doing this in terms of *attention* and *non-active action*. What she does not do is give us a “metaphysical” basis for the method’s efficacy. This Levinas provides in the idea of the passivity or “Passion” of recurrence prior to consciousness:⁷¹⁴

This passion [*Passion*] is absolute in that it takes hold without any a priori. The consciousness is affected, then, before forming an image of what is coming to it, affected in spite of itself. In these traits we recognize a persecution; being called into question prior to questioning, responsibility over and beyond the logos of response [*par delà le logos de la réponse*]. It is as though persecution by another were at the bottom of solidarity with another. How can such a passion [*Passion*] take place and have its time in consciousness? (OB 102)

Only one’s *persecution by the other* (in Levinas’s sense) can witness to their affliction, as though being a subject meant that, in effect, one had always already been oppressed by every victim of oppression, past, present and future. One is already substituted for every other as an accomplished fact, having witnessed to the other, whoever he or she is, simply insofar as the other already resides, along with all the other others, in the depths of oneself. It is a foregone conclusion that the (that is, every) other is the ‘other within’, substituted for oneself as another vulnerable self.

⁷¹⁴ Recall Levinas’s distinctive notion of metaphysics: “a relation with the other that does not result in a divine or human totality, that is not a totalization of history but the idea of infinity” (TI 52). See the Introduction above, p. 53-54.

Expiation is substitution and substitution is expiation. As long as there is expiation, there is the ethical, hence what essentially *recurs* is the ethical.

Levinas uses the word *ipseity* ('selfness', from *ipse*, Latin, 'self') to denote the event in which the oneself is persecuted by the other prior to consciousness.⁷¹⁵ The subject *is* this event, inasmuch as the subject is "a withdrawal in-onself which is an exile in oneself [*une retraite en soi qui est un exil en soi*], without a foundation in anything else, a non-condition" (OB 107). By "non-condition" Levinas means the displacement or "exile" of the for-itself which leaves itself behind, that is, constantly leaves behind its repose in the same, loses its identity. The for-self is continually displaced or "exiled" away from the identity it has fabricated for itself and *once more, yet again*, set on the path towards 'identification' as for-the-other (TI 39). In Weil's terms, the subject is continually in process of decreation, or *is* the continual process of decreation—that is, not a substance undergoing a cause, but the *event* of being torn from the 'I' or for-itself. The oneself is "this rending itself, or else nothingness" (FLN 244), continually de-created and re-created, again and again. Ipseity is essentially the oneself as the event of the *recurrence* of decreation.

If decreation is the "body and soul" of service to the Good (FLN 244), then ipseity denotes the condition in which the embodied self finds its identity for-the-other in the recurring break-up of the very for-itself that would seek its identity in service to its own projects.⁷¹⁶ Service to the Good, whatever else it may turn out to be, is essentially nothing more than this break up, a continual abdication of power. It is not good deeds, which in truth are legitimately called 'good' only after the fact, with the understanding that all deeds are inevitably mixed with evil.⁷¹⁷ For

⁷¹⁵ The term *ipseity* was already in use, by Heidegger and Jankélévitch among others. Levinas introduces his inflection in *Existence and Existents* (EE 32). *Ipseity* occurs in several places in *Totality and Infinity* (for example TI 117-20, 208, 278-79, 301). In this concept, as he interprets it, these earlier works of Levinas anticipate the central notions of the "other within" and substitution in *Otherwise Than Being*.

⁷¹⁶ "The identity of ipseity as recurrence 'breaks open the limits of identity' ["Substitution," BPW 89]" (R. Bernasconi, "To Which Question Is Substitution the Answer?", Critchley and Bernasconi 2002, 244). See Chapter 1 above, pp. 67, 74, and Levinas's essay "No Identity" in CP 141-51.

⁷¹⁷ See the second half of Chapter 5.

Weil, as we have noted before, the only intentional service to the Good is attention, the sole good result of which in oneself is decreation. The oneself serves the Good solely as *ipseity*—that is, solely insofar as there recurs every instant the for-itself-becoming-for-the-other, the *created-becoming-decreated*. All else that we are in the habit of calling good is the product of a Necessity over which we have no control, except the ‘control’ Necessity exercises through us when our attention forces us to take action automatically.

The oneself is therefore in a continuing state of crisis, an ‘identity’ crisis—or “trauma” (*tramatisme*) as Levinas likes to call it,⁷¹⁸ from which it tries to escape by identifying itself with the for-itself. The for-itself is the nominative in the said, referring to itself as noun or pronoun (the ‘I’) through what it says about itself.⁷¹⁹ But because the for-itself exists only gratis its contrary, the-one-for-the-other, every attempt at self-definition leaves it indefinite who this ‘self’ is, since the other continually destabilizes it (OB 107). The oneself as for-the-other, on the other hand, neither is nor aspires to be a *being* denoted by a noun. It is inexorably “undecidable” (OB 56, 107), always under accusation, always accusative, never nominative, *persecuted*:

[The oneself] bears its name as a borrowed name, a pseudonym, a pro-noun. In itself, the oneself is the one or the unique separated from being [*En soi, le soi-même est l’un ou l’unique séparé de l’être*]. ... It can indeed appear in an indirect language, under a proper name, as an entity, and thus put itself on the edge of the generality characteristic of all said, and there refer to essence. But it is first a non-quiddity, no one, clothed with purely borrowed being, which masks its nameless singularity by conferring on it a role. (OB 106 / AE 134-35; cf. OB 56)

⁷¹⁸ In OB, with perhaps one exception, Levinas always writes *tramatisme* rather than *trauma*, suggesting that he means to emphasize the state or condition of suffering rather than the ‘wound’ (*trauma* in Greek) from which one suffers.

⁷¹⁹ See Chapter 1 of Benveniste 1971, 223-30.

Agamben might seem to have reached a similar conclusion in *Remnants of Auschwitz* (1999) from a more strictly linguistic point of view:

On the one hand, the psychosomatic individual must fully abolish himself and desubjectify himself as a real individual to become the subject of enunciation and to identify himself with the pure shifter “I,” which is absolutely without any substantiality and content other than its mere reference to the event of discourse. But, once stripped of all extra-linguistic meaning and constituted as a subject of enunciation, the subject discovers that he has gained access not so much to a possibility of speaking as to an impossibility of speaking—or, rather, that he has gained access to being always already anticipated by a glossolalic potentiality over which he has neither control nor mastery.⁷²⁰

In other words, the individual discovers, as it has sometimes been expressed, that language speaks him rather than that he speaks the language. But this discovery presumably does not prevent one from finding some relief in being able to say ‘I’. Jean Améry, for example, in taking up the difficult task of writing about his torture and concentration camp internment, found that while “in the first lines ... I had still believed that I could remain circumspect and distant ... I now saw that this was simply impossible. Where the word ‘I’ was to have been avoided completely, it proved to be the single useful starting point.”⁷²¹ Susan Derwin explains why this was so: “now in command of a language in which to tell ‘everything’ in the first person, Améry newly experienced himself as the subject of his own history”⁷²²—and, we might add, found himself (if not consciously) in the position of *subject to the other*, the listener or reader on whom Améry depended not only as someone *to* whom to tell his story, but more basically as someone *for* whom

⁷²⁰ Agamben 2002, 116.

⁷²¹ Améry 1980, xiii.

⁷²² Derwin 2012, 2.

to be one-for-the-other, since the freedom to be one-for-the-other would have been the very thing that his war experiences were in danger of destroying.

The missing ingredient in Agamben's analysis is therefore the role of the other as listener and respondent—not to mention source of responsibility. Not only does the oneself not know itself until it knows that (ontologically) it is nothing, as Agamben rightly points out, but knowing this requires a neighbor in whom one can see oneself. Since all of one's relations with the other are mediated through language, we should not find it so disconcerting that human existence is reduced to nothingness by the pronoun 'I'. What Agamben seems to think shameful is in reality humanity's "glory", as Levinas expresses it late in *Otherwise Than Being* (OB 144-45).⁷²³ The glory lies in the fact that, as nothing in oneself, one is entirely dependent on the neighbor and the neighbor on oneself, hence responsible along with him or her, as worldmakers, for supporting the universe.

Weil, of course, does not relate the nothingness of the self and its dependence on the other to its subjectivity. Her emphasis, as always, is on facing the reality of suffering:

To love one's neighbor as oneself is nothing else than to contemplate human misery in oneself and in others.

Our neighbor is for us a mirror in which we discover the knowledge of ourselves if we love him as ourselves. (N 282)

Weil then says that "knowledge of the self is love of God" because "the silence of God compels us to an inward silence" (N 282). Weil does not explain this silence here, but instead goes on to write in words that call to mind both Levinas's notion of substitution and the myth from Plato's dialogue *Gorgias* to which Levinas refers in *Otherwise Than Being*. According to Plato's myth,

⁷²³ Recall Agamben's assessment of Keats' confession of nothingness in Chapter 7 above.

justice is done at the last judgment only when all those who appear before the judge are divested of the clothing that conveys false distinctions between one person and another (OB 190n35):

Compassion for those that are cold and hungry implies the ability to conceive and imagine oneself as being placed in any sort of social and material circumstances whatsoever, and consequently the casting aside of the circumstances in which one finds oneself. This means nakedness; or at any rate a partial nakedness. (N 282)

The state of nakedness suggests vulnerability, of course, and seems to be equivalent to the realization that the created self is nothing. That one is forced to use the self-negating pronoun ‘I’ testifies to this basic substitutability for all others. Thus “the silence of God” compels us to give our attention to every other person’s suffering, as we read in one of Weil’s New York notebooks:

Before an afflicted man, this soul immediately responds with the true note. “My Father, why have you forsaken him?” And in the center of the soul the Father’s silence replies.

“Why has it been allowed that he should go hungry?” While one’s thought is occupied by this question, one proceeds automatically to find bread for him. (FLN 94)

The bedrock of human existence is not self- or even time-consciousness, despite the fundamentality of time. As we have seen in a variety of ways already, it is *alterity*—hence it is decreation, hence persecution by the other. Consciousness is only a layer of dissimulation (OB 56) covering over, with the veneer of a self-constituted world deceptively stable (when it is not manifestly de-stabilized by severe trauma), the ever-recurring tension induced by the other. Of course, it is self-constituted only with the other’s help. The oneself of *ipseity*, of the other within, is not logically or temporally but *pre-logically* prior—on the hither side of—the logic or *logos*

that serves consciousness in thematizing a world (Chapter 2). Nor does the basis for the oneself lie in stability or solidity (the myth of a secure, grounded existence in the world, or as Weil expresses it, the illusion of the reality of one's "person") but is instead susceptibility—vulnerability to harm, but at the same time (in fact, for that very reason) singled out for responsibility—a body that leaves one always susceptible to becoming a Muselmann but, in any other circumstance, with the potential to give to the other "the bread from one's mouth," as Levinas often puts it, having in mind the perpetual hunger one experiences in the concentration camp. Ipseity is decreative: the 'self' that one thinks one defines (for example, by choosing a certain 'lifestyle' or self-image) is not the self at all (that is, the oneself, the-one-for-the-other), but an artificial creation (artifact) supposed to be the referent of the shifter 'I'. This I-for-itself needs to be decreated in order that it may *become*, or resume once again the process of becoming, the oneself without identity. By contrast, to aggrandize the 'I'—essentially to abandon the oneself in favor of the 'I'—is to lower oneself even as one imagines that one is elevated. One does justice to oneself only at the cost of accepting one's fundamental abasement, and in no other way. But at the same time, conversely, this makes the oneself extremely vulnerable to ideological forces (advertising, propaganda) that exploit the temptation to self-aggrandizement in order to bring the self under total domination.

Elevation and abasement. A woman looking at herself in a mirror and adorning herself does not feel the shame of reducing the self, that infinite being which beholds all things, to a small space (*μικρὸν ὄγκον*).⁷²⁴ In the same way every time that we raise the 'I' (the social 'I', the psychological 'I', etc.), however high we may raise it, we degrade ourselves to an infinite degree by reducing the self to being no more than that. When the 'I' actually is abased (unless energy exerts itself to raise it in desire), we know that we are not that.

⁷²⁴ Literally this means 'small mass', but the word *ὄγκον* in ancient Greek also denoted dignity or pride, in either a good or a bad sense. So Weil's meaning is that one reduces oneself to a small-minded pride or to pride as in reality something miniscule, less than nothing.

A very beautiful woman who looks at her reflection in the mirror can very well believe that she is that. An ugly woman knows that she is not that. (N 244)

Since all feelings of abasement are responses to the other, this is but another way of saying that only the *other* induces genuine self-knowledge—the very other who is capable of destroying one’s self altogether. For the evil side of the opportunity the other presents for self-abasement is the power the other has to reduce one to a number, an item, an unthinking thing. Ever since the 1940s we have known not only that the latter is possible, but that there is no limit to the methods it may use nor how widely and deeply it may employ them. One’s sole defense against the concentrationary universe, short of one’s experiencing extreme affliction, is consent to one’s abasement in the form of decreation. It is this that makes the difference between the positive and negative effects of one’s abasement on oneself and on one’s ability to work for justice for the perhaps more abased other.

Levinas’s principal innovation is the idea that the ethical subject is vulnerable to the extent of being “presynthetic”—that is, not the product of a Kantian synthesis (OB 107). The subject does not “synthesize” itself or its responsibility out of the experience of the other’s vulnerability or out of anything else, for this presupposes the unified, grounded subject of which precisely response-ability to the other’s vulnerability is the ground. Instead, it is the other who instigates the subject *as* responsibility. It is the other who, *simply as vulnerable other*, makes possible my vulnerable subjectivity. This is how much further Levinas takes the idea of human vulnerability than Weil. Moreover, the vulnerable subject is already more unified than any Kantian synthesis could require, although paradoxically it is unified in its continual susceptibility to disunity, “fission,” and “breakup.” Its ‘unity’ is that of being dissolved and reformulated every instant in the recurrence. A unity which is “but an ‘outdoing’ of unity,” the unity of the oneself as recurrence is “somehow itself the content” of this very outdoing (OB 108). The oneself does nothing to bring

about this state of affairs: it is a result of the simplest interactions with others—in Weil’s analogy of the genies in the bottles (above, p. 427), it would be the result of the basic fact that the bottles continually bump into one another. For his part, Levinas compares it to nothing more complicated than breathing. “It is as though the atomic unity of the subject were exposed outside by breathing, by divesting its ultimate substance” (OB 107). This is the same as is to say that *decreation* is as basic as breath, an automatic response to the merest contact with others. The self is undermined and recovers, only to be undermined again, continually. And this again is expiation, for the self is undermined always for the sake of the other. It is not expiation out of charity or “solicitude” for the offended one. Expiation, as both Levinas and Weil in their different ways describe it, is not conscious, much less intentional. Rather, the continual undermining of the self is expiation for its (mis)representation of the other, its unavoidable injustice to every other in the ordinary everyday activity of worldmaking. The undermining of the self by the other, on the other hand, produces the subject, the subject as expiation. Thus simply in encountering the other *one expiates for one’s being-in-the-world*—a being-in-the-world which is always at the other’s expense. For in representing the other to oneself, one removes from the world the very same other one cannot do without.

8.2 The Crime of Weil’s Prisoner

Certainly *decreation* is expiation according to Weil’s understanding of the word: *decreation* is loving the Good “through and beyond” one’s own and others’ suffering. As comparable to substitution, *decreation* ought to be comparable to expiation in Levinas’s sense as well, since we have seen that expiation in his sense is practically synonymous with substitution. The following key passage, quoted earlier, summarizes this synonymy explicitly if somewhat telegraphically:

Vulnerability, exposure to outrage, to wounding, passivity more passive than all patience, passivity of the accusative form, trauma of accusation suffered by a hostage to the point of persecution, implicating the identity of the hostage who substitutes himself for the others: all this is the self, a defecting or defeat of the ego's identity. And this, pushed to the limit, is sensibility, sensibility as the subjectivity of the subject. It is a substitution for another, one in the place of another, expiation. (OB 15)

Vulnerability, passivity, accusation, and sensibility, as Levinas means the words, have all been discussed in previous chapters. All of these, he claims, are characteristic of substitution, hence of expiation—and therefore of subjectivity. We are now in a position to connect these ideas with decreation through one of Weil's more arresting analogies.

Let us back up a little and, by way of contrast, recapitulate the ontological view. For the West, as Levinas reads it, the term *recurrence* in the phrase "recurrence to oneself" means that the self always succeeds in finding *itself* again, as though coming home to itself (OB 113-14, GWCM 17 = DEH 154-55). Something like this coinciding of self with self is in fact characteristic of *all* Being, not just of human Being. To disclose Being—in Heidegger's terminology, "unconceal" it—means that Dasein finds at least some beings to be always again the same (more or less) as Dasein had previously identified them to be. In the case of one's own being, *to be* is to find oneself always in essential respects the same through the passage of time.⁷²⁵ One ensures this, according to Heidegger, by one's *resolve* to own one's ownmost *project*—ideally that of seeing to it that all beings are preserved in their Being. One knows oneself to be the same being as one was yesterday because one is still resolved on the same goal as one was yesterday: still the shepherd of Being. Presumably, if one's project is threatened, so is one's (ontological) identity. Here it may be worth noting that one could, along these lines, conceivably destroy another person's

⁷²⁵ This makes Hamlet's question, on the face of it, a questioning of his ontological, not ethical, consistency.

ontological identity by depriving them of the ability to resolve on a project, perhaps by destroying their basic ability to decide what to do from one moment to the next through the carefully engineered chaos of their surroundings. This technique is in fact described by Buchenwald survivor Eugen Kogon in *The Theory and Practice of Hell* (1950), his classic memoir and detailed sociological analysis of the Nazi concentration camp.

But as we know, actively bringing about the disclosure of the same is not what Levinas means by recurrence. His notion of recurrence makes it a passive operation, not even the result of an ego constituting itself as the same from one moment to the next. No doubt the ego reconstitutes itself. But in the *non-coinciding* recurrence of the ethical, prompted by the encounter with the other, the ethical self or “oneself” as ego falls back to where it cannot recognize itself quite as it was before. The ego, as it were, ‘fails’ the self whose ego it is. As a result of the other’s intrusion, the self invariably “retreats to the hither side of its point of departure” (OB 114; see Chapter 1, p. 99). Closer than the present, having no direct relation whatever to time, the hither side is not a place or “site” (*lieu*), whether temporal or spatial, but the point at which the oneself finds itself a stranger to itself and must consequently reconstitute itself. In the presence of the other, the self is therefore revealed to be radically passive, “obsessed” or besieged by a responsibility that arrives from nowhere (anarchical, having no explanation, principle, or discernible origin) and gives no hint of departing (being without limit, purpose, or destination). Hence there are not two *things*, the ego and the oneself, but only two events, the simultaneity of a ‘success’ (egoity, reconstitution) and a ‘failure’ in response to a call (subjectivity, recurrence), which together define the instant we identify with the unique ‘self’ that responds to the other’s call by always just missing it, an *instant* too late. The passage of time is this relentless series of missed rendezvous.

One is repeatedly pulled back to the hither side from the world one’s consciousness constructs, for responding to the other always entails some degree of world revision, usually minimal and unconscious. However unavoidable, there are nonetheless numerous ways in which one can

conceal the contraction of the self this produces, or at least render it superficially harmless: one can forget the other, one can lie to oneself, or one can fill one's time with distractions.⁷²⁶ These efforts prove that there is something (actually, an *event*) that has both an obverse and a reverse: success/failure, other/self. It is this event that we are identifying as the oneself. More importantly for our analysis, it appears that *one can prevent the contraction or render it ineffectual in another person by imposing a thematization by force*. When carried to extremes, this constitutes what Hannah Arendt described as total domination. What precisely happens to the oneself when a thematization, an ideology, is imposed upon it in this way? Before we can answer that question, it is first necessary to find out where the oneself is when it happens. Weil is about to help us see that where it is bears a surprising resemblance in some respects to incarceration. Prior to our confinement by an imposed theme, we are already prisoners, serving time and expiating for a crime.

In one of her more striking images, Weil asks us to “look upon each human being (image of oneself) as a prison inhabited by a prisoner, surrounded by the whole universe” (N 30). At first, this image seems intended only to point out that every human being is finite and therefore, in effect inhabits a finite world.

At the very best, a mind enclosed in language is in prison. It is limited to the number of relations which words can make simultaneously present to it; and remains in ignorance of thoughts which involve the combination of a greater number. These thoughts are outside language, they are unformulable [sic], although they are perfectly rigorous and clear and although every one of the relations they involve is capable of precise expression in words. ... (SWA 69).

⁷²⁶ On the *contraction* of the self, see section 1.3 above.

The prison represents the limited part of creation to which one presently has access through one's senses, one's intelligence, and most significantly (especially in light of our discussion of world-making in Chapter 5), one's language. Beyond this lie all the thoughts that are "outside language ... unformulable" in the limited vocabulary that even the most intelligent person possesses. This seems to refer to what the single individual finds "unformulable" in his or her own particular case. It would therefore vary from person to person, for these "unformulable" thoughts are evidently capable of being formulated: "every one of the relations they involve is capable of precise expression in words" (SWA 69). Weil's use of the word 'thought' here seems extremely broad, reminiscent of Descartes' "everything that is within us in such a way that we are immediately aware of it."⁷²⁷ But for Weil, what is essential is not the content of these thoughts, but one's knowing simply that they exist as a human possibility. Not to know this is to spend one's lifetime unaware that there is anything beyond one's personal world, one's 'prison' world—hence unaware that one is a prisoner. It follows that one would also be unaware that every other person is a prisoner, an ignorance having obvious ethical consequences.

... So the mind moves in a closed space of partial truth, which may be larger or smaller, without ever being able so much as to glance at what is outside.

If a captive mind is unaware of being in prison, it is living in error. If it has recognized the fact, even for the tenth of a second, and then quickly forgotten it in order to avoid suffering, it is living in falsehood. Men of the most brilliant intelligence can be born, live, and die in error and falsehood. In them, intelligence is neither good, nor even an asset. The difference between more or less intelligent men is like the difference between criminals condemned to life imprisonment in smaller and larger cells. The intelligent man who is proud of his intelligence is like a condemned man who is proud of his large cell. (SWA 69)

⁷²⁷ *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, ed. John Cottingham, et al. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press: 1984), 2:113.

One normally finds oneself in prison as punishment for a crime. Weil does not explicitly pursue this angle in her metaphor, but we can imagine how she might have: the crime for which each of us is imprisoned is the desire to *be*: “Our sin consists in wanting to be, and our punishment is that we believe we possess being. Expiation consists in desiring to cease to be; and salvation consists for us in perceiving that we are not” (FLN 218). Of course, “desiring to cease to be” is a description of decreation. The crime of “wanting to be,” according to Weil, is the sole evil that human beings bring into the world, hence “the quantity of evil in the world is precisely equal to the necessary amount of punishment. But it strikes haphazardly” (FLN 218). Both the evil and the punishment for evil are the same thing: *being*. The crime is universal, but since the punishment in the forms we tend to recognize it—misfortune, affliction and pain—depends on the laws of Necessity, and since for the most part we are ignorant of those laws, it seems to us to strike at random. Some people seem to go through life without ever experiencing a major mishap. Others appear to suffer terribly at every turn, or they “live lives of quiet desperation.”⁷²⁸ These appearances are in an important sense deceiving, however real the suffering they involve. Weil, as we noted earlier, maintains that the share of “punishment” one receives through the laws of Necessity is *irreducible*, the same for everyone. This counterintuitive idea was analyzed in Chapter 6.⁷²⁹ We now see that for Weil, one suffers not from the ‘evil side’ of being but from *being* itself. This is the key to her notion of the irreducibility of suffering.

Recall from Chapter 2 that Levinas’s striking trope of the self that “gnaws away” at itself was intended to represent the futility of trying to “come back from all things and concern oneself only with oneself” (OB 114). Levinas calls this inability to come back “remorse.” One must continually refashion the self in light of the other’s intrusion, and this refashioning naturally has the potential to produce regret at having to give up part of one’s old familiar self, although

⁷²⁸ Henry David Thoreau, *Walden*.

⁷²⁹ See above, p. 378.

normally the refashioning is so minor that we do it spontaneously and unconsciously. It is as though one's self continually runs into walls, with varying degrees of violence. (In the vast majority of cases, we might shift the metaphor to 'bumps in the road'.) Despite one's having grown inured to most of these little shocks, there could always conceivably be some awareness of a trace of disorientation or distress. On rare occasions, remorse over a major self-renovation would go further, all the way to expiation. But we have seen that in fact Levinas defines a basic form of expiation that coincides with subjectivity. In his sense, expiation actually accompanies all remorse, however fleeting. All the innumerable little set-backs and bumps that fill every moment count as remorse in his sense, just as do the major traumas. Therefore they are all "expiatory". Subjectivity is unremitting expiation.

Note that in either its ordinary sense or Levinas's, remorse typically involves a confrontation with what is usually understood to be the truth about oneself, although in the case of Levinasian remorse, one need not be conscious of it. To return to Weil's prison metaphor, let us couple this association of remorse and truth with Weil's idea that there is "a natural alliance between truth and affliction" (SWA 68): one does not only learn *from* suffering, but every disciplined contact with the real (Weil's definition of truth) *produces* suffering, since the real is always what disrupts the same and familiar. Now, a common image of remorse is 'beating one's head against the wall'. With this in mind, Weil's metaphor suggests that the remorseful person might suffer not simply out of regret for conscious injustices to others, but because he unaccountably feels trapped in a general way. The feeling of entrapment would result from a sense that there is a truth about himself that he would be wise to seek out but does not have the courage to. That truth would be the fact that one habitually *avoids* reality.

A man whose mind feels that it is captive would prefer to blind himself to the fact. But *if he hates falsehood*, he will not do so; and in that case he will have to suffer a lot. He will beat

his head against the wall until he faints. He will come to again and look with terror at the wall, until one day he begins afresh to beat his head against it; and once again he will faint. And so on endlessly and without hope. One day he will wake up on the other side of the wall.

Perhaps he is still in prison, although a larger one. No matter. *He has found the key*; he knows the secret which breaks down every wall. He has passed beyond what men call intelligence, into the beginning of wisdom. (SWA 69, emphasis added)

The remorse of the prisoner whose crime is *wanting to be* results from the fact that he still exists, is still trapped in 'his own little world'. It therefore constitutes a motive for decreation. Here, intellectual knowledge is useless, but one can use the awareness of its uselessness to go beyond intellectual knowledge, to wisdom. In doing so, Weil claims, one learns to "grasp thoughts which are inexpressible" (SWA 69-70). How is that possible? What can it mean to *grasp* an inexpressible thought? Writing of thought in a way that suggests Descartes' broad application of that word to include virtually every conscious mental event, Weil almost makes it sound as if even in this case one attains something like Cartesian clearness and distinctness of perceptions. But although, like Descartes, she begins by distinguishing clarity from opinion, in the end the result is something un-Cartesian, transcending rather than validating the cogito:

The mind which is enclosed within language can possess only opinions. The mind which has learned to grasp thoughts which are inexpressible because of the number of relations they combine, although they are more rigorous and clearer than anything that can be expressed in the most precise language, such a mind has reached the point where it already dwells in truth. It possesses certainty and unclouded faith. And it matters little whether its original intelligence was great or small, whether its prison cell was narrow or wide. All that

matters is that it has come to the end of its intelligence, such as it was, and has passed beyond it. (SWA 69-70)

Here Weil might seem to equate certainty and faith, but what she means by certainty in this context is not positive knowledge. Perhaps “grasping” means knowing what to do in the sense of acting without hesitation, in obedience to an obvious prompting to non-active action. As we noted in Chapter 2, non-active action is a *non-thinking* action in the sense that the action involved is automatic—one acts with very little prior thought of *what* one is going to do—but it is in no way *thoughtless* action, since it is the consequence of a prior effort of attention. Recall that for Weil, truth is not a goal of knowledge but an orientation or a *discipline* that aims to un-conceal reality.⁷³⁰ The truth in which one dwells when the inexpressible thoughts become clear to the mind would be the ethical orientation that enables one to *know what to do*. The test of truth for Weil is always action. This would be ‘knowledge’ no human *intellect* is able to comprehend, since the relations relevant to whatever needs to be done (between persons, between persons and things, between one thing and another) are essentially infinite. The ‘knowledge’ from which one *acts* without hesitation is therefore not comprehension. Nor is it based entirely on hunch or instinct, since every situation, from an ethical point of view, is absolutely unique. One must pass all the way to the limits not only of one’s intelligence but of instinct, habituation, and Heideggerian comportment. One then passes *beyond* those limits, if one can, only through the practice of attention followed by non-active action and/or waiting.

We note parenthetically that Weil’s notion of truth is in accord with Levinas’s contention that truth is always the result of one’s being called into question by the other. Levinas and Weil both see truth as intimately connected with justice, justice always leading to action. What Levinas adds to this idea is his grounding of justice, and therefore truth, in the response-ability that makes one

⁷³⁰ See above, Introduction, pp. 47-50.

a subject. As in Weil, what is required to ‘know’ the truth is not a sharp intellect but the desire for the Good, as expressed in the willingness to approach the other.⁷³¹

Since attention and waiting, along with desire for the Good, are things of which anyone is capable, Weil declares that “a village idiot is as close to truth as a child prodigy” (SWA 70). What is important is not so much what one knows, but whether one is willing to give up reliance on conscious knowledge for the sake of a truth—that is, an orientation or way of living *in truth*—that lies beyond it. Anyone can do this, at least if they are not the victim of soul-destroying affliction. The real difficulty it involves is the same for all, irreducible like one’s measure of suffering, to which living in truth is not unrelated.⁷³² “The one and the other [person] are separated from [the truth] only by a wall,” but it is the same wall for everyone—the wall of one’s own self. In the following passage, Weil surely has in mind her own case as a sufferer from affliction.

But the only way into truth is through one’s own annihilation; through dwelling a long time in a state of extreme and total humiliation.

It is the same barrier which keeps us from understanding affliction. Just as truth is a different thing from opinion, so affliction is a different thing from suffering. (SLA 70).

To experience total “annihilation” would mean giving up reliance on everything one thought one knew. Where would one then find oneself? Nowhere—that is, on the other- or *hither*-side of a self capable of locating itself in the world, of having a *place (lieu)*. Weil’s prison metaphor is an image of decreative hermeneutics: beating one’s head against the wall would stand for one’s

⁷³¹ For a summary of Levinas’s notion of truth, see the Introduction above, pp. 50-56.

⁷³² “There is a natural alliance between truth and affliction, because both of them are mute suppliants, eternally condemned to stand speechless in our presence” (SWA 68). My use of the phrase “living in truth” is intended to recall Vaclav Havel, whose notion in many ways resembles Weil’s idea of opposing oppression. See the Conclusion to her long essay “The Causes of Liberty and Social Oppression,” OL 115-17.

attempt to empty the void, to avoid the temptation of resting in the place where one is, in one's 'knowledge'. One can fear the temptation, and seek to avoid it, without knowing exactly what it is that tempts one. It comes down to the temptation simply to *be*, the crime for which one is in prison.

Things being ontologically what they are, one therefore finds oneself facing another wall. This is partly one's own fault: one's inveterate habit is immediately to reconstitute the same so as to set one's house in order again following the other's disturbance. But it is no longer the same 'house', and this is the "key". 'Progress' in decreative hermeneutics consists in finding oneself faced with a world which looks different—a little or a lot, all gradations must be possible—hence is capable of revealing responsibilities one did not know one had. There is therefore always something more to *do*, even if it is only to pay attention to the details and wait for a hint. Why beat one's head against the wall only to find oneself, on the other side, facing another wall? Weil does not explicitly say, but she does mention that the prisoner who blinds himself to the fact that he is a prisoner, who as a result does not beat his head against the wall, only thinks he is free and lives a lie (SWA 69). He fails in his actual isolation to discover that beings and *others* truly exist.⁷³³

Towards the very end of *Otherwise Than Being*, we learn more about what is on the other side of the wall. Of course, one finds another wall, but if 'the other side' corresponds to "the end of one's intelligence" (SWA 70), then one discovers oneself on the *hither side* of what was once the familiar and intelligible world. Levinas notes that the hither and beyond (*au deçà et au delà*) have "human significations"—"the trace of a departure, the figure of an irrecuperable past, the equality of a multiplicity, homogeneous before justice"—which "cannot be interpreted on the basis of disclosure" (a reference to Heidegger). They do not have a strictly ontological meaning, but

⁷³³ "From my childhood I have desired only to receive this revelation ... evil actions are those that hide the reality of things and beings, or those that it would be impossible to do if one truly knew that things and beings existed" (Weil, Letter to Bousquet, quoted in Vetö 1994, 171n60).

‘make sense’ only within the ethical proximity of the other: the “departure” is the other’s departure that leads to my remorse, the “irrecuperable past” is the other’s past which has always already passed and retreated from mine. Paradoxically, these significations only ‘make sense’ where the cogito that tries to make sense of the other begins to falter and finds itself thrown back to the hither side.

These significations are not only privative; they signify the end, or the *hither side*, of the dark designs of *inwardness*, the demythization of the myths, *the enlargement of a confinement* [*claustration*] which the abstract notion of freedom and nonfreedom do not exhaust. For here there is a complex of significations deeper and broader than freedom, which freedom animates [*que la liberté anime* (or, which animates freedom)]. Freedom is animation itself, breath, the breathing of outside air, where inwardness *frees itself from itself*, and is exposed to all the winds. (OB 179-80, translation altered, emphasis added)

To break through the wall—that is, to encounter the void, however this happens—is to discover in the most concrete way possible that one does not freely comprehend the other. On the other side, one breathes a cleaner, freer air for a moment. The atmosphere has the sharpness of otherness that makes one momentarily self-forgetful, a little lightheaded. Perhaps something about the other that one did not realize before seems suddenly obvious, or after a period of uncertainty it becomes obvious what to do. Of course, consciousness immediately fills the void, reconstitutes the world, and one finds oneself in another cell in another prison, another ‘version’. As noted earlier, consciousness naturally hates a void. Nonetheless the void represents the goal, in a sense, and imprisonment a kind of blessing in that it leads one to seek liberation—even in that which consciousness abhors. Although the void immediately fills up again, there has at least been an “enlargement” of spirit momentarily unchained from Being, signifying an “animation” more profound—on the hither side of—the dichotomy of freedom and confinement. There has

been an enlivening by the other, one's neighbor, who as an in-spiration from "beyond" makes possible the break-through—along with time-consciousness. To be-in-the-world just *is* to be a world-maker imprisoned in Being, but having the potential every moment to realize one's freedom from Being in the obsession of response-ability to the neighbor. Worldmaking, the making sense of things that enables being-in-the-world, is not only the crime and the punishment; the world one makes turns out to be one's route to absolution, for only *in the world* does one find others who interrupt and set one free of the for-itself, making it possible to be for-the-other—that is, a human subject.

Breaking through is the opening up of space within oneself, as when one opens up the inside of a house by knocking out an interior wall to make it more airy and welcome. What is amazing about human existence, Levinas implies, is that one can do this over and over:

To open oneself as space, to free oneself by breathing from confinement in oneself, already presupposes this beyond: my responsibility for the other and my inspiration by the other: the crushing charge—beyond—of alterity. That the breathing by which entities seem to affirm themselves triumphantly in their vital space would be a consummation, a denucleation of my substantiality, that in breathing I already open myself to my subjection to the whole of the invisible other, that *the beyond* or the liberation would be the support of a crushing charge, is to be sure surprising. (OB 180-81)

Liberation from Being would not, then, be *freedom from* the weight of responsibility, but *freedom for* the greater weight of responsibility for the other—and hence, responsibility for the entire universe. Thus Améry first found real liberation only when he told his story of imprisonment and torture *to* someone for whom he therefore became responsible. The example of Améry, someone

who suffered from real imprisonment and worse, reminds us of the issues that have motivated the present study all along, to which we return in the next section.

Weil does not speak explicitly of the subject as constituted by persecution and expiation, but from a different perspective she outlines something similar in her description of expiating for evil: “Since all good has some evil attached to it,” she writes, “it follows that if one desires the good and if one does not want to spread the corresponding evil around one, one is *obliged*, since it is impossible to avoid this evil, to *concentrate it upon oneself*” (N 414, emphasis added). She calls this “loving ... through and beyond the evil” (N 340). It is also, I think it is safe to say, expiation as substitution, or substitution as expiation. One might paraphrase Weil as follows, transferring what she says about good and evil to the more general situation in which alterity always persecutes (in Levinas’s sense) and expiation is the acceptance of this persecution: Since the experience of alterity is inseparable from evil (persecution), it follows that if one desires the other’s good and one does not want to spread the corresponding evil around one, then one is obliged to concentrate it upon oneself—which means making no distinction between the other’s suffering and one’s own, the other’s evil and one’s own. It is all the same human suffering, like the air we breathe, part of the evil of Being. Expiation for *every* other therefore amounts to taking up the unavoidable persecution of alterity that might have been meant for *any* other and owing one’s identity in this very ‘taking-up’ alone. While the will may be involved in subsequent acts that one’s persecution by alterity inspires, the original taking up of persecution is founded not on an act of will but on the passivity of *substitution* which, prior to conscious action, creates one as a subject. Writes Levinas:

We have to speak here of expiation as uniting identity and alterity. The ego is not an entity “capable” of expiating for the others: it is this original expiation. This expiation is involuntary [*involontaire*], for it is prior to the will’s initiative (prior to the origin). It is as

though the unity and uniqueness of the ego were already the hold on itself of the gravity of the other. In this sense the self is goodness, or under the exigency for an abandon of all having, of all *one's own* and all *for oneself*, to the point of substitution. ... Goodness invests me in my obedience to the hidden Good. ... The self is the very fact of being exposed under the accusation that cannot be assumed, where the ego supports the others, unlike the certainty of the ego that rejoins itself in freedom.⁷³⁴

Thus what Weil says about the penitent individual also holds in a less obvious way, according to Levinas, for the individual's relations with every guilty other: "In the life of the individual," Weil writes, "the innocent must always suffer for the guilty because punishment is expiation only if it is preceded by repentance." That is, if one feels remorse for one's own guilt, then one's suffering becomes innocent suffering, hence expiation. "The penitent, having become innocent, suffers for the guilty, whom the repentance has abolished" (FLN 115). If, as Levinas argues, one never truly suffers only for oneself, and expiation is always for the sufferings of *all* others in one's suffering for oneself, then the innocent and the guilty are essentially the same person—namely me.

"Humanity, regarded as a single being, sinned in Adam and expiated in Christ" (FLN 116).

Primo Levi might seem to disagree. Not always, he insists, are the innocent and the guilty the same person. "The oppressor remains what he is, and so does the victim. They are not interchangeable" (Levi 1986, 15). But unless they *are* interchangeable in *some* sense, what can it mean to say that the one is substitutable for the other, as Levinas contends? For that matter, how can Levi make the observation he does unless he can see himself in the other's place, just because both he and the other are human? Does he not, at the very least, imagine himself from the other's point of view (this is not yet substitution, of course)? Levi is right to object that the innocent and the guilty are not the same person, but only if the guilt meant here is that which follows from the

⁷³⁴ OB 118. The English translation incorrectly has "voluntary".

failure to act according to one's responsibilities (plural). Responsibilities are a matter of justice, as opposed to the responsibility (singular, both grammatically and ethically) which is being-for-the-other. The freedom to be-for-the-other might be called the lowest common denominator between any one human being and any other. This freedom is the same thing as one's vulnerability, one's substitutability. In that sense I am indeed interchangeable with every other person. Thus the other is never so destitute or so evil that one cannot consciously take their place *in some sense*. This is the secret one learns on the other side of the wall.

But could one become so destitute oneself, or so persecuted, that one lost even the ability to do this? We must return now to the destitution of the oppressed, the victims of torture and real imprisonment. How does one witness to them? What is their own 'testimony'? Could they remain forever trapped in the same cell, with no possibility of finding themselves on the other side of the wall? We made some attempt to answer these questions in Chapter 7. It then remains to place the incomplete answers we found there into some sort of provisional perspective.

8.3 The Concentrationary Legacy

In this final section we review the questions that have motivated the present study throughout, keeping in mind that whatever 'answers' we have found are provisional.

First of all, *what does affliction teach us about human subjectivity?* That it is inescapably and limitlessly vulnerable. As with many things human, we do not sufficiently appreciate the depth of our vulnerability. Every human relation is subject at every turn to the vagaries of what Weil calls Necessity. Not that there first exists a subject which only *then* becomes vulnerable because it discovers itself in a threatening world. Instead, Levinas shows, one *becomes* a subject by being

subjected to the Other continually. A subject is pure vulnerability, to the other person and to alterity in general: there is no place, manner, or form in which a human being ever ceases to be vulnerable. If one found such a place, where the threat of affliction no longer existed, one would no longer be human. It follows that it is impossible for a human being to become the slightest bit less vulnerable than it presently is, since its essence, if we may use that term, *is* limitless vulnerability. Subjectivity is the vulnerability, and the response-ability to the other's vulnerability, that Levinas calls *the ethical*. It is no coincidence that Nazi cruelty against the vulnerable was coupled with a resolute denial on the part of its perpetrators of their own vulnerability. One can dedicate oneself to destroying the other's subjectivity only by denying one's own.

The vulnerability of the subject is therefore not simply one of its attributes. Levinas emphasizes that it *signifies*, and what it signifies is nothing more nor less than vulnerability itself. The circularity of this signification, according to Levinas, is the subject's "glory" (*gloire*).⁷³⁵ Vulnerability's "response to the infinite"—that is, to the infinite demands of the other—is a continual "conversion" of vulnerability into responsibility-without-limit-or-condition. This is what Levinas means by "infinite" responsibility—an unceasing "approach to the other" which validates repeatedly the subject's own vulnerability as well as the other's (OB 12), vulnerability continually converted into vulnerability, the substance of one's *non*-identity in recurrence. "This breakup of identity, this changing of being into signification, that is, into substitution, is the subject's subjectivity, or its subjection to everything, its susceptibility, its vulnerability, that is, its sensibility" (OB 14).

Is it possible for affliction to destroy the very humanity of a human being? Here—if not in all of these questions, although perhaps in a subtler way—the answer must remain equivocal because

⁷³⁵ See OB 144-48.

the question is an ethical one. *Yes*, in the sense that everything human is vulnerable without limit. *No*, in the sense that human vulnerability endures and testifies to one's humanity. The contradiction is not resolved by logic but by ethics. One's vulnerability may not sound like the sort of thing one should want most to preserve, but we must remember that nothing we know of is vulnerable in the way that a human being is vulnerable, and that everything about a human being comes under the sway of vulnerability. The fact that "all this signifies a subjectivity that suffers and offers itself before taking a foothold in being" (OB 180) is the definitive significance of subjectivity that Heidegger missed, the reason his philosophy found no need for an ethics beyond the *ethos* of Being, no need to consider subjectivity as subjection to the other *person*.

Above all, any question as to whether the other *is* or *is not* a human being must be removed from the domain of ontology. One answers, always for oneself, the question of the other's vulnerability by the way in which one responds to them. Since the question is an ethical one, its answer depends solely on one's responsibility, one's ability to respond to the being whose vulnerability presents itself to one as unique and *other* simply through one's hesitating for a moment to turn it into more of the same. This hesitation is what Weil means by attention. We have seen that she ascribes to attention the ability literally to give reality, *as a human being*, to the person who receives it.

What does it mean to witness to the other's affliction? One answer we have given to this question has been, in essence, that we expiate for every other person's suffering all the time. Expiation, as Levinas defines it, is proximity, substitution, hence one's very subjectivity. This would mean that every one of us already witnesses every moment to the suffering of any other one of us, without exception. One's very subjectivity is the meaning of witness—even witnessing to those whom one has never known.

But one cannot help wondering whether this answer and the interpretation that supports it are nothing more than an intellectual curiosity. How does knowing that one is already a witness in this rather special *theoretical* sense, as compared to the everyday understanding of witnessing, lead to more effective witnessing to affliction *in practice*? How does it help us to become aware of the concentrationary universe, which survivors of the Shoah warn us we need to recognize as more and more pervasive, for the most imperative practical reasons? Here it might be useful to recall Levinas's remarks on theory and practice at the beginning of *Totality and Infinity*. Levinas reminds us first of all, as he argues repeatedly, that ethics is "already an optics" in that the subject witnesses to the other, *sees* him or her as *other*, in obeying a "command" that transcends one's understanding:

Already *of itself* ethics is an "optics." It is not limited to preparing for the theoretical exercise of thought, which would monopolize transcendence. The traditional opposition between theory and practice will disappear before the metaphysical transcendence by which a relation with the absolute other, or truth, is established, and of which ethics is the royal road. ... We shall go further, and, at the risk of appearing to confuse theory and practice, deal with both as modes of metaphysical transcendence. The apparent confusion is deliberate and constitutes one of the theses of this book. (TI 29)

Metaphysical transcendence refers, of course, to the transcendence of alterity, which *Totality and Infinity* argues is ethical, expressing it using the metaphor of *height*. We encounter not only the other in practice, but also truth in theory, as though coming to us from a commanding elevation. This, Levinas says, is because truth is "a relation with the absolute other": *any* relation with the other that does justice to the other is an expression of—in fact *is*—the truth, and conversely, nothing can be the truth if it betrays the other. Every truth is a truth about the other, about an "exteriority" that must be dealt with practically. "The aspiration to radical exteriority, thus called

metaphysical”—that is, the desire for the other which Levinas calls *metaphysical desire*—“the respect for this metaphysical exteriority which, above all, we must ‘let be’”—this desire that motivates practice, Levinas says, “constitutes truth” (TI 29). Weil would put it a little differently—her *other* is more explicitly (her idea of) the Christian God, and she might speak of reality rather than of truth—but the idea that one should *let things be*, as other than and apart from oneself, is the practical point of decreation. Both Weil and Levinas associate the goal of knowledge or understanding with the object of love, the Other, however differently they present it. Both therefore discount the “traditional opposition” that makes practice subservient to theory, on roughly the same principle: namely that *the other and the imperative to learn what one owes him or her exceeds in importance the distinction between theory and practice*. The goal of all knowledge must ultimately be to facilitate one’s discovering the needs of one’s neighbor. Hence the contents of that knowledge, *of itself and by its very nature*, will demand that it be put into practice as soon as possible. Otherwise it is false.

We have in fact seen in the course of this work that Weil conflates theory and practice in her notion of decreative attention. In order to understand—or more accurately, simply *see*—the other, one must practice a hermeneutics of the void, continually leaving empty the mental ‘representation’ of the alterity to be experienced, emptying the void of whatever consciousness uses to fill it since every thought one entertains regarding the other (not to mention miscellaneous distractions) is a betrayal. One might think that in this process there would be a danger either of accidentally emptying the mind of the very thought one needs and is waiting for, or of never arriving at an outcome. This cannot happen, Weil assures us, because the necessary thought is always only the one that leads *immediately* to action. If it does not do so, and if one “hates falsehood” (SWA 69), then one must simply wait and continue emptying the void. One’s guarantee that the ‘right’ thought or action will eventually occur is simple: one has only to maintain a desire for the Good. “Silence all the motives, all the incentives in yourself, and you

will nevertheless act, impelled by a source of energy which is other than the motives and the incentives” (N 247). Weil really does mean *all*. The required source of energy is nothing more than one’s love of the Good.

For Weil and Levinas both, witnessing to affliction means silencing *every* thought in which one might take refuge, even if only for a moment, from the task of facing affliction for what it is and requires of one. *Waiting with attention* is itself one’s constant and silent witness to reality, and specifically to the suffering of others. How does this *silent* witness translate into testimony in the usual sense? That will depend upon the witness. One cannot predict the outcome, the *action* required, because the action is always a product of the moment. One will receive it as a gift, provided one refuses to give up the process of attention.

Testimony is usually expressed in language. It implies *conscious* witnessing, beyond the primordial witness of subjectivity. In order to testify in words (for example) to the other’s suffering, or to one’s own, one not only needs to be aware of human vulnerability as something one shares in equal measure with everyone, but must also consent to it consciously as defining for the human subject. Without knowledge of one’s own vulnerability to suffering, the other’s will remain largely invisible. By contrast, to rebel against the existence of suffering, whether one’s own or another’s, is not to see its reality—the fault for which Weil reproaches Ivan Karamazov. But Weil is making the deeper point that if consent is equivalent to learning to love the Good “through and beyond” the other’s suffering,⁷³⁶ it follows that one can witness to affliction in no other way than through one’s own *decreation*. In the previous chapter, this idea was behind the notion of decreative reading. Needless to say, the same also calls for decreative writing, decreative listening, decreative political action—decreative testimony in general. All of these, as forms of non-active action, are based on the necessity that one remove the obstruction of self-will

⁷³⁶ N 255. See the previous chapter, pp. 440-41.

from between the ethical self and the other. As we showed in Chapter 2, non-active action is the work of justice, and insofar as it is justice, a testimony to the truth.

This brings us finally to the most difficult case, the question that has haunted our work from the beginning: *how can one witness to those who seem to have been deprived, through dehumanizing treatment, even of the inviolable part of their souls, the victims of atrocity at its worst.* For if we remember their treatment *as* dehumanizing, then we seem to acknowledge that evil has the power to violate even the inviolable part of the human soul. On the other hand, if we insist that something in the victims of atrocity always remains human until the end, we risk giving the lie to the full extent of their suffering, thereby reducing our own responsibility for the victims' reality as the human beings they are.⁷³⁷

As argued in chapter 5, this quandary characterizes the ethical itself in Levinas's sense. In a manner similar to the metaphor of the face—in which Levinas utilizes the phenomenality of the human face as a concrete example of a vulnerability that is not recognizable cognitively—so also here, one must witness to dehumanization in its very concreteness while at the same time refusing to deny the victims' humanity. In confronting either quandary with its contradictions, one is left not with *comprehension* but with the sense that one should be thinking in terms other than comprehension—whether it be giving the other the food from one's mouth or simply giving them greater attention. This is especially important if one is seeking to hear their testimony. Comprehension inevitably betrays the other, whereas the goal must always be to make the human otherness of the other, particularly their pain, increasingly present to oneself. Thus when Levinas writes in *Totality and Infinity* that “the judgment of history is set forth in the visible,” but then adds that “the visible forms, or tends to form, a totality,” and then adds that “it excludes the

⁷³⁷ See Hatley 2000, esp. chapters 3 and 4. Hatley's insights have played an important role in the development of my ideas in this section. Hatley makes no mention of Weil.

apology” (TI 243)—the apology he refers to is the other’s, not one’s own. In order that the other’s apology, their testimony, can be heard, one’s own desire for comprehension must be silenced or at least rendered subordinate. But this requires that one’s conscious witnessing use the concrete in a particular way: as an intermediary or *metaxu* in a decreative phenomenology of the victim’s dehumanization.

Levinas, of course, argues all along that the other’s apology is always already ‘heard’ in every encounter: ‘heard’ before the encountering subject is aware of it. This is precisely how one becomes a subject: one ‘hears’ the apology in the mere act of going toward the other, not before, hearing it in one’s obedience to the apology’s command. But the question we are considering here is not, as it was earlier, that of the ethical nature of the encounter as subjectivity producing; it concerns what must happen in order *consciously* to hear the other’s testimony. This will depend on factors in addition to the ethical in Levinas’s strict sense. Approaching the other can result in consciously hearing the other’s testimony only if certain conditions are met—such as, that one has silenced one’s own apology for oneself, along with the desire for comprehension which makes the other the same by assimilating him or her into one’s world. This is because one is not consciously and truly aware of another person’s pain and suffering unless one has given second place to one’s own. To recall Weil’s image of the grimy window, there are things one will not see in the other when one tries to look through the distortions produced by self-interest—distortions which are always present, if in nothing else then in the universal human desire for the ‘safe and same’. In the end, when faced with another’s suffering, the question ‘What about me?’ should only be what one *hears*—that is, from the *other*—not what one *says*, either to oneself or to anyone else. As for what one can testify about the other, this will follow from a decreative hermeneutics of the void, hence it need not take the form of positive knowledge by any means. Instead, it could very well be implicit in one’s non-active action.

Weil's contribution to the discussion has been mainly on the conscious, practical side. There she does indeed reinforce Levinas's argument that we are not duped by morality, but it is Levinas who provides the necessary metaphysical ground in the ethical without which Weil's more persistently concrete thinking, in spite of her 'mysticism', can too easily give the false impression of being merely her personal religious philosophy. Levinas brings out the philosophical rigor latent in Weil's fragmentary writings. On the other hand, a reading of Levinas alongside Weil concretizes his phenomenological methodology by supplying ideas towards a surprisingly (for him) *hermeneutical* practice or 'method'—in fact a way of *living with* ethical quandary.

One final technicality should be addressed before closing. Certainly comprehension can easily find itself silenced before the indubitable *presence* of suffering in oneself or others, if it is extreme enough. But given the privacy of the experience, even firsthand witnessing of can be notoriously uncertain. *What chance, then, can hearing of suffering second- or thirdhand have as a witness to the victims' protest against "the judgment of visible history"?* The question as phrased either forecloses the possibility of a suitable answer, since it shifts the emphasis away from the ethical, or it answers itself once one sees the category mistake. One needs to avoid picturing the difference between firsthand witness and later-hand witness in terms of spatial or temporal distance. What is to be spanned or reduced is not time or space, but the *ethical* remoteness of the alterity of the sufferer. This remoteness is a paradox, for we have learned that the other is also already *infinitely close*. The innovative nuance Levinas adds to the consideration of the problem of later-hand witness is therefore the certainty that the layers of testimony are *already reduced* by what he calls the other's *proximity*, independently of the limits of space and time. Levinas proposes that *there is no distance at all* that needs to be spanned in an ordinary temporal or spatial sense, but only one's response-ability that needs to be acknowledged consciously, one's obligation to the suffering other to reduce the *ethical* distance between the response-ability that continually makes one a subject, and the responsibilities of justice. One is

compelled to make contact with every other through the witness of one's obedience to their ethical command. Recall that for Levinas, the other is already in some sense *within*, destabilizing one's world from 'inside' through the identical cause that destabilizes it from the 'outside': the intrusion of alterity. This happens automatically every instant simply as a result of living in society with others. The problem here is that of recognizing the destabilizing as an opportunity for the work of justice rather than for totalization. Such a recognition requires the decreative non-active action of attention—equivalently, a decreative phenomenology of the other person, or at least a decreative hermeneutics. In either case, since consciousness itself totalizes, what is required is a shift away from ontological categories towards the ethical.

We have seen that attention, as Weil means the word, is not simply noticing or concentrating intently on some object; it is a kenotic or self-emptying experience of alterity that literally gives the other reality. It does this, of course, not by the application of will to the intentional act of creating space in one's world for the other, but by removing the will and substituting pure consent to the *real*—for it is precisely the will that covers over reality with an imagined 'reality' that is conceived for the purpose of keeping the world 'safe and same', but which excludes the other. The motivation for attention, on the other hand, is nothing more than love of the Good—that is, consent to reality just as it is, over and above any question of safety or comfort. As we have rehearsed in many ways already, this move is essentially that of decreation. It is not intentional. In effect, Levinas teaches that its primordial motivation is simply the approach of the other which makes one response-able in spite of oneself—that is, substitution. One is forced to make room in one's world for the other every instant. To do justice to the testimony of the victim of atrocity, whether encountered first-, second-, or third-hand, one need only translate this process into conscious action. To that end, learning the historical facts behind the other's victimization—however essential such knowledge might be in service to one's attention—must before all else serve one's decreative opening to non-active action.

The following passage from Weil's well known work, *Waiting for God*, could almost serve as a summary not only of this idea but of her entire thought:

The love of our neighbor in all its fullness simply means being able to say to him: "What are you going through?" It is a recognition that the sufferer exists, not only as a unit in a collection, or a specimen from the social category labeled "unfortunate," but as a man, exactly like us, who was one day stamped with a special mark of affliction. For this reason it is enough, but it is indispensable, to know how to look at him in a certain way.

This way of looking is first of all attentive. The soul empties itself of all its own contents in order to receive into itself the being it is looking at, just as he is, in all his truth.

Only he who is capable of attention can do this. (WG 64-64)

It would plainly mistake Weil's meaning to assume that by attention she means actually looking the other person in the face—however important that may be when addressing them if physically present—just as it is a mistake to identify Levinas's *face* solely with the physical part of the body, however important that one part is. Not only is something more required than visual perception "in order to receive into [oneself] the being [one] is looking at, just as he is, in all his truth"; what is required is a different sort of vision altogether. Attention in Weil's sense is more than a manner of *perceiving*, whatever one means by the word. Would it be going too far, by way of conclusion, to conflate it with *the ethical* as Levinas means it? The ethical as response-ability is one's reception of the other into oneself, "just as he is, in all his truth"—in other words, *attentive response* at the pre- or extra-conscious level.

The present work has attempted to give structure to this way of looking by proposing a decreative phenomenology. One of its primary theses has been the idea that ethics, evidence of one's own extreme vulnerability, is itself vulnerable and in need of preservation. In the same way

that we preserve the other's alterity by not refusing or denying their disruptions of the familiar 'sameness' of our personal world, we preserve the ethical itself by allowing attention, in Weil's sense, an opportunity to do its unique work in us of interrupting and taking charge of our mental processes. Needless to say, there is as great a need for this in philosophy as in ordinary life, calling for a phenomenology founded on a hermeneutics that takes into account the vulnerability and inscrutability of the other. The philosophical basis Levinas provides for this phenomenology is the deeper grounding Weil was unable to give her own ideas in her too-short life. In return, Weil's religious metaphysics opens up for Levinas's ethical metaphysics a hermeneutically nuanced way of "reading" the world and the other, namely decreatively.

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