Emmanuel Levinas and the Meaning of Ecological Responsibility

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EMMANUEL LEVINAS AND
THE MEANING OF ECOLOGICAL RESPONSIBILITY

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the Louisiana State University and Agricultural and Mechanical College in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in The Department of Philosophy and Religious Studies

by
Joe Matthew Larios
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For my parents
“My mother is a fish.”
—William Faulkner, *As I Lay Dying*
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ABSTRACT

Recent work in eco-phenomenology has often tried to find a way to situate Emmanuel Levinas’s ethical philosophy in a way that would be productive for environmental ethical concerns. This has often proved difficult due to the anthropocentrism of Levinas’s philosophy and the sometimes inconsistent interpretations of what the face of the Other signifies and whether it should be understood as perceptually present to the one who “sees” it in any way. This, combined with a general lack of engagement with Levinas’s writings on politics, has often made an ecological interpretation of Levinas difficult or awkward.

In this thesis, I try to address these concerns in order to establish my own ecological extension of the work of Emmanuel Levinas. I do this by first offering my own interpretation of his ethical and political ideas and how they appear connected in significant ways that preclude the possibility of making one separate from the other. This I use as the basis for the tripartite argument that follows where I, first, analyze the anthropocentrism of Levinas’s philosophy to show that it was not only not well thought out but, also, not essential to the core of his philosophical ideas and then show what factors influenced the development and context of his anthropocentrism. From there, I go on to demonstrate how the experience of hunter-gatherer animists shows us that the face of the non-human Other can be seen by humans and draw out some of the implications of this for Levinas’s philosophy before, finally, looking at the work of Hans Jonas in relation to Levinas and the animistic experience to clarify the connection between the face of the Other and the metabolic structure of living organisms. This will then lead us into a discussion on the status of inanimate matter as well. The consequences of all this are then schematized and briefly examined in the final chapter before ending with a few reflections on where we might go from here in the conclusion.
INTRODUCTION

Can there be an ethics that leads us beyond humanity? What would this mean and to whom would it apply? And what implications would this have for politics in its structure and policies? These are some of the implacable questions that first began the thoughts that are now organized in this study; thoughts whose vocabulary and theoretical articulation formed themselves in response to an encounter with the work of Emmanuel Levinas. In a text primarily concerned with making ethical sense of ecological questions, he might seem to be a strange figure to choose to build upon but, as will become clear, the shortcomings of Levinas’s personal beliefs are not necessarily core features of his philosophical analysis. They seem to function more as points of arbitrary limitation on an analysis whose scope of application cannot be so easily delineated. Indeed, in his later interviews, Levinas would often answer questions concerning our ethical relation to animals in ambiguous ways that betrayed a surprising lack of sophistication, as if he had been caught off guard by such questions. He certainly did not have access to the insights that we have found in the development of ethology as a field of inquiry. Nevertheless, his philosophy is not archaic or underdeveloped. In fact, despite his anthropocentrism, he was able to develop a robust analysis of the place of responsibility in the constitution of the subject and the meaning of sociality as well as how these come together in conscious judgement, eventually leading to the formation of State institutions from out of these experiences.

The goal of this study will be to understand the basics of what Levinas himself theorized as it pertains to our concern here which is with the question of ecological responsibility. That is, we will seek to understand what ecological responsibility might mean, how it expresses itself, and to whom it pertains both in terms of which beings experience responsibility to Others and which beings constitute those Others to whom we are responsible. In the process, we will take a
journey through archaeology, anthropology, biology, ethology, and even some botany and oncology. Of course, a journey that seeks to, at least, gesture towards an answer to such broad and significant questions will be necessarily broad in scope. However, this also demonstrates the fact that things are always entangled with one another just as all beings, living and non-living, always exist related to one another, dependent on one another, right under and over top of one another even within the “same” space.

These entanglements, in academic inquiry, we seek to disentangle as much as possible so as to focus on what we have created as our isolated object of inquiry. Consequently, we have had to do the same here towards the clarity and purpose of our guiding questions but not without a recognition of this entanglement, as seen in this disciplinary instability required to situate our study. That is, what we have looked at here, to the degree that it has formed itself such that we could study it, is a “thing” in the sense that Tim Ingold uses the term, that is, as something that “has the character not of an externally bounded entity, set over and against the observer, but of a knot whose constituent life-lines, far from being contained within it, continually trail beyond, only to mingle with other lines in other knots.”¹ Ecological responsibility, because it is ecological is tied up with the dynamic systems to which it is related and has similar qualities as a “thing” of inquiry. We will seek to make sense of it but will not be able to fully tie it down, seeking only to see how its life-lines come together to form it and make it perceptible to us. As such, we will arrive at some ideas concerning the nature of ecological responsibility while leaving open what to do next.

The structure of this study is in three parts such that the first two chapters form a single section in which the goal is to establish what my interpretation of Levinas’s work is so that it can

be referred back to and built upon in the chapters to follow. The next three chapters will form the basis of my argument which will then be synthesized together in the final chapter where I draw out the consequences of this argument for the meaning of ecological responsibility.

In chapter 1, we will look at the meaning of ethics as it is found in the work of Levinas but especially as he discusses it in *Otherwise than Being*. What will become clear is that what Levinas focused on in his earlier works, that is, the way to escape from the *there is* becomes nuanced in his later work clarifying the fact that the *there is* is not antecedent to ethics. This is why Levinas will say that the Good comes before Being since, for him, the Good—understood as responsibility for the Other which is the condition for all sociality—is what produces the subject as a posited being since the subject only stands as a subject insofar as it stands *in relation* to something else and is open to the alterity that it must engage in. Hence, Levinas will call the subject a null-site of passivity. In this way, we will see that the subject is defined as relationally constituted. The *isolated* subject will be neither first nor last, but a denial of sociality itself which is how we will discover that the experience of the *there is* is tied to an experience of solitude and arelationality.

In chapter 2, we will move beyond the ethical ideas of Levinas to see what he has to say about politics. What will be significant for our purposes is the way in which the Other is connected to the third and how this relates to the concrete choices I must make in the world. That is, for Levinas, to make a concrete choice requires going beyond subjectivity and into consciousness, since it is in consciousness that we render judgements. Thus, for Levinas, consciousness will be understood as always being a *political* experience because politics will be understood by him as the site in which decisions must be made through the comparison of incomparables. In other words, whereas the ethical experience is between two, the political
experience will be between at least three where the third who shows up destabilizes my duopoly with the Other since s/he is also an Other. The attempt to meet all these competing claims will become the definition of justice and also define its mode of failure since these competing claims exclude the possibility of their all being met. But what also happens in the opening of the third which is found in the Other is the construction of the State since it is in the State that responsible beings come together to try and fulfill their responsibilities. What is important here is that we will discover that there are other beings who are responsible and with whom we are tasked to join to serve justice to the third. More than this, however, we will discover that it is the Others to whom I am infinitely responsible who are the same ones who experience, and thus have, their own responsibilities. This will explain how my responsibility becomes total (since I am responsible for his/her responsibilities) but will also place me in a position of fraternity with these Others who also serve the third since they will find themselves in the same condition as myself. What we will share will be only our infinite relation of responsibility to the Other and, by sharing this, we will come together to form the State. The importance of this chapter, then, will be in coming to understand what Levinas means by politics, how States form, and what it might mean to be in solidarity with the Other. All these points will become salient later as we try to understand how other types of communities form and understand themselves.

In chapter 3, we will begin to go beyond the letter of Levinas to see what else might be possible. This will begin through an analysis of how anthropocentrism manifests itself in his work. In particular, we will investigate his way of understanding the conatus essendi and his idiosyncratic way of defining the term “human.” From there, we will engage in a close reading of Section II of Totality and Infinity to get a better grasp of his understanding of the elemental (“anonymous” natural forces) and the importance he ascribes to the construction of the dwelling
space in which he believes interiority must develop itself such that it can open itself to ethics. This close reading will take us into a critique of the assumptions implicit in his account which we will challenge with a different account based on current archaeological evidence. In the process, we will try to show that the picture Levinas gives us is more akin to a mythos of agricultural settlement and hides within it problematic assumptions concerning the construction of a class of beings who have no value and can be appropriated without concern. This chapter will then end by looking at some of the socio-historical factors that led to the anthropocentric bias that we see in Levinas, and, more broadly, in society at large. This will be done by taking a closer look at the influence of agricultural settlement on human behavioral patterns before going on to do the same for the development of phonetic writing, the printing press, and their influence on the scientific naturalism in whose legacy we now live.

Chapter 4 will then take us into the time before agriculture, as well as the contemporary places outside of it, by looking at the cultural anthropology and ethnology of animistic hunter-gatherer tribes. The point of this exercise will be to get a better handle on the experience of humans living differently than the descendants of agriculturalists to get a sense of whether it might be possible to see the face of non-human Others in a context in which there is regular contact being had with non-humans. What we will discover is that this is, in fact, the case and that, by experiencing their world as totally suffused with relational persons, certain problems will arise that Levinas was able to sidestep by positing the elemental in the way that he did (as faceless). The primary problem will be that of predation. That is, in a relational world filled with persons, one still has to eat and how can this be justified when eating will necessarily mean eating a person. Dealing with this will serve to be one of the more difficult problems present in these societies and it will be dealt with primarily through different types of kinship strategies.
which will be described in some detail ranging from totemism to cannibalism. Through this analysis, we will discover new ways of thinking of key concepts found in Levinas including fraternity, the *there is*, and, of course, the Other and the third.

After establishing that it is possible for humans to experience the face of non-human Others in the previous chapter, we will move on, in chapter 5, to try and understand better what it is that is being perceived by these hunter-gatherer tribes since, in the previous chapter, we would have encountered the fact that animists will sometimes attribute animacy to stones, the sun, and other beings that we would consider inanimate. This will be done through an analysis of the special features of metabolic life-forms by taking a looking at Hans Jonas’s phenomenology of biology. What will become clear is that the precarity of the face is tied up with the mortality of a living being and that, due to the features that metabolic life-forms tend to share, life will tend to show itself in certain specific ways that, when experienced in relation to non-living things, will mark those inanimate things as animate persons. The qualities that will stand out will be the directed movement of living beings and their obstinate resistance to appropriation by others. Any inanimate object appearing to show these qualities will also appear as alive. From there, we will take a look at whether we should extend any moral concern to the inanimate realm of matter and will answer this question with a qualified yes. That is, inanimate matter will show up as something that concerns us insofar as it is related, both materially and socially, to animate beings and totally entangled with them, not to mention that, as will have been seen in chapter 3, the attempt to render any class of beings as outside moral concern will always be ethically problematic.

This will finally lead us into chapter 6 where I will extend my own theory of ecological responsibility. There I will attempt to show that, based on what has been argued so far, we
should look at the stable homeostatic functioning of ecosystems as based on the reciprocal reinforcement produced by the fact that every single being in that ecosystem is both concerned with all Others (as a being that experiences responsibility) and a concern for all others. This, however, will express itself concretely in different ways depending on the physical and mental limitations of the being in question. In this way, we will begin to see that the kinship systems we described in chapter 4 become applicable to any species community found in an ecosystem as a way of managing responsibility in a differential way in the context of a multitude of different species that I am related to. This picture will be found to be broadly consonant with Jean-Luc Nancy’s view of circulation and singularities and we will run with his idea that every singularity is composed of yet more circulating singularities beneath it. We will use this to make sense of the stability of all dynamic processes from the smallest to the largest. This will then form the backdrop from which we will describe how humans have exited this circulation of Being and come to dysregulate it so as to subordinate all beings to their own needs and desires. We will then end with some reflections on this situation that we find ourselves in and some suggestions for where we might go from here.

In the end, the goal of this work is to establish another way for understanding ourselves in this world and our relation to all the Others that surround us. A way which I hope will provide some insight into how we have arrived at the current ecological crisis that we find ourselves in and perhaps even give us some direction in considering ways of addressing or engaging with this problem in fruitful ways. At the very least, I hope to have given some voice to a feeling that I believe has been present in some of my own personal experiences in the world, present with these Others so different from myself. Perhaps, with all this, I can say that I have assisted, in some small way, to a better understanding of this Earth and our place within it and with it.
1 LEVINAS AND THE MEANING OF ETHICS

In the history of philosophy, the question of ethics has often been seen as a question of determining right action. It has been answered through the production of ethical systems that provide specific decision procedures that allow you to assess a situation and make a choice. We see this in deontology’s categorical imperative or in utilitarianism’s greatest happiness principle. As universalizable systems, their decision procedures are designed to allow for an ethical agent to apply them to any situation and produce an ethically justifiable action. But such decision procedures show significant limitations as any student of ethics has seen in examples such as the Trolley Problem or the Murderer at the Door. To address these issues, supporters of such systems have often engaged in theoretical acrobatics to try and plug up the holes in their system. The underlying logic of seeing ethics as something reducible to a universal decision procedure produced by an abstract system, however, has seldom been questioned except as a fall into moral relativism.

To this tendency towards the production of universalizable ethical decision procedures constantly revised to be as water-tight as possible, we can contrast the work of Emmanuel Levinas whose ethical philosophy can be situated more at the level of meta-ethics than normative ethics with the important proviso that his meta-ethics cannot be used as the basis for a normative ethical system as traditionally understood. That is, any “system” derivable from the ethical philosophy of Levinas would have to be constructed according to a logic of singularity, not universality, and would embrace its inevitable limits rather than attempt to erase them. The ethical philosophy of Levinas leads us elsewhere than where we have traditionally found ourselves when conceiving of ethics on the basis of knowledge, mastery, and control. And this elsewhere is what will be explored here.
In this chapter, I intend to, first, explain Levinas’s critique of ontology and show how this leads to his idea of the Good as coming before and constituting Being thus establishing ethics as first philosophy, second, explain his concept of the “face” and how it works to produce the subject as a free, responsible, speaking subject in a community of others and, third, address criticisms of his philosophy leveled by those who do not see it as “useful” enough to allow for the sorts of decision procedures that we have become used to by normative ethical systems.

**Breaking with Ontology**

The unique philosophical project of Emmanuel Levinas begins with his critique of the primacy of ontology which he believes has led us to a fundamental misunderstanding about the nature of how things are constituted and has brought us into a conceptual cul-de-sac that we have found ourselves stuck in. Traditionally, ontology has been thought of as a first philosophy that precedes the possibility of constructing any other philosophical questions because it deals with what *is*. In other words, before speaking about beings, we must first establish that there are beings and what the nature of beings having Being is. It is the attempt to *know* something about Being and here is where the problem will begin. If ontology is fundamentally about *knowing* then that means that the principle relation is that of a subject analyzing an object and making sense of it, making it comprehensible to *that subject*; it is a privileging of the subject. This is why Levinas will describe it as a reduction to the same, since that which is analyzed will be analyzed so that it can be comprehended within a framework produced by that subject according to a knowledge relation where s/he is master of it. Hence Levinas says that “[k]nowledge is always an adequation between thought and what it thinks. There is in knowledge, in the final account, an impossibility of escaping the self; hence sociality cannot have the same structure as
knowledge.”² In other words, the knowledge relation admits of no outside except as assimilation
to itself and so is structured according to the logic of the One to which everything is to be
reduced; there is no relationality. Thought reduces what it thinks to its own terms thereby making
it accessible but also making it its own.

By contrast, Levinas’s project will consist in thinking of this other structure that is
different than knowledge and which does allow for escaping the self and entering sociality. After
all, if the knowledge relation privileged in ontology reduces what is other to what is the same
then that means that, first, there must be an other to reduce and that, moreover, this reduction
entails a change in which something is lost. It is here that we will find a trace that will leads us
beyond ontology and the knowledge relation. This is how Levinas will attempt to place
something before Being as more originary (what he will call the Good) and thus place ethics in a
position anterior to metaphysics. This will be a necessary move and will be the solution to the
idea that Being could precede the Good which will show itself as senseless and absurd in his
description of the there is.

Escaping the There Is

As Levinas describes it, “the there is is unbearable in its indifference...the horror of the
unceasing, of a monotony deprived of meaning.”³ This is the experience of impersonal being
which has no reason except its own existence and takes on a character of absurdity and
arbitrariness and is identified with total meaninglessness. This is the “horror of immortality,

²Emmanuel Levinas, Ethics and Infinity, trans. Richard A. Cohen (Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne
University Press, 1985), 60.
³Ibid., Is It Righteous to Be?: Interviews with Emmanuel Levinas, trans. Jill Robbins and Marcus
perpetuity of the drama of existence, necessity of forever taking on its burden.”

It is the presence of an absence that fills up every gap.

In the early work of Levinas, the *there is* shows up as a problem in its arbitrary meaninglessness and totality. How is it possible that we can live in a meaningful world derived from this originary meaninglessness? Even as it is described as that which has “no exits,” Levinas will attempt to find a way to escape it for an escape will seem necessary if we are to arrive at a meaningful world rather than a purely arbitrary one. At first, he will see an opening in the positing of a being from out of impersonal Being but will quickly find that this provides only a temporary respite since the posited being is still subject to Being insofar as a being must persist in its own being and is thus enchained to Being’s unending drama of persistence. Hence, Levinas will be able to say that “the horror of the *there is* is close to disgust for oneself, close to weariness of oneself.”

He will describe his trajectory years later in an interview:

> Being which is posited, I thought, is ‘saved.’ In fact, this idea was only a first stage. For the ego that exists is encumbered by all these existents it dominates...From whence an entirely different movement: to escape the 'there is' one must not be posed but deposed...This deposition of sovereignty by the *ego* is the social relationship with the Other, the dis-inter-ested relation. I write it in three words to underline the escape from being it signifies...being-for-the-other, seemed to me, as early as that time, to stop the anonymous and senseless rumbling of being...Since that compelled my recognition and was clarified in my mind, I have hardly spoken again in my books of the ‘there is’ for itself.

What you see described in this passage is the moment at which Levinas inverts the traditional order between ethics and ontology. The problem of the *there is* was a problem of how a meaningful world could be constructed from the originary meaninglessness of impersonal Being. In other words, it was the problem of how we derive an account of value from a value-neutral

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5 Ibid., *Is It Righteous to Be?* 46.
6 Ibid., *Ethics and Infinity*, 51-52.
ontology. The solution was to realize that the problem itself arose out of a conceptual
misunderstanding that placed ontology antecedent to ethics when, in fact, the reverse is true. That
is, the “escape from being” that Levinas describes cannot be understood to occur after Being is
posited but is, rather, part of the constitution of Being itself. The Good will appear as that which
both precedes and structures the positing of Being while also existing within Being itself so that
it can have meaning; it will be Being’s other as its condition and its self-rupturing. Hence
Levinas will say that “[t]he Good is before being.” 7 The social relationship that deposes the ego
will turn out to be the very condition of the constitution of the ego as opposed to a moment
added on to an already constituted ego. The Good before Being will enter Being as its rupture.
The “escape” from Being that appears to come temporally after the constitution of Being will, in
fact, be a retrieval of an originary condition at the heart of its creation and ongoing condition.

It is through this first realization that leads to the inversion of the order of precedence that
Levinas will begin his project of establishing ethics as first philosophy. It will require a
rethinking of the meaning of ethics and its relation to Being which he will do through an
elaboration on a variety of concepts including metaphysical desire, freedom, responsibility,
fraternity, infinity, and alterity. These reflections will move away from the dominance of the self
found in ontology towards the idea of the Other which will be a necessary move in order to make
sense of how meaning enters Being and establishes value.

**The Good Beyond Being**

If the Good is otherwise than Being then it is not Being and not a being; neither a specific being
nor impersonal Being and yet it relates to beings without being reducible to them. The Good can
be understood as relationality itself; the ability for beings to relate to other beings in a way that is

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7Ibid., *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press, 1998), 122.
not reducible to vital need or use—non-indifferent concern. This is why Levinas will take some
time in describing the distinction between metaphysical desire and need since the difference
between these two perfectly illustrates what distinguishes an ethical relation from a knowledge
relation.

To have a need is to have a lack that can be filled, such as hunger. We seek out that which
can fill this lack and then we are satisfied. It is a simple relation of addition and subtraction. I
burn calories so I eat calories and then feel satisfied until I’ve burnt enough additional calories to
produce the hunger that tells me to eat again. Moreover, it has to do with me, what I need to be
satisfied and fulfilled. The object I seek is merely the conduit by which I satisfy myself and so
has nothing but use-value for me. It is for me. By contrast, what Levinas describes as
metaphysical desire is what the already satisfied being wants and exists beyond need since it is
not related to a lack that could ever be filled. As Levinas says, “it desires beyond everything that
can simply complete it...It is a generosity nourished by the Desired, and thus a relationship that is
not the disappearance of distance, not a bringing together...for it nourishes itself, one might say,
with its hunger.”8 And this focus on the Desired means that it is an inversion of the order of
priority found in the relation of need where the object sought is for the subject to assimilate. In
this case, “desire is an aspiration that the Desirable animates; it originates from its ‘object.’”9 The
already complete, satisfied subject is the one in whom a desire is aroused for that which cannot
give him/her anything, at least not in the realm of need or Being.

This impossibility of satisfying metaphysical desire turns out to be part of the idea of the
infinite. As Levinas puts it, “[t]he infinite in the finite, the more in the less, which is

8Ibid., Totality and Infinity, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press,
1969), 34.
9Ibid., 62.
accomplished by the idea of Infinity, is produced as Desire... A Desire perfectly disinterested—goodness.” In other words, the idea of Infinity is not experienced as thought but as Desire, a desire that can never be fulfilled and that forever binds me to the Other that arouses that desire in me. This is how we return to the idea of the Good since, if the Good is the capacity to care about something outside myself that has no use-value for me, then my experience of the Good will be as this constitutively unsatisfiable desire which marks my relation to the Other as infinite, that is, never to be resolved, even temporarily. This contrasts it to any relation of need or knowledge found within Being in which every lack is, in principle, satisfiable thus marking it as a totality that could be completed and into which everything could be assimilated. Of course, the constitutive impossibility of satisfying such metaphysical desire must be understood by the existent lest they behave as if it could be fulfilled. To believe that metaphysical desire can be fulfilled completely is to turn it back into a relation of knowledge and thus exit ethics. This will, in fact, be one of the dangers we encounter when turning to politics. That once we find ourselves in the exigencies of political systems, it will become all too easy to abrogate ethics and turn metaphysical desire back into a relation of need; to say that duty can be fulfilled and then move on. As we will see later, this is precisely the danger of a politics left to its own devices in which the face has been forgotten since such a politics has become too self-assured to realize its own limitations.

The Good, as understood through metaphysical desire, comes as something which cannot be contained within Being’s totality which is why it is identified with Infinity thus defining ethics as a relation with Infinity that is forever interminable. And yet this relation with Infinity will occur through Being, not as a being, but as a relation between beings; the priority of the

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10Ibid., 50.
other over the same, and in this way break with Being's own law which, for Levinas, is always that of the conatus essendi: the prioritization of my persistence in my being to the exclusion of all others. Hence he will say that “[t]he relationship with the Infinite is the responsibility of a mortal being for a mortal being.”\textsuperscript{11} Mortality here is important since it is only because I am mortal that I should like to privilege myself over the other, who is also mortal. It is also mortality that, by instituting a hard limit, makes my responsibilities constitutively impossible. That is, because I will die, I will never have enough time to be there for all others and because all others are mortal, I will never be able to save them from their ultimate fate of death so that “[m]y death is my part in the death of the other, and in my death I die the death that is my fault.”\textsuperscript{12}

What we find in Levinas’s concept of the Good is ultimately a relation of responsibility between mortal beings; the capacity to put the Other before the self and in this way get beyond what he sees as the law of Being. This is why he describes ethics as “the breakup of essence.”\textsuperscript{13} In ethics, we can see the Other, whose radical alterity represents an infinity uncontainable by Being, and which can never be assimilated in toto but with always a trace left behind. It is an opening to sociality because it is the site in which the Other is allowed to be as Other with a space conserved between us securing our difference and ensuring the necessity of our never-ending relation. As Levinas says, “we call the relation that attaches the Ego to the Other: the idea of infinity.”\textsuperscript{14} Goodness is thus found in Being but is not of Being since it is the relation of responsibility that one being can have for another which constitutes that gratuity that breaks with Being. And it is here that we encounter the Infinite that overflows Being.

\textsuperscript{12}Ibid., 39.
\textsuperscript{13}Ibid., Otherwise than Being, 14.
\textsuperscript{14}Ibid., Humanism of the Other, trans. Nidra Poller (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2003), 33.
Constituting the Subject

To think of the Good, or responsibility for the other, as that which breaks with the law of Being could easily lead us back into the idea that Being would exist _first_, after which a rupture with Being would produce ethics. As we have already discussed, however, this is not the case according to Levinas who places ethics antecedent to Being. The rupture with Being already exists before Being, precedes Being, structures it and constitutes it. In order to understand this, it will be useful to take a look at how Levinas understands the construction of the human subject and how freedom comes to be situated in relation to that subject.

What we have already described in the previous section as the Good: the relation of responsibility for another being that goes beyond any relation of knowledge by preserving the alterity of the Other through maintaining the distance that allows for relation rather than eliminating it into an assimilation, is something that Levinas argues is not added on to an already constituted subject but is an essential part of the constitution of that subject. In other words, the human subject comes to be _only_ as a responsible subject related to the Other and cannot come to be otherwise. The reason for this can be understood as the impossibility of adding on a capacity to a being after the fact of its constitution. In other words, a snake already born will not manifest the capacity to walk all of a sudden but those capacities it does manifest will have been within it as potential from the very beginning. These potential capacities, however, will not necessarily all come to fruition and the ones that do are subject to being lost for a variety of reasons.

In the case of the human, the possibility of ethics would mean that we are constituted with that potential as a part of our nature, however, ethics is a radically different sort of potential than the ability to walk or fly. The capacity for ethics means something different than an ontical feature of the human being. It is the capacity for value, meaning, and relation—for Goodness.
What this will mean for Levinas is that the subject comes into being as a relational subject. Moreover, this relational capacity of the subject is not just a minor capacity but the very meaning of its existence as a subject. This is how the subject will appear to be constituted as a non-coincident being, non-coincident with itself because of its being affected by alterity in its very structure. The subject’s constitution is a constitution in relation to what surrounds it which is why Levinas will describe it as a passivity and an exposure. In other words, the subject will be the null-site of an exposure to exteriority which will bring it into Being. As Levinas puts it, “[t]he subjectivity of the subject, as being subject to everything, is a pre-origininary susceptibility, before all freedom and outside of every present.”\textsuperscript{15} The subject is a “unicity that has no site…without the identity of the ego that coincides with itself, a unicity withdrawing from essence.”\textsuperscript{16} Constituted already as a null-site withdrawing from essence, we can see how the subject appears as that through which we will be able to access what is otherwise than Being for the subject will itself be constituted as an opening within Being itself.

This is how we arrive at the formula that the subject’s constitution comes \textit{from} the Other. Its exposure to alterity is what makes it what it is. This is what Levinas calls its structure as \textit{the other in the same}. As he puts it, “the other in the same is my substitution for the other through responsibility, for which I am summoned as someone irreplaceable. I exist through the other and for the other, but without this being alienation: I am inspired. This inspiration is the psyche.”\textsuperscript{17} My in-spiration, my psyche are breathed into me by the Other through whom I come to exist and this is before consciousness, before freedom, and before the “empirical order.”\textsuperscript{18} To come to exist is to come to exist as a relational being already charged with a responsibility for the Other. This

\textsuperscript{15}Ibid., \textit{Otherwise than Being}, 146.
\textsuperscript{16}Ibid., 8.
\textsuperscript{17}Ibid., 114.
\textsuperscript{18}Ibid., 116.
relation to the Other is, in fact, what will produce my own experience of inwardness which “is not a secret place somewhere in me; it is that reverting in which the eminently exterior, precisely in virtue of this eminent exteriority, this impossibility of being contained and consequently entering into a theme, forms, as infinity, an exception to essence, concerns me and circumscribes me and orders me by my own voice.”¹⁹ In other words, it is the exception to essence that makes me other to myself and breaks me out of Being by making me responsible for another. The impossibility of my being a solitary ego without any relation to others is what will produce my experience of inwardness and time. The non-coincident subject traveling through time is nothing if not a null-site reacting to its constant exposure to an exteriority that is outside it. If I could be totally alone as a sovereign ego then I would not have a relation with anything and I would not need to react to anything outside myself that would not already be known and predicted by myself; it would be the standing still of time and the death of all relation.

The point of all this is to say that the essential structure of human subjectivity is such that it could not exist as it does without its relation to an Other that concerns it and that this relation to the Other is not merely an optional, ontical contingency but is, in fact, constitutive of the fundamental structure of human subjectivity such that, without the Other, the human subject as we know it would cease to exist. Subjectivity only makes sense in the context of being with Others who could concern it. This means that subjectivity is structured as essentially open to exteriority and to sociality and communication. The emergence of social institutions and language are a consequence of this fundamental structure of human subjectivity. In other words, because we are constituted as responsible for the Other in our fundamental structure, we engage in sociality and communication which helps to facilitate our responsibilities. In fact, it is through

¹⁹Ibid., 147.
this originary relation of responsibility to the Other that consciousness and freedom will come to be; it will form their condition.

**Responsibility Before Freedom**

If freedom has traditionally been understood as the ability to dispose of your time as you see fit without any constraints placed upon you by anyone else then it would seem paradoxical that Levinas would argue that the fundamental condition necessary for freedom is responsibility for the Other. A responsibility would be a constraint on my freedom. The idea of freedom, however, needs to be elaborated on to make sense of this paradox.

Back when Kant was writing the *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, the Universe was believed to be deterministic and the problem of freedom was essentially one of asking whether there could be any room for freedom in a deterministic Universe. Kant’s answer was both yes and no. That is, while he granted that the Universe was physically deterministic and that, therefore, on the phenomenal realm we could not grant the existence of free will, he also claimed that there was a necessity for free will to exist and that this could be allowed by placing it in the noumenal realm. In other words, free will *could* exist, but only so long as it was not subject to physical laws that would determine it and, according to Kant, the only way to do this was to subtract it from the phenomenal realm into the noumenal realm. The importance of this account is that it shows us that the nature of freedom is its inability to be predicted, controlled, or determined from the outside or in advance. A predictable freedom would be no freedom at all.

In Levinas, we find that the freedom of a being to do whatever it wants is still not a true freedom since it is determined according to the law of persisting in being and is thus found to be predictable. In order for true freedom to exist, it has to rupture the law of persisting in being and
open itself to a beyond. Only this beyond would provide the condition of a non-predictable free choice. As Levinas puts it:

Essence, in its seriousness as persistence in essence, fills every interval of nothingness that would interrupt it. It is a strict book-keeping where nothing is lost nor created. Freedom is compromised in this balance of accounts in an order where responsibilities correspond exactly to liberties taken, where they compensate for them, where time relaxes and then is tightened again after having allowed a decision in the interval opened up. Freedom in the genuine sense can only be a contestation of this book-keeping by a gratuity. This gratuity could be the absolute distraction of a play without consequences, without traces or memories, of a pure pardon. Or, it could be responsibility for another and expiation.²⁰

The book-keeping of Being must be contested through a gratuity in order for freedom to arise and one avenue for this gratuity is responsibility for an Other. The Other who is radically Other to me and beyond my control must be the locus of my freedom as that which gives value to my choices and forces them into the openness of an unpredictable field. I am confronted with the Other and must choose how to respond. Only where there is a responsibility which may be ignored can choice have meaning; the choice to take on the responsibility or not and the choice of how to address that infinite responsibility which has no single path towards its attempted fulfillment.

This also mirrors Levinas’s assertion of the Good arising before Being since the experience of the free being will only receive meaning and value after it has first come to realize its responsibility to Others and made its choices with that in mind. This is what it means to be chosen by the Good before the possibility of choice itself. As Levinas says, “[t]his 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.”²¹ In other words, being chosen by the Good is what gives me the power of choice and freedom which

²⁰Ibid., 125.
²¹Ibid., 122.
includes the possibility of ignoring my election to responsibility by the Good. Without this election, all my actions would be meaningless and arbitrary since “[f]reedom must justify itself; [and] reduced to itself it is accomplished not in sovereignty but in arbitrariness.”

What we have found in Levinas’s break with ontology and his turn towards ethics as first philosophy has been an entire reversal of the order of priority of many fundamental structures. The initial problem of meaningless, arbitrary Being led him to go beyond Being and posit the Good as antecedent to it; as that which could rupture it with a meaning beyond it. With this first move, everything else would follow including the constitution of the subject by the Other as part of its essential structure and responsibility as the condition for freedom. But this entire project that Levinas began with his first revelation that escaping the there is meant deposing rather than posing the subject was justified not just through a philosophical analysis but also through a phenomenological method which led him to describe what he saw as the essential features of ethical experience as felt in the encounter with an Other. It is here that we arrive at his description of one of his most important philosophical concepts, the “face.”

The Meaning of the Face

The context of the development of the philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas was his training in phenomenology in which the focus of analysis was on the phenomenal experience present to consciousness without going beyond the phenomena to metaphysical assertions. In other words, the phenomenological method tied the phenomenologist down to the experience of the phenomena itself and limited his/her analysis to only that which could be contained within it.

This influence is readily apparent in the work of Levinas even while he gestures to a place beyond phenomenology. That is, the face of the Other will show itself without showing itself; it will go beyond the mere phenomenal appearance of a face present to consciousness.

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22Ibid., Totality and Infinity, 303.
is why Levinas will say that his ethical philosophy is not so much phenomenological as phenomenologically inspired. What he will retain will be the importance of experience as what justifies an analysis. As such, the ephemeral passing of the invisible face will be crucially important to his understanding of ethics as a first-person encounter with another being from whom I experience a call of responsibility. By seating his ethical philosophy in this first-person experience of an encounter with an Other, Levinas will move towards a privileging of this singular moment; the unique experience between the self and the Other. This non-repeatable experience will mark his contrast from the universalizable maxims of normative ethical systems and serve to reinforce his focus on going beyond the knowledge relation of a reduction to the same.

**Poverty and Authority**

The first thing to note is that the face is experienced as a call from the Other, a call to be responsible to the Other, and presents itself as the fact of the Other’s poverty, vulnerability, or exposure. In other words, the face is my experience of the Other’s mortality and the call to be concerned for that mortality. It is not the experience of an object which is why Levinas stresses that any ontical feature of the material face of the Other is of no consequence. What matters is only this experience of the Other’s vulnerability. As he says, “the face…is like a being’s exposure unto death; the without-defense, the nudity and the misery of the other. It is also the commandment to take the other upon oneself, not to let him alone…The face offers itself to your compassion and to your obligation.”

In other words, the face is not only the mortality of the Other but the demand from the Other to be concerned with this mortality. At the same time, the poverty of the Other guarantees that there is no force behind this demand that would coerce you

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23Ibid., *Is It Righteous to Be?* 48.
into complying with it. It is a demand that issues from the necessity of the Other who is “so weak that he demands.”

This is how the face is able to have a paradoxical structure of poverty and authority. In fact, the poverty motivates the authority of the call. Out of its extreme misery, it can do nothing except call for assistance and this call for assistance, which you can ignore or deny at any moment, takes on its meaning from the fact that the Other is *in need of it*. It is the supplication of the one who has no other choice to which you respond out of your own plenitude. It is in this way that it puts me in question and challenges my claim on existence; this is the deposition of the subject. That is, out of my plenitude, how could I deny the demand that the Other places on me? How could I enjoy myself while the Other suffers? To do so, according to Levinas, would be to do evil which is “the refusal of that responsibility, the fact of letting this prior attention turn itself away from the face of the other man.” In other words, evil is putting the self before the Other, ignoring the call, denying its authority. Nevertheless, the call has always been *heard* even when you turn away from it. You are still constituted as a subject with responsibilities to Others even if you deny those responsibilities.

This also shows us how the face can be both that which does not appear as a phenomenal object, thus being a sort of absence, as well as that which represents infinity and provides us with an infinite command. It is both the least and the most and in this way breaks with any accounting that would be found within Being which likes to deal with whole numbers. The face, in its poverty, is so little while, in its authority, being so much. The command is infinite because the vulnerability of what is finite is infinite. Only what is the weakest can have the strongest

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25 Ibid., *Is It Righteous to Be?* 55.
command such that what is so weak that it can die will have an infinite command. Out of our plenitude, we hear the infinite call of responsibility to the weakest one.

What this also shows us is that the ethical relation is essentially asymmetrical. I am uniquely called to serve the Other but the Other has no reciprocal obligation towards me. Moreover, the Other cannot have a reciprocal obligation towards me, otherwise, the relation would be reduced back to a relation of knowledge and Being. That is, if I expected reciprocity from the Other then I would already be making calculations about the Other and thus reducing the Other to myself; to its position within my system, to an economy of need. This would be the end of gratuity and thus the end of freedom, ethics, and the Good. Reciprocity would be a return to a finite system of closure and the erasure of infinity since it would be based on the interest of the self. This is why Levinas says that the possibility of my being an Other for someone else is “thanks to God,”26 that is, it is not up to me and does not concern me since my concern is the Other.

What we find in the face is, therefore, that which connects me to an Other and opens me to him/her as someone who concerns me and who I am responsible for. This is why Levinas will often refer to it as the opening to humanity or sociality since it is with the face that I become connected to other beings and become concerned with their being rather than just my own solitary being; it is the beginning of community. This concern is itself what constitutes a rupture in Being. That is, although I continue to value persistence in being, the fact of valuing the persistence in being of s/he who has no effect on my own persistence in being takes me out the narrow confines of Being and places me elsewhere. Whereas the privilege of my own persistence

26Ibid., Otherwise than Being, 158.
kept me enchained to myself and to the law of Being, the responsibility for another suspends me in a relation between beings which constitutes a different place, outside Being—the Good.

**Signification**

This connection between beings that happens through the responsibility for the Other as experienced in the encounter with the face is what will make language possible. That is, the necessary condition for the production of language is the social relation which arises out of responsibility for the Other. The solitary being is brought out of his/her solitude in connection with the Other. It is in this way that the face, as a call, appears as the very beginning of discourse and expression. As its beginning, it will have a distinct character that will condition the language and communication that it will inaugurate.

As we have already discussed, in Levinas’s attempt to find an escape from the meaninglessness and arbitrariness of Being, he found the Good as anterior to Being. Its anteriority to Being was precisely so that it could be that which would make Being meaningful through sociality. This is why Levinas says that “[t]he face to face is not a modality of coexistence nor even of the knowledge…one term can have of another, but is the primordial production of being on which all the possible collocations of the terms are founded.”27 As such, the face will have the status as the first value and the signifier of signifiers which starts the chain of signification through its signification of the meaning of signification itself. The face, as expressivity offering itself up to another who could respond to it, produces the necessity for communication and thus the formation of language. Hence, Levinas says that:

> The face is signification, and signification without context. I mean that the Other, in the rectitude of his face, is not a character within a context. Ordinarily one is a character: a professor at the Sorbonne, a Supreme Court justice...And all signification in the usual sense of the term is relative to such a context...Here, to

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27Ibid., *Totality and Infinity*, 305.
the contrary, the face is meaning all by itself. You are you. In this sense one can say that the face is not ‘seen’. It is what cannot become a content. The face is signification but it is not signification in the usual sense because it is outside of all context that would render it meaningful as content, that is, as an object of knowledge. The face is absolute meaning without the need for any context and so is able to signify without a content since it signifies meaning and value itself. The face distinguishes itself by being the meaning of meaning. As Levinas will often say, the face is the very “signifyingness of signification, the very establishing of the one-for-the-other.” And in this way, the face is also the first value—the beginning of meaning.

The arbitrariness of senseless, solitary Being is made meaningful in the social relationship and so begins a meaningful existence which is a social existence with Others whose difference from me is embraced and sustained. This is the beginning of having communities and social organizations constructed on the basis of responsibility for the Other. It is the beginning of fraternity which, for Levinas, “involves individualities whose logical status is not reducible to the status of ultimate differences in a genus, for their singularity consists in each referring to itself.” The fraternal relation is only between those who have nothing in common except their radical difference which is why their differences cannot be understood with reference to a genus but only in relation to themselves as singular beings. The ability to exist in a community in this way, for Levinas, is peace and it is always a peace which must be re-established. That is, the Good before Being may be understood as the site of a peace which is then disrupted by the determinism of Being’s law thus calling for a re-establishment. In my existence, “I repel and send away the neighbor through my very identity, my occupying the arena of being; [so that] I

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28 Ibid., *Ethics and Infinity*, 86.
29 Ibid., *Otherwise than Being*, 85.
30 Ibid., *Totality and Infinity*, 214.
then have always to reestablish peace."31 The fact that I exist and take up space means that I am already taking up the space of another and so must be called to account for my existence and remember the call of the Other.

What we find in Levinas’s concept of the face is a rich and multifaceted explanation of ethical experience as our fundamental condition. The face names our responsibility for the Other which forms the basis of our entire subjective experience including our experience of inwardness, conscience, freedom, sociality, and language. When Levinas says that ethics is to be first philosophy, he truly means it and attempts to show it to us through his explanation of the encounter with the face which is never seen as an object, yet is always present to us and which demands from us with an authority which can have no force and through this movement connects us to Others and brings meaning and value into the world so that we can make free choices that affirm or deny our responsibilities. As Levinas says, “the very node of the subjective is knotted in ethics understood as responsibility.”32 A knot that can never be untangled.

**The Problem of Action**

By now, it should be clear that Levinas’s ethical project constituted nothing less than an overturning of ontology and an attempt to describe the fundamental structures of our experience through ethics as that which gives it meaning and constitutes it as such. This was not an attempt to come up with a new calculus for ethical decision making but, rather, a new understanding of where ethics lies in the constitution of the subject and his/her reality and its fundamental status. One might say that Levinas had more to say about what ethics is and how it affects us than any concrete guidelines on how to be ethical and this has been one of the primary criticisms leveled at him. That is, now that you’ve told me that I have an infinite, inexhaustible obligation to the

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31Ibid., *Otherwise than Being*, 137.
32Ibid., *Ethics and Infinity*, 95.
other, what shall I do? How can I live this way? To this, we have some answers that we can
derive from his work.

The first has already been gestured at earlier in Levinas’s concept of metaphysical desire
in which the desire for the Good is a desire that, because it cannot be satisfied and reaches
beyond the confines of the subject fulfilling a need that could be filled, is that which is aroused
in the already self-satisfied subject. This is why he says that “[t]he 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.”33 In other words, the desire for the Good
arises in the being who realizes that even with his/her being secured in its being that there is yet
something more beyond my being which I want, and that is the Other. This is all to say that
Levinas is not commanding that you sacrifice yourself for the Other even in a situation in which
you are prostrate and destitute until the point of your own self-annihilation and destruction. Or,
rather, if he does say that, he says that as a part of a demonstration of the authority of the call
from the Other and its undeniable voice rather than as a concrete guide for action. After all, you
can never die for the Other which places a total limit on what can be done. This is why he says
that “[t]hese are extreme formulas which must not be detached from their context. In the
concrete, many other considerations intervene and require justice even for me...But justice only
has meaning if it retains the spirit of dis-inter-estedness which animates the idea of responsibility
for the other man.”34 In other words, these extreme formulas must be understood in their context
as being outside all context, a description of a command “from an immemorial past, which was
never present.”35 And they will be moderated in concrete situations which, nevertheless, derive
their meaning from these extreme formulas which will lead us into the meaning of justice, which is, for Levinas, a different question entirely—the question of politics.

It is thus important to note here that when Levinas speaks of ethics, he speaks of a relation that does not exist in the concrete which is why his formulas for it are so extreme. What he is describing is something that undergirds all meaningful relationality but which does not in fact describe any actual state of affairs except as its fundamental structure. The reason for this is the fact of a human multitude in which the third is present. That is, because I exist with many Others and am infinitely responsible to all of them, I will inevitably be forced into the position of making choices between them and comparing incomparables. The third is the one who looks at my relation with the Other and finds that s/he is excluded from it. The fact of a human multitude necessarily leads me back into a relation of knowledge but one that must remember that the motivation for it required by justice is the responsibility for the Other that comes to me from the face. And so Levinas says that “[t]he interpersonal relation I establish with the Other, I must also establish with other men; there is thus a necessity to moderate this privilege of the Other; from whence comes justice.”  

Having arrived at the concrete situation of having to serve the demands of justice in the context of a human multitude, however, we are no closer to knowing what to do. All that has been clarified are the limits of our actions and the way in which they are to be performed. That is, in the context of the human multitude, serving justice means making calculations that, although impossible to perfect and necessarily limited, do the best that we can at serving the infinite demand placed upon us by all the Others to whom we are responsible. For Levinas, however, this is enough. Even as he allows for the return of the knowledge relation in politics, he does not

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36Ibid., Ethics and Infinity, 90.
allow it to become dominant or to determine the meaning of politics. Instead, he leaves politics as constitutively limited in order to retain the power of ethics as the determinant of its meaning so that it can stay open to the face of the Other. For Levinas, if ethics is typified by the infinite demand of a singular Other then politics is typified by the impossibility of weighing an innumerable number of infinite demands. In both cases, Levinas does not tell us what to do but only describes how to do. That is, how we are to be ethical is by putting the Other before the self but what this will mean will depend on each particular encounter with a singular, unique Other. To come up with a more specific criterion would already be to reduce the Other to the same in a universal maxim. Similarly, how we are to do politics is by caring for all Others as best we can but the sorts of calculations and decisions that will have to be made in this attempt and the ones who may be left behind as a result of this cannot be determined according to a universal criterion that would fully justify one course of action over another. In the final analysis, the face of the Other (and the third for that matter) demands that we try to achieve our responsibilities while knowing that we can never fully do so and that we do this while never forgetting where these responsibilities are coming from.

Although Levinas’s ethical project led him to try to find a way out of the knowledge relation, he inevitably had to return to it in the exigencies of the concrete political situation of a human multitude. The universalizable system, one might say, still has some potential for use in Levinas, but no longer as the be-all and end-all of decision making, rather, only as a tool with limitations. One does not cut a carrot with a hammer or hit a nail with a knife. In any case, Levinas’s goal was not to come up with his own universalizable system, however limited, but to clarify the limitations of attempting to reduce everything, without gaps, to the determinism of a system that would totalize everything; to show that the meaning of something always comes
from outside itself. Hence, he says: “[m]y task does not consist in constructing ethics; I only try to find its meaning. In fact I do not believe that all philosophy should be programmatic...One can without doubt construct an ethics in function of what I have just said, but this is not my own theme.”37 One can construct an ethics from what he has said, but he does not. In this way, Levinas begins us along a path upon which, although we may build, we must always remember that what is built has limitations. Thus, any critique of Levinas for not providing a sufficient decision procedure for making ethical choices ultimately misses the point of Levinas’s ethics which has endeavored not to show us what to do but to teach us what it means to be ethical and, therefore, how the actions that will inevitably never be enough are to be done. How are we to be ethical? By performing our actions without forgetting the face of the Other who entreats us. What are we to do then? That is up to our free choice as we do the best we can to respect the Other’s demand.

37Ibid., 90.
2 LEVINAS AND THE QUESTION OF POLITICS

Typically, the philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas has been limited to establishing ethics as first philosophy as his attempt to correct the violence of ontology as it had been developed up to that point. What has usually been emphasized is the idea of the ethical relation as that which implicates me, elects me, and calls me to a responsibility that is both infinite and wholly mine for the Other who is exterior to me and appears as radically different. This was his way of avoiding the tendency of reducing the Other to the same that he identified as typifying most philosophical accounts. In other words, to maintain the radical alterity of the Other as completely dissimilar from myself and exterior to me, and to be responsible to this Other on the basis of this radical alterity that calls me to an infinite responsibility was seen as his innovation.

As we have already seen, this is all true but does not give us a full understanding of Levinas’s philosophy. By staying at the level of ethics without going into his understanding of politics and how it relates to ethics, we have been left with what might be deemed an impossible situation that does not allow for any action as we know it. For Levinas, ethics describes an originary relation between self and Other from which we gain the value that must guide our actions but cannot be understood as descriptive of an actual situation. The world does not, after all, consist of two beings. The necessity of returning to a relation of knowledge in the situation of a multitude where choices must be made about which Other comes first is where the necessity of political calculation arises. As we gestured at the end of the last chapter, the question of concrete action has been a common but unfair criticism of Levinas since it, first of all, reduces his philosophy to only its ethical component and, second of all, ignores the main purpose of his project. That is, rather than develop a way for determining what to do, he gives us a way of
understanding the limitations of what we can do and a value that is to guide the justification of these limited actions.

It is in the concrete situation of being faced with a multitude that we arrive at the question of politics: how are we to make the concrete choices that we must make if we are to do anything at all? The impossibility of perfect action is felt by the fact that there is not one Other in the world, but many; each one worthy, each one calling me infinitely. In a finite world, how am I to choose who shall come first? According to Levinas, it is from this question that, not just politics will emerge, but also justice, reason, the State, and even consciousness. This is the “entrance” of the third who, strictly speaking, was already there from the very beginning. This chapter will serve to, first, explain Levinas’s concept of the third and the relation that it has to the Other as a way of moving us toward a better understanding of how he sees ethics and politics knotted together and, second, explain how he arrives at the justification for the founding of the State and its relationship to his concept of fraternity.

**From the Other to the Third**

Although the third is often described as the one who enters after a duopoly has first been established between myself and the Other, it must be understood that this description is a conceptual contrivance that does not reflect the actual situation. That is, although it is convenient to describe ethics and politics as two moments, where one precedes the other and appears as more primary, they actually constitute two aspects of one simultaneous moment. This is why Levinas says that the “third party looks at me in the eyes of the Other...[since] It is not that there first would be the face, and then the being it manifests or expresses would concern himself with justice; the epiphany of the face qua face opens humanity.”\(^ {38} \) In my relation to the Other, I am already related to the third. This can be understood by the fact that in my gratuitous

\(^ {38} \) Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 213.
responsibility for the Other, I am responsible even for the responsibilities that the Other has to Others. In this way, my relation to the Other already places me within a matrix of infinite responsibility to a multitude. The “entrance” of the third can be understood as the recognition that I have responsibilities to Others besides this one Other and that, because this is the case, I must find some way to take these Others into account as well.

In the situation of a multitude composed of Others to whom I am each infinitely responsible to, a limit is reached. I cannot help them all at the same time and with equal measure, yet, to help one is to ignore all the others. According to Levinas, this is “the birth of the question: What do I have to do with justice? A question of consciousness.” 39 In other words, for Levinas, justice is a corrective to the gratuity of love wherein one would stay with the one Other to the detriment of all the rest. The third is the one who watches the duopoly and questions it, asks for its justification. By putting the gratuity of the duopoly in question, the third opens the way to fairness and equality. The call for justice is the demand that all be taken into account; that no one should be forgotten. However, the way to do this requires the return of reason, comparison, and thematization which Levinas associates with consciousness. Herein lies the contradiction: our infinite responsibility to the Other meets its limit in the fact of the human multitude which leads to the necessity of reason in order to serve justice which, ultimately, is nothing more than the fact that our infinite responsibility to the Other should be met in the context of a multitude where it cannot be met due to our finitude in the face of their multiplicity. In other words, the infinite responsibility for the Other is the basis for justice itself. It is because we have an infinite responsibility to the Other and because there are many Others that we must do what is necessary to care for them all. However, since these choices must be made according to reason,

39 Ibid., Otherwise than Being, 157.
thematization, and calculation, they will never be perfect and someone will always be left out. This is why Levinas says that there will always be a “[b]ad conscience of justice! It knows it is not as just as the goodness that instigates it is good.”\(^{40}\)

Despite this impossibility of perfection, it is the task of justice to better itself and to remain open to its own revision. For Levinas, this is a crucial aspect of justice for only by understanding its own limits and its infinite task of perfection can it avoid falling into totalitarianism which he sees as the result of forgetting this. To put it another way, the tension between the face of the Other and the demand for justice of the third introduces an aporia such that any action taken will always fall short since it will either be too harsh against the Other in the service of justice or be too gratuitous towards the Other and unjust to the third. To believe in the fantasy of a completed, perfect justice is to erase the face of the Other and deny the aporia. In so doing, one engages in “pure” politics in the sense that the calculations of the State now appear autonomous, fully justified, and no longer checked by the poverty of the Other’s face. In this situation, the human multitude has been turned into pure material for the State to mold and the individual has lost his/her radical alterity and become nothing more than an instance of a genus. This is why he says that “charity is impossible without justice, and that justice is warped without charity.”\(^{41}\) That is, charity, as the demand from the Other’s face, requires justice due to the fact of the human multitude, however, justice, as the necessity of fair action, can become distorted in the exigencies of reason and forget the face. This is why Levinas supported the liberal state as he saw it as constituted so as to allow for the constant questioning of politics and justice necessary to keep it from forgetting its basis in charity. As Levinas put it, “the defense of the rights of man corresponds to a vocation outside the state, disposing, in a political society, of a kind of extra-

\(^{40}\) Ibid., *Is It Righteous to Be?* 206.

\(^{41}\) Ibid., 181.
territoriality…that…defines the liberal state and describes the modality according to which the conjunction of politics and ethics is intrinsically possible.”42 In other words, Levinas saw the liberal state as being structurally open in such a way that critique and revision of the workings of justice would never be closed off thus guaranteeing a recognition of the Other. To design a State in such a way that it cannot reach closure is to allow for it to be open to what is exterior to its machinations.

**Between Ethics and Politics**

It is important to emphasize that Levinas does not present us with two separate theories, one ethical and one political, but two aspects of one single theory. The Other and the third are always together and always inseparable and their aporetic relation is what constitutes our human condition. As two aspects, however, they focus on different things. While ethics relates to the structure of a subject constituted by the Other, politics refers to the consciousness formed in the face of a multitude. Hence, Levinas says that “[c]onsciousness is born as the presence of the third party.”43 The situation of the one-for-the-other that Levinas describes as the ethical relation is not yet an experience of consciousness since consciousness would not be necessary if there were only two. The one-for-the-other is only the establishment of a subject who is for the Other without question thus having no need for a reflective self-consciousness in which choices between Others would be made. In other words, even though my infinite responsibility to the Other would still be inexhaustible, there would be no question of who comes first since there would only be one Other entreating me. For Levinas, consciousness is intrinsically tied up with an experience of weighing, judging, and thematizing things so as to make the best choice that is possible while understanding that this choice is still not perfectly justifiable. Consciousness is

43 Ibid., *Otherwise than Being*, 160.
necessary because there can be no final deliberation. However, to render judgement means to have beings which can be judged and to have a question that needs answering. This first question which inaugurates consciousness is the question of justice where the multiplicity of Others demands the use of reason and thematization for the sake of meeting my infinite responsibilities to them all.

It is important to clarify that this question of justice from which consciousness is born is ontologically necessary for Levinas and not based on ontical contingency. In other words, it is not that since there so happens to be multiple Others that consciousness is born such that if I were on a desert island with just one Other then I would never become conscious. Rather, the third is always present in the Other and is felt in the structure of our consciousness which proceeds from the subjective structure of the other in the same. That is, ethics needs politics and politics needs ethics such that the idea of an autonomous ethics without a political context would lead to a contradiction. Nevertheless, they must be distinguished from one another. As Levinas says, “[t]he knot tied in subjectivity, which when subjectivity become a consciousness of being is still attested to in questioning, signifies an allegiance of the same to the other.”

The structure of consciousness as a judging already betrays the necessity of answering a question whose arising is based on that first responsibility to an Other becoming problematized in the condition of a multitude of Others. It is through such judgement motivated by that originary responsibility that free choices are made and justified. However, where there would be no Others producing a question but merely one Other producing a responsibility without a question, there would, theoretically, be a responsible subject without any need for that subject to make any choices since that subject would have nothing to judge and only one justifiable option. Without a need

44 Ibid., 25.
for judgement to answer a question, there would be no need for consciousness which would mean having no more conscious choice and, therefore, no more freedom. Without freedom, however, responsibility would lose its meaning and so would ethics. We find, therefore, that ethics and politics structure one another making each one possible.

The ethical choice that occurs as a free act responding to a responsibility exists meaningfully in a context in which consciousness has been formed because of the question of a multitude. This is why the face of the Other is what opens us to humanity. There cannot be just one face but always many faces. This is why Levinas says that “[i]n the proximity of the other, all the others than the other obsess me, and already this obsession cries out for justice, demands measure and knowing, is consciousness.”\(^{45}\) Immediately, the face of the Other already opens me to the third just as the opening of my subjectivity from the Other leads me into a consciousness of the third. Responsibility structures the subject whose freedom is expressed in his/her consciousness of having multiple mutually exclusive obligations. This is why Levinas identifies consciousness and freedom as emerging together as an immediate springing forth from the constitution of a responsible subjectivity such as when he says that subjectivity “is not self-consciousness attaining itself in the present, but the extreme exposure to the assignation by the other, already realized behind consciousness and freedom.”\(^{46}\) That is, the condition for consciousness and freedom is the subject constituted by responsibility which gives it its meaning. At the same “time,” as we have seen, ethical action is given its import by the fact of its limitation in the face of a human multitude; consciousness and freedom reach back and give context for responsibility. Once again, we see here that there is no temporal movement so much as a

\(^{45}\) Ibid., 158.

\(^{46}\) Ibid., 145.
temporal contrivance used to describe various aspects of one process that occurs outside of time or, perhaps, in the constitution of time itself.

In my originary responsibility I am called to substitute for the Other and through this do I come to exist as myself and this existence as myself is felt through a non-coincidence with myself in which a space is opened up such that I can be self-reflexive. That is, since I cannot substitute for this Other because there are still other Others to be concerned with, I experience myself as neither in the Other’s place nor in my place but transported between in an undecidable openness. It is in this place that I become self-reflexive and conscious and experience myself as different from myself without thereby being alienated from myself. Since the third is always with the Other and the other is in the same then we can say that the third is also present in the same. It is this emergence of consciousness through a non-coincidence with myself made possible through the election of the self by the Other (who already opens me up to the third) that constitutes in me the sense of conscience. That is, to have to justify myself to myself is already to justify myself to the third. We thus find that our experience of ourselves as self-conscious beings is, for Levinas, produced by the structure of our relation to the Other and the third.

What this leads us to is that in the relation between the Other and third there is, first of all, no total separation between them and, second of all, no relation of priority between them. What this means is that neither ethics nor politics can be a grounds for the other and that, therefore, in attempting to perform actions (whether as an individual person or as a State) we cannot rely on a foundation but only on the aporia already described which typifies this singular ethico-political moment; an aporia which is absolutely necessary. As Madeleine Fagan puts it, it “is the very fact that the call of the Other does not determine a particular response and that it is always in competition with the incompatible calls of other Others and provides no way of
adjudicating between these demands that means that the possibility of responsibility…is maintained."\textsuperscript{47} It is the aporia between ethics and politics which makes ethics and politics possible as well as keeps them open as a never-ending task. Or as François Raffoul puts it, “[e]thics and politics call for each other, on the basis of their nonrelation.”\textsuperscript{48} We cannot find comfort in a foundation that would stabilize us but, rather, must exist at a shifting border region that commands us to respond without telling us how. Ethics and politics thus institute an aporia where action becomes possible without the possibility of knowing what action to take in advance or of being able to come up with generalizable guidelines for action. Hence, Fagan notes that theorizing will always “run up against a limit, and what might be considered the ethical or political can only emerge at this limit; it is only here that response is possible.”\textsuperscript{49} We cannot know what to respond with, only that we must respond and that this structure, in its resistance to closure, is also the source of our conscious experience of non-coincidence and produces the possibility of making choices between actions.

\textbf{The Birth of the State}

For Levinas, the tension between the Other and the third will inevitably lead to the founding of the State. It is important to note, however, that although he uses the term “State” and refers to historical nation states, his analysis would be just as applicable to any social formation or grouping. Thus, the inevitability of the State that Levinas describes refers to the inevitability of organized social formations arising for the purpose of dealing with the conflicting demands found in a human multitude.

\textsuperscript{49} Fagan, \textit{Ethics and Politics}, 136.
The primary way in which Levinas’s conception of the State has been understood has been in contrast to the Hobbesian view where the State comes to exist in order to limit violence against the self. In other words, in my desire to be protected, I give up power to the State and allow it to employ physical violence to maintain my security and stabilize its legal structure. By contrast, for Levinas, “violence is originally justified as defense of the other, of the neighbor.” In other words, legitimate violence cannot come from my desire to protect myself but only from my desire to protect the Other. In this first major distinction, we can already see that the State, for Levinas, is geared towards the fulfillment of responsibilities towards the Other, not the protection of the self.

This focus on the Other is the basis of Levinas’s new characterization of the function of the State. What the example of violence shows us is that the goal of the State is not to limit violence but to limit charity. This may sound paradoxical at first, however the meaning of this is that the infinite responsibility of the one for the Other that opens up the question of the third can be better addressed through collective action than through individual action. The formation of the State is what allows this collective action that is both more effective than individual action, but also, more general. Through these general institutions, two things occur. The first is that the infinite responsibilities of all members of the State become generalized in these institutions. The second is that, due to this generalization, my responsibility is limited henceforth. Hence, in the example of violence, the formation of State institutions serves the purpose of protecting the Other from violence more effectively than I, as an individual, ever could and, in this way, fulfills a portion of my responsibilities thus limiting what it is that I have left to do. This is why Levinas says that “[s]ociety according to man’s strength is merely the limitation of this right and this

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50 Levinas, *Is It Righteous to Be?* 221.
obligation toward him [the Other]. The contract does not put an end to the violence of the other…[however] it is possible, when the other man is in principle infinite to me, to limit the extent of my duties to a degree, but only to a degree. The contract is more concerned with limiting my duties than with defending my rights.” 51 That is, the social contract implicit in the construction of a State can be understood as being based on a partial fulfillment of the responsibilities that we each have to all Others leading to a limitation of my obligations. Of course, the fact that these institutions are general introduces its own problem wherein the face of the Other may be forgotten in favor of bureaucratic machinations; a problem described by Levinas’s image of “tears a civil servant cannot see.” At the same time, however, by creating these general institutions, we help to avoid the injustice of preferring those close-by to those far off.

What we see is that the State serves the function of fulfilling our infinite responsibilities as best we can with a surplus always left over for us to step into as responsible subjects. Hence, Levinas says that it “is not through the State…that the person shall be fulfilled—which, of course, does not free the State from instituting the conditions necessary to this fulfillment.” 52 That is, the most important function of the State is to allow the individual to exist as a responsible being; to institute the conditions necessary for this and this, in itself, is already for the State to fulfill responsibilities we each have towards one another while never being able to fully extinguish these responsibilities. After all, as we noted in the first chapter, metaphysical desire cannot be fulfilled and yet it arises in the being who has first become self-sufficient thus characterizing this desire as being based on a lack that goes beyond need. The State may assist in

52 Ibid., 99.
fulfilling our needs while never being able to extinguish our metaphysical desire. And, at the same time, by fulfilling our needs, the State prepares us to focus on our metaphysical desires rather than on the material necessities of our ontical being. My responsibility is still there, even if it has been limited. Where the State cannot reach and that which exceeds its bounds is where I must find myself fulfilling the excess of responsibility which escapes it. Even in a place where all basic needs have been met, there will always be this excess left over.

**The Importance of Fraternity**

If the State exists in order to serve justice by producing institutions that allow for our infinite responsibilities to all Others to be better met and thus limit our duties then it seems that the body politic of the State is defined by the idea of responsibility. That is, those who constitute the will of a State constitute that will insofar as they have responsibilities to fulfill. It is through this election that we each have to be responsible that Levinas arrives at his notion of fraternity which underlies the necessity of State formation.

As we have already seen, the third and the Other exist together such that we are always in relation to both of them in the mode of ethics and politics, responsibility and justice. However, their relation between one another is, in fact, what produces the sense of fraternity that leads to State formation. As Levinas puts it:

The face in its nakedness as a face presents to me the destitution of the poor one and the stranger; but this poverty and exile which appeal to my powers…do not deliver themselves over to these powers as givens... The poor one, the stranger, presents himself as an equal. His equality within this essential poverty consists in referring to the third party, thus present at the encounter, whom in the midst of his destitution the Other already serves. He comes to join me. But he joins me to himself for service; he commands me as a Master. This command can concern me only inasmuch as I am master myself; consequently this command commands me to command. The thou is posited in front of a we…The presence of the face, the infinity of the other, is a destituteness, a presence of the third party (that is, of the
whole of humanity which looks at us), and a command that commands commanding.\textsuperscript{53} What we can extract from this passage is that my encounter with the Other, despite the poverty of the face, is an encounter with someone with whom I form a group constituted through its service towards the third. In other words, through my responsibility to the Other and the Other’s responsibility to the third, I become responsible for the third as well, but not as an independent being who would \textit{alone} be responsible for the Other and the third but as a \textit{we}. I am commanded by the Other to join together in service towards the third, to form a \textit{we} that will serve justice.

What is interesting about the way in which Levinas phrases this is that, if I am commanded \textit{to command} then the implication is that I am commanded to lead the Others in service towards the third. In this way, the structure of \textit{my} election as infinitely responsible is retained for I am called both to serve the third and to lead the Others in service to the third. I am with Others, yet also alone as \textit{uniquely} chosen.

From here, Levinas will go on to say that it “is my responsibility before a face looking at me as absolutely foreign…that constitutes the original fact of fraternity…The non-coincidence consists, concretely, in my position as brother; it implies other unicities at my side… In this welcoming of the face…equality is founded.”\textsuperscript{54} In other words, it is precisely the fact that the Other is radically different from myself that constitutes him/her as being at my side. Only by being separate from me can s/he be next to me as a “brother” where what we share is our difference from one another and the fact of being responsible to the third. Equality becomes the natural outcome of the relation to the face since the face opens up a responsible humanity before me with whom I am tasked to render justice. The concept of fraternity is thus founded, not on

\textsuperscript{53} Ibid., \textit{Totality and Infinity}, 213.
\textsuperscript{54} Ibid., 214.
similarity, but on a difference that renders each one unique in his/her responsibility. All that we have in common is the alterity and responsibility which singularize each one of us.

All of us become “brothers” insofar as each one of us is elected to responsibility. Hence, Levinas will ask “where can I be chosen, if not from among other chosen ones, among equals?...fraternity is the very relation with the face in which at the same time my election and equality, that is, the mastery exercised over me by the other, are accomplished.”\(^55\) In other words, I can only be in community with other chosen ones while at the same time being uniquely chosen to serve them all. This is why Levinas’s concept of fraternity betrays an undecidability at its core, wavering between serving with Others and serving those Others such as when he says that the “election of the I…does not place it among the other chosen ones, but rather in face of them, to serve them.”\(^56\) I am uniquely chosen among the chosen to serve beyond their service and the fact that each of us is in this situation is where fraternity is founded. This is the meaning of the phrase from Dostoyevsky that Levinas repeatedly quotes, “each of us is guilty before everyone and for everything, and I more than all others.”

This idea of fraternity as already being opened up by the relation to the face is what will necessitate the formation of the State as a way of constituting this we. As he puts it, in “the measure that the face of the Other relates us with the third party, the metaphysical relation of the I with the Other moves into the form of the We, aspires to a State, institutions, laws, which are the source of universality.”\(^57\) What we thus find in Levinas’s notion of fraternity is a structure of consciousness and relationality based on a shared radical alterity and unique responsibility that we each have in relation to one another that unites us in rendering justice to the third. The third,

\(^{55}\) Ibid., 279.
\(^{56}\) Ibid.
\(^{57}\) Ibid., 300.
as the opening of humanity, singularizes each one of us in our infinite responsibility to all who compose a multitude and, in this singularization, brings us together to accomplish our duties. Ultimately, for Levinas, this is the purpose of the State; the accomplishment of our duties by rendering justice to the third. Hence, the understanding previously discussed of the State as existing for the purpose of generalizing our infinite responsibilities to one another through institutions and, in so doing, limiting our duties is the working out of the inevitable social organization that arises from the encounter with the face that opens up humanity via fraternity to the demand of justice coming from the third; a justice always to come.

Despite being characterized as primarily an ethical thinker with a limited or incomplete theory of politics, we have found that, in fact, Levinas has a well-developed theory of State formation and political decision making. This mischaracterization of Levinas has been due, in part, to his general emphasis on the ethical relation that structures political decision making and his refusal to produce a universalizable political program since this would be contrary to his entire analysis, based as it is on the *aporia* that opens the way for the possibility of ethical and political action. That is, any political program theorized with the intent of universal application would be a political program produced according to the old style of ontology which Levinas is trying to escape since it would be reducing the Other to merely a pawn in a system.

*That* systems are necessary is not questioned by Levinas, but only that we could come up with a perfect, universalizable, and fully justifiable system. As such, the picture of politics that Levinas gives us is thoroughly unsatisfying for anyone seeking a total system that could be applied anywhere. Of course, this is exactly the point. In lieu of this, Levinas demonstrates that, in the absence of any foundation to stabilize our decisions, we must instead make these choices in a certain way. That is, while the content of my decision cannot be decided in advance, that I
must make a choice that takes into account the Other and the third is. This is why it is problematic to attempt to conceive of Levinas as having produced a purely ethical theory that could function as a ground for a political theory. As we have seen, Levinas posits an ethics and a politics that arise at the same moment and reciprocally determine one another through an aporetic tension between them that makes action both a necessity, in the sense that the call of the Other demands that I respond, and an impossibility, in the sense that the demand of the third for justice means that my action will always be unjust in that I cannot respond to all Others in equal measure. We thus do not have an idea of pure ethics or pure politics in Levinas, but always an entwinement between them, and a necessary one at that.

Pure ethics, as pure politics, would not make any sense in a Levinasian context. On the one hand, pure ethics without politics could only occur in a world where there is but one Other and would exist without any consciousness in the gratuity of love. On the other hand, pure politics would exist as the attempt to manage all human beings as individuals in a genus towards a perfect justice, where the Other has been forgotten. In the former case, ethics would have no meaning any longer since there would be no context of decision in which an ethical choice could be made; the fact of having only one Other before me would destroy the necessity of consciousness and leave me tied to this Other thus eliminating any possibility of free choice. In the latter case, the concept of justice would have no meaning since a forgetting of the Other would leave it drained of the necessity for comparing incomparables which arises from the fact that there are multiple Others to whom we are responsible. The justice of such a State would not be justice, but mere human management according to its own determinism. We thus find that politics and ethics, in Levinas, cannot exist separately without falling into contradiction. They have always and will always be found together in one ethico-political moment where the Other
and the third are both present. As Levinas puts it, “[i]n no way is justice…a degeneration of the
for-the-other…a degeneration that would be produced in the measure that for empirical reasons
the initial duo would become a trio. But the contemporaneousness of the multiple is tied about
the diachrony of two.” The multiple of justice and the two of ethics are to be found always and
necessarily together in a way that, although it can never prescribe to me what I should do,
demands that I do something and that this action be made in the aporia between the Other and
the third that is the hyphen of the ethico-political structure that Levinas theorized.

58 Ibid., *Otherwise than Being*, 159.
3 LEVINAS AND THE PRIMACY OF THE HUMAN

Despite Levinas’s commitment to rethink the Western philosophical tradition, which he believed had lost its way in privileging ontology and thus failed to prevent the atrocities of the 20th century, and move towards an originary ethics as first philosophy, he was unable to fully shake off some of its most significant problematic assumptions. Chief among these was the assumption that the human being is somehow essentially different than all other beings thus giving humans a privileged position in relation to everything else. In this way, nonhumans became an ambiguous class of beings outside of the humanist sphere of ethics thus making the justification of their appropriation, control, and use simpler. However, their ambiguous status seemed to be largely a function of a lack of consideration rather than a deliberate choice. As Levinas says in one of his interviews, “I don’t know if a snake has a face. I can’t answer that question. A more specific analysis is needed.”

Thus the idea of nonhuman beings having faces is not altogether foreclosed in advance by Levinas so much so that, in that same interview, he is able to say that “[o]ne cannot entirely refuse the face of an animal” while, at the same time, qualifying that statement: “[y]et the priority here is not found in the animal, but in the human face.”

Ultimately, the question is left open when Levinas says that he “cannot say at what moment you have the right to be called ‘face.’”

This chapter intends to begin this “more specific analysis” that Levinas said was needed to determine whether or not a snake might have a face. First, we will look more closely at the precise nature of Levinas’s anthropocentrism in order to show that it does not constitute an essential part of his philosophy thus opening up the possibility of getting beyond this limitation.

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59 Levinas, “The Paradox of Morality” 172.
60 Ibid., 169.
61 Ibid., 171.
while retaining the core features of his analysis, this will be followed by a close reading of section II of *Totality and Infinity* in order to draw out some of the assumptions about agricultural settlement and appropriation found therein before moving on to consider some of the factors that led to the circumscription of ethical concern to only other human beings; a context in which Levinas found himself and could not escape.

In this way, I hope to show that, although Levinas himself was anthropocentric, his philosophy need not be so and that, after all, when he wrote was (as it is now) an anthropocentric time in which the consideration of nonhuman Others had become foreign from a long history of constricting the sphere of concern to *only* the separated and enclosed human community. This chapter will thus form the first part of a three part analysis to be continued in chapter 4 by a consideration of the experiences of hunter-gatherers and in chapter 5 through an analysis of how the perception of animacy relates to vulnerability. That is, here, I will address the anthropocentric problems implicit in the work of Levinas which will give way to an expansion of *ethical experience* by looking at what is happening in the perceptions of hunter-gatherer groups which will be followed by an analysis of what animation as such means and why the perception of animacy leads to an experience of ethical responsibility.

**Levinas’s Anthropocentrism**

The anthropocentrism that we find in the work of Levinas can ultimately be tied to his conception of ethical responsibility as a gratuity and a rupture with the determinism of being as persistence in being. That is, for Levinas, to be ethical is to have the capacity to prioritize the

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62 It is important to note that the term “anthropocentrism” is here being used for the sake of convenience. Although Levinas does seem to privilege the human, it is debatable whether we can thereby say that the human is *at the center* of his philosophical project. That is, the Other as encountered in the face is precisely that which *de*-centers and is, therefore, not so much at the center of Levinas’s philosophy as at its rupture. To move beyond the Other as always biologically human is to expand the sphere of that which can *de*-center the I.
Other before the self and this capacity signals a break with being’s own law. To identify which agents can be responsible is thus to identify a class of beings who have been able to break with their *conatus essendi* and put the Other first. According to Levinas, the only being to have done this is the human being. As he puts it, “with the appearance of the human…there is something more important than my life, and that is the life of the other.”\(^63\) In this way, Levinas characterizes the human being as having a unique capacity that separates it from all other beings. This capacity for responsibility (which he also refers to as saintliness) is what constitutes the human *as* human, which is why he says that “it is in saintliness that the human begins; not in the accomplishment of saintliness, but in the value. It is the first value, an undeniable value.”\(^64\)

Of course, to say that the human being is the only being capable of responsibility is not yet to say that it is only to human beings that we should be responsible. As we will see, however, the capacity for responsibility will be important in how Levinas understands the Other.

**Responsibility of the Other**

As we saw in the chapter 2, in the work of Levinas there is an entanglement between the ethical and the political which results in an irresolvable aporia between them. This impossibility of reducing either term to the other both produces the possibility of action while limiting its extent. It is from here that we receive the sense of a justice always to come and of an inordinate responsibility to the Other which can never be disposed of entirely.

This fact of entanglement was described by Levinas in his description of the relation between the Other and the third which we have already covered. That is, that in my relation to the Other I am already related to the third who demands justice and through whom humanity (as a multitude of Others) is opened up. As we saw, this is the moment when State formation

\(^63\) Levinas, “The Paradox of Morality” 172.

\(^64\) Ibid., 173.
becomes possible as a way of rendering justice to the third through coming together with the Other in service as a We. As Levinas says, “[t]he relation with the face in fraternity, where in his turn the Other appears in solidarity with all the others, constitutes the social order.” In other words, the Other is not only the one to whom I am ethically responsible but is also the one with whom justice is rendered in the social order. I am responsible to the Other at the same time that I am in solidarity with the Other. What this means is that the Other cannot be characterized simply as the one to whom I am responsible but also as the one with whom I am responsible, which means that the Other also has responsibilities, that is, is a being capable of responsibility and of ethical action. It is because of this that the third can be opened up by my relation to the Other and lead to the formation of State institutions wherein we can seek to render justice to the third, for the State is the vehicle through which my responsibility is joined with their responsibility.

What is important about this account is what it says about the capacities that the Other has. If the Other were to have no responsibilities then, in my relation with the Other, there would be no connection to a multitude and no solidarity leading to State formation. In such a situation, it would seem, I would truly be alone since I would be the only one with a capacity for responsibility and I would be responsible to every Other but only in a unidirectional way since there would no other responsible agents around. That is, no State could ever form since a State is that which comes to be as a way of addressing the responsibilities of a multitude of beings. In this scenario, there would be but one responsible being. Or, to put it another way, the political exigencies of the State would become equivalent to the ethical actions of the individual since the individual would be equivalent to the State itself. Being the only responsible being, there could

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65 Ibid., Totality and Infinity, 280.
be no higher unity of a multitude in a State beyond the unicity of the individual responsible being.

Of course, this is not what Levinas says. Although he certainly focuses on the election and chosenness of the I, this is not meant to imply that it exists wholly alone as the only responsible agent. Rather, the point is that the very experience of responsibility itself is as a unique and singular election. This is why he asks, “where can I be chosen, if not from among other chosen ones, among equals?” What we find in Levinas’s conception of the Other is, therefore, not just a being whose vulnerability, poverty, mortality, weakness, and exposedness places me in a relation of responsibility but also a being who, in his or her turn, is responsible as well.

Through its connection to the third and the formation of a social order in which our responsibilities can be addressed, we find that the Other turns into a human Other for Levinas. As we noted earlier, the only class of beings that Levinas identified as having the capacity for responsibility was the human being which means that if the Other to whom I am responsible is also understood as a being with responsibilities then we find ourselves in a situation in which the ethical sphere of concern has been limited to human beings as both those who are capable of responsibility and those to whom responsibility is owed. For the Other to be able to open up the third requires that the Other first be capable of a responsible relation to the third.

**Defining the “Human”**

Although Levinas may have rendered the human exceptional in his/her capacity for responsibility and used this as a way of limiting the sphere of ethical concern to refer only to other human beings, it is worth noting that Levinas’s use of the term “human” is not altogether

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66 Ibid., 279.
straightforward. Although he often seems to use the term in its everyday meaning as referring to those beings within the genus *homo* (and, specifically, within the subspecies *homo sapiens sapiens*), it is clear that this is not precisely his meaning. For Levinas, the human is not reducible to any biological classification but is defined by its singular capacities which distinguish it from all other beings. That is, what defines the human, for Levinas, is precisely the fact that they cannot be reduced to any common content and that what they have in common is only their radical difference from one another. And this, as we saw before, is used by him to explain his concept of fraternity. Thus, as Levinas says, “I, who have no concept in common with the Stranger, am, like him, without genus. We are the same and the other.”\(^67\)

This radical difference shared between those without genus is what places them outside of the determinism of nature and into freedom which is why he says that “it is only man who could be absolutely foreign to me…Free beings alone can be strangers to one another.”\(^68\)

In this way, we see that what defines the human, for Levinas, is not a biological classification but the capacity for freedom which, as we saw earlier, is premised on an originary experience of responsibility that breaks us out of the determinism of the *conatus essendi* by a pure gratuity. This experience, which is always singular, is what makes it such that humans cannot be understood according to their like qualities without eliminating what it is that makes them human. And this relation through radical differences is what allows for sociality and community to occur. As Levinas says, “[w]hen taken to be like a genus that unites like individuals the essence of society is lost sight of. There does indeed exist a human race as a biological genus… But the human community instituted by language…does not constitute the

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\(^{67}\) Ibid., 39.

\(^{68}\) Ibid., 73.
Thus, what defines the human more so than any genus is the community founded between those radically different from one another via language which, as Levinas is clear to point out, does not refer exclusively to symbolic language since “the beginning of language is in the face... in its silence, it calls you...[such that] Language is above all the fact of being addressed.”

What we thus find in Levinas’s understanding of the “human” is a being constituted by his/her originary responsibility to an Other who addresses him/her and, in this way, singularizes him/her as a responsible being outside of the determinism of nature and thus free to choose how or whether to fulfill this responsibility to which s/he has been elected. If this is how Levinas understands the “human” then it would seem that any being constituted in such a way would have to be accepted as “human.” That this is the case seems to have been acknowledged by Levinas such as when he says that he does “not know at what moment the human appears” which, of course, if he was thinking of humans in purely biologistic terms, would be simple enough to answer. Indeed, Levinas’s humanism is of the Other whose very alterity implies an impossibility of reducing this Other to a content that would allow him/her to be classified as a biological human. The designation of “human” must be understood beyond biology.

It would seem then that when Levinas opposes the animal to the human that we should understand it as an opposition between two ways of being in the world: the way of evil (that is, the conatus essendi) and the way of ethics (being for-the-other). After all, the human is an animal thus presenting us with the possibility that it could exist as animal or as human, as Levinas understands these terms. If biological humans can, but need not, rupture with the law of being

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69 Ibid., 213-214.
71 Ibid., 172.
and be ethical, then why not other beings as well? The fact that Levinas did not know at what point the possibility of a rupture with the law of being occurred means that the question of which beings would fall under the category of the “human” is left open, and that any being could justifiably be “human” should it be ethically constituted in relation to Others that address it. It is thus necessary to see whether the qualities that Levinas attributed to the “human” are only found in biological humans or whether they appear more broadly in nature.

**Expanding the “Human” and Universal Consideration**

As we saw in the previous section, the category of the “human” cannot be said to be reducible to biology but is defined through the possibility of a gratuity wherein the *conatus essendi* of the Other takes precedence over the self and, in this way, goes against the selfishness of *my* own effort to exist which Levinas identified with the law of being. Thus, any being who is able to engage in this sort of relation would appear to be “human” in the sense of being within the sphere of responsibility and ethics. That there are biologically nonhuman beings that meet these criteria is, at this point, well known. As Matthew Calarco notes, “[i]nstances of certain individual animals sacrificing their own well-being for members of their own and other species are legion…[with] sufficient numbers…witnessed firsthand by scientists or captured on film to constitute genuine verification of radical altruism among nonhuman animals.”

72 To take one well publicized example, there have been numerous firsthand accounts of humpback whales protecting other animal species ranging from gray whales to seals from the attacks of killer whales. Many biologists have attempted to make sense of such behavior according to the law of being by hypothesizing that such behavior is an outgrowth of the fact that killer whales will often attack humpback whales in their infancy. To create a rule to protect

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anything that is being attacked by a killer whale would thus be a way of protecting their young even while inadvertently protecting a variety of unrelated species, however, such an explanation seems to assume that whale behavior is not only mechanical, but highly inefficient. It assumes that a humpback whale is not able to distinguish between a seal and a whale calf. However, even in these explanations, it is impossible to avoid the possibility that a whale has simply ruptured the law of being such as when noting the fact that “not all humpbacks interfere with orca hunts, and many that do bear scars from being attacked by orcas earlier in their lives, perhaps as calves. Therefore, it’s possible that personal history drives humpbacks to respond to orca hunts.”

Of course, another possibility is that it is this whale which has achieved the value of saintliness and that the scars of the past reflect a consistency of ethical action. This explanation, while not endorsed by everyone, is not, however, an outlier such that an expert on cetacean intelligence can say that “[a]lthough this behavior is very interesting, I don’t find it completely surprising that a cetacean would intervene to help a member of another species…[due to] a highly developed degree of general intelligence capable of empathic responses.”

In other words, the whale may have simply been acting ethically due to being called into responsibility by the face of the Other.

What this example demonstrates is that ethical responsibility as shown through the recognition of the Other is not exclusive to biological humans. At the same time, it does not clearly tell us how far we must go until we reach the point where we find pure conatus essendi without any possibility of a rupture in the law of being. As such, we cannot say in advance how far the sphere of our concern is to spread nor which beings may experience responsibility.


74 Ibid.
Any determination we might make now would only be provisional and contingent. No matter how many other examples like this one we find, they will never be enough to form a closed totality of all those beings that should be included within our sphere of concern (which, as we saw earlier, also amounts to recognizing them as ethical agents). And this impossibility of forming a closed totality of beings to be considered Other is precisely the point. After all, if the Other appears ethically in the singularity of my experience, then it cannot be known or predicted in advance and must instead address me in *that* very moment.

As Calarco argues, this is to take Levinas’s concept of the Other seriously since to do otherwise would be to implicitly accept that there are beings which *should* exist outside the sphere of our ethical concern thus establishing conditions for the abuse of those who would fall outside of that sphere, *for now.*\(^75\) This openness to the possibility that any being might take on a face is what Calarco calls “universal consideration.”\(^76\) That is, rather than attempt to decide in advance which beings we should take into account, we instead leave ourselves open to the possibility that *any* being might address me in such a way that I would experience it as having a face. Ultimately, if the Other addresses me before thematization then I relate to the Other before I understand it as the member of a genus or a species. That is, to recognize the Other as a biological human, a cat, or kudzu is already to be in the realm of thematization and judgement and thus to have entered the consciousness of politics in which its membership in a genus *does* come to bear as a part of the exigencies of political calculation and justice.

**Constricted Attunement**

As we know from previous chapters, Levinas’s analysis of an originary ethical call to responsibility is explained through the *experience* of the face of the Other whose poverty

\(^{75}\) Calarco, *Zoographies*, 72.
\(^{76}\) Ibid., 73.
entreats me with a demand. Although the face does not appear as a phenomenal object as such, its poverty is experienced as a trace of infinity which ruptures me. We thus find that this experiential dimension of Levinas’s analysis is important to his entire project of establishing ethics as first philosophy.

If, thus far, we have argued that Levinas’s conception of the Other and the “human” have the potential to be expanded further than the category of biological humans, and if we have even been able to provide a compelling example of a nonhuman being engaging in responsible action thus implicitly seeing the face of a nonhuman Other then it still remains to be seen whether we, biological humans, have ever experienced the face of the nonhuman Other in a way that would not simply be analogical anthropomorphism which Levinas already grants as when he says that “the ethical extends to all living beings…But the prototype of this is human ethics.”77 After all, it is always possible to say that the example of the whale is, in fact, reducible to the law of being through self-interested rule following since we cannot know for sure the interiority of the whale. As such, to establish the possibility of the experience of the face of the nonhuman Other it will be necessary to know whether such an experience has been had by those with whom we can communicate in such a way as to ascertain this.

Towards answering this question, I propose that we consider a concept of attunement.78 “Attunement” is the noun form of the verb “attune” which the Oxford English Dictionary defines as “[m]ake receptive or aware.” As we know from Levinas, the subject is defined as a null-site of receptivity to alterity such that the subject is constituted through its relation to the Other. At the same time, this subject exposed to alterity and constituted through it is free in his/her responses to it which is why, of course, responsibility can be denied. To deny the face

77 Levinas, “The Paradox of Morality” 172.
78 David Abram has a similar concept. See Abram (1997: 42)
of the Other, however, need not be experienced as a conscious denial of the Other but may be experienced as an ignorance of the Other depending upon preceding experiences that condition biases. As such, for instance, a person may come to find it easier to see the face of the Other in a body more similar to their own than one different from them. Of course, this is not a pure seeing since the face is, of course, not a seen object such that to see the Other in his/her corporeality is already to begin to not see the Other as such. Nevertheless, this mixing together of the experience of the face with a thematization of the person in consciousness is unavoidable as we already know from the aporetic relation between ethics and politics.

If the face can be ignored, then the face can also be recovered from out of this ignorance as well. As such, we find that, for instance, people who move to more diverse communities tend to become more tolerant over time. In other words, by being exposed to these Others more frequently, they became more aware and receptive of them, that is, more attuned to them. This would lead us to the conclusion that as one becomes more attuned to a being with a face, one becomes more receptive to seeing that face. To say that a being is faceless would, therefore, be to make the judgement that this being does not have the capacity to address another out of its vulnerability. Of course, it is possible that in lieu of a being having no face that perhaps we are insufficiently attuned to this being such that we are not receptive to seeing its face. In such a situation, it would be possible to become attuned to a being such that the face could be experienced.

In the current historical context, it is easy to understand why it might be that someone would think that only biological humans have faces as we live in an enclosed human society in which we have regular contact with biological humans and limited or circumscribed contact.

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with all others. As such, the cow appears as a unit of production, corn as a commodity, cockroaches as pests, and dogs as pets. The pet, of course, shows up as an exception which, because of its exceptional quality with relation to all the rest, is usually reduced to an analogical extension and anthropomorphism which does not essentially change our relation to the rest. However, the time of the enclosed human community is relatively recent extending over perhaps one quarter of the total history of our species at best. To generalize this experience would be to say that the attunement of a certain class of humans, particularly the settled agricultural human, is to be privileged above the rest. This move, however, has no justification and to generalize the experience of a historically conditioned set of biological humans does not give us the full picture of what can appear as face to us. Moreover, as we have noted, the sphere of experience with an enclosed human community is limited by design.

If we want to understand whether we can become appropriately attuned to nonhuman beings so as to experience them as having faces then we will have to make sense of those humans who have had regular contact with nonhuman entities and determine whether they experience those nonhumans as having faces or not. It would seem that only those who have been sufficiently in contact with a being so as to become attuned to it would be able to tell us whether a being is truly faceless. Towards this end, we will take a look at the way in which hunter-gatherer groups experience their environment in the next chapter. However, before we turn to this, we shall try to make sense of how we found ourselves in a situation of such ethical constriction and lack of contact and attunement with nonhuman beings.

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The Narrowing of Ethical Concern

Levinas’s anthropocentrism was certainly not surprising at the time that he wrote. Even now, anthropocentrism continues to be ingrained into the common cultural fabric of our society. If Levinas did not see the face of the nonhuman, it was because he was not in a context in which the nonhuman could easily become visible as something of moral concern. As we mentioned in the last section, this was likely due to a lack of regular contact and attunement with these nonhuman beings; a (non)relation that began to take shape after the dawn of agriculture allowed for settled society to cut itself off from its surrounding environment and create an autonomous human sphere. Of course, the beginning of settled agriculture, on its own, did not effect a total break and alienation from our environment, it simply set up the conditions for this possibility to fully manifest itself.

As such, we begin by looking at the influence that settlement may have had on the beginning of this separation as well as comparing current archaeological ideas about its origins against Levinas’s own origin story of settlement as described in Section II of *Totality and Infinity*. What we find will be an interesting difference at the intersection of necessity and abundance. That is, while current archaeological evidence supports the idea that agricultural settlement began as a way of dealing with the abundance and productivity of wild grains, Levinas will seem to describe the movement out of the elemental as one based on control and necessity; that is, as a way of dealing with the precarity of the morrow.

From there, we will consider other factors that have likely played a role in shaping the anthropocentric experiential framework in which we currently find ourselves through an analysis of the development of phonetic writing followed by a look at the legacy of naturalism whose ascendancy began in the seventeenth century. By looking at all these historical moments, I hope to show how we gradually moved away from an experience in which
attunement to nonhuman beings was possible to one where it became highly constricted through the influence of these conceptual technologies as deployed in culture.

**Agriculture and the Movement Out of the Elemental**

In the development of agriculture, there was a fundamental change in how humans related to their environment. Although we will get into the details of this later, it suffices to say here that what once was a non-separated (though not necessarily unified) realm of nature, culture, and the supernatural integrated into one experience wherein the environment itself was the home in which the hunter-gatherer nomadically roamed became, in agriculture, a bifurcated antagonistic space in which the inside became the human community and the outside became the roaring forces of nature. In this process, relationships with nonhumans acquired a different tenor as they were transformed into beings to be appropriated and used according to a calculative plan. This can be understood as the move from extractive labor which does not seek to control that from which it extracts to appropriative labor which does. As Tim Ingold puts it, “appropriative labour…establishes claims over resources growing and reproducing in nature.”

Through this appropriation, property claims are established and planning for the future becomes necessary since one can either no longer leave the place where one has settled or cannot abandon the livestock which one is now managing. Thus, Ingold says, for instance, that “[h]usbandry always involves planning for the future…[where] a distinction has to be drawn between the husbandry of living resources, which concerns the separation of reproductive stock from that destined for consumption; and the husbandry of the consumption stock itself, which has to do with making the stock ‘last out’ over a period.” In other words,

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82 Ibid., 564.
the animals tended by the pastoralist have become nothing but “living resources” divided into reproductive stock and future consumptive stock. By contrast, the attitude that the hunter-gatherer is obliged to adopt is very different since:

success in hunting is unpredictable. The hunter cannot say, after making a kill, ‘this has to last me for so many days, so I and my family shall eat so much each day’, for he cannot tell when he will make another kill. Moreover, others have equal and irrefutable claims on the meat. Better, then, to eat one’s fill when there is meat to be eaten than practice unnecessary self-denial, for the very existence of the hunter rests on the assumption that more food will eventually be found.83

What we see here is that the hunter cannot engage in calculative thinking to the same degree that a pastoralist or an agriculturalist can in relation to his/her environment. Instead, the hunter must simply continue with life “on the assumption that more food will eventually be found” which is another way of saying that the hunter must have faith that his/her environment will provide, unlike the agriculturalist or pastoralist who seeks to control and manipulate his/her environment towards his/her ends.

**The Dwelling and the Foundation of Interiority**

This movement from out of an integration with an environment as a constituent of it to existing in a separated human sphere relating to an exterior nature is also described by Levinas in Section II of *Totality and Infinity* especially in his description of the setting up of a dwelling. There, however, Levinas seems to see the movement out of the elemental as being both positive and necessary even while understanding this movement as intimately associated with appropriation and exploitation. Levinas thus agrees that “the domicile…[is] the primary appropriation.”84 However, he seems to think of it as a necessary appropriation from out of the elemental which he understands as “a common fund or terrain, essentially non-possessable,

83 Ibid.
84 Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 131-132.
‘nobody’s.’”\(^{85}\) This is why the elemental is associated with the earth, sea, sky, wind, light, and even city since these are considered to be that which have “no side at all” and, as such, cannot be approached since one can only be steeped in them as within a surrounding medium.\(^{86}\) In this way, the elemental shows up as that which is anonymous as a pure quality determining nothing and this is where Levinas sees it as incapable of bringing to mind the idea of infinity.\(^{87}\) That is, in contrast to the height seen in the infinity of the face which will come later, the elemental displays only a fathomless depth shown in its impossible extension and uncertain future. This is why Levinas will identify the elemental with the \textit{there is} as when he says that “[w]hat the side of the element…conceals is not a ‘something’ susceptible of being revealed, but an ever-new depth of absence, an existence without existent, the impersonal par excellence…The element extends into the there is.”\(^{88}\)

As we remember from the first chapter, the \textit{there is} was that impersonal being without end, the “bad infinity” from which Levinas sought an escape and found it in the positing of the Good beyond Being. By identifying the elemental with the \textit{there is}, we are immediately situated back at that question of escaping the fearsome meaninglessness of impersonal being. To escape the elemental, therefore, would seem to be equivalent to escaping the \textit{there is}.

The first escape that Levinas posited was the hypostasis or the positing of a being from out of the \textit{there is}. Similarly, we find that Levinas seeks to escape the elemental through the positing of the I in enjoyment where enjoyment is understood as the pleasure received in excess of the execution of an activity. This is why he says that “[n]ourishment, as a means of invigoration, is the transmutation of the other into the same, which is in the essence of

\(^{85}\) Ibid., 131.
\(^{86}\) Ibid.
\(^{87}\) Ibid., 132.
\(^{88}\) Ibid., 142.
Enjoyment: an energy that is other, recognized as other...becomes, in enjoyment, my own energy, my strength, me.” In other words, in enjoyment, exteriority is incorporated to fill a need in such a way that what is fulfilled goes beyond the basic need itself to produce something more: my strength, my energy, my vitality, my very ipseity. It is not a simple subsistence that is being described. This is how it is possible for a relation of dependence to turn into happiness and independence, for it is through the enjoyment at the excess of the fulfillment of these needs that the I is posited beyond its needs. That is, in enjoyment I realize myself beyond the brute necessities of my corporeality. Hence, Levinas says that “[l]ife 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. Distinct from my substance but constituting it.” These contents are what give value to life as that which goes beyond basic subsistence in being. It is here where freedom can be experienced for the enjoyment in excess of necessity is already a gratuity beyond the book-keeping of being. This is why Levinas says that freedom, besides being responsibility for the Other, can also be “the absolute distraction of a play without consequences, without traces or memories, of a pure pardon.”

Enjoyment, however, as we have just noted, bases itself on a relation of appropriation with the alterity that it incorporates which is why it is “not ignorance but exploitation of the other.” Since this relation is a fleeting one wherein the need always arises again and again to be fulfilled, enjoyment appears as an experience constantly in danger of loss. That is, a constant inflow of alterity which can be appropriated is needed to maintain oneself in enjoyment, and, surprisingly, is also the condition for the appearance of the metaphysical desire required for

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89 Ibid., 111.
90 Ibid., 112.
91 Ibid., Otherwise than Being, 125.
92 Ibid., Totality and Infinity, 115.
ethics. As Levinas puts it, “[m]etaphysical Desire, which can be produced only in a separated, that is, enjoying, egoist, and satisfied being, is then not derived from enjoyment.”\(^93\) Metaphysical desire is not derived from enjoyment, and yet, metaphysical desire can only arise in the being who has reached enjoyment and satisfaction. As such, it is the enjoying being, no longer concerned about its needs, in whom metaphysical desire may arise but not necessarily so. The satisfaction of the egoist provides the condition for the possibility of ethics but does not cause it to arise. Thus, the I, “[h]aving recognized its needs as material needs, as capable of being satisfied…can henceforth turn to what it does not lack. It distinguishes the material from the spiritual, opens to Desire.”\(^94\) In the fulfillment of its needs which produces enjoyment, the I can now seek out that which it does not lack and, therefore, can never fill which is the metaphysical desire that opens the I to the ethical relation of infinite responsibility with the Other.

In this description, we find that, in order for ethics to come to pass, a condition must be met, that condition being the satisfaction of our needs. However, as Levinas notes, one cannot be sure that one’s needs will always be satisfied and is thus placed in a position of precarity where the opening to ethics would be inconsistent, based as it is on a prior need fulfillment. This precarity is what he describes as “the concern for the morrow.”\(^95\) It is in this relation of precarity that he seems to think we exist in prior to the “primary appropriation” of the domicile. As he describes it:

Man has overcome the elements only by surmounting this interiority without issue by the domicile, which confers upon him an extraterritoriality. He gets a foothold in the elemental by a side already appropriated: a field cultivated by me, the sea in which I fish and moor my boats, the forest in which I cut wood; and all these acts, all this labor, refer to the domicile…He is within what he possesses, such that we shall be able to say that the domicile, condition for all property, renders the inner

\(^{93}\) Ibid., 148.
\(^{94}\) Ibid., 117.
\(^{95}\) Ibid., 150.
life possible. The I is thus at home with itself. Through the home our relation with space as distance and extension is substituted for the simple ‘bathing in the element.’ But the adequate relation with the element is precisely bathing.\footnote{Ibid., 131-132.}

In the setting up a dwelling, we thus find a separation from the elemental which Levinas seems to think is necessary in order for the inner life to become possible. It becomes the space of recollection and reflection from outside of the uncertainty of the elemental and, in this way, becomes a stable point in which enjoyment can be sustained such that there can be an opening to ethics. This is why he says that “[t]he passage from instantaneous enjoyment to the fabrication of things refers to habitation, to economy, which presupposes the welcoming of the Other.”\footnote{Ibid., 146.} In other words, there must first be a stable place erected such that the I can recollect him/herself out of the uncertainty and unpredictability of the elemental so that the I can become open to the welcoming of the Other. This dwelling in which the I can open up its interiority so that it can relate to infinity is produced by labor which Levinas understands as that which masters “the uncertainty of the future and its insecurity…by establishing possession…[and] delineat[ing] separation in the form of economic independence”\footnote{Ibid., 150.} This is all to say that, for Levinas, the ethical relation cannot arise except in a being who has first been separated out of the contingencies of the elemental through a primary appropriation wrought by labor through which s/he maintains his/her persistence in being to a sufficient degree to be open to the welcoming of the Other which goes beyond that.

**Appropriation and the Basis of Ethics**

What is interesting about this account from Levinas is that it would seem that the very possibility for ethics, at least as he describes it in this section, is based on an initial appropriation and exploitation of alterity as a way of making familiar what is strange and in this way setting up a
stable space for the Same to appropriate alterity. Hence, he says that “in the satisfaction of need the alienness of the world that founds me loses its alterity...[so that] Through labor and possession the alterity of nutriments enters into the same.”\textsuperscript{99} The dwelling is precisely that place in which the Same reduces alterity to itself through labor, however, for Levinas, this does not seem problematic since the labor that acts upon the elemental, even if it is acting upon alterity, is not acting upon an ethical Other and thus cannot be understood as violence. As he says, “[l]abor grapples with the fallacious resistance of nameless matter, the infinity of its nothingness. Thus...labor cannot be called violence: it is applied to what is faceless, to the resistance of nothingness...It attacks only the facelessness of the pagan gods whose nothingness is henceforth exposed.”\textsuperscript{100} As such, the process of mastering, controlling, and appropriating the elemental is unproblematic as the elemental is, after all, “faceless” and its resistance expresses only the depths of nothingness. Nevertheless, it is problematic that the ethical attitude of responsibility for the Other is supposed to arise in a being whose interiority has stabilized itself through a relation with alterity based on appropriation, control, and assimilation. In this way, Levinas seems to be producing two types of alterities, those to which we can do no violence and are free to appropriate without concern, and those to whom we are infinitely responsible with the former providing the condition for the latter whose appearance in the interiority of a being requires the establishment of this interiority by way of the former.

The analysis provided by Levinas in this section, however, rests on an important assumption which cannot be secured, that assumption being that a separation from the elemental is necessary to establish the interiority that will lead us into the ethical. If interiority can be established without the need of such a separation from the elemental then it would seem that the

\textsuperscript{99} Ibid., 129.  
\textsuperscript{100} Ibid., 160.
necessity of engaging in the appropriative practices that establish a dwelling are not, in fact, necessary.

As we have just seen, for Levinas, the entire purpose of separating from “bathing” in the elemental through appropriative practices is because of the uncertainty and unpredictability of the future found in such a situation which makes it impossible to have needs sufficiently satisfied on a consistent enough level to establish the interiority necessary for ethics. And this he even ties to religious experience as when he says that “[t]he future of the element as insecurity is lived concretely as the mythical divinity of the element. Faceless gods, impersonal gods to whom one does not speak, mark the nothingness that bounds the egoism of enjoyment in the midst of its familiarity with the element.”  

In other words, the insecurity of the future found in the non-separated relation of “bathing” in the element is experienced as divinity since one is wholly subject to its power and determined by it. This relation, for Levinas, cannot be a personal one in any way similar to that which is experienced in a dimension of height in the trace of infinity to the most high. Rather, he would more likely characterize this relation as being experienced in a relation of depth to the fullness of nothingness of the most low. As Levinas says in distinguishing between possession as appropriation wrought by labor versus “possession” as pure enjoyment of the elemental:

The possession of things proceeding from the home, produced by labor, is to be distinguished from the immediate relation with the non-I in enjoyment, the possession without acquisition enjoyed by the sensibility steeped in the element, which ‘possesses’ without taking. In enjoyment the I assumes nothing; from the first it lives from . . . . Possession by enjoyment is one with enjoyment; no activity precedes sensibility. But to possess by enjoying is also to be possessed and to be delivered to the fathomless depth, the disquieting future of the element.  

101 Ibid., 142.
102 Ibid., 158.
In other words, whereas labor allows one to master and control a portion of the elemental so that it can become my own and can thus be understood as an incorporation of the other into the Same—making the other familiar to and possessed by the Same—the immediate relation with the elemental through enjoyment can be more properly understood as being possessed by the elemental than possessing it. This is why Levinas characterizes this possession “without taking” as one with enjoyment and not wrought by an activity that would produce it (as with labor). It is the submission of oneself to the depths of the elemental upon which one depends, without being able to control or predict it. That is, “the plenitude of its…enjoyment is not ensured against the unknown that lurks in the very element it enjoys, the fact that joy remains a chance and a stroke of luck.”

This is why, of course, Levinas saw the need for an entrance into an appropriative relationship to the elemental, however, this characterization of life before settlement as unpredictable, uncertain, and swirling with impersonal forces to which I am, unfortunately and desperately, subject to is not in line with the likely explanations of the transition to agriculture from out of hunter-gathering society. What Levinas provides us with is a mythology for the appropriation of nature into an enclosed human society based on the assumption that it was necessary in order to ensure human growth and freedom—and ethics. This is why he says that “[t]o be free is to build a world in which one could be free.” Of course, if one can be free without having to build another world then the necessity of building is called into question as a redundant, or even neurotic, activity. Furthermore, to have to build and appropriate before the possibility of ethics can arise seems to place us back into a situation of ontology preceding ethics which, as we know, Levinas’s project was intended to reverse. Although the fullness of this

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103 Ibid., 144.
104 Ibid., 165.
reversal came to its fruition in *Otherwise than Being, or Beyond Essence*, in *Totality and Infinity*, we seem to still retain a trace of this problematic structure.

If, however, one makes the argument that interiority and ethical relationality were, in fact, already present in the situation that Levinas characterizes as “bathing in the elemental,” that is, the moment prior to the establishment of the dwelling through appropriation then things remain consistent with *Otherwise than Being* since that would place ethical relationality at the beginning before the positing of the subject and consciousness, which would come later. That is, the mythos that Levinas gives us here describes a primary ontology from which ethics arises through an erasure of a mode of relation which he can only understand as an awestruck submission to a fearsome nature. It is through this erasure that we return to Being arising before the Good and it is through retrieving this mode of relation that we can return dignity to the “faceless gods” and find the Good before Being once again.

**From Necessity to Abundance**

In the description of the setting up of a dwelling that Levinas gives us, there is a sense of total necessity. That is, what he seems to be describing is a *necessary* movement produced by the privations of depending on an unpredictable and powerful nature which makes it impossible for a being to become situated in a stable way and thus leads into an appropriative relation as soon as it becomes technically or cognitively feasible as a way of controlling one’s future and ensuring stability. The implication is that, in the face of the elemental, any one would certainly prefer to exit it into the comforts of a controlled and consistent dwelling environment. We can thus understand what Levinas is describing as the transition from a nomadic lifestyle to a sedentary
lifestyle which roughly tracks (though not in all cases) with the transition from a hunter-gatherer subsistence style to an agricultural subsistence style.\(^{105}\)

The problem with his account is that it is wrong, thus providing us with a mythology of the birth of civilization based on a false premise. Current archaeological evidence does not support the idea that hunter-gatherers settled into agricultural societies because they wanted to stabilize the sources of their material needs and gain control and mastery over them through appropriation due to the pressure of necessity. In fact, even the storage of foodstuffs has been shown to be an activity not exclusive to sedentary societies; hunter-gatherers engage in it as well but without the accompanying appropriative attitude. This is what Ingold refers to as the difference between practical storage and social storage where the intent of practical storage is only to level “out the effects of natural fluctuations in the availability of food resources.”\(^{106}\) This process does not essentially change the relation of the hunter-gatherers to that which they have procured and yet they have managed to deal with the uncertainty of the elemental without entering into the type of appropriative relationship characteristic of social storage that we find in agriculturalists and pastoralists (and which Levinas suggests is necessary to gain control over the elemental). As Ingold says:

> Storage in its quite distinct social sense refers neither to the physical activity of setting stuff aside, nor to the organic accumulations that result, but to the appropriation of materials in such a way that rights over their future distribution or consumption converge upon a single interest. In this sense, the store has to be considered in its aspect as property or wealth, and storage as a concomitant of social relations of distribution.\(^{107}\)

\(^{105}\) Pastoralism, however, provides us with a special case since it likely arose alongside of agriculture as a product of it. As such, the mindset of the pastoralist, while living a nomadic or semi-nomadic lifestyle is connected to the appropriative way of relating to their environment of the agriculturalist. The main difference is that one owns property that cannot move while the other’s property does. See Maisels (1993: 40) and Ingold (1983: 563).

\(^{106}\) Ingold, “The Significance of Storage” 554.

\(^{107}\) Ibid., 561.
In other words, in social storage, something more than the activity of storing is happening, rather, a new social relation is being established wherein individual appropriation has occurred such that private property and wealth can now arise. This is in contrast to the way in which hunter-gatherers experience their storage as essentially collective and open to all members of their society. That is, they relate to their storage in the same way that they relate to the elemental, as non-possessed and non-possessable. As Ingold summarizes of the hunter-gatherer attitude, “where people neither appropriate nor intervene in the reproduction of living resources—that is in a purely extractive hunting and gathering economy—the appropriation of nature remains essentially collective.”

This collective appropriation of nature then functions quite differently than the individual appropriation of it. Whereas in the individual appropriation of nature, there is a direct investment in a piece of land that has become mine, or livestock which I own and now have to manage towards a futural goal, in this collective appropriation, there is no such investment since it is appropriated each time in that moment through the activity of procurement. Moreover, as a collective appropriation, it belongs to the entire community and is to be shared with all—it cannot be privately owned. Without the sense of invested labor, it takes on a quality of a free good or abundance. Indeed, the lack of investment in this space makes it such that there is no anxiety about leaving a specific place to find goods elsewhere in the extended depths of the elemental. The experience of the hunter-gatherer is, therefore, not so much typified by privation as by mobility. Hence, in describing their nomadism Marshall Sahlins says that:

Certainly, hunters quit camp because food resources have given out in the vicinity. But to see in this nomadism merely a flight from starvation only perceives half of it; one ignores the possibility that the people’s expectations of greener pastures elsewhere are not usually disappointed. Consequently their

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108 Ibid., 569.
wanderings, rather than anxious, take on all the qualities of a picnic outing on the Thames.\textsuperscript{109} Similarly, Nurit Bird-David, when writing of the Nayaka, describes how in their forays into the forest to gather food they walk “at a slow, indulgent pace.”\textsuperscript{110} This is not the behavior one would expect from people living on the edge in the precarity of the impersonal and uncaring forces of nature. Indeed, for them, the environment is personal. It is experienced as composed of personal forces with whom they engage. The forest, for the Nayaka, is a parent and “it is not something ‘out there’ that responds mechanically or passively but like a parent; it provides food unconditionally to its children.”\textsuperscript{111} Existing in such a situation of abundance and mobility in relation to the intimately personal forces of nature, there would not seem to be any great pressure to change their lifestyle into agricultural sedentism. Indeed, a !Kung Bushman, in response to a question asking him why they have not taken up agriculture, is alleged to have replied: “Why should we plant when there are so many mongongo nuts in the world?”

If Levinas’s explanation of the setting up of a dwelling as a necessary appropriation of the elemental is not quite right, then what was it that led us to this? The current archaeological evidence points to abundance, rather than privation, as the reason why agricultural sedentism came to pass. As such, unlike what Levinas suggests, it was not a necessary transition but a contingent one based on some unique historical factors. Keith Maisels summarizes the way in which this transition occurred:

> the model for the emergence of the first agricultural societies from foraging ones…[is] that the process commenced with the increasing reliance by foragers upon the wild cereals available in the Near East during the early Holocene. The success of heavy cereal exploitation led to increasing sedentism, which

necessitated a new pattern for the exploitation of other resources, particularly animals, and the advent of semi-permanent and then fully permanent villages which the new exploitation patterns made both possible and necessary. New patterns of subsistence allows population expansion, hence more villages, then larger villages and, with further social change, towns.\textsuperscript{112}

In other words, agricultural society was the result of the abundance of highly productive cereal grains which led to increased sedentism among hunter-gatherer societies up to the point that their societies began to change from this increased sedentism such that, for example, “\textit{[w]hen animals get scarce round the village, then lambs and kids surviving from the hunt must be reared.}”\textsuperscript{113} That is, the increased sedentism encouraged by the desire to fully exploit the available cereal grains led to a chain reaction of effects culminating in agriculture. After the exhaustion of wild grains, the now semi-sedentary society with an expanded population found themselves appropriating and domesticating these grains as a way of maintaining their newfound sedentism and supporting their increased numbers. Although necessity may be said to come into play at the very end, the rationale for the activities leading up to agriculture was the enjoyment provided by the abundance of the elemental. Thus, interestingly, we find that the move into agriculture finds its basis in the enjoyment of the elemental rather than in the mastery over it. It leads to this mastery, no doubt, but it does not begin there.

\textbf{Dualism, Phonetic Writing, and the Limitation of Sense}

Although we can argue that, with agriculture, we first erected an important separation between human civilization and what would come to be seen as an external nature, it was not simply this bifurcation that explains the kind of human exceptionality and separateness from the rest of the biosphere that we have become accustomed to in modernity. Other important factors came into

\textsuperscript{112} Maisels, \textit{The Emergence of Civilization}, 38.
\textsuperscript{113} Ibid., 40.
play later to further accelerate and finalize this alienation from our natural environment and even from our own embodiment within it.

As David Abram periodizes it, “it was only after the publication of Descartes’s *Meditations*, in 1641, that material reality came to be commonly spoken of as a strictly mechanical realm…whose laws of operation could be discerned only via mathematical analysis.”\(^{114}\) Thus, we might say that with Cartesian dualism we set up the conditions for the scientific naturalism which would become ascendant in the centuries to come and finalize the deadening of matter and the nonhuman. It is important to remember, however, that the naturalist perspective, even before Descartes, could only arise due to a host of other historical factors putting Descartes in a position to articulate the *zeitgeist* of his time, dominated by the Catholic Church as it was and coming two centuries after the invention of the printing press. It is, therefore, important to go further back still to a human technology that arose after the founding of agriculture and shaped virtually everything that would come after it: writing and, in particular, *phonetic* writing, whose arbitrary character, as we shall see, was to prove decisive.

If we return to where we left off in our narrative of the beginning of agriculture, we will be able to note a few interesting things which will give us a clue as to what will come next. The first is that, in the appropriation wrought by labor which leads to social storage, not only does the human community disconnect itself from its environment by positing a separated human sphere but the individuals composing this community also become disconnected from one another. As noted above, whereas the collectivism of hunter-gatherer society leads to a collective appropriation of the elemental, in agricultural and pastoral societies, appropriation is individual. Property becomes private and interests become mutually exclusive, rather than shared, according

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to an assumption of scarcity. This is whyMaisels says that “there is not, beyond hunter-gatherer society, a relationship to the ecology shared by all the members of a society.” If not all members of a society share the same relationship to their ecology then that means that a distinction has been produced between members such that different members can engage in different ways with their ecology. This is the beginning of more stratified role specialization in a society. As Maisels describes it:

sedentarism at favoured sites enjoying diverse and plentiful resources allowed population to increase…[such that] New villages ‘budded-off to new locations, some…of which were not so well endowed as the old, necessitating the introduction of plants and animals either not naturally present, or insufficiently so. Fully-fledged farming villages employing a well-understood range of domesticates…allowed population in the region as a whole to rise as it filled up with farming and herding villages in new and sometimes unpromising locations, such as those requiring irrigation."

What we see here is that with the primary appropriation of the domicile in which this piece of land becomes mine, each person winds up finding him or herself in the situation of appropriating his/her own place in the sun, as it were. Of course, not everyone can appropriate the same place so this will necessarily lead to different activities being carried out on different plots of land and to relations between individuals based on trading goods that one has but the other does not and cannot acquire except through trade. Hence, sedentism at favored sites gives way to sedentism at less favored sites up to pastoralism at marginal sites with each producing different goods depending on what is possible on his/her land and trading with others accordingly.

This movement into individual appropriation, as we have mentioned, also changes the social relations between individuals in a society. Now posited as separated individuals competing for scarce resources in a zero-sum game, the calculations made in relation to others becomes economic. Unlike the sharing relations between the members of a hunter-gatherer community in

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115 Maisels, *The Emergence of Civilization*, 16.
116 Ibid., 124.
which all members see each other as kin, these relations determine themselves, not based on generosity, but necessity. It is at this point that we begin to see centralization in a State as a way of gathering up these fractured individuals into a vertical structure distinct from the horizontality of hunter-gatherer society. As Maisels says, “the state’s emergence depends upon the severing of kinship bonds...between ruler and ruled...[since the] logic of kinship is kinship reciprocity, which will not allow prerogatives...without commensurate obligation and reciprocation.”¹¹⁷ That is, the horizontal society which is held together through the reciprocally reinforcing obligations found in kinship becomes ruptured into a collection of separated individuals whose competing interests must now be mediated through a State whose autonomy is based on a non-reciprocal, vertical relation of sovereign to subject.

Through the instantiation of these processes, we arrive at the beginning of writing which will serve important bureaucratic functions for the State and whose condition is to be found in the beginning of task specialization which leads to the formation of the State. As Marshall McLuhan says, “[f]or until sedentary life permits some specialization of human tasks, there is no specialization of the sense life such as leads to the stepping up of visual intensity.”¹¹⁸ This specialization of our sense of vision above all others will be implicated in the privilege that writing will be accorded. However, before vision can become ascendant among all the senses, it will first have to distinguish itself as distinct from them. This process of separation will happen over time through the various stages of the development of writing and will express itself most forcefully in the arbitrary nature of phonetic script.

If we look at the history of the development of writing, what we find is increasing abstraction and disconnection from the sensory world of experience. What begins as an attempt

¹¹⁷ Ibid., 292.
at a direct representation in the pictogram will give way to an associative representation in the ideogram to finally an arbitrary representation associated with an arbitrary sound in the phonogram. David Abram describes the process:

pictographic and ideographic writing already involved a displacement of our sensory participation from the depths of the animate environment to the flat surface of our walls, of clay tablets, of the sheet of papyrus. However...the written images themselves often related us back to the other animals and the environing earth. The pictographic glyph or character still referred, implicitly, to the animate phenomenon of which it was the static image; it was that worldly phenomenon, in turn, that provoked from us the sound of its name...With the phonetic aleph-beth, however, the written character no longer refers us to any sensible phenomenon out in the world\textsuperscript{19}

In other words, with phonetic writing, we truly have a total disconnection of reference from the environment implicit in the design of the script itself. The “image” of the word is arbitrary and its reference is to an arbitrary sound which together make up a signifier referring to a concept signified. In the untethering of thought found in the phonetic script of symbolic language, we have the beginning of an autonomous realm, disconnected from this Earth.

This is the beginning of the “split man,” as McLuhan says, who is born with the advent of literacy and is no longer \textit{inside} of an environment so much as \textit{standing outside} of it.\textsuperscript{120} Thus, in a fascinating example given by McLuhan, it is found that those from non-literate cultures experience films differently than those from literate ones. Those from literate cultures are able to experience the image as a \textit{Gestalt} and stand outside of it, while those from non-literate cultures experience themselves as \textit{within} the image. As McLuhan describes it, “[n]on-literate people...scan objects and images as we do the printed page, segment by segment...they have no detached point of view...[but] are wholly \textit{with} the object...The eye is used, not in perspective

\textsuperscript{19} Abram, \textit{The Spell of the Sensuous}, 66.
\textsuperscript{120} McLuhan, \textit{The Gutenberg Galaxy}, 22.
but tactually, as it were.”¹²¹ The “split man” is no longer wholly with his environment but detached from it, observing it from afar in this abstract, autonomous realm of the symbolic where “the separation from materiality and energy can be so great and the causal links so convoluted that reference acquires a veritable freedom…as if it were radically separate from the world.”¹²²

It is important to note, however, that the full influence of phonetic writing took a long period of time to take hold. Even after phonetic writing came into use, it was not privileged as a primary way of transmitting knowledge or communication until much later. The first phonetic writing was still subordinated to oral speech and was intended to be read aloud. In fact, the punctuation and word separation that we are now accustomed to was not even developed until the Middle Ages.¹²³ Moreover, even after such developments, their effects would have been limited due to the fact that only a limited portion of society was literate and the reproduction of texts still involved manual and tactile techniques that would not have yet led to a complete privileging of vision as a separated abstract gaze.

As McLuhan says, “there was nothing in the manuscript phase of alphabetic technology that was intense enough to split the visual from the tactile entirely…It was not until the experience of mass production of exactly uniform and repeatable type, that the fission of the senses occurred, and the visual dimension broke away from the other senses.”¹²⁴ Thus, one can say that it was with the uniformity and repeatability of the printing press combined with the fact that it made mass literacy possible through the production of books as reproducible commodities that we arrived both at the point where phonetic script had reached its most abstracted form and become most available. It is out of this background that the Cartesian dualism that will so

¹²¹ Ibid., 37.
¹²³ Abram, The Spell of the Sensuous, 79.
influence the scientific naturalism to come will arise accelerating, strengthening, and reinforcing the tendency towards positing an abstract realm of existence separated from materiality into which human essence will be placed as “mind” as distinct from the corporeality of a body.

As we have seen, between the influence of agriculture and phonetic writing, we have two powerful technologies that, from our perspective, have been around for a very long time and have conditioned the culture and society that we live in and how it understands its world. Agriculture enacted the first separation from an environment into an enclosed and insular human community whose exceptionality and separation in relation to all other beings became reinforced by the influence of phonetic writing which posited an abstract realm of ideas as the exclusive domain of humans. This was the context in which Levinas wrote and came to his philosophical maturity and whose influence he could not fully shake off. Despite this, however, his philosophy was able to go some way in contesting this tradition by, for instance, seeking to focus on the singular encounter with an Other rather than establishing universal, normative ethical rules which would have been the prerogative of the influence of an abstract vision seeking to hold everything within its view. Moreover, as we have gestured earlier, there are other possible ways of engaging with and relating to an environment which can be retrieved from the experiences of hunter-gatherers and oral cultures; experiences which are, in many significant ways, surprisingly Levinasian despite their “paganism” and refusal to leave the elemental in favor of an appropriated dwelling. Of course, as we have just explored here, these biases found in Levinas’s philosophy are neither central to it nor necessarily maintained consistently through his entire career. Towards the project of more fully expanding his philosophy and making it more consistent with itself, we can now look at what we may be able to learn from a closer examination of the experiences of these hunter-gatherers whose relation to their environment is
more complex than Levinas’s characterization of it as “bathing in the element” would lead you to believe.
4 ANIMISM AND THE MEANING OF RELATIONALITY

Despite Levinas’s often dismissive references to pagans or persons bathing in the elemental as existing within an infantile situation in awe of anonymous forces personified but faceless, there is actually much that animistic ways of engaging with the world have in common with the core features of Levinas’s analysis which have hitherto been seemingly unexplored. As such, in this chapter, we will continue what we have begun in the last by looking at the experiences of various different animistic groups to see what they have in common and what distinguishes them and what this has to do with key concepts from Levinas’s philosophy.

We will begin by looking, once again, at the escape from the there is and how this is situated differently in Levinas’s earlier work versus his later work as a way of showing that, in order for his earlier analysis to be consistent with his later one, the erasure of the elemental must be recovered; this will then lead us into a description of the relational constitution of personhood as found in animist systems before returning to the there is to describe how it is experienced differently by animists than how Levinas described it. From there, we will consider the different ways in which kinship is deployed in animistic societies as a way of leading us into a discussion of the similarities and differences between animistic kinship and Levinasian fraternity. By looking at the experiences of these animistic hunter-gatherer groups, I hope to accomplish two tasks: first, if the face is an ethical experience then it is important to show that we can, in fact, experience the face of nonhuman Others and this is borne out in the way in which hunter-gatherers experience their environment and, second, fully modern humans have been around for at least 40,000 years of which about 10,000 have been lived within agricultural settlements, thus to focus on the experiences of those living in the legacy of what amounts to quite recent
historical developments seems to be unjustifiable, and requires that we uncover that which preceded it and was erased from it to the extent that we reasonably can.\textsuperscript{125}

Of course, it is impossible to know precisely what those archaic hunter-gatherers actually experienced, nevertheless, looking at the experiences of contemporary groups does at least give us a clue as to how they might have related to their environment especially when we consider the fact that many of these groups (such as those found in the Americas and Australia) lived hunter-gatherer lifestyles continuously up until European contact and colonization. Through such an analysis, I hope to show that the face of the nonhuman Other does reveal itself in the same way in which the face of the human Other does when given the chance and that it likely did so before the advent of the historical processes that led to our separation and alienation from our environment.

**The Placement of the There Is: From Totality and Infinity to Otherwise than Being**

As we have noted previously, in the work of Levinas, especially as we find it in *Totality and Infinity*, there is a primary erasure that conditions the ensuing analysis of the necessary appropriation of what is “faceless” to set up a space for the interiority to form which will be necessary in order for there to be an opening to the Other in a relation of height. The necessity of this originary appropriation, however, is based on an assumption of privation which, as we have shown, cannot hold. The primary appropriation of space for the construction of a stable dwelling arose, not out of the necessity of privation, but out of the abundance of the elemental which allowed us to stay in one place which we then appropriated afterwards as a way of maintaining this newly found sedentary lifestyle to which we had, by then, become accustomed to after the exhaustion of the resource which had initially provided the condition for it.

\textsuperscript{125} Maisels, *The Emergence of Civilization*, 53.
The contingency of this historical process, then, means that in the absence of the
discovery of these highly productive wild grains that allowed for sedentary society to begin to
form itself (and subsequently transform itself as a way of maintaining itself) that there would
have been no movement into agricultural society. Indeed, the possibility of sedentism itself
seems to be premised on the discovery of such abundance that mobility becomes no longer
necessary, such as with the indigenous peoples of the North American northwest coast whose
easy access to an abundance of salmon allowed them to reduce their mobility.

Of course, what this means is that Levinas’s picture of those “bathing” in the elemental as
existing in an uncertain mode of precarity under the power of impersonal, faceless gods must
now be revised. Indeed, to do so is to revise Levinas’s analysis in Totality and Infinity to make it
more consistent with Otherwise than Being. That is, as opposed to his assertion in Otherwise
than Being that the Good comes before Being and thus conditions Being such that responsibility
is always prior to freedom, in Totality and Infinity, he seems to still be positing Being as that
which comes first and must be escaped from. However, as we saw in the first chapter, the escape
from the there is is into that which is both before and after Being: the Good, understood through
sociality and expiation for the Other which inaugurates meaning into the world. The sensation of
Being as precedent to all things is shown to be an illusion conditioned by an erasure and a
forgetting of the Good which first constituted Being. This is why Levinas says that “[t]he
summoned one is the ego—me. I repel and send away the neighbor through my very identity, my
occupying the arena of being; I then have always to reestablish peace.”126 The ego who came out
of peace must now reestablish that peace that preceded it, for one cannot reestablish what was
never established in the first place. This is why the egoism of the conatus essendi is not so much

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126 Levinas, Otherwise than Being, 137.
a necessary stage along the way to ethics so much as a corruption of enjoyment. That is, if enjoyment describes the point at which my needs have been fulfilled such that I have no material lacks and can open myself to the metaphysical desire of responsibility for the Other, then egoism is the refusal of this opening to the Other; it is a forgetting of the face in favor of the excess of a “play without consequences.”\textsuperscript{127} In this, however, one will never be satisfied since, as Levinas has noted, in escaping the there is through simply positing oneself, the ego “is encumbered by all these existents it dominates.”\textsuperscript{128} It is weighed down by them and returns to a state of meaninglessness. Hence, for Levinas, the “forgetting consciousness is a pure egoism. But egoism is neither first nor last.”\textsuperscript{129} We neither arise from egoism nor are we destined to arrive there; egoism appears, rather, as a point at which we may become stuck in the path in which an originary Good returns to itself by way of Being.

Towards this end of revising Levinas’s analysis in Totality and Infinity to make it more consistent with Otherwise than Being, we shall now look at what it was that was erased in his account of the elemental as coextensive with the there is which could only be escaped into ethics through a primary appropriation and separation of the ego from out of it. That is, if in Levinas’s account, as we recall, the there is was escaped through the positing of the ego whose interiority could now engage with the Other, and if this account forms the basis of his mythos of the birth of settlement wherein the there is of the elemental was escaped by the positing of the ego in the dwelling who could now open him/herself to the Other, then it is time to address the question as to whether those who “bathed” in the elemental truly experienced themselves as being swallowed up by the impersonal, anonymous forces of the there is or whether it is the case that

\textsuperscript{127} Ibid., 125.
\textsuperscript{128} Ibid., Ethics and Infinity, 51-52.
\textsuperscript{129} Ibid., Otherwise than Being, 128.
they were, in fact, able to posit themselves as separated beings, experience interiority, and be open to engagement with the Other without having to escape the elemental through the primary appropriation of the (permanent) dwelling.

We will now, therefore, look at the experiences that hunter-gatherer groups have of their environment as a way of making sense of and understanding their relation to, not just the elemental, but also nonhuman others and themselves. This will primarily be done by looking at groups which have “animistic” beliefs, although, as will become clear later, the term “animism” is a broad term encompassing a variety of different ways of experiencing and interacting with the world with the common thread of relationality at its core. Through this analysis, I will hope to show how their experience, in fact, accords well with Levinas’s assertion that the Good comes before Being which will also lead us towards a new understanding of his concept of the there is as well as of relational personhood.

The Constitutive Relationality of Personhood

As we recall from the first chapter, in Levinas there is a particular way of understanding the subject in which the subject is, as it were, sub-jected to the Other as that from which it derives its being in the sense of its being constituted in relation to alterity. To be a subject is to be in relation and it is through this relation to the Other that the subject comes to experience him/herself as a free, responsible, meaningful agent in the world. The I “exist[s] through the other and for the other” and its very psyche is constituted as an inspiration from the Other. As such, we can say that the subject comes to be as him or herself only by way of the Other to whom s/he is constitutively connected to. By understanding the subject in this way, we find that its existence is such that it is always already in relation. And through consciousness, this relationality becomes thematized in the necessity of making decisions with regard to these

130 Ibid., 114.
Others. Thus, to exist as an I is to exist within a relational matrix of responsibility and justice in which this infinite responsibility to all Others necessarily leads one into the conscious experience of comparing incomparables to make just choices.

If this is how Levinas understands the constitution of the subject and if, as we have seen earlier, the Other must also have this structure due to the relation that is effected between us in the constitution of the State, then the question arises as to whom do we apply these categories to and how can this be justified and/or determined, if at all. As we saw earlier, Calarco argues that we must remain open to the possibility that any being might express a face if we are to take the singularity of the encounter with the Other seriously and avoid reducing them to the Same of classification. What we find in the experience of animistic hunter-gatherer societies is, in fact, precisely this.

For the animist, a “person” does not refer to a biological human being but, rather, to any being that engages in relationships with other beings. As Graham Harvey succinctly summarizes it, “[a]nimists are people who recognize that the world is full of persons, only some of whom are human, and that life is always lived in relationship with others.”\(^\text{131}\) That is, for the animist, there is no predetermined class of beings who are defined as being persons and others which are not. Personhood, because it is relational, is demonstrated through relation itself. No being is foreclosed in advance from being a person, but, at the same time, no being is accorded in advance personhood either. Personhood is that which arises each time in the relation with an Other. Personhood is thus retained and sustained through singular moments of relational encounter and their recurrence.

Because of this agnosticism in relation to that which might be a person, animists tend to see all persons, regardless of outward appearance, as united in their internal being. That is, the reason why any being might be a person is because all persons have the same interiority, even while having different exterior appearances. Because of this, a being’s personhood cannot be judged in advance since the form of their appearance is contingent. Instead, one must wait for personhood to manifest itself through a relational engagement. As Philippe Descola describes it, animism is “a continuity of souls and a discontinuity of bodies…where people endow plants, animals and other elements of their physical environment with a subjectivity and establish with these entities all sorts of personal relations, whether of friendship, exchange, seduction, or hostility.”\(^\text{132}\) In other words, in animism, personhood, as a capacity for relation, can exist in a variety of different material forms. This is also the reason why metamorphosis is common in animist mythology since a person whose personhood is not dependent on an outward appearance can potentially change this contingent appearance into another. This is, in fact, what shamans are believed to have the special capacity of doing. As Signe Howell says, explaining the beliefs of the Chewong, “[e]ach species has its own special body (cloak) by which it may be recognized. Cloaks may be put on and off by those individuals in each species who have shamanic abilities… [and] They may…in certain circumstances, take off their own cloak and put on that of another species.”\(^\text{133}\) As such, we see that what makes a person a person is its property of being a relational entity and this property can manifest itself in any type of body or “cloak.”

The importance of relationality becoming manifest in the singularity of experience can be used to explain some quirks of animist beliefs that otherwise confound the Westerner. For


instance, in the Ojibwa language, nouns can fall into either the animate or inanimate linguistic class. One of the nouns known to be included within the animate linguistic class is “stone” which, from our naturalistic perspective, would seem incorrect. Puzzled by this, Alfred Hallowell decided to ask an elder whether all stones in the given vicinity were alive. The response he received was “No! But some are.”134 This forcefully ambiguous response left an impression on him; he later went on to explain that:

the Ojibwa are not animists in the sense that they dogmatically attribute living souls to inanimate objects such as stones…the allocation of stones to an animate grammatical category is part of a culturally constituted cognitive ‘set.’ It does not involve a consciously formulated theory about the nature of stones. It leaves a door open that our orientation on dogmatic grounds keeps shut tight…the Ojibwa recognize, a priori, potentialities for animation in certain classes of objects under certain circumstances.135

In other words, although not all stones are alive, some might be and so stones, as a class, must be placed within the animate linguistic category in order to keep the door open to the possibility of their manifesting their personhood. Similarly, we find that among the Nayaka, animacy is attributed to those stones that are perceived to relate to them. As Bird-David summarizes an encounter in which a stone seemed to fly towards a Nayaka tribe member, these “particular stones were devaru as they ‘came towards’ and ‘jumped on’ Nayaka. The many other stones in the area were not devaru but simply stones.”136 Here, we note that, for the Nayaka, “devaru” is essentially their term for a relational person. In the example, therefore, the stones that interacted with them were relational persons while the others were not. Bird-David explains the devaru further by saying that they “objectify sharing relationships between Nayaka and other beings. A hill devaru, say, objectifies Nayaka relationships with the hill; it makes known the relationships

135 Ibid.
between Nayaka and that hill.” Which amounts to saying that the concept of devaru encompasses the capacity to engage with one another in a shared reality so that what is devaru is in the world with me such that it can relate to me and I to it. Ultimately, when “devaru” is translated as “spirit” or “soul” this is what it is referring to. Those beings which have relational capacities, by this very fact, have demonstrated their personhood and thus shown their shared interiority which designates them as having a “soul” or “spirit.”

In this context of open relationality to a variety of beings not encompassed by biological humans, what we find implicit is the idea that communication and expression is possible between persons of different kinds. What the stone does is communicate to the Nayaka that it is devaru—alive, a person. For Levinas, of course, the signification of the face is that which signifies outside of all context and expresses to others without yet having the need of symbolic language. If the personhood of a stone can be found in its expression towards you then it might be said that what the Nayaka are experiencing is the “face” of the stone.

Without going immediately to the question of whether we can attribute faces to things like stones, it is important to note that communication is, after all, not exclusively a human domain. As Eduardo Kohn says “[t]he kinds of representational modalities shared by all forms of life—modalities that are iconic and indexical—are not context-dependent the way symbolic modalities are.” That is, before symbolic language can arise, we must first pass through what he calls the icon and the index. As we noted earlier in our discussion of the development of phonetic writing, before the arbitrary sign for the arbitrary sound became ascendant in phonetic script, we first had pictographic and then ideographic script. Similarly, communication can be done in an iconic, indexical, or symbolic way (where the symbolic tracks with the phonetic).

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137 Ibid., S73.
138 Kohn, How Forests Think, 39.
What this means is that we can communicate by attempting a direct representation, an associative representation, or a symbolic representation which makes sense in the context of a total system of associations. Thus, for instance, Kohn mentions the word *tsupu* as an example of iconic communication since the sound of the word is intended to represent mimetically the sound of an entity making contact with and then penetrating a body of water.\(^\text{139}\) It is onomatopoeic.

Similarly, we find in pictographic writing the image of a bull meant to signify the concept “bull.”

In the index, we have the movement towards a basic association where something associated with a thing can be used to represent it. This is metonymical communication such as the barber’s pole where a pole with a helix of colored stripes represents a barber shop despite having no relation to barber shops outside of its customary association with them. This singular indexical relation can form further indexical relations up to the point where a total associative system has been formed. It is at this point that you have entered the system of symbolic language where context does matter since each meaning is a meaning produced within and through that context. To put it in Saussurean terms, one might say that the icon is a “positive term” after which the index becomes a relation of difference between positive terms which eventually gives way to symbolic language as a relational system in which “there are only differences without positive terms”\(^\text{140}\) at which point context becomes crucial since there are no more positive terms to provide orientation. Any student of a foreign language will recognize this in the gradual process in which a foreign tongue ceases to be understood and used through a direct translation of their native language and begins to be understood autonomously. This is the point at which

\(^{139}\) Ibid., 27.

vernacular usage and word connotations begin to make sense. It is the point at which the tethering of the foreign language to the native one stops being necessary.

In our case, the tethering of communication in the icon and the index that makes them meaningful is a tethering to a shared lived experience. It is out of this that communication with other species will become possible since the “positive terms” that ground iconic and indexical communication are available to all. This is what Kohn means when he says that they require no context—that is, no additional context to the context of simply living in the world. He describes how this process works in relation to a fleeing monkey:

The thundering crash she [the monkey] heard would iconically call to mind past experiences of similar crashes. These past experiences of crashing sounds share with each other additional similarities, such as their co-occurrence with something dangerous…The monkey would…iconically link these past dangers to each other. That the sound made by the crashing tree might indicate danger is, then, the product of, on the one hand, iconic associations of loud noises with other loud noises, and, on the other, iconic associations of dangerous events with other dangerous events…But now this association has something more than a likeness…this loud noise is interpreted as pointing to something more than just a noise; it points to something dangerous.\(^{141}\)

Here, then, Kohn explains how the iconic representation of the crash eventually becomes an index pointing to danger as that which is commonly associated with it. The crash of the palm has communicated something more than itself to the monkey and the monkey has reacted accordingly to this association.

As we have just noted, although the icon and index signify without a *symbolic* context, they are essentially tethered to a lived experience as their context. This is in contrast to Levinas’s conception of the face wherein the face is “signification without context,”\(^{142}\) not even the context of my lived experience. That is, in the case of Levinas, what he means is that the face *alone* signifies without the need of any supplement and that its signification, as an entreaty, is itself the

\(^{141}\) Kohn, *How Forests Think*, 52.
\(^{142}\) Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity*, 86.
very basis and condition of signification itself. It is only because of the demand from the face that there is communication at all. It is out of the face that the necessity of communication arises through the attempt at fulfilling the call of responsibility. The face is, thus, that which first connects us in a matrix of relation whereupon communication can then take place iconically, indexically, and then symbolically. It is the possibility and necessity of communication and expression itself without specifying a certain mode of expression. In this way, the face can be said to precede the icon and the index and to signify before context or even to constitute the context in which communication becomes necessary—the context of responsibility. What this means, then, is that in any communicative enterprise—whether iconic, indexical, or symbolic—we can already presume a relation of responsibility preceding it which allows it to come to pass. Thus, if iconic and indexical representation is shared by all life forms, as Kohn suggests, then this would also lead us to the conclusion that all these life forms exist within a matrix of responsibility as well.

What we thus find in the experiences and beliefs of these animistic cultures is a world constituted as an open relational field which is formed and maintained through recurring relationships between persons. As an open field, it does not seek to classify or determine beings in advance but allows them to become determined through the relations that they do or do not engage in—relations typified by directed expression and communication. Since they do not have any criteria to limit who might be a person except for their capacity to relate, the category can never be closed or totalized according to any particular definition; something which becomes especially clear in their myths which often describe a primordial state in which all beings were relationally united and which is often related to the general possibility that any being’s outward appearance could potentially change into that of another.
These features, while being generally compatible with the work of Levinas, also provide us with some questions and difficulties which we will need to address. If any being could potentially be a person, then that would mean that there would be no class of beings which could be defined as “faceless” without question for the animist. The implications of this are that there would be nothing which could be appropriated that would not potentially be a person thus making all appropriation potentially unethical. This is in contrast to Levinas who posits a class of beings beyond ethics, things, whose quality of facelessness means that we can do no violence against them and can freely appropriate them. It is out of this first appropriation that we not only establish our interiority in the dwelling, according to Levinas, but also find ourselves with some thing which we could give or share with the Other who “is going to ask you for something.”\textsuperscript{143}

That is, if I am infinitely responsible for the Other who, for instance, asks me for meat then I should give him/her meat and if the animal from which the meat comes is understood as a faceless thing, then the first process that precedes the giving wherein the meat is acquired through the hunting and butchering of a goat, for instance, is unproblematic. In this case, the first appropriation of the meat from the goat is acceptable since the goat is a thing and not an Other. If, however, the goat is an Other then the ethicality and necessity of appropriating meat from the goat in order to feed another Other becomes a question of importance and the decision to kill the goat becomes part of the political calculation of comparing incomparables. One might say that the goat is an Other but that wheat is not and thus the solution is to give this hungry Other bread. However, if we take the animist view seriously then we wind up in the same situation again. That is, if wheat is not a thing but also a person, an Other, all the same questions arise and we find

\textsuperscript{143} Ibid., “The Paradox of Morality” 169.
ourselves once again making political calculations about the interests of different Others and who to prioritize.

The exigencies of politics and the need for justice in our calculations that we discussed in chapter 2 thus become crucially important in a universe where all beings might be persons and there is nothing faceless tout court. How this plays itself out in animistic societies will be discussed later in reference to how they make sense of and engage in hunting and other predatory practices. What is important to note here is that, in all cases, they see these practices as playing themselves out in a universe of persons who often have mutually exclusive interests.

This sense of a relational universe that we find in animistic societies also seems to contrast itself somewhat with Levinas’s characterization of the there is and our relation to and escape from it. As noted earlier, there seems to be a difference between the earlier and the later Levinas, at least in terms of where the there is seems to be situated. The early Levinas describes the experience of a being found in the meaningless there is who must escape it into meaning and does so through ethical relationality while the later Levinas speaks of the Good before Being thus rendering the appearance of the primacy of the there is an illusion which must be overcome.

If the there is is the illusion of the primacy of Being which must be overcome through a recognition that the Good came first then it is interesting to note that, for animists, they experience an essentially relational (thus meaningful) universe which, nevertheless, is punctured by regions or beings of total arelationality and meaninglessness which are described in similar terms to how Levinas describes the there is. One might say that, with the animist, the relationality of the universe is primary although it is possible to escape it into meaninglessness whereas, in the early Levinas, the meaninglessness of the universe is primary although it is possible to escape it into meaning. We thus find an inversion of the early Levinas’s conception
of the *there is* in animistic beliefs that brings it into closer accordance with the later Levinas. That is, for many animistic societies, sociality precedes asociality rather than the reverse.

In this context, then, it is also interesting to note that the animistic societies that we have been discussing would have been characterized by Levinas as “bathing” in the elemental in the same way that all humans did before the primary appropriation of the dwelling. If Levinas’s description in his early works of the *there is* is an experience from the perspective of settled agriculturalists who have achieved the primary appropriation and moved out of an experience of universal openness to relationality to one of necessary and continuous appropriation and control then one might say that his description of the *there is* is from the perspective of those who came second. In the erasure of the experience of those who came first, we posited the experience of those who came second as primary and found ourselves in a situation in which meaninglessness preceded meaningfulness and sociality would have to be discovered after asociality. However, it would seem that this experience was the product of a mindset produced by the primary appropriation, thus being a contingent formation based on a historical process. By erasing what came before it, we found ourselves in a problematic place in relation to Being, wondering its meaning and how to escape it. It seems that we might say that, historically, as well as structurally, the Good came before Being as shown by the relational primacy of those who came before our forebears for whom, through an inversion, egoism was experienced as primary. There is still more to say on this topic and it is towards a closer consideration of the animist conception of the *there is* to which we will now turn.

**The Animist There Is**

As we noted earlier, in *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas describes the elemental as being coextensive with the *there is* such that if we are to escape the *there is* then we must escape the elemental as well. It was through this equivalence that the necessity of building a dwelling
through an appropriation of land appeared as a fundamental beginning to the process of escaping

the *there is* since this first appropriation was a way of becoming separated from the elemental.

However, as we have gestured towards earlier, the elemental was in no way experienced in the

way in which Levinas describes the *there is* for animist groups.

Whereas the *there is* is described as anonymous, impersonal, meaningless, and

monotonous by Levinas, for the animist, what Levinas would call the elemental, was experienced

as personal, meaningful, and dynamic. The equivalence between the two cannot hold for animist

experience. This is how Hallowell was able to say that “any concept of *impersonal* ‘natural’

forces is totally foreign to Ojibwa thought.”\(^{144}\) Indeed, for the Ojibwa, “the sun is a ‘person’ of

the other-than-human class…[thus] The Ojibwa entertain no reasonable certainty that, in

accordance with natural law, the sun will ‘rise’ day after day…[since] any regularity in the

movements of the sun is of the same order as the habitual activities of human beings.”\(^{145}\) The

unpredictability of the elemental that Levinas identifies as one of the primary reasons for

entering into a relation of appropriation with it is understood by the Ojibwa in a personal way.

As opposed to an uncaring, fearsome force that I must find some way to subdue and control, the

sun appears as a person with habits and qualities and to whom I can relate. Any unpredictability

is a product of its nature as a person. Thus, the sun can be related to as a person and can even get

captured in a snare and not be able to move until rescued by a mouse.\(^{146}\) Instead of trying to control

it, you can simply ask it to rise or to set.

This sense of the elemental as composed of personal forces to whom one can relate is

simply an expression of the general animist view that the universe is essentially relational and


\(^{145}\) Ibid., 28.

\(^{146}\) Ibid.
composed of a variety of different sorts of persons who affect me and I affect as well. As opposed to seeing every being asoriginarily separate or seeing every being as coming into being through an originary separation from something else, animists see originary relationality. The original condition was one of relation, and not of fusion or separation. Here, of course, is where part of Levinas’s misunderstanding comes from. He seems to believe, at least in *Totality and Infinity*, that a separation must be wrought out of an originary fusion in the elemental so that relation can occur. As we have just noted however, animist societies do not experience themselves as fused with the elemental but as related to it. As opposed to Levinas’s reading where we move from total fusion (bathing in the element) to total separation (enjoyment in the dwelling) and, finally, to relation (ethics), animists posit a world that is already relational with no need of these additional movements.

The main distinction for animists is that of who is kin and who isn’t for this has an important consequence when it comes to the political decisions of whom I shall eat, for instance. Thus, in their mythology, many animists groups distinguish between a time when all persons were kin to one another to one where they are not and where allegiances become determined through tribe, species, or totem. Franz Detwiler recounts one myth like this of the Tlingit people concerning the creation of the world by Raven:

Raven created the world but it remained dark. During this time, all the beings of the creation lived together in a single community, all related to each other…Boundaries between humans and nonhumans were much more fluid than they are now, with all beings able to communicate and change forms with each other rather easily. In order to bring light into the world and make it a better place to live, Raven opened the Box of the Sun and transformed the world into a much more fertile place. However, the light frightened the human and non-human persons and they dispersed into their own separate communities, with some going to the waters, others to the air, and others to the land… It was in this time that
Tlingit social structure emerged, with persons divided into clans according to their essential character.\textsuperscript{147}

What we find here is that out of an originary situation of relationality with all beings, we entered into a situation of differentiated relationality based on the type of being we became. As we saw above, there is a continuity of souls and a discontinuity of bodies leading to what Viveiros de Castro calls “multinaturalism.” That is, that all beings share the same “culture”—interiority—even while having different bodies. This shared culture that many animists believe all beings experience is meant quite literally. As Viveiros de Castro puts it, “all beings see (‘represent’) the world \textit{in the same way}; what changes is \textit{the world they see}…[so that] the things \textit{they see} when they see them \textit{like we do are different}:

\textit{…what humans perceive as a mud puddle becomes a grand ceremonial house when viewed by tapirs.}”\textsuperscript{148} This is the case since “a \textit{point of view is in the body}…[thus] the difference between points of view…is not in the soul. The latter, being formally identical across all species, perceive the same thing everywhere.”\textsuperscript{149} The opening of the Box of Sun that we see in the Tlingit story can be seen as the point at which bodies became differentiated such that each relational being or person was then forced to put on his/her respective “cloak” and perceive the world through it.

If we recall Calarco’s idea of universal consideration, it will appear strangely similar to this since one might interpret a creation myth such as the Tlingit’s as indicating that in the beginning there were only Others existing before me as Others and then the Box of the Sun was opened and they became thematized as this or that specific sort of being whereupon I was then


\textsuperscript{149} Ibid., 72.
forced to make political calculations concerning them. The non-thematized Other in the primordial situation gives way to a thematized other in corporeal differentiation.

If the animist conception of the elemental is essentially contained within their conception of the universe as relational, then where does the there is fit in? As we noted, the there is is impersonal, anonymous, and meaningless. For animists, this is a state which can occur within a generally relational universe, hence, for them, the there is shows up in isolated pockets. Morten Pedersen describes it in the context of the Yukaghirs of Siberia:

just as some people are unfortunate enough to lose their soul…many animals and objects are, at any given moment, devoid of any interior quality…[thus] the totality will invariably be ruptured by countless asocial entities…[and] These ruptures…are purely external, natural ‘things’ that have no mutual animistic relations, because they do not share any common social ground. While the hunter and the bear exchange their meat and sacrifices in the same social world, what is the relation between, say, a small grey stone and a piece of peeled wild onion? It seems, therefore, that whereas there is only one social world (shared by human and nonhuman persons alike), there is an infinite number of asocial locations, each inhabited by a non-person its own void (hole), and hence totally disconnected from its fellow non-social entities, or things. Nature, as we know it, exists in North Asian animism, but not as a unified and unifying whole. Rather, the uniting factor is a supersociality that weaves together persons of all sorts, be they humans, animals, or spirit entities. The basic shape of North Asian animist cosmology, therefore, is a whole with holes in it.150

The relational universe is constituted by all those who relate within it, as for everything else, it exists within an asocial, arelational place which is similar to the there is in its meaninglessness. Although these spaces of arelationality may be composed of those stones which are not alive, they may also involve beings which have lost their relational capacity. To lose one’s capacity for relation is often understood as a loss of one’s personhood or soul. The Runa call it being soul-blind which expresses the fact that the one who has become soul-blind can no longer relate to other “souls” or persons and is thus blind to them and in an arelational void. As Kohn describes

it, “[s]oul blindness…is marked by an isolating state of monadic solipsism—an inability to see beyond oneself or one’s kind. It arises when beings of any sort lose the ability to recognize the selfhood…of those other beings that inhabit the cosmos.” In other words, soul-blindness describes the kind of totally self-enclosed egoism that cannot escape itself and, as Levinas says of the there is, “is close to disgust for oneself, close to weariness of oneself.” It is the meaninglessness born of total solitude with oneself in egoism.

If in Totality and Infinity, the there is and the elemental are coextensive and this fact allows for the elemental to be freely appropriated as faceless in preparation for the reception of the Other, it is important to note that this would be very difficult to do in the context of animism. Even if we could grant that beings outside the relational matrix are faceless and, therefore, free to appropriate without compunction, it would be impossible to know which ones these are since, as we discussed earlier, any being might be a person. The consequence is that no being can be said to definitely not be a person and so no being can be treated with total impunity. After all, due to the possibility of metamorphosis, it is possible that that which was not a person before now expresses itself as one.

By looking at these animistic experiences, we have been able to see that, in fact, the state of “bathing” in the elemental that Levinas so much derided was not what he characterized it as being and that, in fact, within this state before the appropriation that allowed for the dwelling, there was already relationality and no need to escape from the there is which, for them, was only experienced as localized phenomena within a relational universe. Rather, the there is, as Levinas understood it, became the experience of those now separated from the elemental whose very separation wrought a new perspective and condition. Now separated, they were plunged into

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151 Kohn, How Forests Think, 117.
152 Levinas, Is It Righteous to Be? 46.
their own localized voids of egoism and generalized the experience into an originary one. By the
time of Otherwise than Being, Levinas came to realize some of this from whence came his
understanding of the Good preceding Being. Here, we can also perceive that the Good was
experienced as occurring before Being in animist societies, including those animist societies
which likely preceded the establishment, based on contingent historical grounds, of the illusion
that Being precedes the Good and that the there is is the originary meaninglessness out of which
we came. The there is, as such, was not a problem that needed solving so much as a problem that
we created for ourselves.

Fraternity and Kinship
As we noted in chapter 2, Levinas had a very specific notion of fraternity in which my “brothers”
were like me in the sense of being radically different from me yet sharing the same condition as
me, that is, being chosen to serve, with an infinite responsibility to all Others. This condition of
responsibility is what would lead us to join together into a We and form a State so that we could
seek to serve the third in justice and not forget any Other to the extent possible. What we found
in this analysis was that the State is produced by those who share a condition of responsibility.
As we have noted above, the condition of experiencing responsibility is connected to the
experience of vulnerability and communication such that s/he that experiences responsibility is
also an Other for someone else and vice versa, even if that responsibility is experienced by each
one as his/her own alone.

With the analysis we have conducted so far, we will now need to look at what becomes of
fraternity in a situation in which my “brothers” can potentially be any being since any being
might be a person. In the process, we will move away from what Levinas calls “fraternity” to
what animist groups call “kinship” and see how these concepts relate to one another as well as
how different notions and deployments of kinship deal with the problem of existing in a universe
populated by persons. That is, if the State must reproduce itself, how will it do so? It must appropriate exteriority and where there is faceless exteriority, this will be preferred. As we have noted, however, in animism, there is no such thing as a totally faceless exteriority and yet society must still reproduce itself. How this problem is dealt with by different groups will show us how kinship functions in different ways to condition the way in which persons might need to be used, for in a universe where any being might be a person, someone will always be harmed in the fulfillment of a need; injustice is unavoidable. Of course, in Levinas’s understanding of politics, he already grants this but in the sense of never having enough to give to all the Others rather than in the sense that the giving itself as a giving is already unjust because what it gives is already a person appropriated as an object. To understand this further, we will look at what I will call totemic intercutting kinship (associated with totemism), horizontal sharing kinship (associated with Subarctic animism), enclosed appropriative kinship (associated with Amazonian animism), and hierarchic holistic kinship (associated with analogism). All of these deal with this problem in different ways, or, as Carlos Fausto puts it, summarizing Descola, “we encounter a common ‘mode of identification’ between humans and nonhumans…but different ‘modes of relation’ subject to regional and historical variation.”

Totemic Intercutting Kinship

Totemism, as Descola describes it, “is cosmogenic in that it derives from sets of cosmic attributes—that is, what cannot be referred to a particular species—everything needed for some humans and non-humans to be included within a single collective.” In other words, in totemism, kinship groups are determined based on qualities that members of the kinship group

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share that cut across species specificity and distinguish them as a whole from other groups. It arises through identifications that take a person beyond their own species due to a foreclosure of identification with all members of their species group by the formation of role specialization within a society or by the need of differentiating between different tribes or other sets of humans in stable ways. Pedersen describes how totemism begins to arise as society becomes more segmented in the case of Halx Mongol society:

in traditional Halx Mongol society, a given man is very likely not a potential leader (or priest or warrior), since he will be bound up to a hierarchy of patrilineal clans delineating for him a clear-cut territory to act within, in spatial, social, and existential terms. Hence, since such a man cannot identify with...all other men, how should he identify with...all other no-men?...our man is likely to look only at the sort of no-man whose differences from his fellow no-men are homologous with those that distinguished our man from his fellow men. At this very point, our man will have become a totemist.\(^{155}\)

Or, as Pedersen summarizes it himself, “what makes a society totemist, is the fact that the difference between Species A and Species B is similar to the difference between Clan 1 and Clan 2.”\(^{156}\) What this means is that through the differences that a person perceives between him/herself and the other humans that surround him/her such as arises in the specialization of roles or the distinguished of cultures (being born into the warrior caste or the priest caste on the one hand or differentiating tribes within a region on the other), identifications form with non-humans whose differences from other non-humans seem to be similar to how this human is distinguished from his/her fellows. The totemic animal chosen is that which seems to best exemplify this way in which these different species share a similar way of being distinguished from others such that “the totem species is the inner nature of its human fellows, and the human

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\(^{156}\) Ibid., 417.
species is the inner nature of its totem fellows.” In this way, a continuity is formed between heterogeneous species groups to form a homogenous totemic group united through similar distinguishing features epitomized in the figure of the totem species.

It is important to note at this point, however, that since these distinctions are considered cosmogenic, they cannot be changed. As opposed to most other animist systems, we find in totemism a sort of immutability of beings which makes it such that, although there are genealogical connections among beings and shared ancestry, there is not the same capacity for metamorphosis and transformation between beings that we find among other animist groups.

This does not mean that it never happens but, rather, that it occurs differently and under special circumstances such as in the rebirth of an ancestor among Aborigines which occurs by way of an animal:

At death the human person devolves into multiple elements, one of which keeps returning within human families. As far as I have learned, only humans recycle from life through death and back into life in this manner. However, the only way to be reborn is to become animal; human return cannot take place without animals. The usual method by which a person moves from animal to human is when the animal is eaten by the woman who is becoming the mother of the newly returned human person. It is usual as well that the animal is killed by the man who is becoming the baby’s father.

We thus find that at the same time as kinship is found with other beings, there are still distinctions being wrought such that you find only humans being reborn, for instance. The totemic groups that connect heterogeneous species do not wholly eliminate differences between the species found in the totemic grouping. They cannot be fused into one another. This fact is what leads totemic shamans to act differently than other shamans. Most shamans will concern themselves with communication among other beings, especially animals; they are thus concerned

with communicating with other persons of the nonhuman type and with whom there exists the possibility of metamorphosis. By contrast, many totemic shamans will attempt communication with ancestors thus concerning themselves with past persons of my type since the possibility of metamorphosis does not exist there to the same degree. That is, in totemism, each being has certain immutable qualities that define it including its relation to other beings in totemic groupings which, while connecting them to other sorts of beings, does not effect a fusion among them. Thus, one might say that while being connected to other beings, one remains essentially separated from them as well. This is what Viveiros de Castro describes as the moment in which horizontal shamanism transforms into vertical shamanism since “[t]he emergence of vertical shamanism can…be linked to the separation of the dead and animals into two distinct positions of alterity [so that]…dead humans begin to be seen more as humans than as dead, and this opens the symmetric possibility of a more realized ‘objectification’ of nonhumans.”\(^{159}\) This is why, as mentioned earlier, in totemism we already begin the differentiation within a society which can then lead it to a more hierarchical structure, although there is no inevitability to this.

In relation to our broader discussion, the salient point about totemism is that it provides us with a context in which every species group out there will have some kinship relation to some group of persons while not having it with all persons. Thus, in dealing with the problem of living in a universe of persons in which every morsel of food procured requires the appropriation of persons, what we find is differentiated responsibility based on kinship relations. That is, even if I am responsible to all Others, the fulfillment of a responsibility to any Other will necessarily involve doing violence to another Other who must be appropriated in order to have something to give to the other Other. The choice of which Other to serve and which to appropriate leads us

\(^{159}\) Viveiros de Castro, *Cannibal Metaphysics*, 156.
into politics in which these relational beings become thematized as specific corporeal bodies. At this point, the political choice then becomes conditioned by kinship relations.

I am barred from the appropriation of my own kin but open to the appropriation of those which are not my kin. Because of the cross-cutting species relationships that we find in totemism plus the fact that ancestry is always a mixed affair, what this means in practice is that every individual will find him/herself in a kinship relation with a variety of nonhuman beings against which appropriation is foreclosed while being allowed to appropriate a variety of beings which fall outside this set. This mix of those who are my kin and those who are not will be different for everyone ensuring that, even if there is no being who is kin to all other beings, every being will be in kinship relations with some beings. That is, there is no being which does not have kin and, therefore, even in the appropriation of those beings who are not my kin, I must be respectful and only take what I need. Even while I recognize the necessity of appropriation and engage in it according to rules established by my kinship relations, I also know that that which I appropriate has family and is not “faceless.” Or, as Deborah Bird Rose says, paraphrasing an aboriginal elder, Big Mick Kangkinang, “nothing is without meaning and purpose in life. Everything that exists is ‘no more nothing’…[where] ‘No more’ is the Aboriginal English term which expresses the concept ‘absolutely not’.”\(^\text{160}\) Thus, we can say that “totemism is more than a representation of the interests of the Aboriginal clan, it is also a symbolic representation of the etiquette of relationships between one group of people and other groups, who may be both human and non-human.”\(^\text{161}\) It is through this etiquette that the fact that no being is worthless is expressed and

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\(^{160}\) Bird Rose, “Death and Grief in a World of Kin” 141.  
where this etiquette is ignored is where unethical killing takes place, killing that is “outside the system of kin and accountability.”\(^{162}\)

What we thus find in the totemic “mode of relation” is a system in which a universe populated by persons is dealt with by establishing interspecies kinship relations that ensure that every being is both connected to other beings through relations of responsibility and disconnected from other beings who become available for appropriation, but only in a respectful and careful way since any being that is not my kin is kin to other beings. One might say that I am responsible to my kin in a different way than I am to my non-kin while still being generally responsible to all beings as persons to whom I owe respect. That is, I cannot kill my kin but I can kill my non-kin, but only for my nutritive needs and not gratuitously. As Bird Rose summarizes it, in totemism “kin responsibilities distribute interest and care across species and countries such that one’s individual interests are embedded within, and realized most fully in the nurturance of, the interests of those with whom one shares one’s being.”\(^{163}\) This distribution of interests ensures that all beings are recognized as “no more nothing” even while being allowed to do what’s necessary for them to reproduce themselves as living beings.

**Horizontal Sharing Kinship**

If totemism dealt with the problem of existing in a universe of persons by establishing overlapping kinship relations through totemic groupings thus ensuring that each being would have beings available for it to appropriate as well as beings to whom responsibility would be owed so that, for each being, a place is opened up in the universe of persons that allows for predatory activities to occur while being sufficiently circumscribed and specific to avoid such predatory activities causing global harm since this open space would be different for every single

\(^{162}\) Bird Rose, “Death and Grief in a World of Kin” 143.

\(^{163}\) Ibid., 141.
being based on the specificities of his/her ancestry, then horizontal sharing kinship deals with this same problem through a conceptual erasure that opens up the total space to “appropriation” which is, however, not understood as appropriation but as consensual sharing. That is, whereas totemists recognize the necessity of predation and find a way to allow for it, for those who experience the horizontal sharing kinship style typical of Subarctic peoples, predation as an appropriation does not actually occur.

As Ingold explains, for these people “the environment shares its bounty with humans just as humans share with one another, thereby integrating both human and non-human components of the world into one, all-embracing ‘cosmic economy of sharing’.”

Whereas totemists had specific kinship relations with specific species, for these animists the kinship relation is essentially opened up and generalized to all beings. And since “to be kin…is to be guided in actions by an ideal of peaceful exchange and sharing. [where] The ‘we’ is delineated through generous acts, solidarity, and the absence of predation” then that means that there can exist no true predation or appropriation between those who consider one another kin. Indeed, the activities of predation that these groups engage in are conceptualized as ways in which sharing occurs. Carlos Fausto summarizes this viewpoint:

animals are killed only when they are willing to die, their motivation being described either in the idiom of love-sharing and compassion or in that of reciprocity: animals give up their bodies because they like (or pity) the hunter or because the humans offer counterprestations during ritual meals. Hunting is therefore described as a positive relationship for both parties, ensuring the reproduction of human life without implying the destruction of the potential for animal life.

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166 Fausto, “Feasting on People” 498.
In other words, the process of hunting is not understood as a process whose outcome depends on my capacity to subordinate an animal to my will through force and power. Rather, success in a hunt is an expression of the fact that this animal has decided to allow itself to be caught in order to share its meat with humans. In many cases, one finds the belief that the spirit of the animal continues to live after its body is given up such that the giving up of its body as meat becomes only the shedding of its “cloak.” This also plays into the necessity of engaging in the respectful rituals of hunting since disrespected prey may decide that they no longer wish to share with humans. For instance, in the case of the Tlingit, after salmon are hunted, the spirits of the salmon “report to other salmon the moral character of the person who caught and ate them. Such experiences and reports have a direct impact on whether that same hunter later has ‘good or bad luck’. “167 To disrespect an animal who shares its meat with you is to risk the end of the sharing relationship and this is how the disappearance of game from a particular area is often interpreted. Similarly, for other groups, animals are commanded by a spirit-master who must be pleased lest s/he stops sharing his/her animals with you and this is done through respectfully treating these animals in our use of them.

By generalizing kinship relations outwards horizontally and conceptualizing predatory activities as ways in which we engage in sharing, these animist groups are able to eloquently deal with the problem of inhabiting a universe of persons. The ritual that displays respect, in this case, becomes singularly important since it is through the ritual that the sharing relationship is affirmed and sustained.

Enclosed Appropriative Kinship

As we have seen so far, the appropriation necessary to reproduce a community may be allowed through reconceptualizing this appropriation as a sharing relationship or by establishing parameters that allow for a space to open in which appropriation becomes allowed. In the former case, universal kinship is not abrogated since these appropriative activities are understood as consensual sharing relations whereas in the latter, stable totemic kinship relations mean that an outside is available for respectful appropriation (since what is exterior to me is kin to another). In contrast to both of these is what I call the enclosed appropriative kinship relation common to many tribes in Amazonia in the regions in which warfare and cannibalism have been more commonly practiced historically although such ways of relating can also appear in other regions, even among groups we have already discussed, without being preeminent among them. What distinguishes this mode of relation is that the human community of the tribe forms the only kinship set of importance and within this set of persons there is sharing and generosity. However, as an enclosed group, it requires exteriority to support and reproduce itself and does so through an appropriation of persons as objects and persons as persons.

The appropriation of persons as objects is not essentially different from what we have already covered although it is worth mentioning what this means precisely. For many animist groups, since the universe is populated by relational persons, hunting becomes a reciprocal engagement in which the predator can be turned into prey in the process of the hunt. This is because, since hunting is an engagement with another relational person, we must relate to that person in order to succeed in hunting it and this is usually done by taking on the perspective of the prey. In taking on the perspective of the prey in order to seduce the prey into thinking that you are one of them, one runs the risk of being seduced by the prey in turn and actually
becoming one of them instead. As Rane Willerslev describes the hunting experience of the Yukaghirs:

> the hunter aims at sexually seducing the animal into ‘giving itself up’ to him in much the same way as he himself risks being seduced by the animal’s spiritual being. In either perspective, the victim, the seduced is said to lose its original species adherence and undergo an irreversible metamorphosis into its predatory counterpart.\(^{168}\)

This may be said to metaphorically express the fact that the animal, once hunted, is to then be incorporated into my body, become myself. At the same time, the reverse possibility is always open as well, although this is usually conceptualized in terms of humans being prey to animal spirits. This is, in fact, how illnesses are sometimes understood. That is, a sick person’s symptoms may express the fact that an animal spirit is seducing that person’s soul and turning that person into one of them. What appears as “death in the eyes of the relatives of the human patient…[is] transformation of an other into kin in the eyes of the entity that has captured the soul…[so that] the capture that appears as seduction…from the viewpoint of the patient’s soul is experienced as…suffering by the embodied person.”\(^{169}\) All this is to say that, in hunting, one is hunting a *person* and not an object and so certain risks are involved from relating to a being belligerently.

Even after a hunt has finished and an animal has been killed, things remain complex. The relational capacities of this being have not simply evaporated and that which was a *person* is not automatically now an *object* but must be transformed into one in order to be consumed as food. This is the role that cooking plays, it is a way of de-subjectifying a being so that it may be eaten as food. The importance of pointing this out is that, if a being must be de-subjectified before it


\(^{169}\) Fausto, “Feasting on People” 502.
can be eaten as an object (as food), then there is another mode of eating available where a being is eaten without being de-subjectified and this is cannibalism. As Fausto says, there are “two modes of consumption: one, cooked, whose objective is strictly alimentary, and another, raw, whose goal is the appropriation of the victim’s animistic capacities.” Thus, in the cannibalistic consumption, one self-consciously consumes a person in order to appropriate that person’s relational capacities. This is why, for instance, the Runa will sometimes feed their dogs the bile or sternum of agoutis since it is believed that doing so can increase their ability to detect agoutis in a hunt as these organs are supposed to be where their subjective capacities are found. Since the Runa example is a case of the consumption of the raw subjective capacities of another person, it is cannibalism as defined by Fausto.

What we are more ordinarily accustomed to calling cannibalism, that is, the consumption of a human being by another is only cannibalism in Fausto’s sense when done with the intent of appropriating the subjective capacities of the person eaten. Of course, no tribe ordinarily hunts human beings for food, however, in cannibalistic rituals, tribe members will often cook and eat the body of an enemy while the one who has killed the enemy will abstain from the cooked meat. This is explained by the fact that the killer will often be placed in ritual seclusion which is understood as necessary for him/her to absorb the subjective capacities of his/her victim which are not in the cooked meat. While the killer absorbs the subjective capacities of his/her victim elsewhere, commensality is produced by the cooked portions of the victim’s body among the rest of the tribe. Sometimes the killer will even be obliged to use a part of the body not usually eaten to absorb the subjective capacities of the victim such as among the Arawakan Kurripaco where “the killer had to make a flute from the enemy’s femur, which was said to contain the victim’s

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170 Ibid., 504.
171 Kohn, How Forests Think 107.
breath.”\textsuperscript{172} Thus, the appropriation of the subjective capacities of a person killed does not always involve the consumption of that person’s raw body.

What is occurring in such rituals is a simultaneity of two different processes of producing persons. As mentioned earlier, in Amazonia, many tribes have a tightly enclosed kinship set that only includes other tribe members such that their relation to exteriority is to that which is outside their kinship community and can and must be appropriated for the sake of reproducing the tribe. The reproduction of the tribe, however, is understood as occurring on two different levels: corporeally and spiritually. The reproduction of the tribe corporeally is done through hunting animals and de-subjectifying them into food, the consumption of which serves the purpose of producing and maintaining kin relations through commensality, eating with persons. As for the reproduction of the tribe spiritually, this is done through the appropriation of the subjective capacities of persons as persons. That is, in cannibalism the enemy is appropriated as a person whose subjective capacities can be incorporated into and used by the tribe to produce its own persons. This is what Fausto calls “the mode of producing persons by means of the destruction of persons.”\textsuperscript{173} What is significant about this is that in order to appropriate the subjective capacities of a person so that it could serve the tribe in producing new persons, the enemy killed had to be recognized as a person first. In contrast, then, to the dehumanization of the atrocities of the 20\textsuperscript{th} century in which people became objects to be sorted, used up, and discarded; the cannibalism found among groups such as the Arawete was one that could not be characterized as a de-humanization since precisely what was to be appropriated were the qualities that this human as a person had so that it could assist in the reproduction of a community. As such, this process was not done in the frenzy of gratuitously killing a worthless enemy but, rather, as an elaborate ritual

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\textsuperscript{172} Fausto, “Feasting on People” 509.
\textsuperscript{173} Fausto, “Of Enemies and Pets” 937.
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“extracting as much as possible from single deaths…[rather than] killing the largest number of enemies.” 174 We thus see here that predation and warfare are both conceived of in terms of persons with whom I relate and who I appropriate either through turning them into nutritive objects (by way of cooking) which can be used in the production of persons via commensality or by a direct appropriation of the subjective capacities of the person in cannibalism. As such, both commensality and cannibalism can be seen as different ways of producing kin for a limited and highly circumscribed kinship community that requires the incorporation of exteriority in order to maintain itself.

For the enclosed appropriative kinship relation analyzed here, the answer to the problem of existing in a world of persons ethically is not so much answered as sidestepped. The kinship community formed is a “totality” without closure and this impossibility of closure is what leads it to find persons exterior to it to incorporate into it in order to maintain itself. In this way, it is closest to the mode of appropriation that we saw earlier described by Levinas in his mythos for the birth of agriculture except that, there, what was appropriated was seen as composed of faceless objects whereas here, what is appropriated is not only accepted as being a person or having a face but, in some cases, is appropriated precisely because of this fact. Unlike totemic systems or the animistic systems of the Subarctic, however, there are no kinship concerns beyond their tribe, although kinship relations within other tribes exterior to their own are implicitly recognized, so that the problem of dealing with kin who I might need to kill for sustenance does not arise as each tribal group forms a closed kinship system relating to persons exterior to it in an appropriative way.

174 Ibid., 948.
Hierarchic Holistic Kinship

So far we have looked at how different animistic hunter-gatherer groups have dealt with existing in a universe populated by relational persons and have seen answers ranging from universal kinship to self-enclosed tribal kinship. Although these are the most common forms found in hunter-gatherer groups, there is also an animistic style identified by Descola as “analogism” which he defines as “predicated on the idea that all the entities in the world are fragmented into a multiplicity of essences, forms and substances separated by minute intervals, often ordered along a graded scale, such as in the Great Chain of Being that served as the main cosmological model during the Middle Ages.”175 In other words, in analogism, there is a total segmentation of all elements which then refer to all other elements in terms of a completed hierarchical structure. In such a system, all beings are totally differentiated from one another at the same time that they must relate to one another according to their given position in the hierarchy. Hence, intrinsic to the analogistic experience is being a distinct and specific piece within a larger hierarchical whole which is why, of course, he can identify it with something like the Great Chain of Being or the Indian caste system, for in each of these cases, a hierarchy is formed in which each piece of the hierarchy is necessary to support the total structure. As Descola says, “in an analogic collective, the hierarchy of the elementary segments is contrastive: it is defined exclusively by reciprocal positions. And this is why the segments do not constitute independent collectives as the totemic classes do…The moiety of the East only exists because it complements the moiety of the West.”176 This is why it can be seen as “a hermeneutic dream of completeness and totalization.”177

176 Ibid., 89.
177 Ibid., 84.
Although this mode of relation occurred among indigenous groups in Hawaii, the Andes, and Mesoamerica it is also associated with archaic China and, as we have just mentioned, the Middle Ages, which helps to emphasize the fact that animism, as an experience, was not something specific only to hunter-gatherer groups or those who existed outside agriculture. These experiences continued and oftentimes were shaped and transformed by new contexts. What we might surmise in the example of analogism is an animism being influenced by the emergence of the State or the Catholic Church which, of course, tends to be represented as a totalized, hierarchical structure composed of distinct elements serving specific roles. And as we noted earlier, in the example of totemism, once segmentation has begun to occur, a hierarchical organization of those segments becomes possible so that we may detect a movement from “universalist” animism through totemism to analogism as segmentation and hierarchy begin to form.

Importantly, in the case of analogism, is that by organizing these segments into a larger structure, a new whole is formed as well as a new exteriority to that whole. As such, Descola says that “the exterior of the collective is not entirely ignored, it remains an ‘out- world’ where disorder reigns, a periphery that may be feared, despised.”\(^{178}\) An “out-world” that sounds a lot like the there is, yet one premised on the initial establishment of an “in-world.” What we can detect in analogism then is an experience of animism placed in a hierarchical and self-enclosed context in relation to its environment. It is not yet a world without spirits and yet, it is a world no longer “bathing” in the elemental. Analogism may thus be seen as a transitional moment between classic animism and naturalism. That is, before we can arrive at the inversion of animism in naturalism where “instead of claiming an identity of soul and a difference of bodies, it is

\(^{178}\) Ibid., 88.
predicated upon a discontinuity of interiorities and a material continuity,”179 we must first pass through the intermediate position in which there is a discontinuity of both soul and body which is how Descola defines analogism. It is the hypothesis, in confronting something different from myself, that “this object’s interiority and physicality are entirely distinct from [my] own.”180 And that through this complete distinction, it fits only into one place in the totality, as do I.

We thus find that, in analogism, the answer to the problem of living in a universe of persons is to order them and through this ordering determine my place in the hierarchy so that I may determine what is below me and, thus, available to me for appropriation. In the Medieval Great Chain of Being, for instance, through this ordering, you could determine who had a rational soul, a sensitive soul, or a nutritive soul thus distinguishing the capacities of different beings and, in this way, preparing oneself to render judgement in relation to them so as to justify the use of them.

In looking at the various modes of relation found in animistic societies, we have been able to see the different ways in which one can deal with existing in a universe of persons in order to justify the appropriation that is necessary in order to reproduce one’s own body as well as the society in which one lives. What this emphasizes then is the fact that, for animists, there is no division between nature, culture, and the supernatural such that it is impossible to imagine a cultural community of humans erected as distinct and separated from everything that surrounds it.181 This lack of a separation is precisely the reason why, for animists, there exists no arelational outside that could be freely appropriated without consequence. As Pedersen puts it, “instead of

179 Ibid., 84.
180 Ibid., 79
181 Except in analogism where this exterior, however, is not so much posited in order to be appropriated into the inside of the analogic whole so much as it is posited for the purpose of maintaining the integrity of the analogic whole. That is, the holistic fantasy of analogism requires an outside against which it determines itself.
having one nature encompassing many human societies, we are confronted with one society of both humans and nonhumans encompassing, as it were, many natures.”\textsuperscript{182} What this means is that every relation between humans and nonhumans is political since every such relation is already deployed within culture and thus becomes a negotiation with another relational being, even if a predatory or belligerent one. This is why the shaman who is able to effect communication between humans and nonhumans is essentially a politician engaging in negotiations between different political communities.\textsuperscript{183}

The differential deployment of kinship by animist groups shows us the ways in which it can be used to produce and condition political decisions. At the same time, however, the importance of recognizing persons \textit{as persons} regardless of where they fall in kinship in relation to you can be said to express a more fundamental level of kinship that precedes this differential deployment of it. We thus find a slippage in kinship since it is both what justifies, among totemic groups for instance, the appropriation of a being that is not kin while at the same time requiring that this appropriation be done with respect and according to a certain etiquette since that being is kin for someone else and thus exists within the universe of kinship and relationality. Kinship, before thematization, may be said to express the connection that all beings have to all other beings and thus their responsibility to one another whereas kinship \textit{after} thematization may be said to function as a limiting structure that sets the parameters that allows for the necessary appropriation of persons to take place by establishing certain persons as available to me by designating them as not \textit{my} kin, or by reconceptualizing what sharing means within kinship relations (an animal can share its meat).

\textsuperscript{182} Pedersen, “Totemism, Animism and North Asian Indigenous Ontologies” 415.
\textsuperscript{183} Viveiros de Castro, \textit{Cannibal Metaphysics}, 60.
This way in which kinship functions among animists is ultimately very similar to the way in which fraternity is used by Levinas. In the concept of fraternity, there is a similar slippage happening since it is both that which ties me to Others in relationality via the face as well as that which obliges me to join with Others to form a State and engage in politics to serve the third. Just as kinship seems to both exist at the level of establishing a responsibility for all beings while also being deployed politically to establish the parameters for engaging with these now thematized beings (such as we saw in the Raven creation myth of the Tlingit), so fraternity both exists before politics while also providing its condition. This is why Levinas often relates his idea of the face with fraternity such as when he says that “[r]esponsibility for the other, this way of answering without a prior commitment, is human fraternity itself.”\(^{184}\) In other words, fraternity is the taking up of the responsibility for the Other experienced through the face. In taking up this responsibility, however, because I am not alone in being responsible and because there are other Others to whom I am responsible in the guise of the third, I come to join Others in forming a State, but a State that cannot forget its basis in the face since “politics left to itself bears a tyranny within itself.”\(^{185}\) The thematization wrought by politics which has its basis in fraternity, in order to stay true to this fraternity, cannot be a full thematization in which the face would be erased and forgotten as this would also erase the meaning of fraternity itself.

Ultimately, this is the same sort of process that happens in kinship where the kinship relation which provides the parameters for the political decisions of which animals can be hunted, for instance, is also that which expresses the necessity of ritual and etiquette because each being is “no more nothing.” That is, although kinship relations delineate which beings are available for me to appropriate, at the same time, they also require that I treat all beings who

\(^{184}\) Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 116.

\(^{185}\) Ibid., *Totality and Infinity*, 300.
exist within kinship relations—even if not my own—with a certain level of respect and care. Their thematization as a being available to appropriate because of its being outside of my kinship relations cannot be a full thematization either, lest they be turned into objects and have their personhood denied. Of course, this is not exactly true of all animist systems, as we saw with Amazonian animism and analogism, or, rather, their recognition takes a different form which is not always peaceful since, in cannibalism, there is an implicit recognition of the person as what is being appropriated are the subjective capacities of the person. Nevertheless, even if they do not engage in practices that instantiate a recognition of this originary kinship, this does not mean that they do not exist within this framework. After all, as Levinas has said, it is “not in the accomplishment of saintliness, but in the value” that the human begins. Even those who engage in unethical, appropriative violence still do so with a universe of relational persons.

What ultimately distinguishes animistic kinship from Levinasian fraternity is its wider scope of application which requires that an accommodation be made that allows for certain types of persons to be appropriated. Since animists exist in a universe of persons in which the reproduction of the self necessarily requires the appropriation of persons since these are the only beings available to appropriate for the reproduction of the self, there must be an allowance made for this necessity. By contrast, Levinasian fraternity, by being circumscribed to humans, does not need to make such accommodations since what is outside the human community—things, the elemental—is free to be appropriated in the reproduction of that human community. In such a situation, persons will never need to be appropriated to serve other persons since there is a realm outside the sphere of persons which can accommodate them. In this situation, the problem is not that of dealing with how to appropriate within a universe of persons in which every appropriation

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will necessarily involve violence against a person, but rather, how to distribute what has been unproblematically appropriated to ensure that all persons are taken into consideration. In the first place, there is the problem of justifying the appropriative act in the first place, while in the second place, there is only the problem of justifying the distribution of what has been freely appropriated. One might say that, with animism, even the most just society will still be unable to escape the appropriation of persons whereas, in Levinas, even the most just society will still be unable to escape the suffering of the Other through the privation caused by an insufficiency of adequate resources. Thus, the main difference between animistic kinship and Levinasian fraternity might be said to rest upon what they see as the fundamental opposition that structures their relational matrix. As Fausto says, for animists, “[t]he fundamental opposition is not between being human or not but between being (and having) a relative or not.” And this determines the sorts of behavior that we see so that, for animists, what is not kin becomes available for appropriation whereas, for Levinas, what is not human becomes available for appropriation, with some qualifications.

In the experience of these different animistic groups, we find experiences that are, in many ways, remarkably in line with Levinas’s analysis in Otherwise than Being. The Good, as sociality, is felt as primary in the experience of a relational universe whose very essence is relationality itself. Out of this relational universe, it is possible to fall into the there is either by not being a relational being in the first place or by becoming an egoistic solipsist. Ultimately, then, the condition of persisting in being and privileging the self over the Other in the conatus essendi is seen by animists as an aberration rather than a rule since it expresses a denial of the originary relationality from which every person comes. And since any being could be a person,

most beings are experienced as being a part of this relational matrix. Thus, for instance, killing that happens outside of relations of kin is not just seen as unethical by Aborigines but “evidence of people going crazy.”

For many of these groups then, the originary law is not of Being, but of relation. And because of this, their world is not one composed of impersonal, natural forces but of personal beings with whom relations are formed. Beings who are responsive to my needs and my behavior and with whom I must constantly maintain relations to ensure my own survival and the survival of others. This fact of a relational universe filled with persons, however, presents problems that Levinas does not have to deal with because of his external sphere of appropriable things available for humans. Not only do I kill Others in Levinas’s sense where “when we sit down at the table in the morning and drink coffee, we kill an Ethiopian who doesn’t have any coffee” but also in the very literal sense within the relation of predation. Intrinsic to the animistic worldview are notions of sacrifice and mourning since in a universe of persons where persons must reproduce themselves through the appropriation of other persons, there will always be trade-offs that will need to be made that go beyond resource scarcity and cut to a being’s very mortality. In this very concrete sense, then, I am not only responsible for the Other’s death by letting him/her die or by not being able to die in his/her place but, sometimes, for killing him/her out of necessity. Hence the proliferation of various different ways of deploying kinship to deal with this tragic situation which is inescapable in a world where one must eat others to live, others who are “no more nothing.”

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188 Bird Rose, “Death and Grief in a World of Kin” 144.
189 Levinas, “The Paradox of Morality” 173.
5 VULNERABILITY AND THE STRUCTURE OF LIFE

As we have seen, a core component of the philosophy of Levinas and from which he derives much of his analysis is *experience*, although not necessarily a *perceptual* experience of phenomenal objects present to consciousness as contents. If we recall from earlier, Levinas says that the “face is signification, and signification without context” which means that the face signifies *alone* without the need of any supplement. 190 As we noted before, this is why the face can be understood as that which *begins* the process of signification or communication since it is that through which beings first become connected to one another so that communication becomes necessary. That is, the poverty of the face *addresses* me such that it requires that I *respond* to it and, for Levinas, this is the genesis of language—this is the meaning of sociality. And this address from the face that demands something of me, demands it because of its mortality. This is why Levinas explains that “to approach the face of the other is to worry directly about his death, and this means to regard him straightaway as mortal, finite.” 191 The mortality and finitude of the Other are what tie me to him/her infinitely since I cannot take away his/her death. The Other will always die eventually for I can never die in his/her place and yet I must *worry* about him/her.

If the poverty of the face expresses the mortality of a being then it would seem to only be applicable to beings that can die, that is, to living beings, which would also imply that sociality and language are formations that only arise among living beings. However, as we saw in the previous chapter, among animists, relationality is experienced, not just with what we would ordinarily consider animate beings, but also with what we would ordinarily consider inanimate beings such as the sun, the wind, glaciers, hills, or stones. How are we to make sense of this

190 Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity*, 86.
191 Ibid., *Is It Righteous to Be?* 135.
The animistic experience of seeing the “face” of that which cannot die because it has never lived? Or do we need to rethink what it means to live and to die? In order to understand this, we will first take a look at the relationship that Levinas draws between the face and the *conatus essendi* before going on to see what the structure of metabolic life itself can tell us about the face as an experience of a being’s mortality. This will assist us in opening up a new avenue for understanding the applicability of Levinas’s ethics as well as lead us into a discussion of the relationship between animacy and inanimacy and what implications this might have for ethical and political concerns.

**The Face and the Conatus Essendi**

As we have just noted, the face of the Other expresses a poverty and a vulnerability tied up with mortality. Because the Other can die, I am responsible for him/her. The “Thou shalt not kill” becomes a “Thou shalt cause thy neighbour to live.”[^192] We thus find that it is through the fact that the Other is *alive* that I am connected to him/her and charged with maintaining and improving upon this condition. At the same time, the fact that I am also alive and mortal is what gives meaning to this responsibility since I also have needs and am subject to mortality. My own mortality makes it such that I could choose to deny my responsibility and care about *my* life more than that of the Other. For Levinas, this is the definition of evil. That is, the privileging of the self over the Other, which he believes is found in Being left to itself. This is why he says that “[t]he law of evil is the law of being.”[^193] Also known as “the *conatus essendi*, which is the effort to exist…[where] existence is the supreme law.”[^194] Hence, in describing animals, he says that

[^193]: Ibid., “The Paradox of Morality” 175.
[^194]: Ibid., 175.
they engage in a “struggle for life without ethics…[where] The aim of being is being itself.”

This privileging of the self over the Other wherein the only concern of being is itself is evil because it is a total denial of sociality, relation, and communication. It is the complete alienation of the self from all the mortal beings that surround it except insofar as they can be used, incorporated, or exploited for itself. This is where the experience of the there is can arise since the meaning that occurs via sociality is not there turning its existence into monotony and senselessness; the sort of solipsistic emptiness that we saw in the previous chapter was identified with the concept of soul-blindness.

The meaning that arises through taking on the responsibility for the Other as experienced in the face, however, is both connected and disconnected from the conatus essendi. The responsible one breaks out of his/her persistence in being by allowing the conatus essendi of another to take precedence. In this process, something happens which can no longer be held within Being but must be understood as happening outside of Being and this is relation. In other words, for Levinas, what is Good is not the conatus essendi but the relation wherein the conatus essendi of the Other can become more dear to me than my own. In this way, we find that the law of being that Levinas identifies with evil is the very same thing expressed in the face and this is possible because the Good is not identified with Being or a being but only with the relation that one being can have for another.

The effort to exist, insofar as it is my effort to exist which becomes my only value is evil, whereas the effort to exist, insofar as it is the effort of the Other which becomes my concern, is good. This is made explicit by Levinas as when he says that “to take pleasure in eating, to take

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195 Ibid., 172.
pleasure in oneself, that is disgusting; but the hunger of the other, that is sacred.”¹⁹⁶ Two hungers appear, one whose fulfillment is necessary but whose pleasurable excess becomes disgusting because there remains beyond me the hunger of the Other to fulfill. Quoting Rabbi Israel Salanter, Levinas makes things even clearer: “the material needs of my neighbor are my spiritual needs.”¹⁹⁷ Through this, we can make sense of why he will later say that “the conception of the face is a certain way of expressing philosophically what I mean when I speak of the conatus essendi, the effort to exist which is the ontological principle.”¹⁹⁸ The effort to exist, because it is effortful, is not easy but difficult, precarious, and unpredictable; the existent asks for assistance out of its very experience of privation which is expressed through the face that addresses the one who could help it live. Ultimately, this is what is happening in the experience of the face and why Levinas understands it as something which can only happen between mortal beings for whom the temptation of forgetting the Other in favor of the self always exists.

Animacy as Vulnerability

If the face is an expression of the conatus essendi of the living being—its exposure to death—then it will be instructive to take a closer look at what is occurring in the living being that marks it as vulnerable and how it is that this becomes expressed in its manner of existing. Towards this end, we will look at the work of Hans Jonas who has produced a phenomenological analysis of biology that can help us to understand in more detail what it is about the living being that produces its distinctive qualities vis-à-vis the non-living being and how this allows us to explain the animistic experience of what we would consider “dead” as expressive of life.

¹⁹⁶ Ibid., Is It Righteous to Be? 46.
The Structure of Life

Although both Jonas and Levinas would agree in giving human beings alone the privilege of ethical responsibility, in Jonas this is undermined by his own ideas concerning the continuity of life-forms so that the rupture of greater significance is not that between humans and non-humans so much as that between life and non-life. In the human, Jonas sees something new develop but only as a function of its complexity in relation to what preceded it rather than as a totally new phenomenon. That is, for him, the human is merely the “most highly advanced relative” of the animal.\(^{199}\) What distinguishes humans from animals from plants and so on can be understood as differences of degree rather than kind such that, in each, they express the same core features that he identifies with life in different ways and at different levels of complexity.

What he will identify then as the common feature between all life-forms and what essentially distinguishes them from what is non-living is metabolism. Jonas describes this at some length:

\[\textit{metabolism}...\text{[is the]}\text{ exchange of matter with the environment. In this remarkable process of being, the material parts of which the organism consists at a given moment are for the analytic observer only temporary contents, whose identity does not coincide with the identity of the whole they pass through. On the other hand, this whole maintains its identity by means of foreign material passing through its spatial system, its living form. It is never materially the same, and yet it persists as this identical self by the very fact that it does not remain the same matter. If ever any two of its ‘slices of time’ do become identical with each other, then it has ceased to live: it is dead.}\]\(^{200}\)

We thus see that metabolism becomes that which defines life by expressing how its identity comes into formation dynamically, as a process. What is alive is alive by virtue of the fact that its material constituents are constantly changing and this change must be supported by the continual incorporation of matter from its surrounding environment. Hence, “metabolism...indicates an


\(^{200}\) Ibid., 64.
ability of organic form—namely, to alter its matter—but at the same time the unremitting necessity for it to do this.”\textsuperscript{201} Thus, as opposed to what is inanimate, the living being’s being becomes a task that it must perform. Its dependence on the incorporation of exterior matter means that it must constantly seek something outside itself and is thus always caught up in activity to do so. The tiger stalks its prey, the plant leans towards the sun, and the amoeba stretches out its pseudopod. In all cases, living beings must engage in activities that support their ability to reproduce themselves as living beings since they are no longer, like inanimate beings, defined in their identity according to the continuity of material constituents. This is why “[s]aying…of a composite, macroscopic body—this stone in my collection—that it is the same as yesterday amounts to saying that it still consists of the same elementary parts as before,”\textsuperscript{202} whereas to say the same thing of a living organism is to assert its death.

What is also significant about Jonas’s description is how we already begin to see echoes of Levinas’s conception of the face. In the metabolic life-form, Jonas sees a being which is no longer defined by its content and this is what distinguishes it from other beings. This means that what is alive cannot be reduced to what materially constitutes it at any point in time since it is a temporal being that must persist through time. In other words, what is alive is, just as Levinas describes the face, “what cannot become a content,”\textsuperscript{203} which, of course, is why the face can be the very meaning of signification itself. Thus, we see that out of the very structure of life, we enter the possibility of communication since the living being already signifies itself as absent from itself in its privation, which is why it demands assistance in its address. Life emerges as already communicative, temporalized, and social which is why, perhaps, the first life-forms,

\textsuperscript{201} Ibid., 68.
\textsuperscript{202} Ibid., 89.
\textsuperscript{203} Levinas, \textit{Ethics and Infinity}, 86.
bacteria, could already fission themselves to form social groups across which chemical communication could occur amongst them.

These structures arise as they do because they must deal with the uncertainty of their own condition. Communication and relation matter because no being can suffice unto itself and this very privation is also at the heart of how Jonas understands freedom’s emergence; a freedom he qualifies as needful. As he explains it:

We have…the case of a substantial entity enjoying a sort of freedom with respect to its own substance, an independence from that same matter of which it nonetheless wholly consists. However, though independent of the sameness of this matter, it is dependent on the exchange of it, on its progressing permanently and sufficiently, and there is no freedom in this. Thus, the exercise of the freedom which the living thing enjoys is rather a stern necessity.204

That is, in order to secure and sustain its freedom from inanimate matter, the living being must engage in free actions that will secure the material basis for its own continuance. Once the capacity for free action arises in the living organism, it becomes required to use it to sustain itself. This relates to the fact that, since the living being is constituted such that the material basis for its existence lies outside it, it can never be guaranteed for it. It will need to seek it out and how it shall do so will become a matter of choice and response since there will be no predetermined way of doing so.

This is why, in the emergence of life, Jonas believes that interiority, subjectivity, and mind must also emerge as ways of organizing the behavior of what lives. And these qualities, for him, cannot be sidestepped by granting a special privilege to the human being. That is, the human being may be the most highly advanced being, but nevertheless, remains tied to a chain of predecessors with whom these qualities are shared. And because of our own firsthand experience of interiority and mind, he believes that we can attribute this experience to those same

204 Jonas, Mortality and Morality, 89.
predecessors at lower levels of complexity. Hence, he says that the living being’s transcendence from matter “includes inwardness or subjectivity, imbuing all encounters occurring within its horizon with the quality of felt selfhood, no matter how faint its voice.”205 Because of this, Jonas is able to say that “[t]he great contradictions that man discovers in himself—freedom and necessity, autonomy and dependence, ego and world, connectedness and isolation, creativity and morality—are present in nuce in life’s most primitive forms, each of which maintains a perilous balance between being and nonbeing.”206

Jonas does not simply leave things at that but attempts to give us a more detailed picture of the development of this interiority in evolution, and in this way tries to identify what is different about the interiority of humans versus animals versus plants. In the movement from plant to animal, he seems to think that something particularly striking has occurred. This is due to his understanding of plants as experiencing their environment in an immediate way versus animals experiencing their environment in a mediate way. As Jonas says:

The original condition is an environment contiguous with the organism…This situation of material contiguity means also continuity in the process of exchange and thus immediacy of satisfaction concurrent with the permanent organic need. In this condition of continuous feeding there is no room for desire. Need passes of itself over into satisfaction by the steady operation of the metabolic dynamics. It still remains true that this dynamism…manifests the basic concern of life with its own continuation…But the continuous availability of the matter needed for the renewal of form gives no occasion for the concern in such renewal to turn into appetite. Environment and self still form one context functioning of itself, and not until some sort of separation between the two takes place can appetite and fear come into play.207

The enrootedness of the plant, for Jonas, seems to be a limiting factor such that it will not be able to develop desire, feeling, appetite, or emotion as an animal will be able to. According to Jonas,

205 Ibid., 69.
206 Ibid., 60.
all of these formations are the product of the more precarious nature of animal metabolism since it “has to depend on the unassured presence of highly specific and nonpermanent organic bodies.”

By contrast, the plant is supposedly “relieved of the necessity…of movement…[via] their continuous contact with the source of supply [such that]…In the uninterrupted exchange the current need, though ever renewed, cannot take on the keen edge of want.” In other words, Jonas seems to understand the plant as if it was connected to an endless supply of resources constantly fulfilling its needs which, of course, is problematic since this is not the situation that plants actually find themselves in which is why carbon will be shared between plants in mycorrhizal networks and why roots will extend into the soil and use touch and chemical signaling to find available resources. Putting this to the side for now, it is instructive to see what it is about animals that Jonas finds unique and significant.

According to Jonas, the three characteristics that distinguish animals from plants are motility, perception, and emotion which all serve to manifest a greater sense of unified individuality in relation to a more separated sense of the world. What is interesting about this difference, however, is that it is the regaining, in a more complex form, of an experience that preceded plants. As Jonas says:

To be functionally ‘centered’ is an original trait of organism, exhibited already in the nuclear organization of the single cell…However ‘rudimentary’ this is as a type of centralization, it is significant for the nature of life not only regarding the technique of its functioning, but as a morphological sign of its essential individuality…[and] this degree of individuation is temporarily lost—to be

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208 Ibid., 103
209 Ibid., 103.
recovered, on a higher level, only in subsequent steps, and in animal evolution only.\textsuperscript{212}

This is why he can say that this “original individuality is not recovered throughout the vegetable kingdom, in spite of the[ir] high integration and functional differentiation…[so that] the most pronounced morphological individuality of a tree is not matched by an internal individuality.”\textsuperscript{213}

This development of internal individuality is identified with the centralization of the animal found in the nervous system. According to Jonas, this centralization is best expressed by motility since “it means control of action…and links centralization to…the special form of its metabolism, in whose service motility stands.”\textsuperscript{214} In other words, the motility of an animal requires centralization for the purpose of coordinating its limbs in movement towards the fulfillment of a purpose. At the same time, this will also connect to the animal’s greater capacity for emotion and perception since “motility guided by perception and driven by desire turns there into here and not yet into now.”\textsuperscript{215}

Ultimately, it is the opening up of distances which Jonas sees as marking the specificity of the animal. A greater capacity for perception happens so that the open field of the world can be disclosed to the animal whose increased motility now permits it to cross these distances which the animal is obliged to cross due to the mediate relation between itself and its material needs. It must find what it needs by moving through space just as it does so in escaping peril and it is here that Jonas identifies the opening up of emotional life where “[d]esire is at the root of the chase [and] fear at the root of flight.”\textsuperscript{216} In the animal, one might say, time and space both open up as fields that must be traversed and that were not previously experienced as such. The

\textsuperscript{212} Ibid., Philosophical Essays: From Ancient Creed to Technological Man (New York: Atropos Press, 1980) 199
\textsuperscript{213} Ibid., 200.
\textsuperscript{214} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{215} Ibid., The Phenomenon of Life, 101.
\textsuperscript{216} Ibid., Mortality and Morality, 71.
“emotionalization” of the organism is a result of the temporalization of the organism which is itself the result of its spatialization since the movement through space to achieve a goal must happen through time over which emotion sustains the animal in its purpose. In this process of enriching the interior experience of the animal, so too does its sense of alienation from its environment become keener which is why it is associated both with a greater sense of individuality as well as a greater sense of the world disclosed.

In Jonas, we see a picture of development wherein interiority, whose individuality was present from the start, becomes increasingly centralized once again in animal life in ways that increase the experience of interiority and exteriority simultaneously. That is, the animal becomes a more complex being in step with its perception of and engagement with a more complex and differentiated world which opens up new possibilities that become most fully developed in the human being’s capacity for self-reflection. Hence, in describing what it is that distinguishes the human being from animals, Jonas speaks of the development of three new forms of freedom opened up by thought which he delineates as:

(1) The freedom of thinking for determining itself through its choice of object: the mind…can reflect on whatever it wants…(2) The freedom to transform the sensuously given into self-created inner images…the imagination’s freedom…(3) The freedom…carried by the symbolic wings of language, to transcend everything that can ever be said and the dimension of the sayable as such: to pass from existence to essence…from the finite to the infinite…The ability to grasp the idea of the infinite, the eternal, and the absolute…indicates the transcending freedom of the mind, which an eros of its own urges on.\textsuperscript{217}

It is here that we see how Jonas’s anthropocentrism is similar to Levinas’s for both give humans certain special capacities that render them alone among all beings in responsibility to others. This is true especially of his third freedom which is associated with understanding the idea of the infinite “which an eros of its own urges on;” an interesting statement which is quite similar to

\textsuperscript{217} Ibid., 174.
Levinas’s assertion that the idea of infinity is experienced as metaphysical desire. A desire that will lead to ethics in Levinas as it seems to do so in Jonas as when he says that “[i]n the understanding of values, where knowledge passes over into an acknowledgment of a claim upon me of what is known…there is added to all of the other freedoms the moral freedom of human beings.” That is, the last freedom beyond even the third freedom delineated is one that transcends all the others moving away from grasping an idea of infinity (which would be knowledge) to acknowledging a claim upon me (which would be ethics). This is a movement initiated by the third freedom that ends in morality since the transcendence enabled by the third freedom allows for the human being to “replace the loosened connection to present things and their demands with a freely chosen attachment to an imagined unconditioned and its demands.” That is, the infinite becomes commanding as the unconditioned to which I must answer. What underlies all of these freedoms, for Jonas, is what he sees as the special human capacity for self-reflection wherein the I can become its own theme and engage in a judgement of the self.

Although Jonas provides us with a compelling picture of the development of interiority from amoebas to humans, he cannot help but go against his own assertion of the continuity between all these beings in his description of their interiority. He seems to be unable to resist erecting divisions marking humans as essentially different from animals, animals as essentially different from plants, and multicellular organisms as essentially different from unicellular ones. Although there are, without a doubt, significant differences between all these types of beings, Jonas seems to be implying that wholly new capacities arise at different stages of development as opposed to, as would seem most consistent with his thesis, the idea that capacities already had by

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218 Ibid., 175.
219 Ibid.
all are expressed differently and/or more fully in different organisms owing to the specificity of their biological constitution. In other words, if, as Jonas says, “[w]here else but at the very beginning of life can the beginning of inwardness be located?” then we must ask ourselves whether anything can be said about what this first emergence of inwardness might be like. As Jonas also says, “[t]he observer of life must be prepared by life…organic existence with its own experience is required of himself for his being able to make that inference…and this is the advantage… of our…being bodies. Thus we are prepared by what we are.”

If our own interiority is all we have to go on then, although we can make the claim that all living beings likely experience interiority, the nature of that interiority will be necessarily left up for debate. In such a situation, however, it is better to assume generously than assume miserly in relation to other living beings, which brings us back to the question of plants.

As we gestured towards earlier, the division that Jonas places between animals and plants seems to be untenable since the experience of the enrooted plant, while different from that of the animal, is not without mediation or privation. A plant is not contiguous with never-ending resources but is subject to the quantity of rain, of sunlight, of minerals and will react to privations through growing in a certain direction, releasing certain chemicals, extending its roots further, or sending messages through a mycorrhizal network. If the plant also needs to move through space and time in its experience of privation then perhaps it too experiences some rudimentary form of desire or fear in accordance with its own biology. In keeping with a continuity of interiority between all life-forms that Jonas posits, this would seem to be perfectly consistent.

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220 Ibid., Mortality and Morality, 63.
221 Ibid., The Phenomenon of Life, 82.
Similarly, one might also say that the three freedoms that Jonas identifies as the special province of humans are established as a way of enacting an unnecessary bifurcation between continuous beings. As we saw in chapter 3 in the behavior of the humpback whale, it is conceivable that this non-human animal has been able to pass through into moral freedom. And for what reason would we, in principle, deny the whale this except for our own hubris? There is no justification for dogmatically asserting that these freedoms are only available to human beings.

The more elegant solution to all this, although extravagant for some, would be to, first, imagine that all living beings have the same interiority that humans do and, from there, reduce the complexity and magnitude of that interiority in accordance with what we perceive to be the biological limitations of that particular organism. As such, an amoeba would, in this process, lose nearly all of the interior capacities given to it in the moment prior to its thematization but a bonobo would be assessed more charitably owing to its closeness to humans as would a *mimosa pudica* in the sense that, starting from this perspective, we would be more generous in our understanding of its responsiveness to stimuli.\(^{222}\)

In this way, we can avoid the tendency to erect divisions between different sorts of life-forms as well as avoid the tendency to privilege the human whereby we assume that a being lacks a quality it *might* have, that humans have, until proof to the contrary rather than assuming the opposite. Of course, classification and the material and mechanical reduction of a being is useful for science, but dangerous for ethics, where, as we remember with Calarco, it can be used to justify the creation of a class of beings outside ethical concern; a class whose limits can never be fully delineated leaving it open to error and abuse. We should, therefore, be generous in our

\(^{222}\) The *mimosa pudica* is also known as “sleepy plant” due to the fact that its foliage will open or close in response to light as well as other stimuli, such as touch.
understanding of the interiority of other beings and this generosity will also assist us now in understanding why the set of all living beings and the set of all relational beings are not coextensive with one another for animists.

**Movement, Resistance, and Appearance**

As we have just seen, there is some overlapping ground that begins to appear through the biological picture that Jonas gives us and the experience of animists that we looked at in chapter 4. In particular, perspectivism appears as consonant with the picture of the continuity of interiority that has just been drawn since it posits a shared interiority among all living beings which becomes differentiated according to the body in which that interiority is expressed, which is precisely the same thesis that we have just described.

The difference between them lies in the understanding of interiority which, for Jonas, is referring only to capacities that we traditionally associate with the mind and consciousness whereas among animists, this shared interiority is often coextensive with their understanding of culture. That is, the reason why, in perspectivism, the jaguar is believed to perceive blood as beer is because the jaguar is also a beer drinker, like me, but due to his corporeality, experiences a different substance as beer than I do. In perspectivism, then, all beings have the same cultural experience because they have the same interiority but this cultural experience is mapped onto different things due to their having different bodies. Here, by contrast, with the help of Jonas, we are positing that all beings have the same capacities associated with the mind that become differentiated in their expression due to their having different bodies. Of course, while explaining how both understand interiority as shared among many different sorts of beings and differentiated according to the corporeal features of those beings, this does not yet explain why, for animists, a being that shares interiority with him/her need not be a metabolic organism.
In the context in which animism developed, there was no way to rigorously define beings as metabolic or non-metabolic entities, moreover, as we noted before, an important feature of animism is its openness to the possibility that any being might manifest itself as relational by showing certain qualities associated with relationality. By doing this, it left itself open to the singular encounter of the Other and avoided trying to determine it in advance through the application of predetermined reductive categories. Now that we have taken a look at Jonas’s analysis of the metabolic organism and how it is structured as a precarious being dependent for its existence on what it cannot control, we can better understand what it is that animists see manifested in those beings which they determine are animate. Towards this understanding, two qualities seem to be most significant: movement and resistance.

As we mentioned earlier, the metabolic organism’s unique structure makes it such that it must somehow secure its material basis for existence. In order to do so, the metabolic organism is forced to act and this action will often be manifested through some sort of movement conditioned by a goal. This is true of the swimming bacteria up to the chasing cheetah. In accordance with the limitations of the human organism, however, humans will be most likely to recognize movement similar to their own that manifests itself within the limits of their perceptual apparatus. As such, any movement perceived to be purpose-driven will be experienced as coming from a living organism since it is only the living organism that is required to move with intent towards the fulfillment of a goal in securing its material needs. And since the organism that does this, does it out of necessity, it may also address another to assist it out of this same necessity. That which seems to address me with intent will thus be experienced as living and this perception of intent will occur according to the level of improbability of an occurrence. That is, the purpose-driven organism’s actions happen against entropy thus appearing ordered and directional and this
distinguishes these movements from the aleatoric movements of what is not alive whose lines of flight do not appear directed towards specific purposes.

With this in mind, we can now explain the example of the Nayaka where a stone that “came toward” them was experienced as alive, while the others were not. Because this stone distinguished itself from all other stones by moving and because this movement was perceived as occurring with a specific intent that, in this case, involved addressing a group of beings (the Nayaka), it was experienced as being alive. All the other stones that did not manifest these qualities were, because of this, considered inanimate. Animacy is a quality shown through the directional movement of a being. This also explains why a plant may be perceived as being “less alive” than an animal since its degree of perceived movement is less.

When we look at what is perceived as living, however, directed movement is not the only feature of a being that would make it perceptible as alive; there is also obstinate resistance to my powers which indicates that the being in question has its own independent autonomy thus designating it as a being with its own powers and interiority that pushes back against mine. This can be experienced in either a negative or a positive way as that which frustrates me or that which overpowers me with its abundance. If we look back to animist beliefs, we find that the sun, glaciers, the wind, hills, mountains, the forest, and natural rock formations are oftentimes experienced as living beings as well without manifesting the directed movement that we just described above. What distinguishes these beings from the others is that they tend to be larger and more powerful and through this greater power manifest a certain independence from human subordination. The mountain which cannot be subordinated to my will expresses itself as separate and autonomous from me. As resistant to my powers, it appears to have a mind of its

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223 This point was developed in conversation with Michael Wickham (Feb. 26, 2018).
own. Similarly, the forest from which I gather my foodstuffs gives it of its own accord and does not produce on demand that which I ask of it; it will give me what it likes. The abundance I engage with, in this case, is one that exceeds me and cannot be subordinated to my will.

In both cases, what we find is something which expresses its own power that cannot become mine thus showing itself as something which is only its own. The stone that moves with intent, by this fact, shows itself as a relational being seeking to achieve some purpose or address someone with its movement. Similarly, the resistance to my control manifested by the autonomous power of the mountain or the forest demonstrates its independence and separateness from myself thus implying that it, too, has its own interiority which pushes back against my powers. By contrast, the inanimate stone neither moves with intent nor resists my powers since I can freely manipulate it, destroy it, or otherwise appropriate it. However, as we noted, the openness of the animistic view means that the stone that appears inanimate now may yet become animate later. Thus, no being is categorically denied the possibility of animacy while the only beings that are animate at any given time are those expressing it through perceived relations with other beings.

What we thus find is that what distinguishes the metabolic organism from all others is expressed through an interiority which cannot be appropriated and a necessity of movement to procure its material needs. Wherever this is perceived, even among non-metabolic beings, those non-metabolic beings will be experienced as alive and this is the reason why, for animists, it is possible to experience a personal relation with the sun, a mountain, or a stone as these can, in their own way, express qualities of animacy.

What also becomes clear through this analysis is that perception sets a limit on that which can be experienced as alive and, accordingly, limits the sorts of beings who can concretely
address me. That is, even if the experience of the face is not reducible to perceptual content, it is still an experience of an Other who addresses me in an encounter. As such, I must first of all feel that I am in the presence of another who challenges me and this is something that we determine through perceptual content that marks out the contours of the site in which the Other stands. This means that there will be certain beings that are metabolic organisms but, by being totally invisible to the human eye and other senses, never quite appear to humans as beings that could be of concern such as some types of protozoa, bacteria, archaea, or fungi. These beings, despite their metabolic nature, cannot be experienced by me in the same way that a glacier, a bear, or a Douglas fir can be.

Interestingly, then, we find that some metabolic organisms do not show up among the set of beings that can address me in a singular encounter while some non-metabolic beings do. But this sort of limitation is to be expected. That is, since the corporeality of every organism limits the expression of interiority possible within that specific body, then this will be the case for humans as much as for any other being. The limitations of the human body mark out our possibilities for engagement with Others in the world as they do for all other living beings. And this limitation can be considered part of what constitutes us as finite beings as well as determines the context of our political actions. That is, even though we are infinitely responsible to every Other before thematization, after thematization occurs we must engage in the judgements that determine our concrete actions. And one of the effects of thematization is not just seeing the Other as a specific corporeal being assessed in a political consciousness, but also the limitations of that consciousness existing in a specific body. Thus, although we will be able to experience the alterity of some Others, we cannot, in principle, experience the alterity of all Others due to our corporeal limitations. When it comes to non-living beings, however, it remains to be seen
whether we would want to say that the experience of the “face” of a rock or a mountain is wholly unwarranted or not—a result of a misunderstanding of the nature of inanimate beings—and we will return to this point later on.

**Another Rupture with Being**

As we will recall, both Levinas and Jonas saw humans as being unique in their capacity for morality and responsibility. Just as Jonas spoke of the moral freedom that he believed arose only in humans, so Levinas characterized humanity as a rupture with Being that allowed for the possibility of ethics. However, as mentioned in chapter 3, there are multiple problems with Levinas’s account that betray an ambiguity concerning the moment at which this rupture with Being that resulted in ethics occurred. As we noted there, since the human is not defined in biologicistic terms, it cannot, in principle, be limited to merely biological humans. Furthermore, if Levinas is unsure of when the face arises in nature and if the face is not only that which calls me to responsibility but also that which opens up humanity through its own responsibilities then we can surmise that any being with a face would also experience responsibility. As such, we arrive at the conclusion that we simply do not know when the “human” or the “face” arises, only that it probably arises sooner than we have previously thought judging by the examples of nonhumans engaging in what appears to be responsible action such as the self-sacrifice of the humpback whale.

**The Rupture of Life**

If we return to Jonas, what we find is a similar description to that of Levinas’s of a total rupture with Being that inaugurates a new way of existing different to what had preceded it except that Jonas identifies this rupture with the emergence of life itself and understands it as remaining *within* Being, that is, Being’s breakthrough as opposed to a break with Being. For him, the “law of being” before the emergence of life could be characterized as the legality of physics wherein
all matter was determined according to interactions ordained by the natural laws to which they are subject to. In such a configuration, everything existed according to chance and inertia and yet, through this same chance and inertia, the interactions eventually occurred that would allow for life to arise. In the emergence of life, however, something new happened since beings came to exist which, although still subject to the laws of physics, were no longer determined according to chance and inertia, from without, but became self-determining according to their own purposes through a felt interiority, from within. As Jonas sees it, in the emergence of life, we gain the capacity for directed action and choice, that is, we have the beginning of freedom. As he says, “this first appearance of the principle of freedom in its naked and elementary object-form signifies Being’s breakthrough into an unlimited realm of possibilities extending into the farthest reaches of subjective life and subsumed in its entirety under the rubric ‘freedom.’”

In other words, one might say that with the emergence of life, the strict book-keeping of Being up to that point had been ruptured by a gratuity exceeding it in which free actions in the metabolic organism became possible. Of course, as we remember from chapter 1, the free action is only free because it is executed in the consciousness of a claim being made upon it which gives meaning to the choice which is why responsibility is prior to freedom, as its condition. This would mean that in the emergence of freedom, we would have already had the emergence of responsibility and, consequently, the possibility for ethics. Thus, if we bring these two views together, we can come up with an answer to the question of when the “human” and the “face” emerged. It was at the same time as life itself whose very features, as we noted earlier, betray the sort of structure necessary to both express the vulnerability that would call on another’s

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responsibility and the freedom of action and choice that would designate it as originarily responsible.

By doing this, however, we change the meaning of the “law of being” from the *conatus essendi* (as Levinas thought) to chance and inertia and we redefine the entire terrain of organic life as being constituted according to responsibility thus extending the possibility of experiencing the face of the Other to all of them in accordance with their corporeal capacities and limitations as well as extending the possibility that they could all be experienced as Others in accordance with the corporeal limitations and capacities of those who would encounter them. If this is the case, however, does it mean that we return primacy to the *there is* as preceding ethics since life emerges from out of non-life?

**Can There be a Material *There Is***?

In the picture we have just sketched out of the emergence of life as that which ruptures the Being which preceded it, characterized as determined by chance and inertia within a context organized by subordination to the rules of physical laws, the question arises as to whether this state of affairs could be characterized as the *there is* thus returning us to the possibility of Being preceding the Good. It is worth noting that the *there is*, as described by Levinas, was not so much a concrete state of affairs as an experience of monotony and meaninglessness. As an experience, it had to be experienced by *someone* capable of experience. In the context before the emergence of life, however, there existed no separated being with the interiority capable of experiencing what surrounds it in any particular way. As such, there could be no experience of monotony or meaninglessness in such a context where experience as such did not exist. This state of affairs could be said to be “value-neutral” since life and death had not yet come onto the scene to give it meaning and values.
With the emergence of life, we begin to have beings that can experience the *privation* of meaningfulness or monotony. However, as privations, they already assume an originary meaningfulness of which they are a deficit. And, as mentioned earlier, the emergence of life is already an emergence of sociality as testified to in the fissioning of early bacteria into colonies. As such, we can say that the *there is* can only emerge as an experience of privation after the meaningful sociality of living beings first emerges to produce a relational matrix in which a negation of relation can be situated and/or experienced, at which point the experiencing being can then project the experience of the *there is* backwards into the time that preceded life. It is, therefore, once again, found to be a secondary experience.

**Between the Animate and the Inanimate**

As we have just discussed, perhaps the rupture that produces the possibility of ethics should be situated at the beginning of life rather than at the beginning of the “human” which, as we noted, cannot even be determined according to Levinas’s own understanding of the term. In this way, we can return some value and significance to non-human living beings whose structure seems to enact what Levinas theorized. However, in this process, have we been unfair to inanimate matter? Are animists mistaken when they see the “face” of a stone or a mountain? Are we, too, creating a class of beings which can be freely appropriated and used because they lie outside what we have determined is the purview of ethics? We will now attempt to address the question of the inanimate.

**Continuity from the Inanimate to the Animate**

Perhaps the rupture with Being through which life and its concomitant qualities emerged should not be seen as such a rupture after all. No doubt something new occurred but living beings are still composed of matter, engage with matter, and return to inanimate matter, thus inanimate and animate matter are inseparable from one other and mutually determine one another in a total
entanglement. And this emergence itself came from out of inanimate matter, thus leading Jonas to postulate that “[t]he very least that we must grant to matter that developed from the Big Bang…is an original endowment with the possibility of eventual inwardness—not an endowment with inwardness…and not even an endowment for inwardness in the sense of already being prepared for it.”225

This was his attempt to make sense of the emergence of interiority while avoiding a commitment to the sort of panpsychism that he identified with Whitehead and found to be reaching beyond its possible grasp. This potential for inwardness “is not yet a being-intended for something in such a way that the process of becoming is guided toward it. Our minimal conclusion from…the emergence of the inner dimension in matter…is just the nearly trivial result that this dimension was ‘possible,’ in accordance with the characteristics of matter.”226 In other words, the matter that came into existence at the Big Bang had no teleology guiding it towards the eventual creation of life but, nevertheless, retained interiority as a possibility within itself that could someday manifest itself given the right circumstances. Jonas uses this to explain a few facts of our Universe such as the seeming rarity of life within it as well as its vastness. That is, if the potential for the interiority latent in matter was to be activated into life then, owing to the aleatoric nature of inanimate matter, it would require aeons of time and an incalculable vastness to allow for the right conditions to appear somewhere such that life could occur. Lucky for us, these conditions appeared on Earth.

By connecting the animate to the inanimate in this way, Jonas stitches back together the rupture that had been initially established, distinguishing these two types of matter based on the

\[225\] Ibid., 172.
\[226\] Ibid.
status of their interiority or “mind” where one is “mind asleep” and the other “mind awake.”

In this way, “[t]he inner dimension as such, from the dimmest feeling to the clearest perception…should be considered as an accomplishment proper to the material substance of the world.” What this connection does, of course, is reestablish a continuity where we had thought a discontinuity had been wrought thus bringing back together the animate and the inanimate into significant relation with one another that clarifies their influence upon one another. After all, if inanimate beings are “mind asleep” then perhaps this is awakened in the metabolizing processes of what is alive so that one might say that the plant is a structure that awakens the interiority of the sun, water, and minerals by synthesizing them together into a new structure. Furthermore, perhaps inanimate matter is not fully “asleep” but only “drowsy” since its own capacities go beyond the simplistic characterization of it as a chaotic mess determined only by chance. After all, matter can organize itself and create its own forms without the need of being animated such as how “the spherical form of a soap bubble emerges out of the interactions among its constituent molecules as these are constrained energetically to ‘seek’ the point at which surface tension is minimized.” This morphogenetic capacity of inanimate matter perhaps already shows us that it can set its own “purpose.”

What this conception also assists us in understanding is the animist openness to the idea that any being might manifest subjectivity and relationality. If, in fact, all matter were to be considered “subjectivity in its latent form” then that would mean that, under the right conditions, any inanimate being might suddenly jolt itself into animacy. At any moment, the

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227 Ibid., 181.
228 Ibid., 173.
230 Jonas, Mortality and Morality, 173.
sleeping mind of something “dead” might awaken into life. In this way, we see an interesting reversibility at play here. It is a mundane fact, after all, that anything living might become dead but animists go further since anything dead might become living as well. Thus the Ojibwa openness to the idea that, although rocks are usually inanimate, a particular rock at a particular time might, in fact, be animate might be said to express this fact of potential for interiority that Jonas identifies within matter itself. To see the “face” of the stone is, perhaps, to see the fact of its potential for interiority, or, as Silvia Benso terms it, a “faciality” that, while not being a face is, nevertheless, evocative of the face. Of course, this is still a far cry from the stone being alive. However, even if we are not prepared to understand matter as having an innate potential for interiority, there are still other reasons that remain to justify some inclusion of the inanimate into our sphere of concern.

**Total Entanglement**

If we were to be prepared to say that what is inanimate is of no ethical concern and thus available for me to appropriate freely and without limit then the problem would remain of how to isolate the inanimate being so as to appropriate it. As we see in virtually any ecology, even the places that appear to be most “dead” continue to teem with lifeforms thus the first problem of turning inanimate beings into an outside open to appropriation is that this “outside” is, in fact, not separated away from us in another realm but right here, with us.

As we saw in chapter 3, where the cosmology of the Yukaghirs is of a “whole with holes in it” designating a relational universe with localized arelational voids throughout it, there is no unified and continuous realm of inanimate beings which could be grasped. The animate and the inanimate are always caught up in one another so that the stone has moss and the river has algae

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and this, of course, is no surprise. Since the animate ultimately has its basis in the inanimate as that from which it arose and that on which it ultimately depends to maintain itself (after all, most energy on Earth is originally derived from the Sun) then the animate will always be close to and knotted together with the inanimate that surrounds it. Moreover, what is inanimate forms the place where what is animate lives and sustains itself. Without it, there is no place in which to exist, no habitat at all. Thus to render the inanimate as wholly devoid of any but use-value is to posit that which cannot be accessed, saturated as it is by what is alive. And even if it could be isolated and accessed, it would be to deny the importance of place—to license its destruction—but without a place to be, a being cannot live. Its very basis and condition for being is lost.

**The Investiture of Meaning**

While we might say that it is true that all naturally occurring inanimate beings are to be found surrounded and suffused by animate life, one might claim that something like a table, a desk, or some other manufactured object could be produced which would be wholly inanimate without question. Of course, the production of this object would already presuppose an appropriation that preceded it from the natural world and, after its manufacture, it would not take long before it became a place for animate beings such as cockroaches, dust mites, or spiders. That being the case, we can still imagine the manufactured object alone in a completely sterile environment, isolated. Can we now say of this object that I can do with it whatever I like since it is wholly inanimate? In this completely artificial environment that we have contrived, it is possible that this object could escape the sphere of concern but this is only due to the extreme artificiality and decontextualization of this example.

The manufactured objects that we encounter in our daily living, even if we could imagine them as wholly inanimate in and of themselves, are not thereby value-less. At this point,
however, the relation with what is inanimate is of a different sort. Whereas in the last section, we discussed inanimate beings that were related to animate beings through being in direct contact with them as their habitat, for instance, here we speak of the investiture of meaning. In other words, manufactured objects exist within the social and relational matrix of those beings who manufacture them and become infused with meaning by them. In this way, every manufactured object becomes a mediated extension of the life of the one who has invested value into it such that the destruction or appropriation of such an object is experienced as a social violence.

This is ultimately the same insight that Karl Marx had in his analysis of the commodity-form that has “absolutely no connection with the physical nature of the commodity and the material [dinglich] relations arising out of this. It is nothing but the definite social relation between men themselves which assumes here, for them, the fantastic form of a relation between things.”

Thus we see that the manufactured object becomes a vector of value in a meaningful world because of those living beings that give it meaning. Even if we could say that no violence can be done against a toy doll, we could not thereby say that no violence is done against the child who has invested meaning in the doll destroyed. It is in this sense that we can say that we give life to things by imbuing them with meaning within our society. No wonder then that Marx said that the commodity that, at first, seems quite trivial is, in fact, “a very strange thing, abounding in metaphysical subtleties and theological niceties.”

But if this investiture of meaning into the inanimate by the animate can occur in relation to manufactured objects, it can occur in relation to any sort of inanimate object. There is nothing tying it specifically to manufactured objects. What we can say then, in response to Jonas who

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233 Ibid.
asserts that “toward a being that is value-indifferent I can defend any action at all” is that no such value-indifferent being exists once animate life has come into the world. In the very emergence of life, value itself is born but not in a way that would limit it only to itself. The living being not only values itself but also values what surrounds it as that from which it fulfills its needs, but also that from which it derives pleasure and that towards which it shows concern. The inanimate object, whether natural or manufactured, always finds itself within a social matrix of relations in which it plays a part as much as it finds itself entangled physically with animate beings as we saw in the previous section. Thus we can say that what is inanimate is always knotted together with what is animate either through material relations, social relations, or both. In the final analysis, even if we refuse to grant to inanimate being the status of “subjectivity in latent form,” we cannot thereby exile it to an island outside of all value since it exists within the relational world of animate beings as a being of value to it, both socially and materially.

In our analysis, what we have uncovered is an important slippage between ruptures erected and stitches weaved such that we cannot forget what has preceded that which appears as new phenomena. New phenomena is, after all, never wholly new but always connected in some way to that which preceded it and this connection cannot be arbitrarily stopped at a particular point just because we would like it to end there. To take continuity seriously is to understand the connections between what appear heterogeneous. In this chapter, this is what has been attempted as a way of better understanding the connection between humans and animals, animals and plants, plants and unicellular organisms, animate matter and inanimate matter. By doing so, we hope to have clarified the true scope of Levinas’s project whose limits were drawn by his anthropocentric bias without clarity or precision.

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234 Jonas, Mortality and Morality, 101-102.
To open up his ethical project, however, to an understanding of the face as expressing mortality and to take this seriously has meant broadening the possible sphere of ethical responsibility to all living beings that I may perceive. Moreover, we have seen that even in denying the face to inanimate beings, this has not, thereby, resulted in placing them outside of ethical concern due to their connection to the mesh of organic life. Ultimately, this analysis is not so much meant to tell us to whom we must be responsible by justifying the applicability of the face to a class of beings so much as show how life itself is knotted together with the experience of the face, and how knotted together the inanimate and the animate are to each other such that the universe is so knotted together that its entirety opens up as the field in which my ethical and political actions and experiences must unfold meaningfully. In this field, I will never be able to fulfill my infinite responsibility to all Others, not only because of my mortality and the mortality of the Other, but also because of the specificities of my corporeality and the corporeality of the Other. In the end, however, this understanding may still prove fruitful by leading us towards the possibility of a just existence on this Earth by delineating my possibilities within it. Towards this end, we will now look at some of the consequences of what we have discovered here in our next chapter.
6 THE MEANING OF ECOLOGICAL RESPONSIBILITY

Up to this point, we have been trying to make sense of Levinas’s ethical and political philosophy within a new context opened up by an attempt to correct the anthropocentric bias found in his thinking. In the process, we have moved far away from the picture we began with in which only biological humans could experience responsibility and then primarily for other humans with non-humans existing in an ambiguous realm of moral concern wherein any importance given to them was derivative of a more primary concern with the human. And all of this was discovered to be founded on a primary exclusion in which inanimate being became open to a free and total appropriation for the sake of building a dwelling for the human being to come into his/her own interiority so as to be open to ethics.

We have tried to demonstrate the limitations and the assumptions of this picture but have only barely sketched out the contours of another picture implicit in the argument that has been offered up. It is the goal of this chapter to replace this wireframe with a more substantial structure that will allow us to understand what ecological responsibility might mean. As such, we will begin by summarizing the claims made up until now and how they relate to one another before building upon these claims by showing what implications they have for our understanding of how ecosystems function and self-organize themselves. What will become clear is that responsibility is not only something that humans have to an ecology but is also something that is innate to the very structure and self-management of an ecology itself. And this will determine how it is that my responsibility, in particular, will relate to it.

Responsibility and the Constitution of Life

As we saw in the last chapter, the face of the Other which expresses the vulnerability and mortality of the Other is thereby indicative of an Other who lives and whose very poverty of being is due to the fact that s/he is a living being. The face, therefore, cannot, in principle, be
denied to any being that lives although whether any particular living being is experienced as having a face will depend on the circumstances of the encounter and the capacities of the being that encounters. As we noted in that chapter, the ability for the responsible being to encounter a being that has a claim upon it is dependent upon the limitations of his/her corporeality such that the human eye, for instance, will not be able to draw the contours of an Other that is invisible to its perception. As will become clear later, however, this will not prove to be too problematic and the human being, due to what is available to him/her in accordance with his/her corporeal capacities, will still have many beings to be concerned with.

Since all living beings can be said to have the capacity to express a face then we must also grant them the capacity to experience some measure of responsibility. We discovered the reason for this in chapter 3 where it was found that my experience of the face of the Other is also, immediately, an experience of a call to join the Other in service to the third so as to render justice. That is, the contemporaneity of the third with the Other means that the Other is a responsible Other whose very responsibility to other Others opens me up to a total responsibility towards all Others since I am also responsible for his/her responsibilities. The formation of State institutions only arises because there are responsible Others with whom I come together in “fraternity” to attempt to fulfill our infinite duties which, because they cannot be fulfilled in a State, always leaves a remainder for me to step into.

We thus find that the capacity for responsibility and the expression of vulnerability go hand in hand with one another and are coextensive with one another. To a certain degree, this makes sense since the meaning of the ethical choice is partly derived from the fact that I, the responsible agent, could be vulnerable and could privilege my own needs over that of the Other but have instead decided to answer the call of the Other. As such, we find that what is vulnerable
is also a locus of responsibility and vice versa. Every animate being is a vulnerable as well as a responsible being in accordance with the limitations of its specific biology. We thus discover that, besides the fact of my mortality and the impossibility of my dying in the place of the Other, my biology also places a limit on my ability to fulfill my infinite responsibility to all Others. That is, my perceptual apparatus along with my size and the complexity of my interiority will all serve to limit my capacity to fulfill responsibilities since I may not always be able to notice them or have a way of assisting Others due to these biological limits. This is all to say that the biological specificity of being is another component of that being’s finitude.

Despite only expanding the experience of responsibility, as well as the expression of the face, to living beings, we did not wish to exclude inanimate matter. What we discovered was that, while being “faceless,” inanimate matter was not thereby valueless and free to appropriate to no end. With the emergence of life, value emerged into the world in a way that allowed its application to all beings and not just living beings. That is, the relational world of the living being is a world that includes inanimate beings and, in this way, situates them as valuable whether by a purely social relation with the inanimate object or a vital one (food or habitat). The inanimate cannot be isolated from the animate anyway and, even if it could, we might still argue that we would owe it some respect as that from which life emerged thus being, as Jonas says, “subjectivity in its latent form.” After all, one may characterize the emergence of life itself as just another way in which matter organizes itself into forms, albeit a novel way in relation to what preceded it.

**Kinship Relations**

As we saw in chapter 4, kinship can be an important way of organizing social relations between different types of persons and can be deployed in a variety of ways to justify certain types of actions. The differences we saw between “universalist” animism, totemism, analogism, and
cannibalism conditioned how different groups related to persons outside of their kinship group and allowed or interdicted certain modes of appropriation. Similarly, in chapter 2, when we looked at Levinas’s ideas concerning the formation of the State, we saw his idea of “fraternity” serving a related function except that in “fraternity” the relation between “brothers” is enacted through the fact that each “brother” is in a vertical relation to the face rather than being connected to one another according to some form of similarity. What all the “brothers” shared in common was merely their condition of total responsibility which, of course, would motivate the formation of the State itself. Here we are concerned with seeing how these two concepts may come together in order to better understand what is going on in the self-organization of an ecosystem.

If we accept that all living beings experience some degree, however faint, of responsibility then it would seem that, because of this, we would be tasked to come together with them to form a State in which justice could be rendered to the third. The concrete limitations of doing so, however, are obvious owing to the significant corporeal differences that are found between life-forms limiting their capacity for cooperating with one another; to say nothing of the spatial limitations that, as we know, have been important limiting factors for the construction of human States. That is, even if we were to maintain that only humans experienced responsibility and that we were, therefore, obliged to form a State with all humans, this aspiration could never be concretized due to the difficulty of organizing people across great distances. This is the reason why the world is populated with many States and why the prospect of a single global State, putting aside any other issues that it might have, seems quite improbable even with our current level of technological development.
The injunction, before thematization, to join with all Others to render justice to the third becomes qualified after thematization into an injunction to join with all Others with whom I can join to render justice to the third. That is, I should join with all Others to the extent that this is possible, however, since Others can be significantly corporeally distinguished from one another, this will mean that I will join, for the most part, only those of my same species in my same region with whom coordinated action is easiest to execute and, in some cases, other species with whom I have become kindred through an evolved symbiotic relationship, for instance. Practically speaking, this means that States, or social groupings as I will now call them, will tend to form among beings of the same species within a particular region.

The formation of such groups in this way, however, presents certain problems in regards to the question of justice. Problems which, however, were already present in relation to the formation of human States. That is, social groupings will tend to see themselves as, first of all, responsible to the members of the body politic and only secondarily responsible to what exceeds this. Of course, if every living being could be a part of the body politic then this problem would not arise, but this situation is not possible. What will tend to occur then is the same problem that we see in the individual, but on a social level. That is, if the individual is tempted to put the self before the Other then so will any social grouping. Thus, for instance, the wolf pack will tend to privilege the wolves within the wolf pack before becoming concerned with any being exterior to the wolf pack. Nevertheless, the wolf pack, especially after meeting its material needs, will become more open to concern for the Other. In this way, the same process that Levinas described of the individual is reproduced, whereby needs are first met in order to allow for the interiority of the individual to open itself up to the Other.
For our purposes, what is important about this account is that this means that every social grouping will, first of all, tend to itself and then tend to other beings that surround it in proximity. How these groups will choose which beings they will engage with according to responsibility will come down to the political exigencies of that group which we cannot determine here, although we might surmise that they would be most likely to address the concerns of beings similar to them thus making it easier for them to experience those beings in a sympathetic way. As such, the beings most open to becoming a concern for another being or group of beings are most likely those with whom there is the least “genetic distance.”

By “genetic distance,” I mean how biologically different an organism appears to another organism. That is, it is more likely that a dog would be sympathetic to a cat than a lizard and to a lizard than a cockroach owing to the fact that the former animal in each couplet is more biologically similar to the dog than the latter one. This is not meant to be applied strictly, however, since it has more to do with how biologically similar another being appears rather than may, in fact, be. With this, however, we find ourselves in an area of slippage between ethics and politics since the responsibility to the Other is being modulated according to the thematization of a being as being like or dislike me. This may, however, be necessary since one is more likely to understand how to assist a being similar to oneself since one will have a better sense of what that being needs as it will be like what I need. Ultimately, this can be understood as a counterpart to spatial distance where those far off will often be passed over in favor of those close by, even though, in principle, we need to be serving both equally. We might say here that, similarly, we will tend to pass over those genetically distant in favor of those genetically close by, even though, in principle, we should be serving them all equally.
And this also helps to explain how present or absent some living beings will be to us in their expression of vulnerability. That is, for humans, mammals tend to be experienced as being “more” vulnerable than reptiles or insects or grasses and so on until we reach those living beings, microorganisms, which, for humans, do not appear at all. Thus, depending on the particular corporeality of a being, it will be situated in relation to other beings such that it will be able to respond to them according to how biologically close those other beings are to him/herself which will likely modulate that organism’s ability to experience the Other as well as respond to it appropriately.

Nevertheless, what we seem to find in an ecological context is the constitution of social groupings according to the same principle that Levinas theorized underlied State formation but with its commitment to justice being unstable due to the concrete necessity of limiting such groupings to particular species and the exigencies of supporting this group before being able to engage with those outside it. Furthermore, the limitations of biology make it such that the relation of “fraternity” with all other beings turns into a relation of limited kinship according to the biological similarities of the organisms nearby.

As we saw in chapter 4, the expression of this kinship can take on a variety of forms and it would seem that all these forms might manifest themselves in an ecological system by different species communities. That is, some species groups might tend to be more universally animistic, some more totemistic, some more analogistic, and some more “cannibalistic” in regards to how that group relates to those exterior to it. Some of these modes of relation, however, are likely to be more common than others and, depending on the circumstances of a group, may also form a continuity from one to another. For instance, we might say that, before thematization (as we saw in many origin myths), there is “universalistic” animistic kinship in the
sense that all beings are connected to all other beings as kin with equal measure. This may be retained after thematization through a reconceptualization of predatory relations as sharing relations (as we saw with Subarctic animism), but where this is not done it would seem that the most likely outcome would be that of the enclosed kinship community that we identified with cannibalism or that of the totemic kinship community and that there may, in fact, be a movement from one to the other.

After thematization a group may form in which intragroup bonds become most important at first, and everything exterior to the group is significant only insofar as it can serve to reproduce this group materially and socially. At this point, it is an enclosed kinship community. Its relation to exteriority, with the fulfillment of its needs, may then change into a totemic relation wherein kinship is extended further out to heterogeneous species depending on how it distinguishes itself in similar ways from other species. That is, in totemism, concern radiates out to the beings of other species, not according to similarity with self tout court, but according to a similarity in difference from others. We are connected by how we distinguish ourselves in similar ways. Nevertheless, the recognition that another organism distinguishes itself in a way similar to my own will still be limited by my ability to perceive this and my ability to perceive this will be grounded in a more basic similarity between myself and the other organism. We thus find that among the set of all organisms which I can perceive, there will be a subset of these that I will perceive to be similar to me in their mode of distinguishing themselves. This subset will then become those to whom I extend my concern further out from the confines of my regional species group. In this way, a set of beings is designated beyond the self and beyond my own species community that becomes a concern for me while allowing for another set to be formed in which I can seek the reproduction of my own materiality. Of course, in principle, every I is
responsible for all Others but, in the concrete, political exigency will lead to the sort of
differentiated regimes of concern as just described in order to balance the tension between
responsibility and predation. Pure gratuity is still possible and would express itself in the way in
which a being might show concern for another being outside of all the calculations of similarity
just described.

What we find, then, is that the formation of the social group itself already attempts to deal
with the responsibilities that all members of the group have to one another, then going outwards,
when possible, to fulfill their responsibility to all the organisms outside of this regional species
group, likely experienced in a differentiated manner according to the degree of perceived
similarity between these other organisms and the self. This latter possibility remains open due to
the very nature of the social group itself whose existence already posits responsibility for the
Other as its condition thus ensuring that the arising of metaphysical desire remains possible.

**The Ecosystem as a Multiplicity of States**

If we are willing to accept what has thus far been argued as an accurate picture of the experience
of the individuals of different species and how they relate to one another and those outside
themselves then we may be able to use this as an explanatory mechanism for how an ecosystem
is able to organize itself and maintain homeostasis.\(^{235}\) That is, the organized, stable functioning
of an ecosystem is a process that is able to manifest itself without the control and centralization

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\(^{235}\) It is important to note the counterexample of solitary predators such as tigers or pumas. They
do not form social groups with those of their own species, however, this does not mean that they
do not relate with those of their own species. It is known that felines will often communicate
with other felines in their territory through scent markings to say nothing of the necessity of
reproduction and rearing young. We might here emphasize that the type and degree of social
behavior that a being may engage in will be a product of the specificities of its biology including
instinctual tendencies. The salient point is that even solitary hunters must engage with other
living beings and do not do so exclusively in a mode of predation even if they may do so less
than other beings. They are then, as all others, constitutively open to the possibility of
responsible engagement with others.
found in human nation-states or the animal nervous system because of its basis in infinite responsibility.

The responsibility that each organism has for all other living beings will express itself through its openness to help others of its own species, then others of species similar to its own, and so on and so forth until reaching the limit of what can be perceived by it. Since every living organism is found in precisely this same position then that means that every organism that exists is not only a concern for itself, but also a concern for another. In an ecosystem, we can say that every being forms a locus of responsibility that radiates outwards from its position in the ecosystem according to how spatially nearby, genetically nearby, and perceptually present another organism is. Since every organism is in this same position, this will create a reciprocally reinforcing mesh of responsible relationships that will stabilize the total ecosystem. The reason for this is that no organism will be able to become a monopoly power in an environment since its power for appropriation will always be tempered by the powers of others concerned with that which it would appropriate. Thus, if we return to our earlier example of the humpback whale, we can see that the humpback whale’s concern for the well-being of gray whales and seals being attacked by orcas reigned in the power of those orcas to appropriate and ensured that they would be balanced into a position where they would not be able to do so without limit. With this sort of process happening continuously and on all levels of an ecosystem, we find that the ecosystem will balance itself into a position of homeostasis maintained by the tension between predation and responsibility.

What is significant about this process is its dynamism such that it reproduces, on the level of the ecosystem, the same sort of dynamism that we find in the organization of the individual
life-form. It is at this point that we can address the issue of invisible microorganisms and where they fit in. That is, when we spoke of the corporeal limitations of bodies modulating the experience of interiority of a being and thus its capacity to engage in responsible action, we gestured at the fact that one of these limitations is wrought by scale. Because of the scale of the being that I am, I will only be able to perceive certain other types of beings that exist at or near the same scale as I do. What is outside this scale will either be too small to be perceptible or too large to be understandable. However, this does not mean that these beings are thereby outside the sphere of concern of all beings. Instead, what occurs is that the beings imperceptible to me instead interact according to a relation of responsibility with other beings at their scale, that is, to which they are perceptible and are perceptible to them. From my concrete circumstances, I can neither perceive nor be addressed by them, which is why my concern will be with beings that do exist at my scale and with whom I can interact.

This also raises some additional points of interest concerning how we understand the organization of organisms and systems. If we can conceive of an ecosystem as a stable process maintained through relations of responsibility emanating out from every living being that composes it, and if this is something occurring at a specific scale level then perhaps the stable process of a living organism is itself the product of the relations of responsibility emanating from every living being that composes that living organism at a smaller scale. In other words, perhaps we could conceive of the stability of the body of an animal, for instance, as the product of the responsible relations between all the constituents that compose that animal including all the different cells found therein but also the bacteria and fungi in the animal’s gut that assist with digestion and so on. Of course, analogizing these relations as sociality based on responsibility

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236 And we could say, more broadly, as mentioned earlier, that this might be the same dynamism found in matter itself as shown through its morphogenetic properties.
may feel like a stretch but if we maintain the thesis that each living being will engage with
responsibility *according to its capacities* then we would no doubt reach the point at which this
responsibility would be manifested in extremely “simple” organisms and no longer be
recognizable to *us*, but then again, only responsibility manifested at our particular scale will be
recognizable to *us* and, even then, preferably as manifested by humans or beings similar to them.

This point, of course, can also take us in the opposite direction towards the idea of macro-
organisms and the possibility that each stable, dynamic system composed of life-forms may
interact with other stable, dynamic systems composed of life-forms in a responsible way towards
the production of a yet larger stable, dynamic system as seems to be implied by proponents of the
Gaia hypothesis. At this point, however, the question may once again be raised of the role that
inanimate matter has to play in all this as we know that there can be dynamic processes that
organize inanimate matter in ways that are, at least, somewhat predictable, if not wholly stable
such as weather systems. Perhaps inanimate matter has its own way of organizing itself
differently from animate matter although not wholly different such that we might say that,
whereas animate matter seeks to create stable, dynamic processes, inanimate matter seeks to
create probabilistic and cyclical processes. Thus, in weather, we find processes that determine
themselves based on probabilities and which cycle through one another in a fashion that cannot
be fully predicted but whose contours we can anticipate.

To see an ecosystem, as well as any animate system, to be composed in this way is to
approach Jean-Luc Nancy’s understanding of community as being made up of singularities in
distinct positions exposed to one another where what is shared between them is their very
exposition to one another as distinct beings—the sharing out of being—and where they come
together in dynamic circulations to produce larger singularities. This circulation is produced in
the space of the *with* that connects all beings together. As Nancy says, “[t]he logic of the
‘with’…is the singular logic of an inside-outside…perhaps the very logic of singularity in
general. And it would thus be a logic of what belongs neither to the pure inside nor to the pure
outside…to what is between two or several, belonging to all and to none.”

This quality of being exposed characterizes the singularity as existing at the limit and is what makes it such that
it is always together *with* others in a space created that belongs to all and to no one. Singularities
cannot complete themselves in a totality or finished object which is why they exist within
*processes* that must always be kept in circulation. The singularity marks this place of being
outside within oneself, in contact, but not fused. The singularity’s “[e]xposure comes before any
identification…It is exposure itself…(But identity, whether individual or collective, is not a sum
total of singularities; it is itself a singularity.)”

The parenthetical is quite important for our
purposes here since it directs us towards the idea that singularities that circulate together only
form greater singularities that also, as singularities, must circulate as processes. Hence, Nancy
says that “Being is put into play among us…[and] does not have any other meaning except the
dis-position of this ‘between.’”

That is, the “between” is the spacing between beings that
connects them to one another while keeping them separate in their exposure to one another. This
is why, for Nancy, “*[t]o be’ is not the noun of consistency; it is the verb of dis-position.”

In other words, existence is constituted by the play of singularities exposed to one another always

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238 Ibid., 7.
240 Ibid., 96.
coming together and separating away from one another in a circulation of partitioned being, thus characterizing the *with* as “at once both more and less than ‘relation’ or ‘bond.’”\(^{241}\)

This “more and less” is ultimately what we have been trying to get at in the tension that arises between ethical responsibility and political calculation; the responsibility for the Other which must always be immediately modulated by the limitations of the concrete situation in which that responsibility is enacted. Hence, the *with* that Nancy speaks of is, for us, the place in which responsibility unfolds itself and limits itself in the concrete situation producing the sort of reciprocally reinforcing structure of the ecosystem that we have just described and which can be characterized as a play of singularities.

**From Reciprocal Reinforcement to Vertical Control**

To understand the functioning of an ecosystem in this way, that is, determined according to the responsible relations between all living beings generally and between determined kinship groups more specifically is to see the circulation of the ecosystem according to a new understanding of politics. That is, the groups formed among members of the same species within a region that coordinate their actions towards the fulfillment of responsibilities towards one another as well as, under certain circumstances, responsibilities towards those exterior to them are groups that can be understood as States in Levinas’s use of the term since these organized social groups come to exist for the purpose of engaging with the responsibilities that all members of the social group composing it have. In the context of an ecosystem, where this is happening with different species communities according to their particular character all throughout it, we find ourselves in a political situation quite different than that which we have become accustomed to in our time of human nation-states.

\(^{241}\) Ibid., 34.
In the ecosystem composed of many different species communities, each forming a distinct “State” relative to all others, what we find is a particular space which is not under the sole control of one particular group but, in fact, is controlled by all of them and none of them simultaneously. Each species community might be said to form a mobile “State” within a specified region in which there are a variety of other “States” also present in that same geographic region simultaneously with it. These “States” then interact with one another according to the way described earlier to produce the stability of the ecosystem. All interspecies relations are, in this sense, political relations.

What is interesting about this understanding is that, in it, the State comes to refer only to the very sociality of a group of organisms cooperating together; this “space” of sociality is with them wherever they may go so long as they go there together. It is, thus, not tied to any specified piece of land which would be appropriated but is defined according to the members that make up a particular group no matter where they might be. This is true no matter what sort of organism it is we speak of. That is, even though trees do not move from place to place, the forest community that is produced through the presence of a multitude of trees in a particular place is not thereby defined by the fact that it occurs in the same place over time. This community’s fact of staying in the same place is merely a contingent feature of its biological necessities and not related to the fact of their being in a community with one another which is defined, not by their being in the same place, but only by their being together.

What this also demonstrates is the way in which ecological niches work. The reason why many different sorts of species are able to occupy the same land-base in a stable way is because they do not directly compete with one another for the same resources in the same way at the same times. This means that the multiple species “States” found in an ecosystem will be able to
coexist on the same parcel of land without necessarily disturbing one another, at least not in a way that would pose an existential threat to any one species community. Hence, even though wolves and bears may both compete for bison, their differing characteristics, habits, and tendencies mean that they won’t compete for other resources which will only be available to one of them due to the particular characteristics of that being. That is, beings will only ever compete for some resources with other beings but never the exact same ones found in the exact same way at the exact same time. We, therefore, find that in the ecosystem, there is room for a wide variety of organisms to live in the same place since each organism engages with the land-base in a different way than all the other organisms. Because of this, we might characterize an ecosystem as functioning as a “stacked” super-State composed of a multitude of different species “States” all coextensive with one another spatially but able to function without an existential threat to any single “State” due to their taking up a different position in the overall ecosystem. Thus the voles on the ground can be in the same “place” as the bluebirds in the sky because they do not, in fact, stand in the same position nor seek the same things that this place offers.

If this is how we may characterize the functioning of an ecosystem and how different species “States” exist within it, then it is plainly clear that human nation-states function on a totally different model than this, although it is important to note that the types of human social organization that preceded the construction of the structures that we now associate with the State were likely more similar to what would be found within the picture of the ecosystem that we have just sketched out. Indeed, as we saw in chapter 4, the way in which hunter-gatherer tribes tend to relate to their environments is as one constituent of it and in relation with a variety of different sorts of non-human persons with value and meaning within it. In other words, they seem to be engaging with their environment as one species community among others, fulfilling
their particular niche within it and engaging with non-humans within it according to the necessity of predation and, sometimes, the gratuity of ethics.

The contrast we wish to draw here, though, concerns the difference between the structures of the State that developed after agricultural settlement versus what has been developed here in relation to the species communities that constitute an ecosystem. As we saw in chapter 3, what agriculture allowed us to do was to decrease our mobility so that we could stay in one place. By staying in one place, however, we totally changed the meaning of community and transformed our relation to our land-base. As we just saw above, the species communities of a region are defined by the sociality among its members and not by whether they stay in one particular place or not, however, with human settlement, we came to define ourselves as owning a piece of land, of being from this place. The humans settling a piece of land thereby appropriated it into their land and set themselves to control it as totally as possible. Through the growth of contiguous regions of land controlled by humans and the need and/or desire to manage all these settled humans, arose the State in which a sovereign power now exercised control over a larger contiguous region of land populated by humans on smaller plots of land upon which they stayed. In this way, the conception of the State became tied up with settlement and place.

The State would draw its borders and establish this region as under the control of the sovereign. More importantly for our purposes, these States, as human constructions, only cared to serve human interests. In other words, what happened in this process was that one species group of an ecosystem (humans) was able to become a monopoly power of that region and subordinate all the living beings of that area to its power thereby breaking the homeostasis of the ecosystem and turning it into limited resources to be appropriated and used up by humans. In making the appropriation of land the condition for the establishment of the State, we made the
State coextensive with the land appropriated turning the entirety of that geographic space into the social space of one species, humans. By doing so, the entire region was transformed from an environment of which we are a part, to a place that we own and control, thus justifying any and all appropriative activities in the region so long as they could be justified as meeting human interests.

This is why the regions within contemporary nation-states not designated as protected wilderness areas have the sort of character that they do. That is, they are, from the perspective of species diversity and ecological circulation, monotonous since these spaces have been designed to eliminate completely, except as subordinates, all beings except humans. Thus, when we look at a city, what we find is a multitude of humans held within a built environment of inanimate manufactured matter, and when we look at rural areas, we find geometric fields of single crops and fenced in livestock. What is alive, and is not human, is only allowed insofar as it meets a human need or desire. As such, the diversity of life-forms that we tend to encounter in human society seldom goes beyond beings used for companionship, protection, decoration, or nutriment by humans. The plants we encounter are for landscaping or food production and the animals we see are pets or livestock.

The exceptions to this mark the excess of that which we have attempted to subdue totally. Therefore, even though we might try to build the same structure all across a country, that structure will not last intact in any place and will gradually fall apart differently in different places owing to the specific weather patterns of each place. We have not yet homogenized all of space. Similarly, no matter where we are, there always emerge beings that were not placed there by us whether these are considered to be “weeds” such as thistle or nettle; “wildlife” such as blue jays, red robins, or squirrels; or “pests” such as cockroaches, ants, or rats. These uninvited
visitors entering our sanitized and homogenized human cultural space remind us that this place which we have appropriated is not and will never be wholly ours. It came before us and will remain after us and that all we are doing is playing at a fantasy of owning and controlling it. We have made great strides in the subordination of all life to our human desires but will always reach a limit of control over which we cannot go. Perhaps, to return to the idea we posited above of the possibility of a macro-organism, this excess of life that returns to those places that we have attempted to totally control may itself be a way of signifying a resistance to our powers and a trace left behind; the face of the Earth except, of course, that owing to our limited scale of existence, we will never be in a position to experience this face directly. No wonder then the difficulty of dealing with something like climate change as what it affects is a macro-organism beyond our scale whose face we cannot see.

In these reflections, we have attempted to make sense of responsibility as a structure of metabolic life both constituting it and determining its actions. In the process we have been led to the conclusion that the experience of responsibility, differentiated according to the capacity of the organism in question, is a phenomenon coextensive with life itself. That is, every organism through its very existence “is guilty before everyone and for everything” with its own experience of guilt and responsibility being singular and hyperbolic in accordance with its capacity to experience this determined by its corporeal specificity. Through this, we have been able to explain the functioning of ecosystems, the reported ethical behavior of whales, and the sharing of carbon between trees and other plants. Although these explanations have been interesting and useful, they merely describe how things are and yet, we know that there is more to do than describe if we are to be ethical. We have seen that responsibility is a part of ecology itself, but what of my responsibility? Can it be said that I have a responsibility to an ecosystem as such?
The answer to this question returns us back to corporeal differentiation, position, scale, and power. As a human, I am limited in the ways that humans tend to be limited; even so, I am also endowed with the sorts of powers and capacities that humans have. If I am infinitely responsible to all Others, and this now means all beings that live, then my actions will now have to attempt to meet this in the political calculus of concrete existence where I still must eat living beings. As we saw in chapter 4, however, the question of predation can be dealt with in a variety of ways and, in any case, the fact of predation alone poses no existential threat to any species in particular. This does not form our main issue here. No, if the human has shown him/herself to be special, it has been through his/her technology which has been used to amplify power. Through the technology of agriculture, we began our appropriative mindset and set up the conditions for the sorts of continued and accelerated technological developments that would come later eventually leading us to our present moment. Through the unchecked growth of our power, we were able to place ourselves in the position of sovereign master of all of the Earth. In doing so, however, we placed ourselves in a position that we were never meant to be and which we could not prepare ourselves for.

Power must be checked by other powers to remain balanced as we saw in the explanation of ecosystem functioning. Where this does not happen, one organism can become too powerful and disrupt homeostasis. One might say that, if responsibility is truly a part of all living beings, then a powerful organism would merely become the steward of all. It is worth remembering, however, that the possibility of ethics is not the same as its actualization. No organism was ever prepared for reaching a pinnacle of total power and the consequences of doing so reach beyond our scale to a place that we can neither understand nor perceive. If we cannot see microorganisms because they are too small, neither can we see the consequences of our powers
which have exceeded the scale of our being. As we mentioned earlier, if there are macro-
organisms then they would exceed our understanding since we would be a component of them,
their existence being on a larger scale than ours. In the achievement of our great power which
has allowed us to skew the environment towards our ends and disrupt the homeostasis of the
ecosystems of which we were once a part, we have hurt something that we cannot see. We are so
small and yet our effect has overflowed our scale. Herein lies the difficulty of the current
ecological crisis. From where we stand, we cannot see the tears of the Earth. Not because it has
no face, but because we cannot step back from our place within it to see it. We cannot experience
it, but only intellectualize it, leaving us without the sense of urgency that the face of the Other
entreats us with.
EPILOGUE: MY PLACE IN THE SUN

“This is my place in the sun, the usurpation of the whole earth begins here.” This statement by Pascal from his *Pensées* #295 was often quoted by Levinas as a way of emphasizing that ethics begins immediately, in the very positing of the self. In my being here, I take up space, I am in a place which could be taken up by Others. How can I justify being here? How can I justify taking away their place? Standing here, I am already guilty and I am put into question by the Other; “one must not be posed but deposed.”242 In the consciousness of my guilt, what shall I do? To be is already to be here and wherever I might go, I am still in a place that could be given to another. Thus, my guilt is inescapable and my responsibility is infinite. I can take the place away from the Other and yet I can never take the place of the Other in his/her death. In my being, I am already taking and cannot give; cannot make amends. Hence the structure of responsibility for the Other as infinite; always guilty, I can never give enough to make up for my guilt.

However, in trying to make amends, to see the face of the Other and be responsive; I find myself moving. I must engage in actions, I must make choices. This place in which I warmed myself in the sun takes on a different quality. It shows itself to me as that which could never be my place anyway. I am mobile, I am with Others and we create a new place beyond the delineation of a geographic region through our very sociality. This place goes with us and is not tied to this or that piece of land. In our mobility, we understand that this place in the sun that I took up was never mine to begin with and I stood there only temporarily. This place was always our place, given to all and to none, and open to our circulation within it; the space of our exposure to one another and our coming together and pulling apart, that is, our relation to one another whose very temporality admits of no ending.

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242 Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity*, 52.
But this can all be forgotten and the illusions just unmasked may instead hold. I can warm myself in the sun and hold onto it, keep it. “This is my place in the sun and no one else shall have it, no one will take it away from me.” In this place becoming my place, a space is opened up of control, domination, appropriation. “No one else will ever take up this space where I stand. Moreover, this space is too small for me to be comfortable, I must expand it further.”

The first appropriation of the ground beneath your feet already begins an appropriative expansion. I am no longer on shared land, moving from place to place in my mobility where all places belong to everyone and no one. Now I am on my land and no one else shall stand here. But if I have my land then he has his land and she has her land. I can no longer venture beyond what I have appropriated, but maybe my land isn’t enough for me. I have exhausted the fertility of the soil, my woodlot is nearly extinguished, the game has disappeared, and the river has dried up. Some of this has happened by bad luck, some by my misuse of these resources. Now I return to expansion. I become satisfied for a while but eventually the new space appropriated becomes exhausted as well and the cycle begins again. In this process of expansion, temporary satisfaction and expansion again there is no limit except the “usurpation of the whole earth.” It began with that first moment in which I took my place in the sun and said to myself: “This is mine and mine alone.”

The problem begins with the appropriation of land. The free gift of the shared landscape becomes property for one group as opposed to the space of circulation of multiple stacked groups of beings. There is a misperception at work here: “I can only exist by pushing back against all others; I must carve out a space through force and power.” But you already have a place in the dynamic system from which you came, you already have a position for yourself in which you stand and relate to all Others. But this position, this place is not spatial; it cannot be found on a
map or fenced in. It is the social space of being with Others produced and determined through relations with them and it is a space that can disappear in isolation from Others. The anxiety produced by this dynamism and the precarity of its maintenance leads to the desire to make something that would seem more stable; something we could touch with our hands and in which we could feel safe forever. And so we began this process of taking that which could never become truly ours and turn it into something derivative and subordinate; for us and us alone. Perhaps we would never again feel pain or hunger or any other privation in this place, or so we imagined. But even in our appropriated space, we could not stop relating to exteriority. It had to be continually incorporated in order for the structure to sustain itself and reproduce itself. We continued to be vulnerable and dependent, but we had changed our relation to everything else. No longer a part of it, we found ourselves outside from it although we experienced this in the converse way, that is, our community became the very meaning and substance of community—the only one of value—and everything else became its outside for appropriation. In this change, we lost contact with all Others except our own conspecifics which only increased our sense of separateness from all Others making it easier to justify the appropriation of the “outside.”

What began this entire process, however, the goal of safety, stability, and control was not, nor could ever be, achieved due to the continuing reliance on exteriority which, as biological beings, could never be erased for humans. Instead, what was concretely achieved was a changed relation to exteriority that began the path upon which we now find ourselves. We stopped our circulation, to the extent that we could, and stopped moving from place to place. And this excision of ourselves from the dynamic ecological systems of which we had been a part created a new structure with a determinism of its own which would come to dominate and appropriate the Earth. That is, human civilization in its separation from the rest of nature and its technological
development placed itself in the position of master of all. But a master with neither wisdom nor knowledge. In other words, we exited the position which we had within the ecological circulation of Being to take up a position of sovereignty in relation to all beings, subordinating them to our will. In doing so, however, we could neither understand nor perceive the harm we were causing to the system as a whole since this position of sovereign in relation to all beings was never one meant for us to take up due to its being far beyond our scale of experience. That is, we now find ourselves in a situation where we are affecting a system far larger and more complex than we could understand and are, therefore, interacting with a being without knowing how to do so.

Humans, as humans, are best suited to interacting with other beings at the same scale as humans. Indeed, our innate physical capacities and limitations made it such that we could only interact with beings at our same scale for a long period of time. However, with the build-up and acceleration of our technologies, we were able to increase our power to the level where our combined technological power far exceeded our scale of understanding and perception. The power allowed through technology became a power dislocated from our bodies and no longer commensurate with them. We continued to live and experience ourselves at the same scale while we began to affect everything around us at a higher scale level no longer intelligible to us. It is through this process that we have arrived at the current ecological crisis and it is through an understanding of this process that our hope of exiting it stands.

If we may permit ourselves an example by analogy, the human body may be imagined as being a dynamic system similar to an ecology. As we saw in the last chapter, if we grant this then we can also grant that the way its constituent elements relate to one another is also similar to that of an ecology which leads us to the conclusion that all the different sorts of beings found therein circulate with and engage with all the other beings found therein according to relations of
responsibility and predation that balance one another out to create the stable, dynamic living organism. But what would happen if one constituent group suddenly exited the circulation of relation and began to refer only to itself in a separated community while continuing to relate to its “outside” only as something to be appropriated to reproduce and grow itself further? When this happens in a biological organism, we call it “cancer.” That is, the mutation of the cell that leads it to replicate itself without concern for anything that surrounds it is one way of characterizing what occurs in the pathogenesis of cancer.

For the organism affected, at its scale, the cancer is a mortal danger that could swallow up its vital processes and leave it dead. This is possible, of course, because the cancer cells have exited their circulation within the dynamic, living system. By doing so, they have started to engage with the rest of the organism according to a linear relation, as a resource to be used until exhausted, and this sort of relation cannot last forever, especially as the cancer cells continue to grow and duplicate themselves further and faster. However, if we can imagine for a moment the perspective of the cancer cell, we would not find some evil being seeking to kill its host at all costs. Instead we would find a cell whose mutation can be understood as a biological change of perspective. That is, in the mutation of the cancer cell, its stance in relation to the rest of the organism changed; instead of continuing to circulate within the dynamic processes of that organism as a component of those processes, it decided to make itself autonomous as a community and stabilize and grow only its own community of cancer cells. Importantly, we might then add, is that in this process, the cancer cell would be engaging only with other cells at its same scale. Its success at growing its own cancer community and reproducing it efficiently would be seen as positive for it, all while having no understanding that in its exit from the circulation of the processes of the organism it was, in fact, doing harm to it and leading it
towards its death. The process that, from the perspective of the cancer cell, is only its taking care of its own community and growing it further is, of course, from the perspective of the living organism, a grave and serious disease. But the cancer cell is situated at its particular scale level, it can neither perceive nor understand that it is harming the organism of which it forms a part. It cannot step outside of it to look at it and see that it is suffering, that it is dying, and that the cause of this is itself. Even if it could somehow step back from it, it could not understand it. The expression of interiority of a cancer cell would be in no way commensurate with the expression of interiority of the organism of which it forms one part. We thus see that while we can imagine that the cancer cell is doing what it thinks is the “right” thing in regards to itself and its community, doing so is, in fact, leading to a great harm that it is impossible for it to experience or understand owing to the limitations of both its corporeality and its scale in relation to that which it harms.

It would seem, unfortunately, that we find ourselves in the same position as the cancer cell just described. In our quest for security and control, we have managed to break free of the dynamic systems of which we were once a part and posited in their place our own linear systems organized according to the logic of a total outside of nature available for free appropriation to support the reproduction of the total inside of human society. From our perspective, these have been positive developments. Indeed, we would not want to eliminate the great cultural achievements of humanity. Even so, however, this has been at a price which we could not have anticipated and which we could not have any understanding of until now. The same technologies that allowed us to increase our powers of appropriation have also allowed us to better understand the effects of these appropriative relations. And what has become clear is that we have become that overgrown, separated community of beings within a larger dynamic, living system
threatening its destruction through our very success. However, because these effects happen at a scale beyond our understanding and experience, we can only make sense of them abstractly and intellectually rather than through a direct experience of the face of this Other of which we, in fact, form a part. Even this already causes a strain on the intellect. How to be responsible to something of which we form a part? Outside of us, yet also us somehow?

Ultimately, being responsible to all Others must be taken seriously and drive the ethical and political actions that I will engage in. To take all Others into consideration means opening myself beyond all measures of scale. Of course, this was already the case anyway, the reduction of concern only coming later as a necessity produced by the thematization that marks a being in its finitude and corporeal specificity. But we must yet seek to go beyond the limitations of our bodies when it comes to ethics (even after thematization) since we have already done so when it comes to meeting our needs. Our ethics must be commensurate with our capacities whose powers, as augmented by our technology, now far exceed the limitations of our bodies and what they can perceive. And this means, contra Levinas, that we will need to go beyond experience since we are now in the strange and unexpected place of affecting a being that we cannot interact with at our level; a being of which we form a part without being of it.

How to fix our situation is something that will need to be considered in more depth elsewhere, however, we may briefly note, in relation to our earlier example, that cancer is not always fatal. A cancer can grow so slowly as to pose no mortality risk, and, occasionally, a cancer will stop growing on its own or even diminish on its own. In all of these cases, the cancer found in the body winds up existing within the body without killing that body. In our context, we might say that these alternatives point us primarily in one direction: growth limitation. We need to find a way to control and limit our growth so as to not overwhelm the dynamic system that we
have affected with our power. How we might enact such a change, however, remains to be
determined especially considering the difficulties found in trying to mobilize people to address a
concern that they cannot experience themselves or empathize with as what is concerning is
beyond our scale of perception.

Thus, we might say that, if human beings are special, it is because of their advanced
technologies which have allowed them to break beyond their scale level and affect that which
they cannot otherwise interact with; they have been able to totally change and remodel the
dynamic systems from which they came. We might then agree with Jonas that “[o]nly in man is
power emancipated from the whole through knowledge and arbitrary will and only in man can it
become fatal to him and to itself.”

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129.
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VITA

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