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An-Archy and Justice: An Introduction to Emmanuel Levinas's Political Thought.

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Dedicated in loving memory to:

Patricia Ann Idzikowski  
(1953-1988)

and

William Henry Simmons  
(1933-1993)
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ABSTRACT

Emmanuel Levinas's political thought is best understood as a tension between an-archy and justice. Levinas claims that the aim of philosophy has most often been a search for an arche, or a neuter term that accounts for all of reality. Levinas argues that the reduction of reality to an arche obliterates all transcendence and subordinates man to a totality.

Against the predominance of totality in the Western tradition, Levinas proposes a philosophy of transcendence. This transcendence is not found in the direct relationship with God, but in the face of the other person, the Other. Since the face of the Other cannot be thematized, it calls the sovereignty of the ego into question. The ego is called to respond infinitely, concretely, and asymmetrically. Thus, Levinas establishes ethics without positing a fundamental arche.

Levinas's philosophy moves from this an-archical, ethical relationship with the Other to the totalizing realm of politics with his phenomenology of the third person, the Third. With the appearance of the Third, the ego must respond to more than one Other. The ego
must decide whom to respond to first. This decision is the foundation of all politics.

Although the Third universalizes the an-archical relationship with the Other into politics, it does not supplant the original ethical relationship. Instead, there is a never-ending oscillation between ethics and politics. The world of institutions and impersonal justice must be held in check by the an-archical responsibility for the Other. Levinas calls for both an-archy and justice.

By establishing a tension between ethics and politics, Levinas's thought changes the foundations of modern political thought. Against the selfishness of the liberal state, Levinas proposes a heteronomous political thought, that is, a politics based on the Other. Against Hegelian totality, Levinas proposes a radical pluralism based on the irreducible alterity of the Other. This pluralism places the Other person, not the State or impersonal history, as the ultimate value. Thus, Levinas's heteronomous philosophy is a humanism, a humanism of the Other.
CHAPTER ONE
INTRODUCTION

Since the publication of his ground breaking work Totality and Infinity in 1961, the Franco-Jewish philosopher Emmanuel Levinas has gradually become recognized as one of the most important thinkers of the twentieth century. Although a plethora of works discuss Levinas’s ethical and metaphysical theories, very little research has been done on his political thought. This dissertation is an attempt to fill the void.

Levinas’s political thought offers a plausible antidote to modern political thought and to the Heideggerian project. Against modern political thought, which emphasizes individual freedoms and rights, Levinas argues that the only proper justification for politics is justice. Freedom is not given by God or found by reason in the state of nature, but is an investiture from the other person, the Other.¹ For Levinas, the fundamental relation is

¹Levinas uses the French term autrui, to refer to the other person, the "Other", while autre, refers to otherness or alterity. Unfortunately, Levinas and his translators have not always been consistent with capitalizing "Other". For the sake of consistency,
the ethical face-to-face encounter with the Other, an encounter which precedes Being. Thus, Levinas, against Heidegger, replaces ontology with ethics as first philosophy.

The Other cannot be reduced by thought to ontological categories. According to Levinas the vast majority of Western philosophy since Plato has attempted to reduce all alterity to the Same, that is, an attempt by the subjective ego to grasp or appropriate that which is different and make it fit pre-conceived ontological categories. This tradition culminates in the Hegelian system which equates being and knowing. According to Levinas, this equation is a gross perversion of the uniqueness of the Other. In his earlier works, Levinas denounced politics because it reduces all alterity to the Same by treating each individual as interchangeable. Yet, in his later writings, he acknowledged the key role that politics must play.

"Other" will be capitalized in this essay whenever it refers to the unique other person, who approaches the ego in the face-to-face relationship. Likewise, "Same" will be capitalized, when it is used, like Heidegger's Being, to refer to an ultimate neuter concept, which encompasses all of 'reality'.

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Intellectual Biography

Levinas's life, more than most thinkers, betrays the multitude of inspirations for his thought. The major events in his life; from his youth in revolutionary Russia and his studies under Husserl and Heidegger, to his confinement in a Nazi prisoner of war camp, each left an indelible imprint on his philosophy.

Emmanuel Levinas was born in 1906 to a middle-class Jewish family in Kaunas, Lithuania.² In the early twentieth century, Kaunas was famous for its orthodox Jewish community and yeshivas. Ironically, Levinas, who would become one of the century's most

important Talmudic scholars, was not sent to the fabled yeshivas. Instead, his family moved away from the Jewish Quarter and young Emmanuel received a typical Russian education, reading the literary giants Pushkin, Tolstoy, and Dostoyevsky. After studying in Russian schools, seventeen year old Emmanuel left for France to study at the University of Strasbourg, where he encountered the great writers of what he called "the Christian tradition," Shakespeare, Racine, and Hugo. In France, his interest in philosophy grew, especially through the writings of Durkheim, Bergson, and Husserl. Levinas left France in 1929 to attend Husserl's lectures in Freiburg. He became close acquaintances with the master of phenomenology and even tutored Husserl's wife in French. Levinas's dissertation at the University of Strasbourg, translated into English as The Theory of Intuition in Husserl's Phenomenology, is credited with introducing phenomenology to France.¹ In particular, this work had a lasting influence on Jean-Paul Sartre.

However, like many other young scholars, Levinas was attracted to the lectures of Martin Heidegger, who two years earlier had published *Being and Time*. Levinas was to call it "one of the finest books in the history of philosophy. . . . One of the finest among four or five others." During the next thirty years, Levinas attempted to come to terms with Heidegger's fundamental ontology and supplant it with a fundamental ethics.

While in Germany, in 1935, Levinas first read Franz Rosenzweig's *Star of Redemption*, a work which had great influence on his own. Not only did it allow him to "come to terms with all this Europe, which is undeniably great and unquestionably Christian," but as Cohen has convincingly shown, Levinas's work mirrors Rosenzweig's. Whereas Rosenzweig sought to subvert the Hegelian totalizing system, Levinas attempted to subvert the Husserlian-Heideggerian system of ontological supremacy.

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5 Quoted in Friedlander, *Vilna on the Seine*, 86.

In 1939 Levinas was mobilized into the French army, and like so many others, was quickly captured in the blitzkrieg. He would remain a prisoner of war for the remainder of the war. While in slave labor camps, Levinas was somehow able to continue his studies, reading Hegel, Proust, Diderot, and Rousseau. He was unaware of what was happening to Jews throughout Europe. Only after the war did he learn that his entire family in Lithuania had been killed in Auschwitz.

After the war, Levinas was tutored by the enigmatic Rabbi Shushani. This modern day "Wandering Jew" traveled throughout Europe after World War II teaching the Talmud, Torah, and Zohar. Shushani was fluent in thirty languages and had mastered modern physics and mathematics. This polymath, would appear, offer lessons, then vanish. While living with Levinas, Shushani was also tutoring the future Nobel Laureate Elie Wiesel. This contact with Shushani made a lasting impression on Levinas.

What remains of this contact that filled me with wonder, made me anxious, and caused me sleepless nights? A new way to approach rabbinic wisdom and to understand what it meant to be human. Judaism is not the Bible, it is the Bible as seen through the Talmud, through the wisdom and questions of rabbinic religious life.... Shushani gave me reason again to have confidence in the books. The phrase I frequently use now, "the books are deeper than consciousness and the inner-self" comes from this period of my life when I studied with him.8

Levinas sought to fuse his newfound respect for Talmudic Judaism with his philosophical training. While writing Talmudic commentaries of the first rank and instructing hundreds of Jewish scholars, Levinas also wrote profound philosophical essays on a broad range of topics. However, his central concern was to restore a place for ethics in the Western tradition.

Totality and Infinity

In Totality and Infinity, published in 1961, Levinas searched for a new ground within the Western philosophical tradition for the ethical relationship with the Other. Levinas argued that an adequate ethics can only be found in transcendence, but the predominant traditions in philosophy have erected totalizing systems which subordinate all elements of

*Quoted in Friedlander, Vilna on the Seine, 88-9.
transcendence. Totalizing philosophies are grounded in an arche, usually a neuter term, like Being, spirit, reason, or history, which is declared to be the origin and guiding principle of reality. Philosophers desire to comprehend all experience in terms of this neuter term. Even theologians subordinate the divine to a neuter term "by expressing it with adverbs of height applied to the verb being; God is said to exist eminently or par excellence." The transcendent can be subordinated because all objects are reduced to a thing, and as a thing they can be comprehended or grasped.

This objectifying "science" has led to great technological advances but at the expense of transcendence. Whatever is other can always be reduced to the Same; thus, there is nothing beyond the grasp of the Same. Although relative alterity, that is, qualitative differences between objects, may remain, radical alterity or transcendence is destroyed. Commenting on Gagarin's claim that he did not find God in outer space, Levinas said

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To take this seriously, we may hear in it a very important assertion: the new condition of existence in the weightlessness of a space 'without place' is still experienced by the first man sent there as a here, as the same, without genuine otherness. The marvels of technology do not open up the beyond where science, their mother, was born. In spite of all these movements, there is no outside here! What immanence! What a wretched infinite! Hegel expresses it with remarkable precision: 'something becomes an Other, but this Other is itself a Something, therefore it likewise becomes an Other, and soon ad infinitum.'

This reign of ontology has important political consequences. The reduction of the human Other to a neuter term such as Being elevates the neuter term over man himself.

"I think" comes down to "I can"—to an appropriation of what is, to an exploitation of reality. Ontology as first philosophy is a philosophy of power. . . . A philosophy of power, ontology is, as first philosophy which does not call into question the same, a philosophy of injustice.

Ontologically based politics have been especially pernicious in their nineteenth and twentieth century manifestations, where final totalizing answers are

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closely tied to final totalizing solutions. According to Levinas, Heideggerian ontology with its pagan roots is especially deleterious. "Heideggerian ontology, which subordinates the relationship with the Other to the relation with Being in general, remains under obedience to the anonymous, and leads inevitably to another power, to imperialist domination, to tyranny."12

Therefore, Levinas makes two serious accusations against ontology as first philosophy. First, since it does not consider true transcendence, ontology is incomplete. Second, ontology leads to tyranny.

How is it possible to break the stranglehold of ontology? How can transcendence be rediscovered in the Western tradition? According to Levinas, the face-to-face relationship with the other person, the Other, is beyond the grasp of ontology. The face cannot be totalized because it expresses infinitude. In other words, the ego can never totally know the Other. This inability to comprehend, to grasp, calls the ego into question. Have I, merely by existing, already usurped the place of another? Am I somehow

12Levinas, Totality and Infinity, 46-7.
responsible for the death of the Other? "In its mortality, the face before me summons me, calls for me, begs for me, as if the invisible death that must be faced by the Other, pure otherness, separated, in some way, from any whole, were my business." The face calls the ego to respond before any unique knowledge about the Other.

This ethical, face-to-face relationship, not only cannot be thematized, that is, reduced to a theme or neuter concept, but it is the foundation of all meaning. Without the Other there would be no need for signification or communication. More dramatically, before the encounter with the Other, the ego would have no conception of itself. The ego would be content to dwell, consume, and enjoy, without thought. Only when confronted with the Other will the ego begin to contemplate itself. Thus, the relationship with the Other precedes the "I think" of Descartes' famous formulation.

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Derrida's Analysis of Totality and Infinity

In Totality and Infinity, Levinas opposed the totalizing system of philosophy with the infinity of the face-to-face relationship. He has established an originary ethics based on transcendence. Therefore, ethics supplants ontology as first philosophy.

The radical critique of Western philosophy in Totality and Infinity received scant attention until the publication in 1964 of Derrida's extended analysis, Violence and Metaphysics: An Essay on the Thought of Emmanuel Levinas.14 Derrida claims that Levinas failed in his attempt to establish transcendence beyond totality for two reasons. First, a philosophy which seeks to think otherwise than totality cannot rely on the dominant logos of the tradition. Levinas who desires to replace ontology with ethics, relies, at least in Totality and Infinity, on terms which are permeated with ontological connotations such as 'being', 'truth', 'objectivity', and 'infinite'. In other words,

Levinas cannot transcend the philosophical tradition because he is using its language.

Second, Levinas has failed to move beyond the tradition because language is presupposed in the encounter with the Other and language itself is ontological and violent. In *Totality and Infinity* Levinas claimed that the ethical relation is "originally enacted as conversation." Derrida argues that if discourse with the Other is primary, then the first relation cannot be ethical. Since language is thematizing, violent, and appropriative, our first encounter with the Other will be thematizing, violent, and appropriative. Thus, the first relationship is not ethical. Further, language is ontological, so if discourse is fundamental, then Levinas has not found an original ground for ethics.\(^{15}\)

\(^{15}\)Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 39. The French is discours.

Most commentators either claimed that Derrida convincingly disproved Levinas's main theses or that Derrida has misread Levinas and that his criticisms are irrelevant.17 Often overlooked in these, at times, acrimonious debates between epigones have been the close affinity and mutual respect between Derrida and Levinas. Robert Bernasconi, in a series of essays, has carefully shown how Derrida's "criticisms" should be seen as a deconstruction based on a double reading of Levinas.18 Yes, Derrida does argue that discourse and pre-original discourse. In Totality and Infinity, Levinas was negligent in distinguishing between the non-linguistic discourse (expression) which the face calls to the ego, and the rational, thematizing discourse based in ontology and society. In his later writings, Levinas attempts to clarify the distinction using the saying and the said (See the discussion below in Chapter 4).


18 See, for example, Robert Bernasconi, "The Silent Anarchic World of the Evil Genius," in G. Moneta, J. Sallis, and J. Taminiaux eds. The Collegium Phaenomenologicum: The First Ten Years (Dordrecht:
Levinas has failed to get beyond the limits of Western philosophy, but Derrida also insists on the necessity of the effort. The attempt to move beyond philosophy is always needed to breathe life into philosophy. Derrida argues that philosophy is at its best when it knows itself to be dying, when its very existence is called into question. It needs to justify itself before its others. Derrida describes Levinas's intentions:

All the classical concepts interrogated by Levinas are thus dragged toward the agora, summoned to justify themselves in an ethico-political language that they have not always sought—believed that they sought—to speak, summoned to transpose themselves into this language by confessing their violent aims.19

This project of confronting philosophy with its Other is also very much Derrida's project. Derrida says, "I often feel that the questions I attempt to formulate on the outskirts of the Greek philosophical tradition have as their "other" the model of the Jew,

that is, the Jew-as-other."\(^{20}\) In many other ways, Derrida's project is similar to Levinas's. For example, Derrida seems to have appropriated Levinas's conception of the trace as a past that was never present, and, in this context, Derrida's celebrated "différence" is admittedly akin to Levinas's critique of classical ontology.\(^{21}\) Derrida makes it clear that his concerns about Levinas's thought have already been considered by Levinas. In fact, Levinas had earlier conceded that a major flaw of Totality and Infinity was its reliance on "classical rationalist terminology."\(^{22}\) Recently, Derrida seems to have moved even closer to Levinas's positions with his essay "The Politics of Friendship" which outlines an


\(^{22}\)Emmanuel Levinas, "Transcendence and Height," trans. Tina Chanter, Simon Critchley, and Nick Walker (Unpublished Translation), 22. See also, Levinas, Totality and Infinity, 221.
ethical theory based on asymmetry and infinity, central terms from Totality and Infinity."13

Nonetheless, Derrida and Levinas diverge on the relationship between philosophy and non-philosophy. Derrida stresses the resilience of philosophy or, as he and Levinas label it, the Greek tradition. Only by using its concepts can we attempt to move outside of it, an attempt that must fail but an attempt that must be made. Derrida concludes citing "A Greek:" "If one has to philosophize, one has to philosophize; if one does not have to philosophize, one still has to philosophize."14

Otherwise than Being

Levinas, without explicit reference, responded to Derrida's concerns in his second major work, Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence.15 Derrida provoked


14"Derrida, "Violence and Metaphysics," 152.

Levinas to rethink how difficult it is to think otherwise, that is, to think transcendence beyond totality. As Bernasconi said, "one cannot simply pass beyond the confines of Western ontology by edict alone." Levinas begins Otherwise than Being by asking, "what is Being's other?" He stresses that neither the traditional category of "not-Being" nor death can be considered otherwise than Being, because the void of not-Being will be quickly filled with Being. "To be or not to be is not the question where transcendence is concerned. The statement of being's other, of the otherwise than being, claims to state a difference over and beyond that which separates being from nothingness." Levinas then analyzes other traditional means of surpassing Being, such as


"Levinas, Otherwise than Being, 3.

"Levinas, Otherwise than Being, 3.
language, freedom, time, and egoism, and concludes that none have escaped Being.

Levinas reintroduces the face-to-face relation with the Other, but changes his focus and his terminology. Instead of the infinitude of the face, Levinas concentrates on the moment of transcendence that is experienced in the encounter. In particular, how does the expression of the face differ from ontological discourse? Levinas calls the former, "the saying," while he calls the latter "the said." The expression of the face is a saying, which exists prior to any linguistic concepts, which are fundamental to the said. What is this saying? It is a responsibility before any signification, it is a pre-archical or an-archical responsibility. However, the an-archical saying must be thematized into the said, "the subordination of the saying to the said, to the linguistic system and to ontology, is the price that manifestation demands."29 However, steps can be taken to maintain the potency of the ethical saying.

29Levinas, Otherwise than Being, 6.
In Otherwise than Being, Levinas also tried to remove all traces of ontology from his writing, to maintain the saying inside the said. Levinas went so far as to avoid using the copula in the entire work. Instead, he relied on participial constructions and, at times, replaced sentences with clauses. Further, Levinas replaced terms permeated with ontological connotations. For example, he replaces essence, and its derivatives, with derivatives of eidos. Also, he no longer uses totality, exteriority, and separation, but refers to proximity, subjectivity, obsession, and an-archy.

Despite the altered terminology, Levinas was steadfast to his original position that Western philosophy had based ethics on ontology, and this had dire political consequences. It is only by re-introducing transcendence that a place can be carved out for ethics. Transcendence is present in the anarchical relationship with the Other, a relationship which precedes ontology. Philosophy must be dragged

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"Alphonso Lingis, "Translator's Introduction," in Levinas, Otherwise Than Being, xxxviii."
to the agora to justify itself in front of its other.

So, Levinas responds to Derrida:

"It is not always true that not-to-philosophize is still to philosophize. The forcefulness of the break with ethics does not evidence a mere slackening of reason, but rather a questioning of the validity of philosophizing which cannot lapse again into philosophy.\(^{11}\) . . . . Not to philosophize would not be 'to philosophize still.'\(^{12}\)

**Judaism and Philosophizing Otherwise**

Who or what is philosophy's other? Levinas finds the model for beyond being in the ethical relation with the Other, which is called for by Judaism. Thus, Levinas claims that the ethical impulse of the Jewish tradition is philosophy's other.\(^{13}\) It must be

\(^{11}\)Levinas, "Ideology and Idealism," 235.

\(^{12}\)Levinas, "God and Philosophy," 186.

\(^{13}\)Levinas has also claimed that skepticism has steadfastly served as philosophy's other (Otherwise than Being, 165-171). For a discussion of Levinas's use of skepticism see below, chapter 4. Also, see Adriaan Peperzak, "Presentation," in Re-Reading Levinas, ed. Robert Bernasconi and Simon Critchley (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), 51-66. and Robert Bernasconi, "Skepticism in the Face of Philosophy," in Re-Reading Levinas, 149-161. Robert Gibbs has written, "philosophy's other is skepticism, which disrupts the system and universal reasoning. What skepticism objects to is not important: what is important is the perennial need for philosophy to apologize, to justify its answers to another." ("A Jewish Context for the Social Ethics of Marx and Levinas," in Autonomy and Judaism: Papers from the
stressed that Levinas uses the term "Judaism" in two distinct but related senses. First, Levinas will refer to Judaism as a religion based on the Torah and the Talmud. This sense is mostly restricted to his Talmudic commentaries and rarely used in his philosophical texts.\(^3\) Second, Levinas uses the term "Judaism" to refer to the Jewish moments in any tradition, including Western philosophy. These moments are not Jewish because they embrace the God of the Old Testament, but because they point to something beyond Being that can be used as a justification for ethics. Thus, any moment, in any tradition, that calls for an an-archical ethics is a Jewish moment. This definition groups Plato's Good beyond Being, Aristotle's active intellect, and Descartes' idea of the infinite as Jewish moments in the Greek tradition.

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When Levinas refers to traditional Judaism, the Judaism of the Old Testament, he only uses a particular type of Judaism and in a specific way. For Levinas, following Rabbi Shushani, Judaism is to be understood through the Talmud.

Rabbinical Judaism, in the centuries that preceded and followed the destruction of the Second Temple, is the primordial event in Hebraic spirituality. If there had been no Talmud, there would have been no Jews today.35

Why is the Talmud unique? According to Levinas, the Talmud is infused with hermeneutics and responsibility for the Other. The endless interpretations of the Talmud, which may be frustrating to some, open up the ethical testimonies of the Bible for each generation. "What is taught at the school of R. Akiba is said to be incomprehensible to Moses, but is yet the very teaching of Moses."36

The dialectical structure of the Talmud calls for new


interpretations, that is, it demands a response from its readers.

Levinas also discovers a call to responsibility for the Other, or what he labels prophetism, in the Talmud. This responsibility exists prior to faith, politics, and ontology. "This responsibility prior to the Law is God's revelation. There is a text of the prophet Amos that says: 'God has spoken, who would not prophecy?, (Amos 3:8) where prophecy seems posited as the fundamental fact of man's humanity."37

Besides the Talmud, Levinas also finds inspiration in the Shoah.

If there is an explicitly Jewish moment in my thought, it is the reference to Auschwitz, where God let the Nazis do what they wanted. . . . Either this means that there is no reason for morality and hence it can be concluded that everyone should act like the Nazis, or the moral law maintains its authority. Here is freedom; this choice is the moment of freedom.38

37Levinas, Ethics and Infinity, 113-4.

This reference to Auschwitz should not be separated from Levinas's critique of ontologically based politics. Levinas demands there be a place for the ethical order of Judaism to counteract the rational, violent, ontological order of the Greek tradition.

The Jewish tradition may be an important motivation for Levinas's philosophical writings, but Levinas refrains from using the Hebrew Scriptures as a proof in his philosophical texts. Instead, they serve as an illustration, just as Heidegger often calls upon Hölderlin's poetry. The Jewish passages introduce a strangeness to philosophy, which can be a source of new thinking, a re-thinking of philosophy. "All one can say is that the Septuagint is not yet complete, that the translation of biblical wisdom into the Greek language remains unfinished."

Many commentators misrepresent Levinas's intention of translating Judaism into Greek. It is frequently claimed that Levinas is adding something to the Greek tradition that it lacks. For example,

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Friedlander argues that Levinas is trying to incorporate into Greek thought "a set of ethical principles found among the ancient Hebrews, but not among the people of Greece." Levinas's goal was not to introduce something alien to the tradition but to revive a part of the tradition that has been subordinate. These "Jewish elements" are scattered throughout the history of Western philosophy. Transcendence beyond being has been a recurrent theme in philosophy beginning with Plato's Good beyond being from the Republic, which Levinas claims is equivalent to the "invisible of the Bible." Further, responsibility for the Other demanded by the Talmud is equivalent to the radically Other of the Platonic dialogues. Levinas writes


Against the Heideggerians and neo-Hegelians for whom philosophy begins with atheism, we have to say that the tradition of the Other is not necessarily religious, that it is philosophical. Plato stands in this tradition when he situates the Good above Being, and, in the *Phaedrus*, defines true discourse as a discourse with gods.42

Other moments of transcendence beyond being include Socrates' daimon, the active intellect of Aristotle, the trace in Plotinus, Pseudo-Dionysius's doctrine of *via eminetiae*, and the idea of the infinite in Descartes' *Third Meditation*. Also, Levinas often praises the ethical impulse or prophetic cry in the wilderness of thinkers such as Marx and other Marxists. Thus, he can claim that the infinite, ethical relationship with the face is the "first truth" of both Greek and Judaism.

What does it mean to translate Judaism into Greek and why must this translation take place? First, Levinas usually uses Judaism and Greek as metaphors: where Judaism refers to the ethical relation for the Other, while Greek refers to the rational order, which

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emphasizes universality, discourse, and the political. In Judaism pre-philosophical experiences are non-thematized, while the Greek tradition thematizes every pre-philosophical experience it encounters; that is, it reduces all of transcendence to a neuter category. A prime example is Plato's good beyond being which is immanentized by Aristotle in Book 1 of The Nicomachean Ethics.

Levinas insists that the an-archical, pre-philosophical experiences must be a constant check on the rational, philosophical, and political order. Nonetheless, Levinas is not calling for a renunciation of the Greek tradition. The Greek tradition is needed to universalize the ethical truths of the Jewish tradition. "At no moment did the Western philosophical tradition in my eyes lose its right to the last word; everything must, indeed, be expressed in its tongue; but perhaps it is not the place of the first meaning of beings, the place where meaning begins."43 So, Levinas insists that the ethics of the face-to-face relationship must be extended to the political realm, that is, the political realm should

43Levinas, Ethics and Infinity, 24-5.
be held in check by the ethical. Thus, his writings fuse the Jewish and Hellenic traditions.

But it's the fundamental contradiction of our situation (and perhaps of our condition), which I called Hypocrisy in my book, that both the hierarchy taught by Athens and the abstract and slightly anarchical ethical individualism taught by Jerusalem are simultaneously necessary in order to suppress violence. Each of these principles, left to itself, only furthers the contrary of what it wants to secure. Do you not think, especially in our epoch, that we must be particularly sensitive to the value of this protest against the hierarchy and that it demands a metaphysical explanation?"

Levinasian Politics

Although rarely discussed systematically, politics is ubiquitous in Levinas's writings. At root, politics serves as the motive for his writings, but it is also a necessary step that his philosophy must take. "I do not believe, however, that pure philosophy can be pure without going to the 'social problem.""

However, for Levinas, politics will be secondary to re-establishing an ethics. Only on an ethical basis can an adequate politics be judged. Thus,

"Levinas, "Transcendence and Height," 24-5.

"Levinas, Ethics and Infinity, 56."
Levinas's primary concern is to establish a foundation for ethics before moving to politics. In many ways, the creation of a political thought is an unfinished project in Levinas's works. This is the task of the current essay.

Justice, society, the state and its institutions, exchanges and work are comprehensible out of proximity. This means that nothing is outside of the control of the responsibility of the one for the other. It is important to recover all these forms beginning with proximity, in which being, totality, the state, politics, techniques, work are at every moment on the point of having their center of gravitation in themselves, and weighing on their own account."

Levinas's politics have been directly explored only infrequently. Only two book-length works have been written primarily about his politics. Donald Awerkamp's dissertation at De Paul University was the first work to directly tackle Levinasian politics. Drawing heavily on Totality and Infinity, Awerkamp attempts to clarify the relationship between ethics and politics in Levinas's thought. Awerkamp presents

"Levinas, Otherwise than Being, 159.

"Reprinted as, Donald Awerkamp, Emmanuel Levinas: Ethics and Politics (New York: Revisionist Press, 1977)."
many of the complexities of this question, but concludes that politics for Levinas is independent of ethics. "Politics, even at its best, remains murderous." Chapter 5 will show how Levinas is much more optimistic about the role of politics, that politics is essential to balance the excesses of ethics. Also, Awerkamp's research is dated. His work was published before Levinas wrote his second major work, Otherwise Than Being or Beyond Essence in 1974. Further, Awerkamp makes scant use of the numerous short essays which have only recently been translated into English, in particular, the collections of Talmudic exegeses Difficult Freedom, Beyond the Verse, and In the Time of Nations.

The most thorough examination of Levinas's politics, and the standard by which all works on Levinasian politics must be judged, has been conducted by Roger Burggraeve." Burggraeve incorporates most

"Awerkamp, Emmanuel Levinas: Ethics and Politics, 37.

"Roger Burggraeve, "The Ethical Basis for a Human Society According to Emmanuel Levinas," Ephemerides Theologicae Lovanienses 57 (1981): fasc. 1, 5-57. Burggraeve also wrote a lengthy essay that focuses on Levinas' conception of desire as formulated in Totality and Infinity. (Roger Burggraeve, From
of Levinas's works, including the Talmudic essays, into a coherent picture of his politics. Especially important is Burggraeve's juxtaposition of the autonomic political theory based on the social contract and Levinas's heteronomic politics based on the ethical relation with the Other. The present essay, especially chapter 5, is indebted to Burggraeve's ground breaking work on Levinasian politics.

In many ways, this essay is an extension of Burggraeve's work. It will develop more thoroughly the ethical foundations of Levinasian politics. This development is especially crucial for understanding the oscillating relationship between ethics and politics in Levinas's thought. Further, chapter 6 will place Levinas's politics in the context of modern political thought. Levinas's political thought will be presented as an alternative to the egoistic

_Self-Development to Solidarity: An Ethical Reading of Human Desire in its Socio-Political Relevance According to Emmanuel Levinas_, trans. C. Vanhove-Romanik [Leuven: Center for Metaphysics and Philosophy of God, 1985]]. Burggraeve has also written several other essays on Levinasian social and political theory which sadly have, as yet, not been translated into English.
political thought of Hobbes and Locke, the totalizing political thought of Hegel, and the anti-humanistic political thought of Heidegger. Thus, chapter 6 will examine Levinas's radical reformulations of such key political concepts as freedom, natural rights, pluralism, and humanism.

Levinas's politics have also been discussed in several recent essays. Foremost among these, is a chapter in Simon Critchley's The Ethics of Deconstruction. Critchley uses Levinas's theoretical movement from ethics to politics (discussed below in chapter 5) to provide a feasible alternative to Derrida's apolitical philosophy. In Critchley's words, Levinas's politics provides "a political supplement to deconstruction, in the full sense of that word, as something which both makes up for a lack and adds to what is already complete."


In a recent essay, George Salemohamed alleges that Levinas's political thought is "not much more than a justification of theology and of the State of Israel." He claims that although Levinas seems to analyze ethics from a stance that precedes ontology, his ethics are but a servant for his theological views and it follows that Levinas's politics are but a simple extension of his theological and ethical views. "Faith and fidelity to the notion of the Jews as 'ethical nation' rather than ethics or justice is the true basis of his political philosophy." Although Levinas has acknowledged the unconscious role which the Bible has played in shaping his philosophical thought, his philosophical inquiries must be judged by philosophical standards.

Finally, Levinas's ethical thought has been used to analyze two contemporary political realities. David Campbell has utilized Levinas's thought to open up new vistas in international relations. In an essay

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written with Michael Dillon, Campbell uses Levinas's thought to establish an ethical foundation for international relations against the rationalist and the Nietzschean approaches. The rationalist approach seeks an ontological imperative to justify action, while the Nietzschean approach with its disavowal of any telos leaves no basis on which to act. Levinas, they argue, presents a radical alternative to these two positions; namely, anarchical justice or justice which precedes an arche.

In his most ambitious use of Levinasian ethics, Campbell analyzes the Persian Gulf War from an anarchical perspective. He concludes, "to be judged as having acted in an ethical way, it would have been more fitting for the United States to acknowledge this heteronomous responsibility than to assert its autonomous freedom." The autonomous paradigm which

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"Campbell, Politics Without Principle, 93.
the U.S. government adopted led to a creation of an appropriative narrative that reduced the Iraqis to a single image, that of Saddam Hussein. There was little attempt by the American public to reach out and feel responsibility toward the radically Other, i.e., the Iraqi soldier. There was no feeling of responsibility for the more than 100,000 Iraqi military deaths or even the 13,000 civilian deaths.57

The Argentine philosopher, Enrique Dussel, has also used Levinas's ethical thought to analyze contemporary political problems. Dussel fuses Levinas's heteronomous ethical thought with Marxism to provide a more ethical basis for liberation theology.58 Dussel equates Levinas's concept of

57Precise figures have not been provided by the U.S. or the Iraqis. The numbers given are based on estimates made by U.S. military sources and reported in Campbell, Politics Without Principle, 68-70.

philosophical totality with Marx's concept of ideology. Thus, Dussel believes that he can use Levinas's ethical thought to move beyond the ideological, totalizing moments in Marxism.

Even more interesting is Dussel's use of Levinasian ethics as an anthropological principle for understanding the relationships between nations. Oppressed, or in his terms, peripheral, nations are equated with the Other, while imperialism is equated with totalizing philosophies. Imperialism fails to appreciate the uniqueness of the Other, the oppressed nation. Instead, the oppressed nation exists only to be conquered or comprehended. Only by a praxis of otherness, or revolution, will the oppressed nation be treated ethically.

Conclusion

The principal aim of this essay is to extend Levinas's ethical philosophy into the political realm. This task was called for by Levinas, but never completed. Thus, the central question of this dissertation: is it possible to construct a politics which maintains the ethical relationship with the Other, one which does not reduce the Other, but
preserves alterity? To paraphrase Levinas, the crucial question is not "to be or not to be?" but rather "how can politics be justified in the face of the Other?"

In order to answer these crucial questions, Levinas's thought must first be considered in relation to the dominant strands of the Western philosophical tradition. Thus, chapter 2 will detail Levinas's extensive critique of the Western philosophical tradition, especially his critique of totalizing and autonomous thought. Special attention will be paid to his analysis of Heidegger; who, although on the surface has escaped a philosophy of totality, in fact, takes this strand of thought to its logical conclusion.

Chapter 3 will explore the major themes in Levinas's ethical thought as they appeared in *Totality and Infinity*. Levinas claims that the sovereignty of the ego is shattered by the face of the Other which calls the ego into question, by calling for it to justify its life. Instead of a concern for self-preservation, the ego is primarily concerned with the
Other. Being is not primary and thus, ethics precedes ontology as first philosophy.

Chapter 4 develops Derrida's criticisms of Totality and Infinity and Levinas's response as it appears in his second major work, Otherwise than Being. Although Levinas, in response to Derrida, modifies the metaphysical underpinnings of his thought, the conclusion remains; the ego is infinitely, asymmetrically, and concretely responsible for the Other.

Chapter 5 will discuss the foundations of a Levinasian politics. This chapter has three main functions. First, it shows that Levinas is not an apolitical thinker even though he is deeply suspicious of most strands of Western political thought. Second, Levinas's phenomenology of the third person, the Third, is shown to be the bridge between Levinas's ethics and his politics. Finally, the liberal state is shown to be the type of government that balances the needs of both ethics and politics.

Chapter 6 will place Levinas's heteronomous political thought in the perspective of the Western political tradition. His thought will be presented as
an alternative to the autonomous and totalizing political thought of Hobbes, Locke, and Hegel. In this opposition, it will be shown how Levinas's anarchical politics provides a new foundation for some of the key concepts of political thought; namely, freedom, natural rights, and pluralism.

Chapter 7 shows how Levinas's thought contributes to one of the most important political debates of the twentieth century, the debate between humanism and anti-humanism. Levinas agrees with many of the charges of anti-humanism, but he disagrees with their nihilistic conclusions. Instead, he advances a new type of humanism, a humanism based on the other person, the Other.

The final chapter steps back and examines Levinas's thought from a broader and more critical perspective. Levinas's thought will be summarized using Plato's phenomenology of desire. Each major aspect of Levinas's thought, metaphysics, ethics, and politics, makes use of the paradoxical structure of desire. Scholars have criticized Levinas's philosophy for being merely a justification of Judaism, for his failure to establish a non-ontological philosophy, and
for his failure to found ethics before ontology. Each of these criticisms will be explored in the second section of the chapter. The essay concludes by reiterating Levinas's main criticisms of Western philosophy. Levinas's questions call for a radical re-thinking of metaphysics, ethics, and politics.
CHAPTER TWO

AUTONOMY, TOTALITY, AND ANTI-HUMANISM:
LEVINAS'S CRITIQUE OF THE WESTERN
PHILOSOPHICAL TRADITION

Levinas's criticism of Western philosophy can be summarized as an opposition to autonomous and totalizing philosophies, which together lead to anti-humanism. Autonomous and totalizing philosophies reduce all of reality, including man, either to a sovereign ego or to a totalizing neuter term. The goal of Western philosophy has been to obliterate all traces of alterity or transcendence.

Autonomous thought props up an ego, assured of itself, who is free to initiate action and free to complete the act. The free thinker analyzes the world objectively, appropriating the world with logos, like consuming food. That which is other is reduced to the Same, i.e., placed into neuter categories that the mind has already created. The external object "falls into the network of a priori ideas, which I bring to bear so as to capture it."1

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Autonomous thought requires a detached, free thinker who perceives the world from an Archimedean point. Disinterested, theoretical reason reigns supreme.

Perceived in this way, philosophy would be engaged in reducing to the Same all that is opposed to it as Other. It would be moving toward auto-nomy, a stage in which nothing irreducible would limit thought any longer, in which, consequently, thought, nonlimited, would be free. Philosophy would thus be tantamount to the conquest of being by man over the course of history... the conquest of being by man over the course of history.²

The autonomous ego ventures into the world but always returns to its lair, unchanged by its worldly experiences. "So many events happen to it, so many years age it, and yet the Ego remains the Same!"³

Levinas opposes autonomous thought with heteronomic philosophy, a philosophy based on the Other. The Other shakes the contemplative ego to its foundations, forcing the ego to concede that it is not sovereign in its own sphere. A philosophy based on the Other drags the ego out of its dwelling and leads


it to the beyond. "Truth would thus designate the outcome of a movement that leaves a world that is intimate and familiar, even if we have not yet explored it completely, and goes toward another region, toward a beyond, as Plato puts it." Thus, the relationship with the Other jolts the ego from its dwelling and leads to transcendence.

Levinas contrasts Odysseus and Abraham to illustrate the difference between autonomic and heteronomous philosophy. The journey of autonomic philosophy is a return to the Same, to the ego's homeland. It is the journey of Odysseus.

Philosophical knowledge is a *prêriori*: it searches for the adequate idea and assures autonomy. In every new development it recognizes familiar structures and greets old acquaintances. It is an Odyssey where all adventures are only the accidents of a return to self.5

Heteronomous philosophy, in contrast, leads the soul to a beyond. "It appears as movement going forth from a world that is familiar to us . . . from an 'at home' which we inhabit, toward an alien

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outside-of-oneself, toward a yonder." This journey is the wanderings of Abraham who "leaves his fatherland forever for a yet unknown land, and forbids his servant to even bring back his son to the point of departure."

Autonomous thought is closely related to totalizing thought. The a priori ideas of the autonomous thinker are often grounded in a totalizing neuter term, a term that accounts for all of reality. To remain sovereign the thinker appropriates the world into categories, which are then reducible to one neuter term such as Being, spirit, reason, or history. The reduction of all of reality to this neuter term becomes the goal of philosophy. Totalizing philosophy, which appropriates and grasps all of reality, violates the uniqueness of individuals.

To understand the non-I, access must be found through an entity, an abstract essence which is and is not. In it is dissolved the other's alterity. The foreign being . . . becomes a theme and an object. It fits under a concept already or dissolves into

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"Levinas, Totality and Infinity, 33.

relations. . . . Cognition consists in grasping the individual, which alone exists, not in its singularity which does not count, but in its generality, of which alone there is science. And here every power begins. The surrender of exterior things to human freedom through their generality does not only mean, in all innocence, their comprehension, but also their being taken in hand, their domestication, their possession."

The autonomic and totalizing traditions have their roots in Parmenides' dictum "there is the same for Being and knowing." Aristotle, in the Nicomachean Ethics, takes Parmenides one step further by granting freedom from the polis to the contemplative man. Hegel, in his introduction to the Phenomenology, claims victory for the autonomous position when knowing is equated with Being. Subjective knowing has finally won out over Being. Autonomous thought, which posits man as the self-mover in Aristotle, ends up subordinating man to the system of Hegel. What began in the guise of humanism culminates in a profound anti-humanism.

This chapter will examine the development of autonomous and totalizing thought in Western

philosophy. It is not the goal of this chapter to evaluate Levinas's criticisms or even to defend any of the thinkers against Levinas's charges. Instead, this chapter will show how, according to Levinas, many of the leading thinkers of Western philosophy, from Parmenides to Heidegger, have been involved in a project that emphasizes autonomy and totality at the expense of transcendence. The result, in Levinas's view, is a pernicious anti-humanism.

**Parmenides: Being and not Non-Being**

Philosophical anti-humanism begins with the father of Western philosophy, Parmenides. According to Levinas, Parmenidean philosophy reduces all alterity (otherness) to the neuter term, "Being". Thus, Levinas asserts that "since Parmenides across Plotinus we have not succeeded in thinking otherwise."*

Protevi has carefully read the Parmenidean fragments from a Levinasian perspective.10 The key

*Levinas, Totality and Infinity, 104.

10 John Protevi, "Repeating the Parricide: Levinas and the Question of Closure," *Journal of the British Society for Phenomenology* 23 (1992): 21-32. The following arguments are also indebted to discussions with Dr. Protevi during Spring 1995. For an analysis
text for establishing a philosophy of the Same is Fragment 3, to gar auto noein estin te kai einai (for there is the same for thinking and Being). Anything that exists can be known, so nothing can escape the grasp of the knower. Thus, there is no place in the Parmenidean schema for radical alterity or transcendence.

An analysis of Fragment 2 reinforces this interpretation. In this fragment, the young Parmenides is instructed by an unnamed goddess about the ways of truth. The goddess describes two paths of thinking; the first has to do with Being, the second has to do with non-Being. However, she says that the second path is unknowable and unsayable. Thus, the only possible path for transcendence, non-Being, is an empty path. Therefore, only the path through Being is feasible. For Parmenides there is Being and not non-Being. According to Levinas, this repudiation of transcendence has dominated Western philosophy from Parmenides to Heidegger.

Plato: The Forms, Anamnesis, and the Good beyond Being

In the *Sophist*, Plato claims that a parricide must be committed against father Parmenides. In particular, the Eleatic Stranger calls for a discussion to establish "that what is not, in some respect has Being, and conversely that what is, in a way is not." Nevertheless, Levinas asserts that Parmenides has escaped every parricide, including Plato's. Plato failed in his parricide because he attempts to totalize the world through his theory of forms. The forms are neuter categories that can account for all of reality and, in the *Parmenides*, the forms are modified to exclude all radical alterity. Under interrogation by Parmenides, Socrates is forced to concede that if the forms exist separate from the things of this world, then they can have no interaction with worldly things. This is what Levinas is referring to when he writes, "the relation with the

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11 Plato, *Sophist*, 241d.

Absolute would render the Absolute relative."13 If the forms have no interaction with worldly things, including men, then men cannot know anything beyond the world of Becoming. Plato's attempted parricide fails.

Further, Plato's philosophy explicitly totalizes all of alterity to the Same. In the Sophist, the highest categories are proclaimed to be the same and other.14 However, in the myth of creation in the Timaeus, the demiurge encloses the circle of the other within the circle of the same.15 Levinas claims that his heteronomous philosophy will reverse this relationship.

By this 'turn,' philosophy changes radically. If the Other is taken seriously, the inclusion of its circle within the circle of the Same, which according to Plato's Timaeus (35ab) constitutes the

13Levinas, Totality and Infinity, 50. Levinas is referring to Plato's Parmenides 133b-135c and 141e-142b. For a thorough discussion of this "two world" argument, see Charles P. Bigger, Participation: A Platonic Inquiry (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1968), 49-68. Also, see Protevi, "Repeating the Parricide," 27. The "two-world" problem between the realms of Being and Becoming is developed in some detail in chapter 3 below.

14Plato, Sophist, 254b-256d.

15Plato, Timaeus, 35a.
ultimate horizon of the cosmos, is undone and the ultimate meaning of all things and humans has been changed.16

Levinas further opposes Plato's autonomous epistemology, which claims that knowledge can be brought out by maieutics and anamnesis. Truth, in some parts of Plato, consists in memory (anamnesis), whereby the truth is discovered in oneself. The teacher only facilitates this remembrance by an act of midwifery (maieutics). "The primacy of the same was Socrates' teaching: to receive nothing of the Other but what is in me, as though from all eternity I was in possession of what comes to me from the outside."17 This epistemology rejects any form of learning which is exterior or transcendent. It is a philosophy dominated by the Same. "The ideal of Socratic truth thus rests on the essential self-sufficiency of the same, its identification in ipseity, its egoism. Philosophy is an egology."18

Nonetheless, Plato occupies an ambiguous place in Levinas's philosophy. Levinas portrays Plato as a

16Peperzak, To the Other, 99 n.33.
17Levinas, Totality and Infinity, 43.
18Levinas, Totality and Infinity, 44.
philosopher of the Same, but he also advocates a return to Platonism. Levinas claims that Plato's to agathon (The Good) can serve as the foundation for an ethics that transcends Being and history. Therefore, a return to Platonism would be necessary to restore "the independence of ethics in relation to history" and to trace "a limit to the comprehension of the real by history."\(^{19}\) In fact, the agathon beyond Being of Plato's Republic is the very model for Levinas's heteronomic philosophy grounded on transcendence.\(^{20}\)

"Plato nowise deduces being from the Good: he posits transcendence as surpassing the totality. . . . The Place of the Good above every essence is the most profound teaching, the definitive teaching, not of theology, but of philosophy."\(^{21}\)

**Aristotle: Autonomous Thought and Comprehension**

The Platonic ambiguity between totality and transcendence becomes an almost total victory for totality in Aristotle. Aristotle's thought, in many ways, exemplifies the philosophy of the Same which

\(^{19}\)Levinas, "Signature," 295.

\(^{20}\)Plato, Republic, 509b.

\(^{21}\)Levinas, Totality and Infinity, 103.
reduces all absolute alterity to immanence. Much has been written of Aristotle's reduction of Plato's transcendent Good, a Good which is beyond being, to an immanent entity.22 However, Aristotle's work exemplifies autonomous and totalizing thought in several other ways.

Aristotle posits the thinker as sovereign and autonomous. Man is "the principle and the generating force of his own acts as he is the parent of his children."23 Not only is the self free to initiate action but Aristotle equates freedom and wisdom in Book X of the Nicomachean Ethics. The contemplative man is the most self-sufficient man and lives a life of leisure. His contemplation is explicitly not for political reasons but for its own sake. "This is a regal and as it were unconditioned activity, a sovereignty which is possible only as solitude. . . .

22Aristotle, Nicomachean Ethics, 1096ab. Nevertheless Aristotle maintained some notion of radical alterity. For example, Levinas praises the transcendence inherent in the active intellect of De Anima 430a. Of course, in the same section, Aristotle reduces all of reality to the nous, which can become, in a way, all things.

[It permits] the notion of the pure theoretic, of its freedom, of the equivalence of freedom and wisdom.\(^\text{24}\)

The free thinker, who is at a distance from the world, grasps objects and places them into neuter categories. Thinking has literally become a comprehending, a grasping of objects by logos to put them into their genus. Thus, the individuality of a thing, the tote tì (a this) is violated. Levinas criticizes Aristotle's epistemology because "the individuality of a thing, the tote tì, that which is the designated and seems to alone exist, is in reality only accessible starting with generality, the universal, ideas and law. One grasps hold of a thing out of its concept."\(^\text{23}\) This com-prehending is a form of violence which "denies that being all its individuality, by taking it as an element of its calculus, and as a particular case of a concept."\(^\text{24}\)

\(^\text{24}\)Levinas, "Ethics as First Philosophy," 77. Levinas refers to Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1177b. The happiness inherent in freedom is also discussed in *Rhetoric* 1360b.


Aristotle's philosophy of species and genus differentiates members of a species by qualitative properties. However, these logical distinctions are not equivalent to Levinas's conception of radical alterity. Instead, they involve only a relative alterity, where individuals are distinguished in relation to each other. Radical alterity or transcendence is not possible because nothing escapes the grasp of the a priori categories.

Alterity is not at all the fact that there is a difference, that facing me there is someone who has a different nose than mine, different colour eyes, another character. It is not difference, but alterity. It is alterity, the unencompassable, the transcendent. It is the beginning of transcendence. You are not transcendent by virtue of a certain different trait.27


Aristotle's autonomous man, who can comprehend the world through logos, is taken to new heights by Descartes. For Descartes, knowledge is only possible


through the freedom of the ego. Only by stepping away from all worldly objects, which may be the works of an evil genius, can the ego be confident of its knowledge. Descartes "sets up reason as an ego and truth as dependent on a movement that is free, and thus sovereign and justified." Descartes epitomizes the desire for an autonomous philosophy.

Also, Levinas criticizes Descartes for propping up the autonomous ego unchanged after facing the absurdity of the evil genius. Descartes overlooks the tortures of skepticism in his rush to certainty, "as though the being that, in the cogito, came out of a coma were still the same as the being that had fallen into a coma."  

However, Levinas is not adverse to appropriating theoretical snippets from thinkers with whom he has fundamental disagreements. For example, Descartes with his extreme subjectivism, also provides a useful framework for understanding the irreducible infinite. Levinas employs Descartes' formulation of the idea of


3"Levinas, "Humanism and An-Archie," 129.
the infinite in the Third Meditation to explain the absolute alterity shown in the face's epiphany.

Descartes introduces the Idea of the Infinite as his proof of God. After assuring the existence of the cogito, Descartes asks himself how he could possibly know that God exists. After all, Descartes is but a finite being, yet he is able to contemplate the infinite goodness of God, an infinite being. Descartes argues that the idea of the infinite must have been placed in him by God. Therefore, God must exist.

I must necessarily conclude from all I have said hitherto, that God exists; for, although the idea of substance is in me, for the very reason that I am a substance, I would not, nevertheless, have the idea of an infinite substance, since I am a finite being, unless the idea had been put into me by some substance which was truly infinite.31

Descartes' idea of the infinite is central to Levinas's ethical theory, but he does not use the formulation as a proof of God's existence. Such

proofs are foolish in Levinas's eyes. Instead, Levinas employs the idea of the infinite as a way of revolting against the supremacy of the Same.

It is not the proof that Descartes sought that interests me here. I am thinking here of the astonishment at this disproportion between what he calls the 'objective reality' and the 'formal reality' of the idea of God, of the very paradox—so anti-Greek—of an idea 'put' into me, even though Socrates taught us that it is impossible to put an idea into a thought without it already having been found there.

Descartes' radical freedom of the ego and Aristotle's desire to place the world into neutral categories are fused into the grand philosophical system of Hegel. Whereas Aristotle and his epigones maintained a modicum of transcendence, Hegel reduces all of reality to the neutral, system. "The Hegelian system represents the fulfillment of the West's thought and history, understood as the turning back of a destiny into freedom. Reason penetrating all

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12"The existence of God is not a question of an individual soul's uttering logical syllogisms. It cannot be proved." (Levinas and Kearney, "Dialogue with Emmanuel Levinas," 54) Levinas's theory of the idea of the infinite will be developed in some detail in chapter 3.

13Levinas, Ethics and Infinity, 91-2.
reality or appearing in it. An unforgettable enterprise!'"34

Hegel: Totality and the Master-Slave Relationship35

Levinas lists Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit* as one of the "finest" works in the history of Western philosophy and yet, Hegel often serves as chief foil for his critiques of Western philosophy. This section will show how Hegel's thought embodies the autonomous and totalizing traditions and how Hegel's master-slave relationship differs from Levinas's phenomenology of the face-to-face relationship with the Other.

The Hegelian system is the consummation of the totalizing and autonomous traditions. Hegel, not only reduces all of reality to his system, but the system is incarnate in an individual's free self-consciousness. Hegel solves the two-world problem of


Plato's Parmenides by identifying consciousness with universality, or in Leibniz's terms; A = A. "The Wisdom of first philosophy is reduced to self-consciousness. Identical and non-identical are identified. The labour of thought wins out over the otherness of things and men." Further, Hegel's system actualizes Parmenides' dictum that there is the same for Being and knowing; all objects can be known by the subjective consciousness. "Hegelian phenomenology ... expresses the universality of the same identifying itself in the alterity of objects thought."37

This desire for an absolute system coincides with a subordination of ethics. The purpose of Hegel's thought is to make self-consciousness aware of its freedom, in spite of the individuals abandoned on the slaughter-bench of history. For Levinas it is no coincidence that the culmination of philosophy in Hegel is coupled with a diachronic relation with Judaism and a subordination of that which is other than the Greek tradition. Previous epochs must be

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36Levinas, "Ethics as First Philosophy," 78.
37Levinas, Totality and Infinity, 36.
made to fit into Hegel's philosophy of history. For example, Judaism is labeled an outmoded stage on the way to universal spirit, a stage which has failed to reconcile individuality and spiritual universality. In fact, "the Judaic spirit is the negation of spirit."38 For Hegel, Judaism must be overcome.

Nonetheless, there is a famous dialogical point in Hegel's system; the relationship between the master and the slave. Is there an affinity between Levinas's derivation of reason from the Other and Hegel's derivation of subjectivity and reason from the master-slave relationship? How can Levinas and Hegel both derive consciousness from the Other but still remain diametrically opposed?

Hegel and Levinas both agree that Descartes erroneously emphasized the subjective ego and the free theoretic. Hegel criticizes Descartes dictum "I think therefore I am," because it emphasizes thinking and not the I. According to Hegel, the ego does not become conscious of itself through contemplation, because in thinking we become absorbed in the object and lose the subject. Instead, the ego is discovered

38Levinas, "Hegel and the Jews," 236.
in relation to the worldly objects and other people. Further, both Hegel and Levinas seek to find subjectivity beyond Spinoza's *conatus essendi*, the effort to exist. Hegel argues that for man to reach self-consciousness he must desire more than pure animal preservation.

In the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, Hegel develops the master-slave relationship to transcend both Descartes and Spinoza. In Hegel's conception, history begins with a confrontation between two antagonists, each seeking recognition from the other. However, recognition is not granted if one of the antagonists is killed in the confrontation. Recognition is only granted when one decides to submit to the mastery of the other. In his subjugation, the slave must create objects to please the master. In these objects and in the battle with the master, the slave recognizes an objectified version of himself. He gains self-consciousness. "We come to know ourselves not by isolated introspection in the manner of a Descartes but through interaction with others."


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Levinas's theory of consciousness also originates in a primordial relationship with the Other. However, this relationship is not a fight to death, nor is it even a battle for recognition. Instead, the ego becomes self-conscious when the Other confronts it in its shame. This confrontation calls the ego's very existence into question. "I begin to ask myself if my being is justified, if the Da of my Dasein is not already the usurpation of somebody else's place."40

The Other is not initially a fact, is not an obstacle, does not threaten me with death; he is desired in my shame. To discover the unjustified facticity of power and freedom one must not consider it as an object, nor consider the Other as an object; one must measure oneself against infinity, that is, desire him. It is necessary to have the idea of infinity, the idea of the perfect, as Descartes would say, in order to know one's own imperfection.41

Husserl: Self-Consciousness and Time Consciousness

Husserl attempts to break from the Hegelian system with his emphasis on consciousness and presence. Husserl charged that most of Western philosophy had been reduced to an egology, which champions the freedom of the subjective ego. He

40Levinas, "Ethics as First Philosophy," 85.
41Levinas, Totality and Infinity, 84.
contested the primacy of the autonomous ego, who observes the world objectively, by insisting upon the "medieval idea of intentionality . . . where all consciousness is consciousness of something."42 This consciousness of something cannot be separated from the world, so, on the surface, Husserl has broken away from the autonomous tradition.

Levinas praises Husserlian phenomenology for its focus on concrete, non-formal ways of thinking, which break up the formal categories of thought.43 Truth must be based on "direct intuition into the phenomenon" and not on theoretical ideas. Thus, Husserl's phenomenology reveals the pre-philosophical experiences that ground philosophy. Levinas often employs Husserl's phenomenological method to break from the totalizing tradition.

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"Levinas, "Ethics as First Philosophy," 77.

Nevertheless, Levinas criticized Husserl for remaining within the autonomous and totalizing traditions. Husserl's phenomenology belies its battle charge, "to the things themselves", because it does not let the things stand on their own, but attempts to reduce them to another arche, namely, consciousness. For Husserl, consciousness is always consciousness of an object. In Husserl's epistemology, the object or noema presents itself to consciousness, the noesis. "To the things themselves" is a strategy for comprehending the noema by removing it from its surroundings. The noema is "inseparable from a world out of which it is torn when it is first picked out and grasped, and yet such an act of separation is presupposed in every relation to or between things or beings." Nothing can escape the grasp of consciousness. All of reality can be comprehended by consciousness.

Self-consciousness also follows the noesis-noema structure, but consciousness is both noema and noesis.

Self-consciousness is a com-prehension of consciousness. For Husserl, the highest form of knowledge is an adequation between thought and consciousness. This adequation is only possible because of the phenomenological reduction that brackets the subjective states and liberates the ego to com-prehend the world.

The phenomenological reduction is a special mode of existence, motivated by a desire to be contemporaneous and present at the origins of oneself and the world. . . . [It] establishes a total coincidence of the subject with itself and therewith the highest autonomy. Husserlian phenomenology is a realization, not a questioning, of liberty.45

Finally, Husserl's conception of time, denies any temporal alterity. Husserl posits time as a series of instants that can be re-presented. "The past is representable, retained or remembered or reconstructed in an historical narrative; the future is pro-tension, anticipated, presupposed by hypo-thesis."46 Of course, the ego would be the gathering site for all of these instants. Thus, all of history, can be


46Levinas, "Beyond Intentionality," 104.
re-presented in the ego's consciousness. In Husserl's thought, transcendence is impossible.

The rigorous correlation between what is manifested and the modes of consciousness enables Husserl to affirm both that consciousness bestows sense and that Being commands the modalities of consciousness which reach it, that Being controls what appears as phenomenon. This final phrase receives an idealist interpretation: Being is immanent in thought and thought does not transcend itself in knowledge. Whether knowledge be sensible, conceptual or even purely symbolical, the transcendent or the absolute, claiming, as it does, to be unaffected by any relation, can in fact bear no transcendental sense without immediately losing; the very fact of its presence to knowledge signifies the loss of transcendence and of absoluteness. In the final analysis, presence excludes all transcendence."

Husserl's noesis-noema structure is just another moment in the philosophy of the Same. In his doctoral dissertation, Levinas used Heidegger's fundamental ontology to supersede the noesis-noema structure. If consciousness is consciousness of something, he argued, "then a theory of conscious acts and consciousness is at the same time a theory of the meaning of their objects. This in its turn is a


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theory of the modes of being of these objects.""
Thus, Levinas claims that Husserlian phenomenology is best understood as an ontology. Levinas further implicates Husserl in his critiques of Heidegger.

Levinas: "Dasein, Mitsein, and Anti-Humanism"

Levinas claimed that Heidegger's thought remained the great event of our century because he had shown philosophy a new way to look at the world. No longer was the philosopher disengaged from Being, free to contemplate his existence. Now the philosopher found himself thrown into the world, being-together-with-others, with objects ready at hand, and perhaps most importantly, the philosopher is a being-towards-death. Coincidentally, the philosopher's occupation now shifted from understanding beings to understanding Being itself, without any predicates. Ontology is the comprehension of the verb "to be" and the philosopher reaches Being not through contemplation but through lived experience. Thus, Heidegger seems to have


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overturned the Western tradition's reliance on the pure-theoretic.

However, Levinas places Heidegger squarely in the autonomic and totalizing traditions, because of his idolization of Being. Heidegger had censured Husserl for placing autonomous theory above Being, but in doing so, Heidegger elevated neutral and impersonal Being over man. Furthermore, in Heidegger's world, Being grants Dasein its freedom, but does not place limits on it, except in death. Thus, Dasein's freedom is never called into question. "He puts over man a Neuter which illuminates freedom without putting it in question. And thus he is not destroying, but summing up a whole current of Western philosophy." 50

Dasein's autonomy is exemplified by its fundamental mode of existence, comprehension. As with Husserl's thought, comprehension destroys all radical alterity and celebrates subjectivity.

Being is inseparable from the comprehension of Being; Being already invokes subjectivity. Heideggerian philosophy precisely marks the apogee of a thought in which the finite does not refer to the infinite.

Defenders of Heidegger might assert that the Heideggerian project allows a place for alterity in Heidegger's phenomenologies of mitsein (being-with) and seinlassen (letting-be). They claim that Heidegger's conception of mitsein, in the sense of being-with others, is equivalent to Levinas's theory of radical alterity based on the Other. Not only is this mitsein one of the fundamental structures of Dasein, but authentic existence demands the letting-be (seinlassen) of other beings. Thus, defenders of Heidegger might claim that Heidegger accords a privileged place to the Other.

However, Levinas claims that Heidegger's formulations of mitsein and seinlassen do not establish a radical transcendence. In fact, they reveal how much Heidegger remains a subjectivist thinker. For Levinas, the Other is the primary

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relation, but for Heidegger the ego's relation with itself is primordial. "Only by authentically Being-one-self in resoluteness, it is possible to be authentically with one another." Subjectivity retains its central place in Heidegger's analysis. Also, subjectivity appears in Heidegger's insistence on the mineness (Jemeinigkeit) of Dasein.

That's also the first word of Heidegger's, which I haven't forgotten. Dasein is a being who, in being, is concerned with its own being. . . . Later he changed it a little: Dasein is a being concerned with the meaning of being.

Moreover, Heidegger's famous analysis of being-towards-death exposes the subjectivity of Dasein. If nothingness is the secret of time and the authentic fundament of existence, the human person cannot rely on anything other than itself. Dasein is left alone, to face its death heroically, but in solitude. Thus, Levinas concludes, "being-with-one-another seemed to

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54 Levinas is referring to Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 68. "As modes of Being, authenticity and inauthenticity . . . are both grounded in the fact that any Dasein whatsoever is characterized by mineness."
me always to be a marching-together. That isn't my way, that isn't a face."

Levinas claims that the supremacy of fundamental ontology, the idolization of Being, in Heidegger's thought has dire political consequences. It is instructive that Heidegger, the philosopher of Being, who rejects all vertical transcendence, sided with the National Socialists. However much he hoped that this connection was coincidental, Levinas could not help wonder if there was some connection between Being and Time and Mein Kampf. He insists we must praise Being and Time, but "can we be assured, however, that there was never any echo of Evil in it?"

After the rector's address of 1933, Levinas increasingly distanced himself from Heidegger. He was most dismayed after the War by Heidegger's silence about the holocaust. How could Heidegger remain silent during peacetime about the Final Solution, gas chambers, and death camps? Levinas asks, does it not

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"Levinas, "As if Consenting to Horror," 488."
"lie beyond the realm of feeble excuses and reveal a soul completely cut off from any sensitivity, in which can be perceived a kind of consent to the horror?"

Besides the overt actions of Heidegger, Levinas was alarmed by the pagan elements in Heidegger's thought which elevate place and "mineness" over transcendence and the Other. Authentic existence required Dasein to act heroically in the face of Being, not to act ethically responsible when confronted with the face of the Other. Heidegger's philosophy is a continuation of the tradition that grants supremacy to ontology over metaphysics and freedom over justice.

To conclude, the well-known theses of Heideggerian philosophy—the preeminence of Being over beings, of ontology over metaphysics—end up affirming a tradition in which the same dominates the Other, in which freedom, even the freedom that is identical with reason, precedes justice."

Conclusion

Levinas claims that the history of philosophy has been dominated by autonomous and totalizing thought.

"Levinas, "As if Consenting to Horror," 487.

Autonomous thought requires a detached thinker who observes the world from an Archimedean point. "Thought is an activity, where something is appropriated by a knowledge that is independent, of course, of any finality exterior to it, an activity which is disinterested and self-sufficient." The ego may venture out to understand the world, but it is unaffected by its journeys.

The autonomous ego understands the world through appropriation or comprehension. All of reality is reduced by thought to neuter categories. These categories are often grounded in one totalizing term, that accounts for all of reality. Totalizing philosophies cannot do justice to individual things, including individual people. Instead, individuals are only understood through a neuter term. Also, these philosophies of the Same sacrifice any attempt at pure transcendence and any possibility of ethics beyond Being itself. Although Husserl and Heidegger both claim to have broken the dominance of the philosophy of the Same, Levinas shows they have failed.

"Levinas, "Ethics as First Philosophy," 77."
Levinas stresses that the drive for autonomy and totality leads to a brutal anti-humanism. As Peperzak writes:

The secret of Western ontology is its basic sympathy with political oppression and tyranny. In this sense, the celebration of physis as an impersonal and generous mother without face could conspire with the vulgar guide for terror that was Mein Kampf. A society based on ontology cannot be just, although it might try to create a balance out of the polemos to which the liberties of its monads inevitably lead. Originary respect, metaphysics as critique of spontaneously violent autonomy, is the only possibility of a just society.⁶⁰

Philosophy needs its other, needs to be called into question. Unrestrained, theWestern tradition will lead to tyranny. For Levinas, it is no coincidence that the culmination of the ontological tradition is associated with the apotheosis of anti-humanism and anti-semitism, the Shoah. Against the tyranny of ontology, the Jewish, or ethical tradition must be resuscitated. "The terms must be reversed."⁶¹

⁶⁰Peperzak, To The Other, 139.

⁶¹Levinas, Totality and Infinity, 47.
CHAPTER THREE

LEVINASIAN ETHICS I: TOTALITY AND INFINITY

Chapter 2 examined how autonomy and totality have governed the Western philosophical tradition. Both totalizing and autonomous philosophies result in a tyranny of the Same. All of reality is reduced to either an autonomous ego or a totalizing neuter term and nothing can transcend the comprehension of the ego or the encompassing neuter term. All of reality is the Same. According to Levinas, philosophies of the Same destroy transcendence and without transcendence ethics is untenable. This chapter and chapter 4 will develop Levinas's overturning of the tyranny of the Same and his grounding of ethics in radical transcendence. The present chapter will develop the argument as it appeared in his first major work, Totality and Infinity, while chapter 4 will show how Levinas transformed his metaphysical and ethical thought in his later works, primarily in response to Derrida's criticism.

Overturning the Tyranny of the Same

The tyranny of the Same will only reluctantly surrender its privileged position. The autonomous
ego, secure with its knowledge of the world and comfortable with its sovereignty, possesses a good conscience. It "settles down with a good conscience, in its non-culpability, to take refuge in itself." The only resistance confronting the ego is subjective death. However, death, which is the end of all possibilities for the ego, does not shake its good conscience.

Nonetheless, in the twentieth century, it has become banal to claim that subjective death shakes the ego to its foundations. For thinkers such as Heidegger, Sartre, and Camus, anxiety in the face of death gives meaning to life and is the basis for morality. But, according to Levinas, subjective death only shows the derisory nature of selfishness.

Death renders meaningless every concern that the ego would like to take for existence and for its destiny—an enterprise without issue and always ridiculous. Nothing is more comical than the concern that a being destined to destruction takes for itself.

Further, subjective death alone cannot be the basis for ethics. For Levinas, ethics only has

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'Levinas, "Transcendence and Height," 11.

meaning when it is separate from Being itself, that is, when it is established in transcendence. Ethics must exist prior to Being. Thus, death as merely a subjective event, based on the preservation of being, is meaningless. Levinas, as opposed to Heidegger, Sartre and Camus, holds that subjective death is inadequate for building an ethics.

If subjective death, the very destruction of the ego, cannot call into question the ego's autonomy, what can? According to Levinas, the confrontation with the other human person, the Other, shatters the complacency of the ego. The approach of the human Other breaks the ego away from a concern for its own existence; with the appearance of the Other, \textit{Dasein} is no longer a creature concerned with its own being.

What I want to emphasize is that the human breaks with pure being, which is always a persistence in being. \textit{This is my principal thesis} . . . . The being of animals is a struggle for life. A struggle for life without ethics. It is a question of might. Heidegger says at the beginning of \textit{Being and Time} that \textit{Dasein} is a being who in his being is concerned for this being itself. That's Darwin's idea: the living being struggles for life. The aim of being is being itself. However, with the appearance of the human--and this is \textit{my entire philosophy}--
there is something more important than my life, and that is the life of the other.\textsuperscript{3}

Levinas argues it is the approach of the human Other, not the death of the self, which displaces the ego. By extension, the Other breaks down any philosophy based on the primacy of the Same; including realism, which is based on the objective ego, phenomenology, which calls for a sovereign noesis, and Heidegger's fundamental ontology, which is grounded in Jemeingikeit (mineness). In short, "the resistance of the other to the Same is the failure of philosophy."\textsuperscript{4}

Consequently, the Other breaks down any political thought based on the primacy of the Same. Ancient political thought with its emphasis on the mature man (spoudaios) and modern political thought with its emphasis on a social contract between free individuals are both undermined by Levinas's claim that the Other is primary.

Desire and the Idea of the Infinite

How can Levinas reject the Cartesian hypothesis and claim that the relationship with the Other is


\textsuperscript{4}Levinas, "Transcendence and Height," 6.
primary? How can the relationship with the Other precede my being? How can the Other be an-archical? In Totality and Infinity, Levinas develops an an-archical ethics by modifying Plato's conception of eros and Descartes' idea of the infinite. Levinas's heteronomous phenomenology begins by reviving the Platonic distinction between need and eros or desire. A need is a privation which can be sated, but a desire cannot be satisfied. The ego satisfies its needs, and remains within itself, by appropriating the world. "Need opens upon a world that is for-me; it returns to the self. . . . It is an assimilation of the world in view of coincidence with oneself, or happiness." As the desired is approached, on the other hand, the hunger increases. It pulls the ego away from its self-sufficiency. Thus, needs belong to the realm of the Same, while desires pull the ego away from the Same and toward the beyond. Nonetheless, desires also originate in an ego, who longs for the unattainable. Therefore, desire has a dual structure

For Plato's distinction between eros and need, see Symposium, 189c-193 and Phaedrus, 265.

"Levinas, "The Trace of the Other," 350.
of transcendence and interiority. This dual structure includes an absolutely Other, the desired, which cannot be consumed and an ego who is preserved in this relationship with the transcendent. Thus, there is both a relationship and a separation.

This dual structure of relationship and separation is also key to Levinas's central concept, infinity. Levinas claims that any theory of the infinite that does not include both separation and relationship is inadequate. If the infinite does not include separation then it encompasses all of reality, forming a totality. Transcendence would be impossible. If the ego cannot have a relationship with the infinite then the infinite is irrelevant.

Of course, the infinite has been a serious philosophical question for centuries. To understand Levinas's conception of infinity it is necessary to examine previous formulations. A recurrent problem with theories of the infinite has been labelled the "two-world" problem. This problem presupposes that any true infinite must be separate from the finite things of this world. Thus, any knowledge of the infinite would require a radical separation from this
world. Plato, analyzes the major facets of the "two-world" problem in his Parmenides. In this dialogue, Plato's theory of forms are put to their harshest test. Socrates must defend the theory before the father of unity, Parmenides. Parmenides argues that if the forms are truly transcendent and always exist, then they can have no relationship or concern with the world of becoming. "The significance of things in our world is not with reference to things in that other world, nor have these their significance with reference to us." It follows that our worldly knowledge could not possibly know anything about the forms, because the two worlds do not intersect. Consequently, as finite beings it is not possible to have knowledge of infinity or transcendence. The "more formidable consequence" would be that a transcendent entity such as God, would have no knowledge or concern with this world. "Extreme transcendence must always pay the price of religious irrelevancy, whatever other apparent values it may possess."

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7Plato, Parmenides, 133e-134a.

8Bigger, Participation: A Platonic Inquiry, 54.
Hegel, in Book 2 of his *Logic*, rejects another common conception of the infinite. According to Hegel, the infinite cannot simply be a negation of the finite. Hegel labels this simplistic definition, the "bad infinite". Hegel reasons that a simple negation of the finite must be finite, because nothing can negate something which is finite, unless it was finite itself. In other words, the infinite is finite's other. As other, it is something in a relationship with another something. The infinite is thus limited by its relation to the finite, and as limited, it cannot possibly be infinite by-itself. "The infinite is only one of the two; but, as only one of the two, it is itself finite, it is not the whole but only one side; it has its limit in that which is opposed to it; it is thus the finite infinite."

Hegel argues that this relationship between the finite and the infinite is a mutual negation. In turn, each is posited and each is rejected by the other. This negation is a never ending process of positing, opposing, and overcoming. This

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relationship, itself, is without limit and thereby is the true infinite. However, this infinite excludes all radical alterity. Nothing can transcend the opposition between finite and infinite. The finite and the infinite form a unity which "has for image the circle, the line which has reached itself, closed and wholly present and having neither beginning nor end." According to Levinas, this theory exemplifies Hegel's philosophy of totality. All of reality is encompassed in this relationship. No transcendence is possible.

Hegel's circular infinite is similar to the infinite embraced by the mystical tradition. In this tradition, the self is risen up and, however briefly, unites with the transcendent. This is often referred to as a loss of the self. According to Levinas, this mystical union should be rejected just as Plato rejected suicide at the beginning of the Phaedo.

"Socrates refuses the false spiritualism of the pure and simple and immediate union with the Divine, characterized as desertion; he proclaims ineluctable the difficult itinerary of knowledge starting from the

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10Hegel, Hegel's Science of Logic, 162.
In both the mystical tradition and Hegel's positive formulation of infinity, all of reality, including the individual person is subsumed under this unity or totality. Levinas, on the other hand, claims that the infinite must maintain the dual structure of Platonic desire; separation and relation.

To summarize: the philosophical problem of the infinite centers around two questions 1) How can the infinite exist and yet be beyond Being or, put another way, how can the infinite be known to exist and still be beyond Being? 2) How can the ego participate in the infinite without being consumed by it?

Levinas's conception of infinity struggles to preserve the dual structure of desire, both related and separated. Levinas believes he has found the formal structure for such an infinite in Descartes' Third Meditation. Descartes used the idea of the infinite as a proof of God's existence. He asks, how can a being such as the ego which is finite, have a conception of the infinite glory of God? "These attributes are so great and eminent, that the more

attentively I consider them, the less I am persuaded that the idea I have of them can originate in me alone. 12 Descartes concludes that the idea of the infinite must have been planted in him by an infinite being. Thus, God, an infinite being, must exist.

Levinas is not interested in Descartes' formulation as a proof of God's existence. Instead, Levinas uses the formal structure of Descartes' argument to establish both relation and separation between the ego and the infinite. First, the idea of the infinite allows Levinas to claim that the infinite can participate in the finite without being subsumed under the Same. Descartes' idea of the infinite is an idea which cannot be reduced to consciousness. It overflows thought itself. In Descartes' words, it is an idea without an ideatum. The idea is separated from the ideatum in a qualitatively different way than the separation between object and mind. It is an idea which cannot be reduced by the noesis, nor can rationality claim to have discovered it. Thus, the

12 Descartes, Discourse on Method and the Meditations, 124.
idea of the infinite is the ultimate non-adequation between the noesis and the noema.

It has been put into us. It is not a reminiscence. It is experience in the sole radical sense of the term: a relationship with the exterior, with the Other, without this exteriority being able to be integrated into the Same.\(^\text{13}\)

The idea of the infinite as non-adequation seems to solve Plato's "two-world" problem; the infinite is transcendent, yet it is still known.\(^\text{14}\) Of course, this knowledge has a different structure than the knowledge of objects. Descartes seems to grant this when he closes the Third Meditation by pausing "to consider, admire and adore the incomparable beauty of this immense light, as far, at least, as the strength of my mind, which is so to speak, dazzled by it will permit."\(^\text{15}\) Levinas also avoids the term knowledge


\(^{14}\)"To affirm the presence in us of the idea of infinity is to deem purely abstract and formal the contradiction the idea of metaphysics is said to harbor, which Plato brings up in the Parmenides--that the relation with the Absolute would render the Absolute relative." (Levinas, Totality and Infinity, 50).

\(^{15}\)Descartes, Discourse on Method and the Meditations, 131.
when discussing the infinite, instead he will refer to an experience, expression, or epiphany.

For Levinas, the second theoretical question of the infinite is crucial. How can the ego participate in the infinite without being consumed by it? If the ego is consumed, the responsible self disappears. Further, if the infinite embraces all of reality, including the ego, transcendence would be shattered. Levinas finds the necessary separation in the double origin of Descartes. Recall, that Descartes begins not with God, but with the cogito. Only later would he discover the glory of God. This double origin allows Levinas to posit separation.

The ambiguity of Descartes' first evidence, revealing the I and God in turn without merging them, revealing them as two distinct moments of evidence mutually founding one another, characterized the very meaning of separation. The separation of the I is thus affirmed to be non-contingent, non-provisional. The distance between me and God, radical and necessary, is produced in being itself.¹⁴

Relation is only possible between two separate entities and Hegel has shown that this separation cannot rely on pure opposition. For Levinas to

¹⁴Levinas, Totality and Infinity, 48.
establish transcendence, then, the self must have meaning independent of its relationship with the Other. The self must exist prior to its relationship with infinity. Levinas locates the needed separation in his phenomenology of interiority.

Before encountering the Other, the self eats, drinks, and breathes. It is self-sufficient, living within itself. This interiority does not constitute a drive for existence, a conatus essendi. Instead of preserving its own being, the self lives from enjoyment. As humans, we do not live on pure sustenance, instead we enjoy life, we seek contentment. "We live from 'good soup,' air, light, spectacles, work, ideas, sleep, etc. . . . Thus, things are always more than strictly necessary; they make up the grace of life." In fact, we will often pursue enjoyment at the expense of our very being. Levinas, in his analysis of interiority, is already moving away from ontology.

The reality of life is already on the level of happiness, and in this sense beyond

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"Levinas, Totality and Infinity, 110-2."
ontology. Happiness is not an accident of being, since being is risked for happiness.18

The self, by itself, does not exist. It is only drawn out of its self-sufficiency by the encounter with the Other. Prior to this encounter, the self is content to dwell, consume, and enjoy, without thought. Only when confronted with the Other will the self begin to contemplate itself. The ego is born when the Other shakes it to its foundations. Thus, the relationship with the Other precedes the "I think" of Descartes' famous formulation. Levinas, like Descartes, postulates a double origin. "Just as the interiority of enjoyment is not deducible from the transcendental relation, the transcendental relation is not deducible from the separated being as a dialectical antithesis forming a counterpart to the subjectivity, as union forms the counterpart of distinction among two terms of any relation."19

The idea of the infinite, approached as desire has the dual structure of relationship and separation. The desire for the infinite, leads the ego from its

18Levinas, Totality and Infinity, 112.

19Levinas, Totality and Infinity, 148.
lair, but cannot be satisfied. As Descartes writes, in the face of the infinite "I know that I am an imperfect, incomplete and dependent being, and one who tends and aspires unceasingly towards something better and greater than I am." Also, as desire, the idea of the infinite maintains a separated structure. By desiring the infinite, it becomes both worldly and otherworldly without forming a totality. It is both infinite and in-the-finite.

Infinity is produced by withstanding the invasion of a totality, in a contraction that leaves a place for the separated being. Thus relationships that open up a way outside of being take form. An infinity that does not close in upon itself in a circle but withdraws from the ontological extension so as to leave a place for a separated being exists divinely.

The Face

Descartes employed the idea of the infinite to prove the existence of God but Levinas uses the infinite to refer to the human Other. They both agree that infinitude overflows human thought, but Levinas asserts that the concrete form of this overflowing is

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30 Descartes, Discourse on Method and the Meditations, 130.

31 Levinas, Totality and Infinity, 104.
not initially a direct relationship with God, but the face to face relationship with the human Other. In Levinas's philosophy, the Other person is this exceptional thought which overflows thinking itself. According to Levinas, the face of the Other cannot be thematized. Thus, the ego has a conception of the Other, but cannot comprehend it, just as Descartes' cogito could not comprehend God. "So little does the other deliver himself over to me that he cannot be contained within the adequate idea of being but only within the inadequation par excellence of the idea of infinity." 22

How can the face lie beyond thematization? Of course, Levinas is not addressing the outward face, which can be comprehended by the senses or manipulated by doctors, but a face which is beyond perception. It is beyond thematization and the accusations of ontological categories. So, properly speaking, we cannot construct a philosophy of the face, or even a phenomenology of the face.

Therefore, Levinas usually refers to the face in the negative. The face does not really appear, it is

22 Levinas, "Transcendence and Height," 3.
not a "representation, it is not a given of knowledge, nor is it a thing which comes to hand."\textsuperscript{23} In its positive formulation, the face is the direct relationship with a substance \textit{kath auto}, by itself. It is "the archetype of direct relationship . . . a relationship with that which is."\textsuperscript{24} In Aristotelian terms, the face is a substance without form. The face "puts us in contact with a being that is not simply uncovered, but divested of its form, of its categories, a being becoming naked, an unqualified substance breaking through its form and presenting a face."\textsuperscript{25}

Substance without form is naked, unclothed by any countenance. "Prior to any particular expression and beneath all particular expressions, which cover over and protect with an immediately adopted face or countenance, there is the nakedness and destitution of

\textsuperscript{23}Levinas et al., "The Paradox of Morality," 169.

\textsuperscript{24}Levinas, "Freedom and Command," 21.

\textsuperscript{25}Levinas, "Freedom and Command," 20. Levinas is referring to Aristotle's \textit{Metaphysics}, Book VII.
the expression as such, that is to say extreme exposure, defencelessness, vulnerability itself."²⁶ "The face is a hand in search of recompense, an open hand. That is, it needs something. It is going to ask you for something."²⁷

The face of the Other has a paradoxical dual structure. While it is extreme frailty, it is also ultimate authority. The vulnerability of the face, commands me to respond, to do something, to ease its misery. This command does not carry the threat of force, instead it originates in frailty. The face is so destitute that it can only command. Thus, the face is pure expression. It expresses alterity itself, an alterity which overflows thought.

The content of the face's command is "thou shall not kill." This is the first word in Levinas's ethics. The face, which approaches as pure expression, as substance itself, beseeches the ego not to destroy it. In its mortality, the face summons me, as if its invisible death was my business.

Responsibility for the Other's death is not limited to

²⁶Levinas, "Ethics as First Philosophy," 83.

the ego's overt actions. Killing the Other can take on many forms. Does my very existence put the Other in harm, am I usurping a place that the Other needs to live? "I begin to ask myself if my being is justified, if the Da of my Dasein is not already the usurpation of somebody else's place."28 Just by existing, by eating, drinking, taking shelter, have I not "already oppressed or starved, or driven out into a third world. . . . It is the inability to occupy a place, a profound utopia."29 The ego is called by the face of the Other to justify its very existence. Has the ego done something to justify the space it appropriates? No longer is the primary question to be or not to be, but how can my existence be justified in the face of the Other? Levinas has moved from Dasein as a Being-toward-death to an ego concerned for the death of the Other. The ego knows that the Other will die, so the question is, what can be done in the meanwhile?

28 Levinas, "Ethics as First Philosophy," 85.
29 Levinas, "Ethics as First Philosophy," 82.
Responsibility

The face as pure expression calls the ego to respond, to do something to justify its existence. However, Levinas's theory of responsibility does not call for the annihilation of the ego. Levinasian responsibility maintains the dual structure of desire; that is, it questions the privileged place of the Same, but it keeps the ego intact, albeit in a subordinate position. Without a responsible self, responsibility loses its meaning.

Instead, Levinas furnishes a new way to think about responsibility: the ego does not choose to answer the Other's demand, to be human, it must respond to the Other. Responsibility is so extreme that it is the very definition of subjectivity, the ego is subject to the Other. "The I is not simply conscious of this necessity to respond ... rather the I is, by its very position, responsibility through and through."30 The epiphany of the Other's face draws the ego from its comfortable dwelling. Responsibility founds the ego. This primordial

30 Levinas, "Transcendence and Height," 12.
responsibility is concrete, infinite, and asymmetrical.

Levinas insists that the ethical relation is concrete and must be "enacted with full hands." A relationship with the infinite cannot be used as an excuse not to care about the world. Levinas often cites a Jewish proverb, "the other's material needs are my spiritual needs." To give, to be for the other, in spite of oneself, but while interrupting the for-oneself, is to take the bread out of one's mouth, to feed the hunger of the other with my own abstinence. Thus, Levinas's ethics demand concrete hospitality for the Other, be it the stranger, the widow, or the orphan.

What are the limits of this responsibility? According to Levinas, the face of the Other calls the ego to respond infinitely. The ego cannot comfortably rest from this responsibility. "At no time can one

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32 Levinas, Otherwise than Being, 56.
say: I have done all my duty. Except the hypocrite. 33 Just like desire, the more I respond to the Other, the more I am responsible. Responsibility is so extreme that the ego is responsible for the Other's responsibility. Levinas often cites Alyosha Karamazov as an example of this infinite responsibility. Alyosha boldly claims that "each of us is guilty before everyone, for everyone and for each one, and I more than others." 34

Is the Other also infinitely responsible for the ego? Is the ethical relationship symmetrical? No, Levinas calls for a radical asymmetry. The Other may be responsible for the ego, but that is his own affair. "I am responsible for the Other without waiting for reciprocity, were I to die for it. . . . The I always has one responsibility more than all the others." 35 Without this asymmetry ethics would lose its meaning because ethics, for Levinas, must be grounded in the beyond Being. Ethics requires the ego

33 Levinas, Ethics and Infinity, 105-6.


35 Levinas, Ethics and Infinity, 98-9.
to be radically dis-interested." The ego cannot demand reciprocity.

The recent movie *Schindler's List* nicely illustrates Levinasian responsibility." Oskar Schindler, a member of the Nazi party, had profited during World War II through the exploitation of Jewish slave labor. When he becomes aware of the atrocities committed by the Nazis, Schindler vows to save as many Jews as possible. Before his factory workers are disbanded and sent to Auschwitz for extermination, Schindler bribes the Nazi officers to allow him to export his workers to a factory in Czechoslovakia. Thus, Schindler was able to save over one thousand

3"It is on this question of symmetry that Levinas's thought decisively breaks with Buber's I-thou relationship. In Buber's formulation the I approaches and speaks first to the Thou, as if the I was investing the Thou with the right to respond. For Levinas, the Other speaks first, from an infinite height. For a discussion of Levinas's relationship with Buber see Robert Bernasconi, "Failure of Communication" as a Surplus: Dialogue and Lack of Dialogue between Buber and Levinas," in The Provocation of Levinas: Rethinking the Other. ed. Bernasconi and David Wood (London and New York: Routledge, 1988), 100-35.

Jews. For his actions, he was given a plaque in the Park of Heroes in Tel Aviv and declared a Righteous Person by the state of Israel.

Although he had saved so many, Schindler had not done enough. As he fulfilled his responsibilities, his responsibilities grew. Near the end of the movie, Schindler understands that all the money he had spent previously prevented him from buying the lives of a few more Jews. By eating, drinking, and taking shelter, Schindler has usurped the place of the Other.

Schindler: I could have got more out. I could have got more. I don't know, if I'd just.... I could have got more.

Itzhak Stern: Oskar, there are eleven hundred people alive because of you. Look at them! . . . . There will be generations because of what you did.

Schindler. I didn't do enough.

Stern: You did so much.

Schindler: This Car! Goeth would've bought this car. Why did I keep the car? Ten people right there. Ten people. Ten more people. This pin: two people. This is gold: two more people. He would've given me two for it--at least one, he would've given me one. One more person. A person's who's dead. For this! (crying) I could've got one more person and I didn't--and I didn't!3

3Spielberg, Molen, and Lustig, Schindler's List. Note: this exchange is not found in Keneally's novel.
The Divine

Like Descartes, who establishes the ego before discussing the idea of the infinite, Levinas establishes the ego and the Other before establishing the divine. Indeed, for Levinas it is only through the face of the Other that the divine appears. After a lecture, Levinas was asked by a fellow professor why he places ethics before divinity: "Is morality possible without God?" Levinas responded: "Is divinity possible without relation to a human Other?" Levinas is not atheistic, but is attempting to ground ethics in the beyond Being.

I am able to define God through human relations and not the inverse. The notion of God--God knows, I'm not opposed to it! But when I have to say something about God, it is always on the basis of human relations. . . . I do not start from the existence of a very great and all-powerful being. Everything I wish to say comes from this situation of responsibility which is religious and which the I cannot elude.

Levinas's conception of God contrasts with ontological and participatory theologies. Ontological theories assert that God is being par excellence. Such a conception places God in Being itself, thereby

"Levinas, "Ideology and Idealism," 247."
enslaving God to Being. More importantly, God as an eminent being, is within the grasp of the comprehending ego. A thematizable God is no longer transcendent. Against participatory theologies, Levinas’s formulation retains the dual structure of separation and relationship. "The comprehension of God taken as a participation in his sacred life, an allegedly direct comprehension is impossible, because participation is a denial of the divine, and because nothing is more direct than the face to face, which is straightforwardness itself."

Responding to the face of the Other renounces the drive toward being, and testifies to the infinite. Life tends toward self-preservation; to act otherwise is to give testimony to the glory of the otherwise than being which is the glory of God. The "otherwise than being" is worshipped only by a radical dis-interest-edness.

Conclusion

To summarize Levinas’s theory of radical alterity as it appeared in Totality and Infinity: the face, because it cannot be thematized, overflows all

"Levinas, Totality and Infinity, 78."
ontological categories. Thus, the face calls into question the ego's sovereign knowledge. The ego wishes to understand the Other, is drawn to the Other, but its desire can never be satisfied. Thus, the face, like the infinite, cannot be put into the accusative case. Instead, the face is experienced in the imperative or vocative cases. The face commands the ego to respond infinitely, a responsibility that grows as it is fulfilled. This desire guides the ego to the beyond, to God.

The phenomenology of the relation with the Other suggests this structure of Desire analysed as an idea of the Infinite. . . . The privilege of the Other in relation to the I--or moral consciousness--is the very opening to exteriority, which is also an opening to Highness.41

Levinas's formulation for radical alterity breaks down the tyranny of the Same. In its place, he discovers a transcendental basis for ethics in the face of the Other. Against Heidegger and Spinoza for whom the conatus essendi, the effort to exist, is the supreme law, Levinas proclaims a new law: "Thou shalt not kill." This new law is "a limitation on the conatus essendi. . . . A rupture is produced with

41Levinas, "Signature," 294.
being's own law, with the law of being. The law of evil is the law of being.\textsuperscript{42}

\textsuperscript{42} Levinas et al., "The Paradox of Morality," 175.
Chapter 3 outlined Levinas's heteronomic philosophy as it appeared in Levinas's first major work, *Totality and Infinity*. Levinas argued that the ego was shaken to its foundations by the face of the Other. The face of the Other calls the ego out of its selfish lair and demands a response. The ego is called by the Other to respond infinitely, concretely, and asymmetrically. In this ethical relationship, the ego is no longer primarily concerned with self preservation. Instead of subjective death, the death of the Other is the ego's primary concern.

Fundamental ethics supplants fundamental ontology.

This chapter is devoted to Derrida's insightful criticisms of *Totality and Infinity* and Levinas's responses to Derrida. Although Levinas, in response to Derrida, changed the metaphysical underpinnings of his ethics, the fundamental conclusion remains: the ego is still infinitely, concretely, and asymmetrically responsible for the Other.

Levinas's radical interpretation of the Western tradition remained largely ignored until Jacques
Derrida published his extensive commentary, "Violence and Metaphysics". Although Derrida praised the Levinasian project, he claimed that Levinas had ultimately failed in his attempt to establish a transcendent ethics beyond Being. Derrida argued that a philosophy that seeks to think otherwise than Being cannot rely on the dominant logos of the tradition.

"If one thinks, as Levinas does, that positive Infinity tolerates, or even requires, infinite alterity, then one must renounce all language, and first of all the words infinite and other."1

Levinas, who desires to replace ontology with ethics, relies, at least in *Totality and Infinity*, on terms laden with ontological undertones, such as, 'interiority', 'objectivity', 'in-finite', and 'epiphany'. Derrida claims that the philosophical tradition cannot be transcended with its own language.

Further, Derrida argued that Levinas's attempt to establish an originary ethics had failed because language is vital to the encounter with the Other. In *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas had claimed that the face appears as expression or discourse. From this

1Derrida, "Violence and Metaphysics," 114.
foundation, Levinas has claimed that he had developed a primary ethical relationship that preceded ontology. Derrida counters that if the Other relates to the ego linguistically, then ethics cannot be primary. After all, Derrida and Levinas had agreed that language itself is ontological and violent. Since language is thematizing, violent, and appropriative, our first encounter with the Other will then be thematizing, violent, and appropriative. A relationship based on violence and appropriation is hardly ethical. Thus, ontology precedes ethics.

More radically, Derrida argues that Levinas has failed in his attempt to discuss the positive infinite. In other words, Levinas failed in his attempted parricide of father Parmenides. Recall, that Parmenides had asserted that true transcendence was impossible because anything that can be known was caught inside Being. In the *Sophist*, Plato urges a parricide against Parmenides. The Eleatic Stranger calls for a discussion to establish "that what is not, in some respect has being, and conversely that what

\[\text{Cf. Derrida, "Violence and Metaphysics," 115-7.}\]
is, in a way is not." The attempted parricide was foiled because the Stranger was unable to name anything that was beyond Being. Levinas, on the other hand, adapted Descartes' idea of the infinite to show how a positive infinite could exist and be named and yet, remain separate from the ego.

Derrida argues that Levinas has failed in his attempt to formulate both separation and relationship with the infinite. First, Derrida revives Hegel's argument against the simple infinite. If the Other is the opposite of the Same, or even known only in relationship to the Same, then the Other is not the infinite because it is limited by its relationship with the Same. "If I cannot designate the (infinite) irreducible alterity of the Other except through the negation of (finite) spatial exteriority, perhaps the meaning of this alterity is finite, is not positively infinite." Furthermore, if Levinas claims that the Other is radical alterity or positive infinity, then the Other is unthinkable and unutterable. Thus,

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1Plato, Sophist, 241d.

Levinas's attempted parricide will fall short just as the Eleatic Stranger had.

As soon as one attempts to think Infinity as a positive plenitude (one pole of Levinas's nonnegative transcendence), the other becomes unthinkable, impossible, unutterable. Perhaps Levinas calls us toward this unthinkable-impossible-unutterable beyond (tradition's) Being and Logos. But it must not be possible either to think or state this call.

Derrida is willing to grant this radical alterity, but argues that it will not break from the totalizing philosophical tradition. "Contemplation" of the unthinkable-impossible-unutterable might be non-philosophy, but non-philosophy is bound to philosophy. Using Hegel's oppositional logic, Derrida claims that non-philosophy can only be known through philosophy, and thus is within its domain. He quotes, 'a Greek': "if one has to philosophize, one has to philosophize; if one does not have to philosophize, one still has to philosophize (to say it and think it). One always has to philosophize."

Also, Levinas's attempt to break out of the Greek tradition was doomed to fail, because he relied on the

"Derrida, "Violence and Metaphysics," 152."
Greek logos, the language of philosophy. Derrida claims that Levinas must move outside the reach of the Greek tradition to accomplish what a Greek, Plato, could never do. "Will a non-Greek ever succeed in doing what a Greek in this case could not do, except by disguising himself as a Greek, by speaking Greek, by feigning to speak Greek in order to get near the king?" In short, it is impossible to break out of the Greek tradition. It is impossible to articulate radical alterity. Father Parmenides lives!

**Otherwise than Being**

Levinas answered Derrida's three main concerns in his second major work, *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*. In response to Derrida's criticism of using the tradition's *logos* to break from the tradition, Levinas replaced such ontologically laden words as 'essence', 'totality', 'infinity', 'substance', and 'exteriority' with 'proximity', 'substitution', 'obsession', 'recurrence', and 'an-archy'. Thus, he purged, as much as possible, his later work of all ontological terminology.

"Derrida, "Violence and Metaphysics," 89."
Levinas also clarified the difference between the expression of the face and the language which Derrida claims is violent. Levinas concurs with Derrida: language, as it is usually conceived, is thematizing and thus violent to individuals. However, the primordial expression of the face is a non-thematizing saying that exists prior to the linguistic concepts, which are fundamental to the said. Against Derrida, Levinas is proposing an original discourse which is non-violent.

Now more aware of the distinctions between the saying and the said and the difficulty in discussing transcendence, Levinas's method in Otherwise than Being becomes much less thematic or logical, and much more repetitive and cyclical. Levinas writes in the preface, "the themes in which these concepts present themselves do not lend themselves to linear exposition, and cannot be really isolated from one another without projecting their shadows and their reflections on one another." Indeed, Otherwise than Being blends form and content. The content of the essay, the unthinkable-impossible-unutterable

"Levinas, Otherwise than Being, 19."
beyond Being is expressed in a non-ontological, non-thematizing form. For example, Levinas refrained from using the verb "to be" in its predicative sense. In its place he relied on participial constructions and series of clauses instead of sentences. Caution about terminology and syntax alone does not prevent the saying from being thematized. Any expression of the saying will reduce it to the said. Levinas confronts this problem by repetition, a continuous resaying of the said. The said will win out in the end, but it is the philosopher's task to retain an echo of that which cannot be thematized, the saying. "As the truth of what does not enter into a theme, it is produced out of time or in two times without entering into either of them, as an endless critique, or skepticism, which in a spiralling movement makes possible the boldness of philosophy, destroying, the conjunction into which its saying and its said continually enter." Thus, Otherwise than Being is not so much a proof of the beyond Being, but an oscillating, repetitive essay where the beyond Being is insinuated. Transcendence

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"Levinas, Otherwise than Being, 44."
or non-philosophy does not rely on philosophical reasoning, as much as it shines forth.

Despite the terminological changes, the changes in emphasis, and the difficulty of expressing the ineffable, Levinas's conclusions remain the same. The ego is called to a responsibility for the Other, a responsibility which is concrete, asymmetrical, and infinite. Since this responsibility comes from an anarchical relationship with the Other, ethics still precedes ontology.

The Saying and the Said

In *Otherwise than Being*, Levinas goes to great lengths to clarify the distinction between the saying and the said. This distinction is used on several different levels. Most simply, it is a direct answer to Derrida's charge that the initial relationship with the Other is violent if it based on language or discourse. More importantly, Levinas uses the relationship between the saying and the said, just as he earlier employed the Platonic concept of desire, as the paradigm for other aspects of his theory. The oscillating, but non-encompassing relationship between the saying and the said is extended to cover the
relationships between philosophy and non-philosophy, Hellenism and Judaism, and ethics and politics.

First, Levinas distinguishes between the saying and the said to counter Derrida’s criticism about the violence of the primordial relationship with the Other. Derrida argued that if the original relationship with the Other was enacted as discourse or language, then the original relationship is not ethical but violent. After all, language categorizes (accuses) the individual into a priori concepts. Individuality is subsumed by the genus. Derrida offers Levinas the means to overcome this obstacle. The original discourse would be ethical and "coherent if the face was only glance, but it is also speech . . . now there is no phrase which is indeterminate, that is, which does not pass through the violence of the concept."10 If Levinas claimed that the original discourse was a discourse before language, then Derrida's objection would be moot. This original discourse Levinas labels the saying, while the violent, ontological language he labels the said.

The distinction between the saying and the said is best understood in juxtaposition to traditional theories of expression. In the traditional view, language originates with the speaker. The speaker intends to speak, formulates thoughts into words, then expresses them. The ego is preeminent. Levinas, on the other hand, emphasizes the role of the addressee. The focus is thus shifted from the ego to the Other. "The activity of speaking robs the subject of its central position; it is the depositing of a subject without refuge. The speaking subject is no longer by and for itself; it is for the other."11

The traditional view of expression emphasizes the content of the communication, the said. In the realm of the said, the speaker assigns meanings to objects and ideas. It is a process of identification, a kerygmatics, a designating, a process of labeling "a this as that."12 This is the realm of totality and autonomy, "a tradition in which intelligibility derives from the assembling of terms united in a system for a locutor that states an apophansis. . . .

11Peperzak, To the Other, 221.

12Levinas, Otherwise than Being, 35.
Here the subject is origin, initiative, freedom, present."13 This realm is the domain of Husserlian time, where time is a series of instants which can be re-presented in the consciousness of the ego. "It is only in the said, in the epos of saying, that the diachrony of time is synchronized into a time that is recallable, and becomes a theme."14 This synchronic, totalizing world is the world of Derrida's violent language.

The realm of the said overlooks the most important aspect of communication, the Other. Prior to the speech act, the speaker must address the Other, and before the address is the approach of the Other or proximity. Before any speech, before any intention to speak, there is an "exposure of the ego to the other, the non-indifference to another, which is not a simple 'intention to address a message.'"15 The saying includes not only the content of the speech, but the process itself which includes the Thou who is addressed and the speaker as attendant to the spoken

13Levinas, Otherwise than Being, 78.
14Levinas, Otherwise than Being, 37.
15Levinas, Otherwise than Being, 48.
word. As Peperzak writes, "saying is a sort of foreword or 'preface' to the message that follows."\(^6\)

The Saying signifies otherwise than by its function as an attendant! Beyond the thematization of the Said and of the content stated in the proposition, apophansis signifies as a modality of the approach to the other person. The proposition is proposed to the other person. The Saying is a drawing nigh to one's neighbor.\(^7\)

While the said emphasizes the autonomous position of the ego, the saying tears the ego from its lair. The autonomous ego is forced out of its skin. The "saying uncovers the one that speaks, not as an object disclosed by theory, but in the sense that one discloses oneself by neglecting one's defenses, leaving a shelter, exposing oneself to outrage, to insults and wounding."\(^8\) In the saying, the ego is more than just exposed to the Other, it is assigned to the Other. Assignation supplants identification. "The one assigned has to open to the point of separating itself from its own inwardness, adhering to

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\(^6\)Peperzak, "Presentation," 60.


\(^8\)Levinas, Otherwise than Being, 49.
esse; it must be dis-interestedness."¹⁹ The saying is a de-posing or de-situating of the ego. Thus, the saying is otherwise than Being.

But, is it not possible to thematize this saying, to account for it with the concepts of the said? Is our understanding limited to the thematizable, or is there something beyond? According to Levinas, the saying cannot be entirely encompassed within the said.

_Saying Thou_ is not an _aim_, but precisely an allegiance to the Invisible, to the Invisible thought vigorously not only as the non-sensible, but as the unknowable and unthematizable _per se_, of which one can say nothing. The saying of Thou to the Invisible only opens up a dimension of meaning in which, contrary to all the other dimensions of thought, there occurs no recognition of _being_ depicted in the Said.²⁰

The approach toward the Other is non-thematizable, nonutterable, impossible because the saying is diachronous to the said. The realm of the said, is a synchronic time, where all of reality can be thematized and made present to the mind of the ego. The saying, on the other hand, "is the impossibility

¹⁹Levinas, _Otherwise than Being_, 49.

of the dispersion of time to assemble itself in the present, the insurmountable diachrony of time, a beyond the said."21 The saying comes from a time before the time of Being, and is thus irreducible to ontology. It is the past that was never present. "Dia-chrony is a structure that no thematizing and interested movement of consciousness--memory or hope--can either resolve or recuperate in the simultaneities it constitutes."22

The distinction between the saying and the said, is not unique to Levinas's philosophy. Similar distinctions have been made by other thinkers, such as, Heidegger and Derrida. Levinas's formulation is made unique by his claim that the saying is ethical. This ethical dimension is brought out in his analysis of proximity and substitution.

21Levinas, Otherwise than Being, 38.

22Emmanuel Levinas, "The Old and the New," in Time and the Other, trans. Richard A. Cohen (Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press, 1987), 137. This "un-reasonable concept" of a past that was never present is discussed below in the section on the trace.
Levinas develops his theory of proximity, again, in response to Derrida's criticisms about language. Levinas had subtitled *Totality and Infinity, "An Essay on Exteriority"*. Through his analysis of desire and the infinite, Levinas claimed the Other was truly exterior to the subject. However, he insisted that this relationship could not be reduced to spatial categories. Derrida rightly asks why Levinas still employs spatial vocabulary, such as exterior and interior "in order to signify a nonspatial relationship?" According to Derrida, this is another example of discussing infinity's excess in the language of totality; "that it is necessary to state the other in the language of the Same." Further, Derrida argued that Levinas's analysis of the face relied too much on Husserlian presence. The epiphany

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of the face closely resembled Husserl's notion of an object coming to presence before consciousness.

In Otherwise than Being, Levinas dis-stands himself from spatial language and Husserlian presence by downplaying the face and concentrating on proximity. For Levinas, proximity is not a spatial or locative term. "It is not even the overcoming or neglecting or denying distance--it is purely (though not at all simply), 'a suppression of distance." 26 Instead, proximity is the original approach of the Other, an approach which is prior to language and even address. Proximity, the pre-original approach, is prior to the ontological said, and is therefore, before Being.

In Otherwise than Being, Levinas conducts an extensive phenomenology to describe this pre-original proximity. Before speaking, the Other must approach, must somehow beckon the ego to speak. The Other affects the ego before the ego intends to be affected. "The neighbor strikes me before striking me, as though I had heard before he spoke." 27 Proximity is a

26Bauman, Postmodern Ethics, 87.
27Levinas, Otherwise than Being, 88.
response before any question, a saying before any said. Before the ego has a chance to designate the Other as a tode ti (a this), the ego has been assigned by the Other. This assignation disturbs the tranquil world of the ego and calls it to respond to the Other. Thus, proximity, like the face, does not originate in the ego, but is beyond cognition and intentionality. The ego is called out of its lair despite itself.

In proximity, a subject is implicated in a way not reducible to the spatial sense . . . . As a subject that approaches, I am not in the approach called to play the role of a perceiver that reflects or welcomes, animated with intentionality, the light of the open and the grace and mystery of the world. Proximity is not a state, a repose, but, a restlessness, null site, outside of the place of rest. . . . No site then, is ever sufficiently a proximity. ²⁸

This proximity of the Other affects the ego despite the ego. It is a radical patience, in the etymological sense. It is a passivity, but not a passivity as opposed to an action. It is passivity without choice. The ego does not intend to be affected, it is affected, affectation itself.

Proximity is a radical exposure of the ego. "It is in the risky uncovering of oneself, in sincerity,

²⁸Levinas, Otherwise than Being, 82.
the breaking up of inwardness and the abandon of all
shelter, exposure to traumas, vulnerability."^{19}
Proximity is a vulnerability which can only be for-
the-other, non-indifferent, and dis-interest-ed. As
non-intentional, this passivity signals an an-archical
responsibility.

The face itself constitutes the fact that
someone summons me and demands my presence.
Ethical proximity begins here: in my
response to this summons. This response
cannot be conceived of as the communication
of information; it is the response of
responsibility for the other man. In the
approach to others indebtedness takes the
place of the grasp of the comprehension of
knowledge.^{30}

Ethics precedes ontology because the realm of the
saying is diachronous to the realm of the said. The
passivity of proximity, which belongs to the realm of
the saying, cannot be synthesized into presence.
Passivity does not belong to a time which can be
reduced to an instant, com-prehendable to
consciousness; it is "incommensurable with the

^{19}Levinas, Otherwise than Being, 48.
^{30}Levinas, "Beyond Intentionality," 110.
In conclusion, proximity is a contact, a contact which exposes the Other to a diachronous time. This contact cannot be reduced to themes or presence.

Levinas responds to Derrida:

This exteriority has to be emphasized. It is not objective or spatial, recuperable in immanence and thus falling under the orders of—and in the order of—consciousness; it is obsessional, non-thematizable and, in the sense we have just described, anarchic.

Proximity is an an-archical assignation. The Other assigns the ego in a primordial time. Levinas, without using ontological language has revived his conception of an-archical responsibility. This responsibility is so extreme that the ego must substitute itself for the Other.

Such a placing in question signifies not a fall into nothingness but a responsibility for the other, a responsibility that is not assumed as a power but responsibility to which I am exposed from the start, like a hostage; responsibility that signifies, in the end, to the very foundation of my position in myself, my substitution for others. To transcend being through disinterestedness! Such a transcendence

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31Levinas, Otherwise than Being, 100.

32Levinas, Otherwise than Being, 102.
comes under the species of an approach to the neighbour without hesitation, even substitution for him?"3

The Trace

Before discussing the radical responsibility found in substitution, a possible objection to Levinas's later philosophy must be addressed. If the saying, the proximity of the Other is diachronous to the ego, then how can this proximity affect the ego? Has Levinas, by moving away from Descartes' idea of the infinite, re-opened the two-world problem? Levinas uses the trace, just as he used the idea of the infinite, to show how the infinite can affect the finite without being comprehended. "This way of passing, disturbing the present without allowing itself to be invested by the arche of consciousness, striating with its furrows the clarity of the ostensible, is what we have called the trace."34

3"Levinas, "Ideology and Idealism," 243.

The trace refers to the approach of the Other, to saying, to the an-archical, which affects the objective world, but without leaving any imprint. Levinas qua phenomenologist follows the traces of the infinite, just as the hunter follows the traces of the game or as a detective studies fingerprints. However, this trace is an exceptional sign, it leads to a signifier who cannot be found, who in fact, was never present. The trace is the only evidence from the perfect crime; it is unrectitude. The trace is accompanied by its own effacing; that is, it is wholly ab-stract, a drawing away. "To be qua leaving a trace is to pass, to depart, to absolve oneself." It is an absence that was never present. The trace belongs to the diachronous time of saying. It is an absence, which can never be re-presented. "A trace is a presence of that which properly speaking has never been there, of what is always past."

A trace, which affects the phenomenal order, and was not present, is an unreasonable concept. It

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"Levinas, "Meaning and Sense," 105.
defies logic. How is such a non-concept known? Perhaps, it is only known by a 'bastard reasoning', just as Plato describes the receptacle in the Timaeus. The receptacle "is an invisible and formless being which receives all things and in some mysterious way partakes of the intelligible, and is most incomprehensible." As beyond comprehension the trace breaks down the sovereignty of the ego. In fact, it points to the otherwise than Being.

How could one understand the conatus of being in the goodness of the Good? How in Plotinus, would the One overflow with plenitude and be a source of emanation, if the One preserved in being, if it did not signify form before or beyond being, out of proximity, that is, out of disinterestedness, out of signification, out of the-one-for-the-other? 

Divinity is experienced through the trace. The enigmatic trace could not have been left by objects of this world, it is beyond the sphere of cause and effect. The trace was left by he who was not caused, but is origin itself. Levinas coins a term 'illeity', or he-ness to refer to this divinity. "Illeity is the origin of the alterity of being in which the in itself

37 Plato, Timaeus, 51ab.

38 Levinas, Otherwise than Being, 95.
of objectivity participates, while also betraying it."39 This illeity is not experienced directly, but by responding to the Other.

To be in the image of God does not signify being the icon of God, but to find oneself in his trace... He shows himself only by his trace, as is said in Exodus 33. To go toward Him is not to follow this trace which is not a sign; it is to go toward the others who stand in the trace of illeity.40

Substitution

In Otherwise than Being, Levinas re-develops his ethical theory without relying on ontological terms, such as, 'face' and 'infinity'. Instead, he relies on non-ontological, non-spatial terms, including, 'saying', 'proximity', and the 'trace'. Nevertheless, the key conclusion remains. Before any ontological proofs, before any intentional actions, the ego is responsible for the Other. As in Totality and Infinity, responsibility maintains the dual structure of desire: separation and relation.

Levinasian responsibility is radically for-the-Other, but it does not annihilate the ego. Without the ego, without separation, responsibility is


40 Levinas, "The Trace of the Other," 359.
meaningless. In Totality and Infinity, Levinas had established separation by conducting a phenomenology of interiority. Before the face's epiphany, the self was immersed in the world, pursuing its own enjoyments. The appearance of the Other, who is radically exterior, pulled the self away from its interiority. According to Derrida, this formulation of the interior and exterior, was too indebted to oppositional logic and spatial language.

In Otherwise than Being, Levinas discovers the necessary separation in his phenomenology of recurrence. Recurrence is an extraction of the ego from the original for-itself, but an extraction which bends back to the ego. Before the confrontation with the Other, the self is involved in its own affairs. This for-itself is confronted with the Other in proximity and is called out of its lair. The for-itself is assigned by the Other to respond to the Other's vulnerability. The Other assigns the for-itself to respond as a unique, irreplaceable individual. The self is obliged to respond, because no one else has been called. The for-itself becomes for-the-Other.
In the exposure to wounds and outrages, in the feeling proper to responsibility, the oneself is provoked as irreplaceable, as devoted to the others, without being able to resign, and thus as incarnated in order to offer itself, to suffer and to give. It is thus one and unique, in passivity from the start, having nothing at its disposal that would enable it to not yield to the provocation.41

Responsibility is so extreme that it is the very definition of the subject, a for-the-Other. This for-the-Other is even a radical substitution for-the-Other. This responsibility I cannot refuse nor can I be substituted by another. "I can substitute myself for everyone, but no one can substitute himself for me. Such is my inalienable identity of subject."42

The self only knows itself by a curving back upon itself, a recurrence. Having been assigned by the Other, having been pulled out of its lair, the subject has now discovered its true identity. The self is subjectivity in the sense that it knows itself only as subject to another. "To be in-onself, backed up against oneself, to the extent of substituting oneself for all that pushes one into this null-place, is for

41 Levinas, Otherwise than Being, 105.
42 Levinas, Ethics and Infinity, 101.
the I to be in itself, lying in itself beyond essence." 43

Levinas finds the proper separation because the self is two parts of a unicity. It is both for-itself and for-the-Other. "The for itself signifies self-consciousness; the for all, responsibility for the others, support of the universe." 44 So, Levinas has found interiority and exteriority, for-itself and for-the-Other.

This passivity undergone in proximity by the force of an alterity in me is the passivity of a recurrence to oneself which is not the alienation of an identity betrayed. What can it be but a substitution of me for the others? It is, however not an alienation, because the other in the same is my substitution of 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. 45

This recurrence maintains the Cartesian double origin. Logically, the ego is antecedent, but empirically, the Other is primary. Empirically, the ego is called to respond in a proximity which comes

43 Levinas, Otherwise than Being, 116.
44 Levinas, Otherwise than Being, 116.
45 Levinas, Otherwise than Being, 114.
from an anarchical past. The Other approaches and demands a response before any intentionality. "Responsibility for another is not an accident that happens to a subject, but precedes essence in it... I have not done anything and I have always been under accusation—persecuted." The self as subjectivity is produced from an immemorial past, which is diachronous to the self. It is a radical deposing of the self which occurs prior to the existence of the self. "It is a withdrawal in oneself which is an exile in oneself, without a foundation in anything else, a non-condition. The withdrawal excludes all spontaneity, and is thus always already effected, already past." This past is beyond the realm of ontology. It is otherwise than Being.

From his new, non-ontological foundation, Levinas continues to extol a responsibility that is concrete, infinite, and asymmetrical. Responsibility must be concrete because the ego is not called to respond from a transcendent being or ideal imperative, but from the approach of an incarnate Other. The subject who

"Levinas, Otherwise than Being, 114.

"Levinas, Otherwise than Being, 107."
responds is also an incarnate being, who can only respond with concrete hospitality. This hospitality is so extreme that the ego must be "capable of giving the bread out of his mouth, or giving his skin."48

Substitution has the structure of an infinite desire. The closer it is approached, the more the desire grows. The more the self discovers itself as for-the-Other, the more it becomes aware of its increasing responsibility. "The more I answer the more I am responsible; the more I approach the neighbor with which I am encharged the further away I am. This debit which increases is infinity as an infinition of the infinite, as glory."49 The ego as recurrence, that is, as de-position, can only discover itself through the Other. "The more I return to myself, the more I divest myself . . . the more I discover myself to be responsible; the more just I am, the more guilty I am."50

Finally, responsibility is asymmetrical because it is based on the substitution of a unique individual

48Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 77.
49Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 93.
50Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 112.
for the Other. "I can substitute myself for everyone, but no one can substitute himself for me."\textsuperscript{51} The ego is called by the Other to substitute himself completely, to take his place. The ego as Being-for-the-Other, by its very nature prohibits any reciprocity. "It is I who am integrally or absolutely ego, and the absolute is my business. No one can substitute himself for me, who substitutes myself for all."\textsuperscript{52}

Oscillation Between the Saying and the Said

Starting from the an-archical saying Levinas has re-developed his ethical philosophy. Although the world of the saying is originary, Levinas does not abolish the important place held by the ontological said. The saying requires the said. For instance, to communicate the saying, indeed, to write Otherwise than Being, Levinas must employ the said. The saying must spread out and assemble itself into essence, posit itself, be hypostatized, become an eon in consciousness and knowledge, let itself be seen, undergo the ascendancy of being. Ethics itself, in its

\textsuperscript{51}Levinas, \textit{Ethics and Infinity}, 101.

\textsuperscript{52}Levinas, \textit{Otherwise than Being}, 126.
saying which is a responsibility requires this hold. 53

The an-archical saying must be thematized, but it should not be forgotten. Steps must be taken to maintain the potency of the ethical saying. According to Levinas, this is the proper, albeit neglected, duty of philosophy. Levinas by writing tomes is trying to unsay the said. Strangely enough, producing more said is the proper modality of unsaying. The task of the philosopher is ceaselessly to move backward to the time of the saying, to re-say continually the said. This is a peculiar type of philosophical reduction.

The reduction is reduction of the said to the saying beyond the logos, beyond being and non-being, beyond essence, beyond true and non-true. It is the reduction to signification, to the one-for-the-other involved in responsibility (or more exactly in substitution), to the locus or non-lieu, locus and non-lieu, the utopia of the human. 54

Although the saying is originary, it has been mostly forgotten in favor of the said in the Western philosophical tradition. "I wonder whether, in that whole tradition, language as Said has not been

53 Levinas, Otherwise than Being, 44.

54 Levinas, Otherwise than Being, 45.
privileged, to the exclusion or minimizing of its dimension as *Saying*.

Levinas desires to resuscitate the underprivileged term, the saying, as a means of checking the thematizing discourse of the Said. However, Levinas is well aware that the pre-original term requires the privileged term in order to be universalized.

This oscillation between the saying and the said serves as a paradigm for Levinas's later philosophy. Levinas's entire project was to resuscitate the forgotten terms in the Western philosophical tradition. His writings are filled with such hierarchical pairs as; Same/Other, Greek/Jew, philosophy/non-philosophy, autonomy/heteronomy, ontology/ethics, synchrony/diachrony, and most important for this essay, politics/ethics. Each pair is mutually interdependent, but the second unit of the pair, although pre-original, has been neglected in the

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55 Levinas, "Everyday Language and Rhetoric without Eloquence," 141.

56 On this point, I am indebted to Susan Handelman's excellent exegesis of Levinas's method, especially as it relates to the dichotomies of philosophy / non-philosophy and Greek / Jew. (Handelman, *Fragments of Redemption*, 233-249 and 263-275).
tradition, while the hegemonic first term has been unrestrained. Levinas seeks to restore balance to the pairs without ignoring either.

For example, Levinas will attempt to resuscitate a pre-original ethics to balance the political. Politics, left unrestrained by ethics, will devolve into tyranny. However, Levinas does not eschew the political. He understands that it is necessary to universalize the ethical. In many ways this structure mirrors the dual structure of desire. The desired or transcendent element is pre-original to the ego, but the ego has been privileged in the tradition. Levinas re-emphasizes the transcendent term, but does not wish to do away with the ego. The transcendent needs the ego, but also must restrain it. What is most important is the oscillation that Levinas maintains between the two terms. As Handelman writes, "in Otherwise than Being, this conjunction and becomes the back-and-forth 'oscillation' of saying and said, philosophy and skepticism, subject and other, ethics and ontology, ethics and politics."\(^7\)

\(^7\)Handelman, *Fragments of Redemption*, 234. This Levinasian "method" closely resembles the more formal aspects of Derridean deconstruction. It is beyond the
Skepticism and Anarchical Ethics as Non-Philosophy

Finally, the exposition returns to Derrida's most serious charge. Derrida argued that Levinas's thought failed in its attempt to move outside of philosophy. The parricide of Parmenides had been foiled. The analysis of oscillation in Levinas's work shows that he is not arguing for an overcoming of philosophy, nor is he attempting a parricide. Levinas is simply calling for a reprieve (or in Derrida's terminology a 'deferral'). He is asking that non-philosophy serve as a check on philosophy. Non-philosophy can only check philosophy if it is not consumed by it, that is, if they exist in separation. Levinas is seeking a pre-philosophical experience which is radically Other to philosophy. This non-philosophy can infuse philosophy and revive it, but cannot be entirely subsumed in philosophy.

Levinas does not have to go far to find an example of this peculiar constellation of thought which cannot be reduced to philosophy. He has already

scope of this essay to compare and contrast the Derridean and Levinasian methods. For a good introductory discussion of Derridean methodology see Irene Harvey, *Derrida and the Economy of Différance* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986).
argued that philosophy as thematizing discourse must continually unsay the said. This unsaying, this calling into question of philosophy has been the traditional function of skepticism. "Philosophy's other is skepticism, which disrupts the system and universal reasoning. What skepticism objects to is not important: what is important is the perennial need for philosophy to apologize, to justify its answers to another." Levinas is not calling for a return to skepticism, but only employs it as an example of how non-philosophy is not "to philosophize still." Skepticism, by its very resilience, seems to be diachronous to the philosophical said. Skepticism, which maintains separation from philosophy, is a form of non-philosophy.

Philosophy is not separable from skepticism, which follows it like a shadow it drives off by refuting it again at once on its footsteps. Does not the last word belong to philosophy? Yes, in a certain sense, since for Western philosophy the saying is

exhausted in this said. But skepticism in fact makes a difference, and puts an interval between saying and the said. Skepticism is refutable, but it returns."

Levinas also claims that his ethics which is based on the an-archical responsibility for the Other, is an example of non-philosophy. Or, to use Levinas's metaphor, this an-archical ethics is the Jewish moment in his philosophical thought. To reiterate, in his philosophical works, Judaism does not refer directly to the God of the Old Testament, but is a metaphor that refers to those moments in Western philosophy that exceed the grasp of totality and autonomy. These moments include Plato's Good beyond Being, Aristotle's active intellect, Descartes' idea of the infinite, and many others. In these Jewish moments, Western philosophy was aware of its limits and knew that there was something beyond its reach. Although philosophy must return to its Greek moment of ontology and thematizing discourse, it must not forget these Jewish moments. Non-philosophy must continually reinvigorate philosophy. For Levinas, the Jewish moment, par excellence, is found in the ethical relationship with

"Levinas, Otherwise than Being, 168."
the Other. This moment lies outside the grasp of autonomy and totality. Philosophy cannot encompass the face of the Other. There is a place for non-philosophy. Levinas responds to Derrida:

It is not always true that not-to-philosophize is still to philosophize.60 Not to philosophize would not be to philosophize still.61

Conclusion

In Totality and Infinity, Levinas sought to establish an ethics that preceded ontology, an ethics based on the face of the Other. Levinas’s formulation was sharply rebuked by Derrida for failing to establish an originary ethics. In response, Levinas changed the foundations of his thought. Most importantly, Levinas re-thought how difficult it is to establish an originary transcendence. As Bernasconi wrote, "one cannot simply pass beyond the confines of Western ontology by edict alone."62

Beginning with the modest claim that communication requires an approach of the Other, 

60Levinas, "Ideology and Idealism," 235.
61Levinas, "God and Philosophy," 186.
Levinas re-developed his theory of an-archical responsibility. Before the ego intends to speak, the Other approaches and demands a response. This demand calls the ego out of itself, to become for-the-Other. The ego becomes the very definition of subjectivity. It is subject before it exists. Thus, "responsibility for another is not an accident that happens to a subject, but precedes essence in it." The approach of the Other leads to an otherwise than Being.

The face of the other in proximity, which is more than representation, is an unrepresentable trace, the way of the infinite. . . . it is because in an approach, there is inscribed or written the trace of infinity, the trace of a departure, but trace of what is inordinate, does not enter into the present, and inverts the arche into anarchy, that there is forsakeness of the other, obsession by him, responsibility and a self. The non-interchangeable par excellence, the I, the unique one, substitutes itself for others. Nothing is a game. Thus being is transcended.

The most important aspect of Otherwise than Being is Levinas's attempt to resay the said. His method of repetition and oscillation is an attempt to revive a

"Levinas, Otherwise than Being, 114.

"Levinas, Otherwise than Being, 116-7."
non-philosophy which will check the hegemony of philosophy. Levinas's essay oscillates between the saying and the said. This oscillation was used by Levinas to refer to the relationship between philosophy and non-philosophy.

This structure can also be used to analyze the relationship between ethics and politics in Levinas's thought. Ethics which is a manifestation of the saying, has been subordinated by politics, a manifestation of the said. What is needed is a resuscitation of the ethical to check the political. However, the political should not abandoned, because it is needed by the ethical. This oscillating relationship can be transformed using Levinas's metaphors: the Hebraic has been subordinated by the Greek. While the Hebraic, ethical tradition needs to be resuscitated, it should not supplant the Greek tradition of ontology and politics. They should coexist. Thus, it was most appropriate for Derrida to begin "Violence and Metaphysics" with this quotation from Matthew Arnold.

Hebraism and Hellenism, --between these two points of influence moves our world. At one time it feels more powerfully the attraction of one of them, at another time of the
other, and it ought to be, though it never is, evenly and happily balanced between them."

"Derrida, "Violence and Metaphysics," 79.
CHAPTER FIVE

ETHICS AND POLITICS: ANARCHY AND JUSTICE

Chapters 3 and 4 showed how the ego, and philosophies that privilege the ego, are overturned by Levinas's heteronomous philosophy. According to Levinas, the ego is called into question by the anarchical relationship with the Other. The ego no longer strives for self-preservation, but rather is called to respond to the Other. Ethics begins not from the self, but from the Other.

This chapter will show how Levinas's radical, heteronomous ethics can be extended to the political realm. First, it must be demonstrated that Levinas's thought is not apolitical even though he is deeply suspicious of traditional political thought. Second, Levinas's phenomenology of the Third person, "the Third" (la tiers) will be presented as his theoretical move from ethics to politics.¹ Although the Third universalizes the anarchical relationship with the

¹"The Third" will be capitalized because it refers to a specific other person, an Other, who by pure circumstance stands outside the original relationship between the ego and the Other. The Third as (an-)Other demands the same infinite responsibility as the Other.
Other into politics, it does not supplant the original ethical relationship with the other person, the Other. Instead, there is a never-ending oscillation between ethics and politics. This oscillation is discussed in the third section of the chapter. The final section describes the Levinasian state which balances the demands of both ethics and politics.

The Politics of Suspicion

Levinas begins Totality and Infinity by asking whether or not we are duped by morality. According to Levinas, morality can only have meaning when it has its own justification, when it is not absorbed by ontology and politics, when it exists outside of the violence of ontology and politics. In the terms of Totality and Infinity, ethics will have meaning "only if the certitude of peace dominates the evidence of war." Levinas responds that we are not duped by morality. He finds

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1Levinas, Totality and Infinity, 21.

2Levinas, Totality and Infinity, 22.
the certitude of peace in the non-ontological saying, in proximity, and in the an-archical substitution for the Other. The primordial relationship with the Other is originally peaceful. Ethics has its own justification.

On equal footing is the question: are we duped by politics? Is it worthwhile to theorize about politics, or is the existent regime, the one that is the strongest, always the best regime? Can there be another foundation for politics or does politics carry its own justification? In Levinasian terms, is it possible to construct a politics which maintains the ethical relationship with the Other, one which does not reduce the Other, but preserves alterity? To paraphrase Levinas, the crucial question is not "to be or not to be?" but rather: How can the state be justified in the face of the Other?

Despite the importance of the political question, Levinas very rarely discusses politics at length. This neglect is best understood in relation to his suspicion of traditional ethics. Levinas is acknowledged to be one of the foremost ethical thinkers of our century. Yet, as Robert Bernasconi
pointed out in a recent essay, Levinas rarely confronts traditional ethical thought, including the ethics of Aristotle, Aquinas, Kant, or Hegel. "Alongside Levinas's relative silence about the tradition of philosophical ethics is his equally puzzling silence about the critiques of Jewish morality to be found in Hegel and Nietzsche."

Like many other nineteenth and twentieth century philosophers (Marx, Nietzsche, Freud, Foucault, and Derrida come to mind), Levinas harbors a deep suspicion toward traditional ethical theories. Why would such a highly regarded philosopher of ethics choose largely to ignore the ethical tradition? Levinas disregards most of the tradition because his critique of ethics is radical, that is, he attacks the roots of the tradition. Levinas claims that the ethical tradition subordinates ethics to ontology; ethics is derived from an eminent being or the contemplation of an autonomous individual. Levinas, on the other hand, provides ethics with a justification beyond ontology. Thus, he confronts the

ontological foundations of traditional ethical theories, but rarely the theories themselves. Levinas, the great ethical thinker of our century, is more of a metaphysician than an ethicist.

Levinas's assault on the foundations of traditional ethical philosophy changes the very nature of ethics. No longer is ethics a prescription for correct behavior that may be freely chosen or refused. No longer does ethics require that this prescription be capable of being carried out. No longer does ethical action have a limit. No longer is the conscience the final arbiter of ethical action. Instead, Levinas claims that ethics is pre-originary, based on a bad conscience, and requires an infinite responsibility for the Other. In Levinas's ethics, the ego is no longer concerned primarily with itself, nor does it follow an abstract set of rules derived by reason. Instead, the ego is concretely, asymmetrically, and infinitely responsible for the Other. Levinas's suspicion leads to a radical transformation of ethics.

5This "traditional" formulation of ethics is outlined in Bernasconi, "The Ethics of Suspicion," 3.
Levinas's attitude toward traditional political thought parallels his attitude toward traditional ethical thought. Levinas rarely confronts the great thinkers of the Western political tradition. For example, he never discusses, at length, such prominent political thinkers as Machiavelli, Hobbes, Locke, Montesquieu, or Rousseau. And when he discusses thinkers such as Plato, Aristotle, Aquinas, Spinoza, and Hegel he emphasizes their metaphysical theories instead of their extensive political thought.

Just as he attacks the foundations of Western ethical thought, Levinas attacks the underlying presupposition of Western political thought; namely, that political thought begins with the self. Levinas's critique of Western political thought is best applied to modern political thinkers such as Hobbes, Spinoza, and Locke, who base their political thought on self-preservation. For instance, Hobbes claims that men's actions are determined by desires and the highest desire is self-preservation, or in Spinoza's terminology, the conatus essendi, the effort to exist. According to Hobbes, to ensure
self-preservation, men desire security and its corollary, power. To ensure power, men must have more power.

I put for a generall inclination of all mankind, a perpetual and restlesse desire of Power after power, that ceaseth onely in death. And the cause of this, is not alwayes that a man hopes for a more intensive delight, than he has already attained to; or that he cannot be content with a more moderate power: but because he cannot assure the power and means to live well, which he hath present, without the acquisition of more.6

Since other men also ceaselessly desire power, each is an enemy to the others. In such a world there can be no science, no knowledge, no arts, "no Society; and which is worst of all, continuall feare, and danger of violent death; And the life of man, solitary, poore, nasty, brutish, and short."7 To ameliorate this war of all against all, a social contract is agreed upon, under which individuals lay down their rights to ensure peace. Politics is established to preserve self-interest.


7 Hobbes, Leviathan, 65.
Levinas argues that any politics, such as Hobbes', which begins with self-preservation, subordinates ethics to politics. Society is based on self-interest, not ethics. Instead of the originary peace necessary for ethics, there is an originary war which is not destroyed by the social contract, but is only concealed. As Pascal wrote,

They have used concupiscence as best as they could for the general good; but it is nothing but pretense and a false image of charity; for at bottom it is simply a form of hatred.

Men have contrived and extracted from concupiscence excellent rules of administration, morality and justice. But in reality this vile bedrock of man, this *figmentum malum*, is only covered, not removed.  

Levinas's critique of the foundations of political thought changes the very nature of politics. A politics based on the battle between autonomous selves, like Hobbes', is a negative politics whose primary purpose is to constrain individual desires. Levinas, on the other hand, insists that politics must have a positive role. Politics must serve ethics.


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The occidental ethic always proceeds from the fact that the other is a limitation for me. Hobbes says you can come directly to philosophy from this mutual hatred. Thus we could attain a better society without love for the other, in which the other is taken into account. That would be a politics that could lead to ethics. I believe, on the contrary, that politics must be controlled by ethics: the other concerns me.9

Although Levinas is suspicious of the Western political tradition, his thought is not apolitical as many have charged.10 His philosophy begins and ends with politics. Numerous commentators have noted the political motivations of Levinas's work. For example, Peperzak argues that "the point of orientation and the background of all other questions" in Totality and Infinity is "the question of how the violence that seems inherent to all politics (and thus also to history) can be overcome by true peace."11

9Levinas and Rôtzer, "Emmanuel Levinas," 59.


11Peperzak, To the Other, 122. Also, Simon Critchley wrote, "I would go further and claim that, for Levinas, ethics is ethical for the sake of
Politics is also a necessary step that Levinas's ethical thought must take. Just as the an-archical saying requires the ontological said, an-archical ethics requires politics. The mutually interdependent relationship between the saying and the said serves as the paradigm for the relationship between ethics and politics. Ethics, which is a manifestation of the saying, has been traditionally subordinated by politics, a manifestation of the said. A resuscitation of the ethical is needed to check the political. However, the political should not be abandoned. Ethics requires the political to be universalized into laws and institutions.

**Ethics to Politics: The Third**

Levinas's philosophy champions the ethical relationship with the Other, but this is not the end of his philosophy. According to Levinas, the Other drags the ego out of its selfish lair, and leads to ethics. However, Levinas worries that the

--that is, for the sake of a new conception of the organization of political space. . . . My claim is that politics provides the continual horizon of Levinasian ethics." (Critchley, The Ethics of Deconstruction, 223).
face-to-face relationship with the Other will devolve into another selfish lair. In this relationship, the ego can become infatuated with the Other to the point of ignoring all others. As Kant wrote, "complaisance toward those with whom we are concerned is very often injustice towards others who stand outside our little circle."12 This embrace of lovers, as Levinas calls it, is interrupted by the appearance of another person, "the Third" (la tiers). With the appearance of the Third, a host of new questions arise. Are both others the Other? How can the ego be infinitely responsible for more than one Other? Which Other should receive its attention first? What if one Other makes war on the other Other? Can the ego defend the Other against attacks from an-Other? If so, can the ego use violence, even kill an-Other in defense of the Other? The question of the Third disrupts Levinasian ethics and leads to politics.

If just the two of us were in the world, you and I, then this wouldn't be a question, then my system would work perfectly. I'm

responsible to the other in everything. In this anthropology his death, his being toward death, is more important to me than my being toward death. . . . But we're not only two, we're at least three. Even now we're three. We're one humanity. Then comes the question, the political question: Who's the first?\textsuperscript{13}

The third party occupies an equivocal position. It is "other than the neighbor, but also another neighbor, and also a neighbor of the other, and not simply his fellow."\textsuperscript{14} If the ego is confronted with one Other, then ethics is straightforward: the ego is infinitely, asymmetrically, and concretely responsible for the Other. However, with the appearance of the Third, the ego's attention is divided, no longer is it only intimate with the Other. Responsibility assumes a new appearance.

The appearance of the Third invariably extends the ego's responsibility because its appearance is not necessarily an empirical fact, nor does it come chronologically after the exposure to the Other. Simultaneously, the ego is confronted with the face of the Other and the Third. "Because there are more than

\bibitem{13} Levinas and Rötzer, "Emmanuel Levinas," 59-60.

\bibitem{14} Levinas, \textit{Otherwise than Being}, 157.
two people in the world, we invariably pass from the ethical perspective of alterity to the ontological perspective of totality. There are always at least three persons."15 Thus, in the face of the Other, the ego is confronted with the Third. Indeed, in the face of the Other, the ego is confronted with all of humanity. "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."16 The ego is now called to respond to all of humanity. As Burggraeve writes, "in the meeting with another person's naked face, I become confronted with all other people, who are just as much in need of my help as the one who stands before me."17 The ego can no longer prioritize those in proximity, it must give attention to all. The ego's dis-inter-ested-ness is now a concern for world peace. "To see a face is already to

16Levinas, Totality and Infinity, 213.
17Burggraeve, "The Ethical Basis for a Humane Society," 36.
hear 'You shall not kill', and to hear 'You shall not kill' is to hear 'Social justice.'

However, it is impossible to have a face-to-face relationship with each member of humanity. Those far away can only be reached indirectly through language, justice, and politics. Thus, the appearance of the Third extends the anarchical responsibility for the Other into the realm of the said, ushering in the latent birth of synchrony, consciousness, knowledge, justice, and politics.

The appearance of the Third opens up the dimension of justice. Judgements must be made. The ego must compare incomparable Others. "It is consequently necessary to weigh, to think, to judge, in comparing the incomparable. The interpersonal relation I establish with the Other, I must also establish with other men." Therefore, Levinas

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19Levinas, Ethics and Infinity, 90.
distinguishes the ethical relationship with the Other from justice which involves three or more people.\textsuperscript{20}

The an-archical relationship with the Other is the pre-linguistic world of the saying. Language is unnecessary to respond to the Other. The Third, however, demands an explanation. "In its frankness it [language] refuses the clandestinity of love, where it loses its frankness and meaning and turns into laughter or cooing. The third party looks at me in the eyes of the Other---language is justice."\textsuperscript{21} In order to judge between Others, they must be co-present, or synchronous. Thus, the Third also opens up the world of knowledge and consciousness.

Here is the hour and birthplace of the question: a demand for justice! Here is the obligation to compare unique and

\textsuperscript{20}This distinction between ethics and justice was not elucidated until Levinas's later writings. "In Totality and Infinity I used the word 'justice' for ethics, for the relationship between two people. I spoke of 'justice', although now 'justice' is for me something which is a calculation, which is knowledge, and which supposes politics; it is inseparable from the political. It is something which I distinguish from ethics, which is primary. However, in Totality and Infinity, the word 'ethical' and the word 'just' are the same word, the same question, the same language." (Levinas et al., "Paradox of Morality," 171).

\textsuperscript{21}Levinas, Totality and Infinity, 213.
incomparable others; here is the hour of knowledge and, then, of the objectivity beyond or on the hither side of the nudity of the face; here is the hour of consciousness and intentionality.22

Finally, the Third introduces the realm of politics. The ego's infinite responsibility must be extended to all humanity, no matter how far off. Ethics must be universalized and institutionalized to affect the others.

To the extent that someone else's Face brings us in relation with a third party, My metaphysical relation to the Other is transformed into a We, and works toward a State, institutions and laws which form the source of universality.23

Before examining the relationship between ethics and politics, several implications of Levinas's move from the Other to the Third need to be addressed. First, does the ego still have an infinite responsibility for the Other? In Otherwise than Being, Levinas defines justice as "the limit of responsibility and the birth of the question."24

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23Levinas, Totality and Infinity, 300.

24Levinas, Otherwise than Being, 157.
However, in the same work, he also claims that "in no way is justice a degradation of obsession, a degeneration of the for-the-other, a diminution, a limitation of anarchic responsibility." How can these conflicting statements be resolved? Either justice limits the responsibility for the Other or it does not. The contradiction is resolved by considering, once again, Levinas's theoretical emphasis on the separation between the saying and the said. Ethics is found in the anarchical realm of the saying, while justice is a part of the totalizing realm of the said. Ethics and justice exist in both relation and separation. Neither can be reduced to the other. Thus, justice cannot diminish the infinite responsibility for the Other: the ego remains infinitely, asymmetrically, and concretely responsible for the Other. This responsibility always maintains its potency. However, the ego is also invariably transported by the Third into the realm of the said. The ego must weigh its obligations. It is not possible to respond infinitely to all Others. The original demand for an infinite responsibility

"Levinas, Otherwise than Being, 159."
remains, but it cannot be fulfilled. Ethics must be universalized, but in attempting to do so, the ego has already reneged on its responsibility for the Other. Thus, Levinas's peculiar formulation; justice is unethical and violent. "Only justice can wipe it [ethical responsibility] away by bringing this giving oneself to my neighbor under measure, or moderating it by thinking in relation to the third and the fourth, who are also my 'others,' but justice is already the first violence." 26

The "logic" of separation between the saying and the said can also be applied to the question of self-interest and reciprocity. The realm of the said is a synchronic world where all of humanity, including the ego, is co-present. In this realm, the ego is bound by the same institutions, the same justice, and the same laws as all the others. In this world, the ego can reasonably expect to be treated with reciprocity from the others. "Subjectivity is a citizen with all the duties and rights." 27 However, the reciprocity found in the world of the said does not negate the


27Levinas, Otherwise than Being, 160.
prior asymmetry of the an-archical relationship with
the Other. Since the Third is known through the
Other, reciprocity is only a secondary movement. An-
archical responsibility remains.

Justice can be established only if I, always
evaded from the concept of the ego, always
desituated and divested of being, always in
non-reciprocable relationship with the
other, always for the other, can become an
other like the others. Is not the Infinite
which enigmatically commands me, commanding
and not commanding, from the other, also the
turning of the I into 'like the others,' for
which it is important to concern oneself and
take care? My lot is important but it is
still out of my responsibility that my
salvation has meaning.28

Finally, the relationship with the Third begs the
question of violence in the name of justice. Can the
ego with its infinite responsibility for the Other
actually harm an-Other to protect the Other? While
never explicitly condoning the use of physical force,
Levinas insists that the ego must defend the Other.

Surely, humility is the greatest of virtues
--one must be as dust which becomes trampled
down. But justice is necessary to preserve
the Others from evil ones. One cannot
forgive violence in the place of those who
have undergone it or died. This is the

28Levinas, Otherwise than Being, 160-1.
limit of substitution. To make peace in the world implies justice."

However, Levinas does explicitly grant that force is necessary to punish transgressors, but this punishment must be tempered by the ethical relationship with the Other. Punishment is necessary or evil will run rampant. "The extermination of evil by violence means that evil is taken seriously and that the possibility of infinite pardon tempts us to infinite evil. . . . Without a hell for evil, nothing in the world would make sense any longer." In his commentary on the lex talionis, the eye for an eye, Levinas describes how this punishment is necessary but must be tempered. The passage seems clear enough:

He who kills a man shall be put to death.
He who kills a beast shall make it good,
life for a life. When a man causes a
disfigurement in his neighbor, as he has
done it shall be done to him, fracture for
fracture, eye for eye, tooth for
tooth. . . . You shall have one law for the
sojourner and for the native; for I am the
Lord your God."

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"Quoted in Burggraeve, "The Ethical Basis for a Humane Society," 56.


Leviticus, 24:17-22.
Even in such a strict commandment, Levinas finds a "humanizing of justice." By placing the passage in context, Levinas concurs with the Talmudic Doctors, "the principle stated by the Bible here, which appears to be so cruel, seeks only justice." This justice is only possible by tempering the violence against evil.

Violence calls up violence, but we must put a stop to this chain reaction. That is the nature of justice. . . . Humanity is born in man to the extent that he manages to reduce a mortal offence to the level of a civil lawsuit, to the extent that punishing becomes a question of putting right what can be put right and re-educating the wicked. Justice without passion is the only thing man must possess. He must also have justice without killing."

How can an eye for an eye be translated into a softening of justice? Levinas, following the Talmudic tradition, claims that an eye for an eye refers to a fine. This "fine" may be the only possible form of justice, but it leaves open the way to the rich who can afford the fine. "They can easily pay for the

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"Levinas, "An Eye for an Eye," 147.
broken teeth, the gouged-out eyes and the fractured limbs left around them." The demand for a tempering of justice must be expressed in the harsh words of the lex talionis, so that the rich do not commit evil in good conscience. "Yes, eye for eye. Neither all eternity, nor all the money in the world, can heal the outrage done to man."35

In conclusion, the Third both extends and limits the responsibility for the Other. The ego's responsibility must be extended beyond the Other, to the Third, even to all of humanity. Further, the Third necessitates an extension of the ego's anarchical responsibility into the realm of the said, that is, responsibility must be made concrete in language, justice, and politics. Conversely, the

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34Levinas, "An Eye for an Eye," 147. Levinas is far from clear on how the lex talionis represents a fine. However, this argument is common among Old Testament scholars. See, for example, William W. Hallo, "Leviticus" The Torah: A Modern Commentary (New York: Union of American Hebrew Congregations, 1981), 939-40. As Levinas is quick to point out, the lex talionis is an extension of justice beyond the tribal system to all foreigners. (See, Leviticus 24:22) Cf. Plato who draws a long litany of distinctions between citizens and strangers. (See, for example, Plato, Laws, 850, 865-79).


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Third also limits the responsibility for the Other. Since the Third forces the ego to choose between Others, the ego's responsibility for the Other must be tempered by its responsibility for others. Moreover, the Other may behave in a way which negates the ego's infinite obligations. The Other can become an enemy.

If your neighbour attacks another neighbour or treats him unjustly, what can you do? Then alterity takes on another character, in alterity we can find an enemy, or at least we are faced with the problem of knowing who is right, and who is wrong, who is just and who is unjust. There are people who are wrong.3

Levinas uses the Third to move from the anarchical realm of ethics to the totalizing realm of language, justice, and politics. Levinas is not only interested in the ethical relationship with the Other, he is a social and political thinker. However, by placing his emphasis on the ethical relationship with the Other, Levinas has radically altered the relationship between ethics, justice, and politics.

Ethics and Politics: Hebraism and Hellenism

We should also say that all those who attack us with such venom have no right to do so.

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... along with this feeling of unbounded responsibility, there is certainly a place for defence, for it is not always a question of 'me' but of those close to me, who are also my neighbors. I'd call such a defence a politics, but a politics that's ethically necessary. Alongside ethics, there is a place for politics."

Levinas argues for a place for both ethics and politics, or, to employ his metaphor, a place for both the Jewish tradition of ethics and responsibility along with the Greek tradition of language, justice, and politics. This section will analyze the mutual necessity of both ethics and politics. According to Levinas, ethics and politics can both be needed only if there is separation, that is, if each has its own justification. Neither ethics nor politics should be taken to their extremes; each must be moderated by the other. "I think there's a direct contradiction between ethics and politics, if both these demands are taken to the extreme."3

Ethics must temper the political because politics unbounded leads to tyranny, absolute power of the

37 Levinas, "Ethics and Politics," 292.
38 Levinas, "Ethics and Politics," 292.
strongest. Further, politics ignores the individuality of each citizen, treating each as a cipher, a member of a species. "In political life, taken unrebuked, humanity is understood from its works—a humanity of interchangeable men, of reciprocal relations. The substitution of men for one another, the primal disrespect, makes possible exploitation itself."

Without a norm outside of the scope of the said, there is no standard to judge political regimes. The call for a standard by which to judge regimes is what Levinas means by a return to Platonism. Plato, in the Republic, had used the good beyond being as his standard. A return to Platonism would be necessary to restore "the independence of ethics in relation to history" and trace "a limit to the comprehension of the real by history." Levinas finds a standard in the ethical relationship with the Other.

The norm that must continue to inspire and direct the moral order is the ethical norm

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3Levinas, Totality and Infinity, 298. Note: "substitution" here refers to its everyday meaning and not to the technical meaning it acquires in Levinas's later works.

4Levinas, "Signature," 295.
of the interhuman. If the moral-political order totally relinquishes its ethical foundation, it must accept all forms of society, including the fascist or totalitarian, for it can no longer evaluate or discriminate between them. The state is usually better than anarchy—but not always. In some instances,--fascism or totalitarianism, for example--the political order of the state may have to be challenged in the name of our ethical responsibility to the other. This is why ethical philosophy must remain the first philosophy.\textsuperscript{41}

At the same time, ethics needs politics. To reach those others who are far away, ethics must be transfixed into language, justice, and politics. "As \textit{prima philosophia}, ethics cannot itself legislate for society or produce rules of conduct whereby society might be revolutionized or transformed."\textsuperscript{42} Although this universalization distances the ego from the Other, it must be done to reach the others.

We must, out of respect for the categorical imperative or the other's right as expressed by his face, un-face human beings, sternly reducing each one's uniqueness to his individuality in the unity of the genre, and let universality rule. Thus we need laws,

\textsuperscript{41}Levinas and Kearney, "Dialogue with Emmanuel Levinas," 30.

\textsuperscript{42}Levinas and Kearney, "Dialogue with Emmanuel Levinas," 29.
and—yes—courts of law, institutions and the state to render justice."

Further, politics is necessary because there are those who will refuse to heed the new law, "thou shall not kill." Levinas is well aware that this commandment is not an ontological impossibility. Many will take Cain's position and shun the responsibility for the Other. Thus, politics is necessary to prohibit murder, in all its forms. "A place had to be foreseen and kept warm for all eternity for Hitler and his followers."**

Both ethics and politics have their own justification. The justification for ethics is found in the face-to-face relationship with the Other. The justification for politics is to restrain those who follow Cain's position and ignore the responsibility for the Other. Politics does not subsume ethics, but rather it serves ethics. Politics is necessary but it must be continually checked by ethics. Levinas calls for a state that is as ethical as possible, one which

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"Levinas, "As Old as the World?" 87.
is perpetually becoming more just. Levinas calls for the liberal state.

The Levinasian State

According to Levinas, the move from the Other to the Third is the beginning of all violence. In the realm of the said, the ego must necessarily weigh others in the name of justice, but this process reduces the Other to a cipher. Strangely enough, justice is un-ethical. When justice is universalized into laws and institutions it moves yet another step away from the an-archical responsibility for the Other. The necessary universalization of ethical responsibility into the state is inherently un-ethical and violent. In the state, the ego is unable to respond directly to the face of the Other. Further, the institutions of the state treat the Other as an interchangeable cog in its machinery, thereby denying the transcendent element in man. Even when the state functions perfectly it is, by its very nature, opposed to ethics.

For me, the negative element, the lament of violence in the state, in the hierarchy, appears even when the hierarchy functions perfectly, when everyone submits to universal ideas. There are cruelties which are terrible because they proceed from the
necessity of the reasonable order. There are, if you like, the tears that a civil servant cannot see: the tears of the Other.4

Vigilance against violence in the state is essential. Institutions need to be constantly checked by the ethical relationship with the Other.

In order for everything to run along smoothly and freely, it is absolutely necessary to affirm the infinite responsibility of each, for each, before each... As I see it, subjective protest in not received favourably on the pretext that its egoism is sacred, but because the I alone can perceive the "secret tears" of the other which are caused by the very reasonableness of the hierarchy.4*

The state must be constantly reminded of its inherent violence. Levinas finds just such a self-critical state in the modern liberal state. The liberal state "always asks itself whether its own justice really is justice."47

What qualities does the liberal state possess that makes it self-critical? First, there is the

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"Levinas, "Transcendence and Height," 23.

"Levinas, "Transcendence and Height," 23.

freedom of the press, the freedom to criticize the government, to speak out against injustice.

You know the prophets of the bible, they come and say to the king that his method of dispensing justice is wrong. The prophet doesn't do this in a clandestine way: he comes before the king and he tells him. In the liberal state, it's the press, the poets, the writers who fulfill this role."

Second, in the liberal state, the leader is not above the people, but is chosen from among the people. A ruler who is in an ethical relationship, sees humanity through the Other's eyes. Against the Platonic formulation that the best ruler is the one who is best in control of himself, Levinas argues that the best ruler is the one who is in an ethical relationship with the Other. "The State, in accordance with its pure essence, is possible only if the divine word enters into it; the prince is educated in this knowledge.""

However, for Levinas, the most important component of the liberal state is its call for a

"Levinas and Mortley, "Emmanuel Levinas," 19.

"permanent revolution".50 The Levinasian liberal state is always trying to improve itself, trying to be more just. It is "a rebellion that begins where the other society is satisfied to leave off, a rebellion against injustice that begins once order begins."51 Although no state can be purely ethical, the liberal state at least strives for ethics. Such a state is the desideratum if politics cannot be ethical.

There is no politics for accomplishing the moral, but there are certainly some politics which are further from it or closer to it. For example, I've mentioned Stalinism to you. I've told you that justice is always a justice which desires a better justice. This is the way that I will characterize the liberal state. The liberal state is a state which holds justice as the absolutely desirable end and hence as a perfection. Concretely, the liberal state has always admitted—alongside the written law—human rights as a parallel institution. It continues to preach that within its justice there are always improvements to be made in human rights. Human rights are the reminder that there is no justice yet. And consequently, I believe that it is absolutely obvious that the liberal state is more moral than the fascist state, and closer to the morally ideal state."52

50This discussion is indebted to Burggraeve's excellent analysis (Burggraeve, "The Ethical Basis for a Humane Society," 52-5).

51Levinas, "Ideology and Idealism," 242.

Conclusion: An-archy and Justice

Since "it is impossible to escape the State," Levinas insists that the state be made as ethical as possible. The world of institutions and justice must be held in check by the an-archical responsibility for the Other. Levinas calls for both an-archy and justice. Alongside the an-archical responsibility for the Other there is a place for the realm of the said, which includes ontology, justice, and politics.

Levinas's thought is not apolitical as many have charged. His harsh critiques of the political realm refer to a politics unchecked by ethics. For example, in Totality and Infinity, Levinas sees politics as antithetical to an ethics based on the Other. "The art of foreseeing war and winning it by every means--politics--is henceforth enjoined as the very exercise of reason. Politics is opposed to morality, as philosophy to naivete." Politics,


"See, for example, Wingenbach, "Liberating Responsibility," 19-45; Valevicius, From the Other to the Totally Other, 89-91, 150; and Weiss, "Ethics as Transcendence And the Contemporary World," 147.

"Levinas, Totality and Infinity, 21.

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left to itself, by necessity, totalizes the Other by reducing him or her to abstract categories.

Levinas will call for a politics that is founded on ethics and not on ontology. The state must be answerable to the an-archical relationship with the Other, it must strive to maintain the exteriority of the Other. Levinasian heteronomic political thought oscillates between the saying and the said, an-archy and justice, ethics and politics. The liberal state is the concrete manifestation of this oscillation. Levinas calls for a balance between the Greek and the Judaic traditions. Neither tradition should dominate.

The fundamental contradiction of our situation (and perhaps of our condition) . . . is the simultaneous necessity both of the hierarchical structure taught by Athens and of the abstract and somewhat anarchic ethical individualism, taught by Jerusalem, in order to suppress the violence. Each of these principles, left to itself, only hastens the contrary of that which it wishes to insure."

"Levinas, "Transcendence and Height," 24."
CHAPTER SIX

LEVINAS'S HETERONOMOUS POLITICAL THOUGHT IN PERSPECTIVE

The preceding chapter developed the foundations of Levinas's heteronomous political thought. Starting from the an-archical relationship with the Other, Levinas uses the Third to move to the realm of the said, which includes justice and politics. According to Levinas, the state must balance both the ethical realm of the saying and the universal, violent realm of the said. Levinas claims that this balance can be found in a liberal state that always strives to be more just.

This chapter places Levinas's heteronomous political thought in perspective. The first section distinguishes Levinas's heteronomous political thought from the autonomous political thought of Hobbes and Locke. Levinas, like Hobbes and Locke, embraces the liberal state but he provides it with a new, more ethical foundation. This new foundation changes the nature of key liberal concepts such as natural rights and freedom.

Levinas's critique of Hobbes and Locke is, in many ways, shared by Hegel. Both claim that
traditional liberal theory has unethical foundations. However, Levinas disagrees with Hegel's solution for infusing ethics into liberalism. Levinas claims that the Hegelian solution, the modern nation-state, totalizes the irreducible alterity of the Other. Against the totalizing politics of Hegel, Levinas posits a radical pluralism based on the Other. The second section of this chapter examines Levinas's critique of Hegel's totalizing politics.

**Heteronomy Contra Autonomy: Levinas Contra Hobbes and Locke**

Although Levinas embraces the liberal state, he distances himself from the classical liberal state of Hobbes and Locke. He claims that each grounds their political thought on the freedom of the self and thus, do violence to the Other. Politics is established to prevent the greatest harm (*summum malum*), rather than to promote the greatest good (*summum bonum*). For example, Hobbesian political thought (outlined in chapter 5) begins with free individuals seeking to fulfill their personal desires. Conflicting desires leads to widespread enmity, a war of all against all. From fear of violent death men join together in a
social contract. Politics does not originate in the _sumnum bonum_, but in the _sumnum malum_.

Locke's political thought seems to originate from a more peaceful state of nature than Hobbes' because he supplements the drive for self-preservation with a concern for others. Locke's law of nature teaches that, "all being equal and independent, no one ought to harm another in his life, health, liberty, or possessions." Locke claims that Hobbes has confused the state of nature and the state of war. "Here we have the plain difference between the state of nature and the state of war, which however some men have confounded, are as far distant, as a state of peace, good will, mutual assistance and preservation, and a state of enmity, malice, violence and mutual destruction are one from another."

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1 For an excellent discussion of the consequences of this replacement of the classical ideal of the _sumnum bonum_ with the _sumnum malum_ see Eric Voegelin, *The New Science of Politics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1952), 178-84.


However, Locke's peaceful state of nature quickly degenerates into a war of all against all with the invention of money. Originally, the state of nature provides all the resources that a person needs to survive. "In the beginning all the world was America, and more so than that is now, for no such thing as money was anywhere known." However, once money, a non-perishable commodity, is introduced, those possessing better natural talents, will accumulate more resources than they need for their self-preservation. As some people gain large amounts of wealth, others soon find it more difficult to provide for their self-preservation. Contentions increase. The state of nature is transformed from a state of peace to a state of war. Individuals are quickly driven into society for the protection of their property. Even in Locke's scheme, politics is justified to check a war of all against all.

Levinas, like Hobbes and Locke, embraces the liberal state, but he aims to found it, not on the *summum malum*, the war of all against all, but on the *summum bonum*, the face of the Other. In a recent

interview, Levinas rhetorically asked; if his philosophy ends up embracing justice, politics, and the liberal state, "why tell this long story about the face, which is the opposite of justice?" In other words, why begin with the phenomenology of the face if Levinas's eventual political formulations echo traditional liberal theory? Levinas answers that the phenomenology of the face provides a new foundation for politics. Politics no longer has its own justification, it must answer to ethics. In the traditional liberal state, on the other hand, ethics serves individual desires and politics. The individual enters and remains in civil society for selfish reasons. A state that serves selfishness does not call the ego's desires into question; the ego's good conscience is not shaken in this politics.

As a free man beside other free men, the subject remains a 'prince'. Even though this sovereignty is shared equally with others, it is still power: the possibility to stone free men, criminal hostility with regard to the individual. Alternation of violence exercised by the one and the persecution undergone by the others.6

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5Levinas et al., "The Paradox of Morality," 175.

6Quoted in Burggraewe, "The Ethical Basis for a Humane Society," 16.
According to Levinas, politics must be based on the ethical relationship with the Other which shakes the good conscience of the ego. Without such a foundation, a state based on a social contract between autonomous individuals is perpetually on the verge of degenerating into chaos. The social contract is "the reasonable order of a tamed but not conquered violence that, at any moment, could explode again in the terror of a systematic destruction, unrestrained by absolute morality." Thus, Levinas's theorizing about the face provides a new foundation for justice. "It is ethics which is the foundation of justice. Because justice is not the last word; within justice, we seek a better justice. That is the liberal state."

To illustrate concretely how Levinas's heteronomic political theory changes the nature of the liberal state, the next section will describe his reformulations of two key concepts of liberal thought, natural rights and freedom. Natural rights and freedom radically change when the self no longer feels

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'Peperzak, To the Other, 130. This argument is greatly indebted to Burggraeve, "The Ethical Basis for a Humane Society," 15-7.

'Levinas et al., "The Paradox of Morality," 175.
itself to be a prince, but feels a responsibility for the Other.

Whereas other theories of natural rights rely on ontological assumptions, Levinas resurrects natural rights by grounding them on the an-archical relationship with the Other. According to Hobbes and Locke, natural rights are originary, that is, they exist before any social status or any action of the individual. In fact, natural rights are inherent to the definition of "man," and thus, they are inalienable. As originary to the nature of man, natural rights become the justification for both politics and ethics. "They are probably, however complex their application to legal phenomena may be, the measure of all law and, no doubt, of its ethics." With natural rights as foundational, traditional liberal theory is based on a society of autonomous, unique individuals. Rights, "express the

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alterity or absolute of every person, the suspension of all reference."\(^{10}\)

To ensure the protection of natural rights, individuals agree to forfeit some of their rights, most importantly, the right to execute the law of nature, to the state. Thus, the state is established to adjudicate disputes between competing rights' claims. In the dispensation of justice, the balancing of competing rights claims, the state necessarily must treat the incomparable individual "as an object by submitting him or her (the unique, the incomparable) to comparison, to thought, to being placed on the famous scales of justice, and thus to calculation."\(^{11}\) The state which was created to ensure individual rights as its end, must treat the individual as an object.

This objectification is exacerbated in the modern world because of the inevitable expansion of rights. In fact, the number of new rights increases exponentially, as each new right requires additional rights to be enforced.

\(^{10}\)Levinas, "The Rights of Man," 117.

\(^{11}\)Levinas, "The Rights of Man," 122.
The right to oppose exploitation by capital (the right to unionize) and even the right to social advancement; the right (utopian or Messianic) to the refinement of the human condition, the right to ideology as well as the right to fight for the full rights of man, and the right to ensure the necessary political conditions for that struggle. The modern conception of the rights of man surely extends that far!12

The plethora of new rights may be ordered into hierarchies, but they are very rarely deposed. This burgeoning of rights exacerbates the fundamental problems of rights theories. Egos, who were not called into question, demand an increasing array of new rights, that undoubtedly increases contentiousness and selfishness in society. Autonomous liberal society becomes an atomized liberal society. The institutionalized scales of justice become overburdened and the state must use more violence to protect the rights of individuals.

Despite this situation, Levinas praises traditional liberalism for attempting to create a

pre-political peace, that is, for founding politics on an extra-territoriality, something that exists outside of politics. However, by finding the extra-territoriality within the individual, traditional liberal theory has created a tenuous peace. "The justice that is not to be circumvented requires a different 'authority' than that of the harmonious relations established between wills that are initially opposed and opposable. These harmonious relations must be agreed upon by free wills on the basis of a prior peace that is not purely and simply non-aggression."13

Levinas discovers a more ethical originary peace in the responsibility for the Other. In this relationship, the ego is freed "from its egotism of a being persevering in its being, to answer for the other, precisely to defend the rights of the other man."14 With this foundation, the "rights of man takes on an immutable significance and stability better than those guaranteed by the state."15

13Levinas, "The Rights of Man," 123.
14Levinas, "The Rights of Man," 125.
15Levinas, "The Rights of Man," 125.
Rights now are not an extension of the freedom of the individual but are a duty. Life, liberty, and property are replaced by the life of the Other. The face's expression, "Thou shalt not kill," is the first demand for rights.

Levinas also opposes traditional liberal theories of freedom. According to Locke and Hobbes, freedom is inherent to human nature. Locke writes, "Men being, as has been said, by nature, all free, equal, and independent, no one can be put out of this estate, and subjected to the political power of another, without his own consent." Levinas, on the other hand, claims that the responsibility for the Other exists prior to the ego's freedom. This shift provides a more adequate basis for politics.

Levinas concurs with Hobbes and Locke, that institutions must be created in order to protect man's freedom. Freedom by itself is illusory, it can be taken away by tyranny. The threats of tyranny are so great that the soul can be forced to obey, to go against its will, without realizing it.

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16 Locke, Second Treatise of Government, 52.
We know that the possibilities of tyranny are much more extensive. It has unlimited resources at its disposal, those of love and wealth, torture and hunger, silence and rhetoric. It can exterminate in the tyrannized soul even the very capacity to be struck, that is, even the ability to obey on command. . . . that one can create a servile soul is not only the most painful experience of modern man, but perhaps the very refutation of human freedom. ¹⁷

Levinas claims that "protection against such a loss of freedom can only be found in political institutions that urge and sanction the exercise of individual freedom."¹⁴ We can arm ourselves against tyranny by setting up institutions and laws. The setting up of a state, "is the only way to preserve freedom from tyranny . . . we must impose commands on ourselves in order to be free. But it must be an exterior command, not simply a rational law, not a categorical imperative, which is defenseless against tyranny; it must be an exterior law, a written law, armed with force against tyranny."¹⁹

However, the establishment of institutions to protect freedom introduces the strange conception of a

¹⁴ Peperzak, To the Other, 126.
finite freedom. The ego finds itself constrained by institutions that, in its prior freedom, it had agreed to inaugurate. As time passes, the ego changes. Perhaps, it will no longer perceive tyranny as the same threat. Perhaps, the institution now seems a greater threat than the previous potential for tyranny. The ego no longer recognizes its will in the impersonal institutions. Thus, the institutions that were set up to guard against tyranny present themselves as another tyranny.

Levinas asks whether the individual can be persuaded to establish institutions for a different motive than protection of individual freedom. Perhaps, the ego can be persuaded by something prior to this rational decision to protect its freedom. "Does not impersonal discourse presuppose discourse in the sense of this face-to-face situation? In other words, is there not already between one will and another a relationship of command without tyranny, which is not yet an obedience to an impersonal law, but is the indispensable condition for the institution of such a law?" The ego can be commanded to

[Levinas, "Freedom and Command," 18.]
establish institutions, not to protect its freedom, but to protect the Other. Thus, Levinas concludes, "I can be led without violence to the order of institutions and coherent discourse because beings have a meaning before I constitute this rational world along with them."21 In this creation, the freedom does not perceive institutions as tyrannical, but feels a responsibility to try always to make the institutions more ethical.

In the autonomic liberal state, "when one sets up freedoms alongside one another like forces which affirm one another in negating one another, one ends up with war, where each limits the others. They inevitably contest or are ignorant of one another, that is, exercise but violence and tyranny."22 However, Levinas's philosophy starts with "the relationship that is nontyrannical, and yet transitive. We have sought to set forth exteriority, the other, as that which is nowise tyrannical and makes freedom possible."23

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In conclusion, liberal politics which began as the answer to the *summum malum* has failed to create a permanent peace. With an ever increasing demand for rights, the tenuous peace threatens to sink into selfishness and war. Moreover, as modern states become more complex, the autonomous will feels even more distant from the impersonal institutions that it has created. Levinas calls for a new foundation for liberal society, one that emphasizes the rights of the Other and a command from the Other.

To create an ethical politics, ethics must have its own justification, an extra-territoriality. Levinas still finds this possible in the liberal state, but only in one that is always trying to be more just. "The capacity to guarantee that extra-territoriality and that independence defines the liberal state and describes the modality according to which the conjunction of politics and ethics is intrinsically possible."2

Without a foundation in ethics, the liberal state is but a concealment of war. However, Levinas argues that it is possible to found the liberal state on the

2"Levinas, "The Rights of Man," 123.
ethical responsibility for the Other. These new foundations change the very nature of the liberal state and two of its key concepts, natural rights and freedom. So, in response to Levinas's question, yes, there is a reason to tell the long tale about the face, even if it leads once again to liberal politics. The ethical face-to-face relationship with the Other changes the meaning of liberal politics. No longer are we driven to create a society for selfish reasons. The *raison d'être* of the liberal state is now ethics.

It is very important to know whether the state, society, law, and power are required because man is a beast to his neighbor (*homo homini lupus*) or because I am responsible for my fellowman. It is very important to know whether the political order defines man's responsibility or merely restricts his bestiality.²⁵

**Pluralism Contra Totality: Levinas Contra Hegel**

A philosopher settling his views on Hegel is like a weaver installing a loom—a necessary preliminary task to all subsequent work.²⁶

Hegel and Levinas share a disdain for the liberal state of Hobbes and Locke, which is primarily a contest between opposing wills seeking to maximize


²⁶Levinas, "A Language Familiar to Us," 201.
their desires. Levinas and Hegel both seek to infuse ethics into this self-centered state through the externalization of the ethical realm of human existence into the universal realm of politics and the state. For Hegel this means the externalization of the moral realm of the family into the state, while for Levinas the an-archical responsibility for the Other must be externalized into politics. Levinas praises Hegel for his understanding of this necessary universalization.

Hegel's great meditation on freedom permits us to understand that the good will by itself is not a true freedom as long as it does not dispose of the means to realize itself. . . . Freedom is not realized outside of social and political institutions, which open to it the access to fresh air necessary for its expansion, its respiration, and even, perhaps, its spontaneous generation.27

Although they agree that the liberal state must be made more ethical, Levinas disagrees with the Hegelian solution; that ethics should be actualized in the modern state and its functionaries, the civil servants. Levinas claims that the Hegelian state is a

27Levinas, Totality and Infinity, 241.
form of totalization which is violent to the individual.

According to Hegel, the state is the reconciliation of ethical life in history. The state, as the realization of the ethical life (sittlichkeit), is a synthesis of the altruistic, particular realm of the family and the egoistic, universal realm of civil society. In the family, a person is not an individual but a member whose ties are based on emotion rather than reason. Each member of the family is willing to sacrifice their well-being for the good of the family, but only for their own family. Inevitably, the members of the family are pulled out of the family structure and must interact with individuals from other families. The individual is thrown into the realm of civil society, a form of ethical life, that is only minimally ethical. In civil society each individual seeks to satisfy its own desires. However, civil society is to be commended for extracting the individual from the particularism of its family and forcing the individual to think in more universal terms. "In the course of the actual attainment of selfish ends--an attainment conditioned in this way by
universality—there is formed a system of complete interdependence, wherein the livelihood, happiness, and legal status of one man is interwoven with the livelihood, happiness, and rights of all."

According to Hegel, neither civil society nor the family are adequate for a true ethical life. Whereas classical liberal theory praised the selfish order of civil society as the end of political life, Hegel argues that this selfishness needs to be overcome. Hobbes and Locke are mistaken to think that this selfish sphere is the aim of politics.

Contrary to the traditional liberal theories originating with Hobbes and Locke, Hegel views the state not as an arrangement aimed at safeguarding man's self-interest (this is done in civil society), but as something transcending I. The state to Hegel is universal altruism—a mode of relating to a universality of human beings not out of self-interest but out of solidarity.

Hegel proposes a higher stage of ethical life which overcomes (aufheben) the weaknesses of both family life and civil society. Hegel argues that

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ethical life will be realized in the universal altruism that only occurs in the modern nation-state. Thus, "the state is the actuality of the ethical Idea."30 In the modern state, the individual identifies its will in the various institutions (estates, legislature, bureaucracy or monarchy) that represent its interests. The actions of the state, for universal ends, correlate with the desires of the individual. Thus, the individual's will serves its freedom as in civil society and its duty as in the family. The public and the private are reconciled.

The state is the actuality of concrete freedom. But concrete freedom consists in this, that personal individuality and its particular interests not only achieve their complete development and gain explicit recognition for their right (as they do in the sphere of the family and civil society) but, for one thing, they also pass over of their own accord into the interest of the universal, and, for another thing, they know and will the universal. They even recognize it as their own substantive mind; they take it as their end and aim and are active in its pursuit.31

Levinas contra Hegel, claims that the modern state does not actualize the ethical idea in history,

but rather, in its drive for unity, the Hegelian state reduces all alterity to a totality. The Hegelian State is not ethical, it is violent. The individual is reduced to a moment in the unfolding of history and a cog in the machinations of the state. In the Hegelian system history and politics subsume ethics. "Idealism completely carried out reduces all ethics to politics. The other and the I function as elements of an ideal calculus . . . they play the role of moments in a system, and not that of origin."\(^3\)

Further, the Hegelian state is an extension of autonomy. The goal of the state is the self becoming conscious of itself. The self fulfills its needs through the state, regardless of its relationship to others. "Consciousness' quest for recognition reveals

\(^3\)Levinas, Totality and Infinity, 216. Moreover, the Hegelian state is not judged by the Other, but is judged by its place in the unfolding of reason through history. "The verdict of history is pronounced by the survivor who no longer speaks to the being he judges, and to whom the will appears and offers itself as a result and as a work. . . . judgement taken as the judgement of history kills the will qua will. . . . The virile judgment of history, the vile judgment of pure reason is cruel." (Levinas, Totality and Infinity, 241-3.) Hegel's cunning of reason through history seems more concerned with "world-historical figures" than with the widow, orphan, and stranger.
itself as a narcissistic longing and self-fulfilling aggrandizement. In this drive for self-recognition, the self is never called into question.

Man is conceived of as an I or as a citizen but never in the irreducible originality of his alterity which one cannot have access to through reciprocity and symmetry. Universality and egalitarian law result from the conflicts in which one primitive egoism opposes another. The being of the real never ceases to signify its being for me. In this sense, idealism is an egoism.

Against the totality of Hegel's political thought, Levinas proposes a radical pluralism based on the Other. The advocacy of pluralism against Hegelian totality is shared by many other philosophers including Kierkegaard and William James. For example, Kierkegaard complains that Hegel's system shows a "comic neglect" of the existing individual. To remedy this neglect Kierkegaard creates a philosophy based on the subjective individual. Society is then a pluralism of individuals that cannot be reduced by the totality. Levinas's opposition to Hegel, on the other hand, is based not on the uniqueness of subjectivity,

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34Levinas, "Transcendence and Height," 7.
but is founded on the infinitude of the Other. Levinas argues that only such an unnameable, unthinkable, unutterable Other can break the Hegelian system.

To understand how the infinitude of the Other breaks the Hegelian totality, it is necessary to compare the Hegelian *aufheben* (overcoming) with the Levinasian oscillation between the saying and the said, between ethics and politics. As Derrida points out, *aufheben* is a multi-faceted term: "*aufheben* is relever, in the sense in which relever can combine to relieve, to displace, to elevate, to replace and to promote, in one and the same moment." The Hegelian *aufheben* is an overcoming of two opposing forces, but in this overcoming each is retained, but raised to higher level." Thus, the Hegelian state which is

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the aufheben of the particular morality of the family and the universal egoism of civil society should maintain both family life and egoism. Neither should be eliminated by the state.

Hegel might respond to Kierkegaard that his philosophy does not totalize the individual but admits a plurality. In fact, individuals are not only maintained, they are risen to a new level in the modern state. The freedom of the individual is only fully realized in the state and in history. Indeed, compared to the German state of his time, Hegel envisioned a rich pluralism, one that represents almost all interests in modern society.

Some have argued that Hegel's state, in its purely logical form, maintains a plurality, but that in his more empirical political writings, Hegel's state, due to Hegel's adulation of the state, overwhelsms the individual. "The concrete reality of this logic, of Hegel, is that social plurality, the stuff of ethics, is subsumed in his system under the
thematic of citizenry in the universal homogenous political state."37

Levinas, however, argues that even in the ideal state, which relieves but maintains the individual, Hegel has created a totality. Against this totality, Levinas does not advocate the glorification of subjectivity, as per Kierkegaard. Instead, Levinas advances a more subtle argument against the Hegelian totality. Levinas, using Hegel's own logic of opposition, claims that if an individual is only known in relation to its part in the state or in world history, then the individual even if it is an opposing force, such as Kierkegaard's individual, is still subsumed in Hegelian totality. Levinas insists that the individual must have a justification beyond the totality. Such a justification can only be found on the hither side of spirit's (geist) unfolding in history. Hegel explicitly discounts this beyond of Geist as the "realm of the false." Hegelian Geist, like Parmenidean Being, is all encompassing.

37Schroeder, Altered Ground: Levinas, History, and Violence, 71.
Levinas's radical pluralism is based on the unique Other that cannot be totalized. The infinity expressed in the face-to-face relationship cannot be contained within the relationship of the state. The aufheben cannot account for the face of the Other. Thus, a politics that originates with the Other cannot totalize the Other. The infinity that remains unaccounted for in the totality restrains the political.

Levinas argues that a pluralism not based in transcendence, such as Kierkegaard's, is unable to resist the Hegelian totality. It is impossible to create a pluralism based simply on the addition of individuals. "Numerical multiplicity remains defenseless against totalization."3

Pluralism as opposition to totality is only possible in transcendence. "Insisting on the irreducibility of the personal to the universality of the State; we appeal to a dimension and a perspective of transcendence as real as the dimension and perspective of the political and more true than

3Levinas, Totality and Infinity, 220.
Pluralism can only exist in radical alterity. "This radical transcendence with regard to society prevents the latter from degenerating into an impersonal totality."  

In conclusion, Levinas's oscillation between the saying and the said (and Derrida's conception of diffèreance) shares a formal structure with Hegel's aufheben. However, Levinas (and Derrida) posits a beyond or disruption that cannot be incorporated into the totality. Thus, Levinas offers a radical

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39 Levinas, Totality and Infinity, 300-1.

40 Fabio Ciaramelli, "The Riddle of the Pre-original," in Ethics as First Philosophy: The Significance of Emmanuel Levinas for Philosophy, Literature and Religion, ed. Adriaan Peperzak (West Lafayette, IN: Purdue University Press, 1995), 92. Derrida and Levinas agree that Hegel's aufheben can only be overcome by something that is beyond the geist. "For Derrida, there is always a reserve or a remainder which the Aufhebung cannot integrate. It is the 'non-representable,' which is of course usurped by 'being-represented' anyways--the violence of the name. . . . Nevertheless, Derrida aims with Différence--which is exorbitant, unnameable, and can never be made present, which escapes all formalizations, as do force, the idiom and thought with respect to language--to make a fold in the process of systematizing and the all-inclusiveness of the Aufhebung." (Harvey, Derrida and the Economy of Différance, 208).

41 For the structural similarity between Derrida's diffèreance and Hegel's aufheben, see Harvey, Derrida and the Economy of Différance, 78.
pluralism based on individuals that cannot be encompassed in the totality. Against Hegel's claim that the modern state reconciles the individual and the community, or in the terms of Hegel's *Phenomenology*, "I=We", Levinas claims that "we" can never be merely a plural of individuals because the Other can never be encompassed in a totality."

**Conclusion**

This chapter showed how Levinas' radical break with the Western philosophical tradition leads to a new basis for several fundamental terms in political philosophy, namely, natural rights, freedom, and pluralism. Against the selfishness of the liberal state, Levinas proposes a heteronomous political thought, that is, a politics based on the Other. Against Hegelian totality, Levinas proposes a radical pluralism based on the irreducible alterity of the Other. This pluralism places the Other person, not the State or impersonal history, as the ultimate value. Thus, Levinas's heteronomous is a humanism, a humanism of the Other. The next chapter will show how

Levinas's humanism of the Other offers a viable alternative to the theoretical and methodological anti-humanisms of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.
CHAPTER SEVEN
HUMANISM CONTRA ANTI-HUMANISM: LEVINAS CONTRA HEIDEGGER

This chapter shows how Levinas's heteronomous political thought contributes to one of the most important political debates of this century, the debate between humanism and anti-humanism. Levinas, while taking seriously the charges of anti-humanists, such as Heidegger, resuscitates humanism based on the responsibility for the Other. This chapter and the previous one combine to examine Levinas's critique of autonomous, totalizing, and anti-humanist politics. Therefore they mirror the second chapter, which discussed Levinas's critique of autonomic, totalizing, and anti-humanistic philosophies.

Humanism and Anti-Humanism

One of the most controversial debates in twentieth century political thought has been the debate between humanism and anti-humanism.¹ This debate has led to a reappraisal of the foundations of

¹For good discussions of the political aspects of these debates see Kate Soper, Humanism and Anti-Humanism (London: Hutchinson, 1986) and Luc Ferry and Alain Renaut, French Philosophy of the Sixties: An Essay on Antihumanism, trans. Mary H. S. Cattani (Amherst, University of Massachusetts Press, 1990).
traditional humanism. Traditionally, humanisms, in
their various manifestations, have been predicated on
two key propositions. First, humanisms posit the
human as the foundation (arche) for all actions and
second, humanisms claim that the human is to be highly
valued, if not the supreme value. The most
controversial aspect of humanism is its positing of
the human as the arche, as the guiding principle of
its own actions. In its most extreme formulations
this has resulted in the various cults of man, such as
Comte's, which merely replace God with man. In
posing man as the arche, humanisms have assumed that
man has a universal human nature. "If one understand
humanism in general as a concern that man become free
for his humanity and find his worth in it, then
humanism differs according to one's conception of the
'freedom' and 'nature' of man."2

This view of human nature becomes the "telos" of
man in all its original Greek senses. Man's telos
means that man is the goal of man's existence, it also

Frank A. Capuzzi in collaboration with J. Glenn Gray,
in Basic Writings, ed. David Farrell Krell (San
means that man is the supreme authority to determine value, and finally, the telos offers a vision of the perfected man.  

Thus, the various humanisms, by positing an essence (often idealized) of man, have created a standard by which to make moral judgements. And since, man has not reached his highest state, humanists are usually eager to provide a blueprint as to how to transport man toward his perfection. Since most humanists claim that man has not yet achieved his perfection, man is viewed as alienated or homeless. This alienation needs to be overcome by human action.

The traditional view of humanism was sharply attacked on both theoretical and methodological grounds in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Theoretical anti-humanists, including Marx and Nietzsche, claim that humanism is not the solution to man's alienation, but only serves to perpetuate it. According to Marx, all previous humanisms have been based on an idealization of the essence of man, when, in fact, the essence of man is determined by man's social and historical conditions. All previous

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humanisms are ideologies that serve a particular class interest in a particular epoch of history. "The corollary of theoretical Marxist anti-humanism is the recognition and knowledge of humanism itself: as an ideology." These humanisms that perpetuate the existing social conditions must be overcome.

Nietzsche concurs with Marx that any humanism based on a universal human nature, obfuscates man's potentiality. Nietzsche claims that any conception of man, or of value, is subjectivist, that is, man creates his own essence and value. Previous humanisms


In his early writings, Marx attempted to supplant atheistic humanism with a positive, natural humanism. See for example, Karl Marx, The Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844, trans. Martin Milligan (New York: International Publishers, 1964), 181, 187. Of course, one of the main controversies in Marxist thought has focused on the extent that Marx moved away from his own early humanism. For example, Althusser wrote, "any thought that appeals to Marx for any kind of restoration of a theoretical anthropology or humanism is no more than ashes, theoretically" (Althusser, For Marx, 229-30). Others claim that Marx maintained, at least implicitly, a conception of human nature, that could be used to build a socialist humanism. See for example, Adam Schaff, Marxism and the Human Individual, trans. Olgierd Wojtasiewicz (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1970) and the symposium edited by Erich Fromm, Socialist Humanism (Garden City, NY: Anchor Books, 1965).
have been created by the weaker groups in society, the herd, in order to restrain the higher type of man. Thus, for Nietzsche, as with Marx, humanisms must be overcome.

Methodological anti-humanists, including Freudians such as Lacan, behaviorists such as Skinner, and sociobiologists such as E. O. Wilson, also question the permanency of universal human nature. These anti-humanists devalue the human by reducing it to a creature determined by impulses, stimuli, or, in it is most recent form, DNA. By reducing human action to such motives, the new human sciences destroy any notion of subjectivity or interiority. "All respect for the 'mystery of man' is henceforth denounced as ignorance and oppression." These sciences of man, by reducing man to external forces, are radical materialisms, that totalize the


individual. "The inwardness of the self-identical ego is dissolved into the totality which is without recesses or secrets. The whole of the human is outside. That can pass for a very firm formulation of materialism." In their most pernicious forms, these sciences conflate method and existence by assuming that their scientific method accounts for all of reality. Method determines existence. Levinas finds this reduction inexcusable, "to take methodic principles as affirmations concerning the depth of things . . . is, indeed, characteristic of simple and hasty minds."

Methodological and theoretical anti-humanists share a distrust of subjectivity. Man is seen as desperately alienated from himself. These anti-humanisms often resemble humanisms by positing great projects of de-alienation to overcome the obfuscation of man. But the failure of these projects has only exacerbated man's alienation. "Today's anxiety is more profound. It comes from the experience of revolutions that sink into bureaucracy and repression,

"Levinas, "No Identity," 142.

"Levinas, "No Identity," 142."
and totalitarian violences that pass as revolutions. For in them the disalienation itself is alienated."\(^{10}\) The failure of disalienating projects calls into question the possibility of any future reconciliation of the self, "as if the adequation of the self with himself were impossible, as if interiority where formerly values were experienced could not close itself in on itself, as if the self in his presence to himself failed to coincide with himself and missed himself."\(^{11}\) Thus, all subjectivity and interiority where man usually found value was lost.

**Atheistic Humanism: Jean-Paul Sartre**

Against this intense attack, humanism received a short-lived revival through the writings of Jean-Paul Sartre.\(^{12}\) In a popular essay, Sartre argued for a rebirth of humanism in an existentialist framework. Building on what he perceived to be Heideggerian

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\(^{10}\)Levinas, "No Identity," 143.


\(^{12}\)Humanism received a concomitant revival in the many forms of Marxist humanism. See, for example, Erich Fromm ed., *Socialist Humanism*.
foundations, Sartre responded to theoretical anti-humanists, such as Marx and Nietzsche, by creating a humanism without explicitly positing an essence of man. Sartre agreed that all previous humanisms had asserted that "man possesses a human nature; that 'human nature,' which is the conception of human being, is found in every man." Sartre, on the other hand, denies any universal essence of man. He takes the atheistic position to its logical conclusion: without a God, there is no one to create a human essence except man himself. By existing, by acting, man defines his own nature. Existence precedes essence.

Man first of all exists, encounters himself, surges up in the world--and defines himself afterwards. . . . Thus, there is no human nature, because there is no God to have a conception of it. Man simply is. Not that he is simply what he conceives himself to be, but he is what he wills. . . . Man is nothing else but that which he makes of himself. That is the first principle of existentialism.14

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14Sartre, "Existentialism is a Humanism," 291.
Concomitantly, Sartre maintained that man must be the source of all values. "If I have excluded God the Father, there must be somebody to invent values." Sartre attempts to distance himself from an extreme relativism, a morality of mere caprice, but he can only offer a very limited morality. He claims that man as alone in the world, is a free individual, free to create his own history. "We are left alone, without excuse. That is what I mean when I say that man is condemned to be free." Thus, Sartre can pass judgement on those who ignore their radical freedom and subordinates their autonomy to a God or even a categorical imperative. "I can form judgments upon those who seek to hide from themselves the wholly voluntary nature of their existence and its complete freedom." These he calls cowards and scum. Beyond this radical freedom Sartre can only claim that man "chooses without reference to any pre-established values, but it is unjust to tax him with caprice.

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15 Sartre, "Existentialism is a Humanism," 309.
16 Sartre, "Existentialism is a Humanism," 295.
17 Sartre, "Existentialism is a Humanism," 308.
Rather let us say that the moral choice is comparable to the construction of a work of art. 18

Without a universal human nature, or a God to provide values, the ultimate truth is human subjectivity. "There must be an absolute truth, and there is such a truth which is simple, easily attained and within the reach of everybody; it consists in one's immediate sense of one's self." 19

Sartre takes Marx and Nietzsche to heart and creates a humanism that does not require a universal human nature. Further, his humanism distances itself from traditional humanism by boldly claiming that man cannot be the highest value.

That kind of humanism is absurd, for only the dog or the horse would be in a position to pronounce a general judgment upon man and declare that he is magnificent. . . . Existentialism dispenses with any judgment of this sort: an existentialist will never take man as the end, since man is still to be determined. And we have no right to believe that humanity is something to which we could set up [as] a cult, after the manner of Auguste Comte. The cult of humanity ends in Comtian humanism, shut-in upon itself, and--this must be said--in

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18 Sartre, "Existentialism is a Humanism," 305.
19 Sartre, "Existentialism is a Humanism," 302.
Fascism. We do not want a humanism like that.20

Sartre's existentialism is a humanism because it posits man as the arche, the principle of all its actions. Man, abandoned in the world, must make the most of its autonomous existence. "This is humanism, because we remind man that there is no legislator but himself; that he himself, thus abandoned, must decide for himself."21 Sartre's humanism is a humanism of hope or despair; it is our choice.

Ontological Anti-humanism: Martin Heidegger

Sartre's essay was widely read and, since he explicitly claimed a Heideggerian legacy, had the effect of making Heidegger's works more popular. Soon after the publication of Sartre's essay, the French Heideggerian, Jean Beaufret, sent his master a letter asking whether Sartre's work was consonant with Heidegger's own work. Heidegger replied, in his famous "Letter on Humanism," that Sartre had altogether misread his own work, especially Being and Time.


21Sartre, "Existentialism is a Humanism," 310.
Although Sartre had borrowed from Being and Time many key terms such as "thrownness", "anxiety", and "project", he had neglected the key theoretical advancement of that work, the ontological difference. In Heidegger's mind, the ontological difference, the distinction between Being and beings, subverted all previous metaphysics. Western metaphysics had overlooked the full weight of the most fundamental question in philosophy, Leibniz's question, "Why is there something and not nothing?." Instead, Western philosophy had jumped to the Platonic question of essence, "What is?" This Platonic question shifted the focus of philosophy to beings by themselves without examining the meaning of Being itself. According to Heidegger, only in relation to Being, can the essential, Platonic question be answered.

Heidegger claims that Sartre's humanism had ignored the ontological difference, and therefore was just another metaphysics. Sartre's humanism, like all previous humanisms, asked what it meant to be human, what is the essence of man, without considering man's relationship to Being. "Any determination of man's essence that, whether it knows it or not, already
presupposes the interpretation of the beings without raising the question about the truth of Being, is metaphysical . . . [and] because of its metaphysical origin humanism even impedes the question by neither recognizing nor understanding it. Even a philosophy as radical as Sartre's, which had tried to subvert the existence-essence hierarchy, had not gone far enough. "The reversal of a metaphysical statement remains a metaphysical statement." Sartre's existentialism founded on the claim that "existence precedes essence" is just another example of man's forgetting of Being.

This forgetting of Being is Heidegger's definition of man's alienation, his homelessness. "Homelessness so understood consists in the abandonment of Being by beings. Homelessness is the symptom of oblivion of being." Man can only regain his place by recognizing his true relationship to Being. Man, properly understood, is a shepherd of Being. As a shepherd, man must not tyrannize Being,

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but should let Being, be. Man's actions toward Being, should be limited to providing a voice for Being. This voice will not be a rational voice, but a poetics, a poetics attuned to Being itself, such as the verses of Hölderlin. "Hölderlin does not belong to 'humanism' precisely because he thought the destiny of man's essence in a more original way than 'humanism' could."²⁵ Being is best understood by a poetics which clears out a place for Being. "Language is the abode of Being. In its home man dwells. Those who think and those who create with words are the guardians of this home."²⁶

Heidegger debates whether to throw away the concept of humanism. On the one hand, he is vehemently opposed to previous humanisms. But he stresses that this "opposition to humanism in no way implies a defense of the inhuman but rather opens other vistas."²⁷ Instead, Heidegger's "anti-humanism" claims that previous humanisms, including

Sartre's, had ignored the regal place of man as the shepherd of Being.

The highest determinations of the essence of man in humanism still do not realize the proper dignity of man. To that extent the thinking in Being and Time is against humanism. But this opposition does not mean that such thinking aligns itself against the humane and advocates the inhuman... humanism is opposed because it does not set the humanitas of man high enough."38

Thus, Heidegger keeps open a place for a new foundation of humanism, one perhaps found in the poetry of Hölderlin and the speculations of the presocratics. "Humanism now means, in case we decide to retain the word, that the essence of man is essential for the truth of Being, specifically in such a way that the word does not pertain to man simply as such. So we are thinking a curious kind of 'humanism'."39

Metaphysical Anti-humanism: Jacques Derrida

Derrida, in one of his few explicitly political essays, analyzes Heidegger's attempt to open an exalted place for man without drifting into a metaphysics. Derrida agrees with Heidegger, that previous humanisms have not been radical enough. For


instance, Sartre sought to remove metaphysics from man's nature: but maintained the unity of 'human-reality.' Sartre had removed God, but not the God structure. "Atheism changes nothing in this fundamental structure."30

Derrida then analyzes the attempt of other French humanists to appropriate the works of Hegel, Husserl, and Heidegger to create new humanisms. Derrida claims that French humanists have misread Hegel, Husserl, and Heidegger. After all, each of these thinkers was explicitly anti-anthropological, and thus, anti-humanist. Hegel, Husserl, and Heidegger, were asking more fundamental questions than the essence of man.

Nonetheless, at a deeper level, in a second reading, they each fall within the metaphysical, humanist tradition. By emphasizing the end (goal) of man Hegel, Husserl, and Heidegger had failed to end (terminate) man. Derrida claims that the establishment of a goal (telos) for man, prescribes an essence of man, and thus, each philosopher remains in the metaphysical, humanist tradition. For instance, Hegelian philosophy, when understood by its telos,

defines man as the site of spirit's (geist) unfolding. Husserl finds the goal of man in reason unfolding through history: "transcendental phenomenology is in this sense the ultimate achievement of the teleology of reason that traverses humanity."  

Heidegger's attempt to move beyond metaphysics is much more difficult. He has, on the surface, moved beyond thinking of the classical conception of man as a creature having rationality (zoon logon echnon). Yet, there remains something like a magnetic attraction in Heidegger's writings between man and Being. Man is given a privileged place as shepherd of Being. Thus, it is man that must be questioned about the truth of Being. "This entity which each of us is himself and which includes inquiring as one of the possibilities of its Being, we shall denote by the term "Dasein."  By directing the questions of Being toward a particular being, Heidegger privileges man.

Of course, Heidegger went to great lengths to avoid making Dasein into a metaphysical creature. But Dasein's care structure reveals Dasein for what it is,

31 Derrida, "The Ends of Man," 123.
32 Heidegger, Being and Time, 27.
namely, man. "In the claim upon man, in the attempt to make man ready for this claim, is there not implied a concern about man? Where else does 'care' tend but in the direction of bringing man back to his essence." Thus, Heidegger has failed to move outside of metaphysics.

It remains that the thinking of Being, the thinking of the truth of Being, in the name of which Heidegger de-limits humanism and metaphysics, remains as thinking of man. Man and the name of Man are not displaced in the question of Being such as it is put to metaphysics. Even less do they disappear. on the contrary, at issue is a kind of revaluation or revalorization of the essence and dignity of man.

Heidegger attempts to supplant the metaphysical underpinnings of traditional humanism but metaphysical humanism seeps almost surreptitiously into Heidegger's thought. Derrida's deconstruction of Heidegger's "Letter on Humanism" demonstrates how difficult it is to establish a humanism that is not tied to metaphysics. In fact, Derrida shows how difficult it is to think 'anything' outside of metaphysics.

Humanism, because it is based on either essence

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"Derrida, "The Ends of Man," 128.

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(being) or common language, is inevitably a metaphysics. "Being and Language--the group of languages--that the we governs or opens: such is the name of that which assures the transition between metaphysics and humanism via the we." But neither Derrida nor Heidegger cut off the possibility of a post-metaphysical humanism. If there could be a post-metaphysical humanism it must follow Heidegger's lead and be based on an anarchy. It would be a "curious kind of humanism."

Any questioning of humanism that does not first catch up with the archaeological radicalness of the questions sketched by Heidegger... any metahumanist position that does not place itself within the opening of these questions remains historically regional, periodic, and peripheral, juridically secondary and dependent.

Humanism of the Other: Emmanuel Levinas

Levinas's essays on humanism, in response to Heidegger and Derrida, are an attempt to create an anarchical humanism. Levinas wants to create a new foundation for humanism, one that privileges man, but remains outside of traditional metaphysics.

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"Derrida, "The Ends of Man," 121.
"Derrida, "The Ends of Man," 128."
Levinas, like Derrida, claims that Heidegger has failed in his attempt to find a higher place for the human. Indeed, Heidegger's attempt to elevate Dasein ends up subordinating Dasein to the neuter concept, Being. "Being would be without an exit, and man would be certainly one of the high places where the designs of being work themselves out, but a high place where these designs work themselves out without man's knowledge." Just as Hegel had reduced man to the totalizing system, Heidegger has reduced man to the neuter Being. Heidegger has failed to find a higher place for the human. Moreover, Heidegger has failed to resolve man's homelessness. Man, as a shepherd of Being, remains subservient to the totality.

Levinas, on the other hand, wonders whether man's alienation, his strangeness in the world, his homelessness, may be even more primordial than a forgetting of Being or Plato's misreading of Parmenides. Could it be that man's alienation is an inescapable part of the human condition? Is it possible that alienation could not be reconciled even

by the pre-Socratics or the venerable Hölderlin? Is it possible that value can be found not in the dealienation of man, but in alienation itself?

Levinas argues that man has always been homeless. The goal of modern philosophy, the self-identity of the ego, is doomed to fail. Inferiority cannot be reconciled. Man is without identity. Thus, Levinas agrees with the theoretical and methodological anti-humanists; inferiority, defined as the adequation of the ego, is impossible. "Here is the impossible human inferiority claimed by the anti-humanism of our times. It derives neither from metaphysics nor from the end of metaphysics."

For Levinas, the strangeness of man to himself, the impossibility of inferiority, is not due to the forgetting of Being, but is due to an inability of man to cut himself off from the Other. The Other, before the ego has any conception of itself, demands a response. "There always being a distance between the I and the self. The recurrence of the I to the Self is impossible. It is impossible, for no one can

remain in himself, for the humanity of man is a responsibility for all." The impossibility of ego's adequation has been ignored by philosophy, which has always attempted to reconcile identity, to make man whole, apart from others. "Stranger to itself, obsessed by the others, dis-quiet, the ego is a hostage, a hostage in its very recurrence as an ego ceaselessly missing itself."

Levinas often refers to a passage from Genesis to illustrate this inability to close oneself off from humanity. As the Bible explicitly tells us, it took God to close the door behind Noah when humanity was doomed to die in the flood. Noah was unable to close the door to humanity in distress. The ego cannot close itself in its little world and ignore others. This insurmountable alienation does not lead to nihilism. Instead, alienation leads to ethics. The inevitable alienation of men, the common experience or pathos of homelessness, brings men together.


"Levinas, "No Identity," 149-50.
According to Levinas, this is the principle lesson of the Old Testament.

An echo of the Bible's permanent message and perhaps its principle message, this condition—or un-condition of stranger and "slave in the land of Egypt" draws man together with his neighbor. Men seek themselves out in the uncondition of strangers. This latter unites humanity. The difference which accounts for this strangeness in the world is fundamentally a nonindifference in regard to men—in regard to value.41

In this response to the Other, this hospitality, the ego is able to find some inferiority. "Having no rest in one's self, without any bias in the world, this strangeness to every place, this being-on-the-other-side of being, this beyond—this is certainly an

41Levinas, "The Contemporary Criticism of the Idea of Value," 185. Levinas implicitly brings up the crucial role that hospitality toward strangers plays in an ethical system. Both the Hebrew and the Greek traditions use hospitality as a gauge for judging societies. For example, Odysseus asks "what are the people whose land I have come to this time, and are they violent and savage, and without justice, or hospitable to strangers, with a godly mind?" (The Odyssey, 6:119-120). For the diminished importance of hospitality in the modern world, see Michael Ignatieff, The Needs of Strangers (London: Chatto & Windus, 1984). Further research on Levinas's notion of hospitality is needed. For a brief discussion of Levinas's views on hospitality, see Thomas W. Ogletree, Hospitality to the Stranger: Dimensions of Moral Understanding (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985), 35-63.
interiority in its own way."42 This is not a metaphysical interiority but a discovery of the subject as subject to the Other. Thus, Levinas provides a unique interpretation of Rimbaud's infamous line, "I am the Other." Rimbaud is correct, the I is the other, but not as alienation, or even as a Hegelian identity with the Other. I am the Other because I can only find myself through the Other. "Is it certain that already the most humble experience of him who puts himself in another's place, that is, accuses himself for another's distress or pain, is not animated with the most eminent meaning of this "I is the other?"43

In conclusion, Levinas seeks a revival of humanism, but on a new foundation, one that takes into account the arguments of the anti-humanists, but still elevates man as the highest value. Against the methodological anti-humanists, Levinas does not find in man's crisis of interiority, a justification for materialism. "In vulnerability there then lies a

43 Levinas, "No Identity," 145.
relationship with the other which causality does not exhaust, a relationship antecedent to being affected by a stimulus . . . vulnerability is obsession by the other or an approaching of the other. It is being for another, behind the other of a stimulus."

Against the theoretical anti-humanists, Marx and Nietzsche, Levinas finds a place for value before any ideology or subjectivism. Man can be valued without positing man as an arche. Levinas, like Plato, finds an ethical standard beyond being or essence. Unlike Plato, this standard is not an abstract form; it is the Other. "It is not the concept 'man' which is at the basis of this humanism; it is the other man.""45

Levinas agrees with Heidegger that man, as an individual, is not the highest part of reality. Also, Levinas agrees that subjectivity is not the proper source of humanism. "Modern antihumanism is no doubt right when in man conceived of as an individual in a genus or a being situated in an ontological region, persevering in being like all other substances, it

"Levinas, "No Identity," 146.

does not discover a privilege which would make of him the aimed at end of reality or when it calls into question as a being belonging to no genus, to no ontological region but only to his interiority." Levinas and Heidegger agree that traditional humanism has failed to find something precursory to genus, species, and interiority.

However, modern anti-humanists, especially Heidegger, have greatly erred by not finding in man's alienation the relationship with the Other. The cogito is shaken, not by technology, but by the Other. The relationship to Being, or even a generation of supermen, will not resolve this alienation. Even in a world of alienation, a world where the telos of man does not resolve alienation, it is still possible to have value and to privilege man; if value stems from the Other. "I ask if in this way the Other Person is not a value. Modern anti-humanism is perhaps not right in not finding in man, lost in history and the order of things the trace of this responsibility which

makes a subjectivity and, in the other person, the trace of this value."

Conclusion

Traditional humanisms have withered under severe attacks in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In the nineteenth century, Marx and Nietzsche began the onslaught by claiming that humanisms were merely a weapon of the bourgeoisie or they epitomized a slave morality. In the twentieth century, the deconstruction of the subject; the reduction of man to impulses, stimuli, or genes, has further called into question any defense of humanism. Levinas, while taking seriously these attacks, locates a new foundation for humanism. If man's responsibility for the Other stems from an an-archical past, then a source of value can be found beyond the scope of ideologies or the will to power. Moreover, if the basis for humanism is the Other, then the deconstruction of the subject is moot. In fact, Levinas concurs with those who deconstruct the subject. After all, Levinas's an-archical ethics

based on the responsibility for the Other, places the supreme value not in the self, but in the Other.

In a broader context, Levinas's resuscitation of humanism shows that postmodern political thought, a thought true to the arguments of Marx, Nietzsche, and Heidegger, does not necessarily result in nihilism or totalitarianism. It is possible to resuscitate humanism and find value in a post-metaphysical world.

To contest that being is for me, is not to contest that being is in the view of man; it is not to give up on humanism; it is not to separate the absolute and humanity. It is simply to contest that the humanity of man resides in the positing of an I. Man par excellence--the source of humanity--is perhaps the other."

"Levinas, "Transcendence and Height," 7."
CHAPTER EIGHT

CONCLUSION: THE QUESTIONING OF LEVINAS

The greatest virtue of philosophy is that it can put itself in question, try to deconstruct what it has deconstructed, and unsay what it has said. Science, on the contrary, does not try to unsay itself, does not interrogate or challenge its own concepts, terms, or foundations, it forges ahead, progresses.¹

This chapter steps back and examines Levinas's thought from a broader and more critical perspective. The first section summarizes Levinas's metaphysical, ethical, and political thought using the structure of desire. Desire, as analyzed by Plato, includes the paradoxical structure of separation, relation, and oscillation. Each major aspect of Levinas's thought makes use of this structure. Examining Levinas's thought from the perspective of desire reveals how Levinas attempts to re-establish the tensional relationships between totality and transcendence, the ego and the Other, and ethics and politics.

Levinas's attempt to re-establish these tensional relationships has been sharply criticized by many scholars. His thought has most often been censured

¹Levinas and Kearney, "Dialogue with Emmanuel Levinas," 22.
for being merely a justification for his Judaism, for failing to find a justification for a non-ontological philosophy, and for failing to establish the primacy of ethics. These criticisms will be examined in the second section of this chapter.

The chapter ends by presenting, in summary fashion, Levinas's key questions to the Western philosophical tradition. The forcefulness of Levinas's questioning shakes philosophy to its foundations.

Separation, Relation, and Oscillation: Levinas's Metaphysical, Ethical, and Political Thought

The structure of desire or eros plays a crucial role in Levinas's metaphysical, ethical, and political thought. According to Plato, desire has the dual structure of relationship and separation. In Plato's analysis, the ego can never satisfy its desires, the desired is always out of reach. In this relationship the ego is pulled out of itself toward a beyond. In a relationship based on need, on the other hand, the ego is able to appropriate or comprehend that which is outside of itself, to satisfy its needs. That which is exterior is made interior. In the desired relationship, the desired is not appropriated; it
remains other to the ego. However, the ego is still in relation to it. The ego and the desired exist tensionally, that is, they are both related and separated. In this relationship neither term should dominate. At times, the ego forgets itself in the pursuit of the desired, and at other times the ego forgets the desired and is content with itself. This is an oscillating relationship where both the ego and the desired have their moment.

Each major facet of Levinas's thought relies on this structure of separation, relationship, and oscillation. Levinas's goal is to restore the tensional relationships that have been lost in the Western philosophical tradition, that is to restore the tensional balance between totality and infinity, the ego and the Other, and ethics and politics. The tension can only be regained by separating what has become fused or by relating what has been separated.

Metaphysically, the structure of desire allows Levinas to establish a place for transcendence outside of any totalizing systems. Previous theories of transcendence had either established a radical separation between the ego and transcendence (Plato's
two-world problem) or fused the transcendent into an all-encompassing system (for example, Hegel's bad infinite). A transcendence that can be reduced to a system is no longer transcendent.

Levinas, on the other hand, finds the structure of separation, relationship, and oscillation to be useful for restoring the tensional relationship between the ego and transcendence. He shows how Descartes' idea of the infinite has this paradoxical structure. In the Meditations, Descartes claims that he has an idea of the infinite, but he cannot account for how this idea was put in him. He claims that such an idea could only be put in him by a transcendent being. Thus, the ego has a relationship with the transcendent, but the transcendent exists apart from the ego's comprehension. Levinas claims that Descartes "discovers a relation with a total alterity irreducible to interiority, which nevertheless does not do violence to interiority."² Descartes' idea of the infinite represents an oscillation or a tension between the ego and the transcendent. The

²Levinas, Totality and Infinity, 211.
transcendent is no longer radically separated from the ego, nor is the transcendent reduced to a system.

According to Levinas, the concrete manifestation of the idea of the infinite is the face of the other person, the Other. This relationship is ethical. Levinas uses the structure of separation, relation, and oscillation, to base ethics on transcendence without losing the ego. The Western ethical tradition, from Aristotle to Descartes, has privileged the ego at the expense of the Other. It is Levinas's aim to restore a place for the Other, that is, to separate the Other from the ego's grasp. However, Levinas insists that a place must remain for the responsible ego. This relationship between the ego and the Other has the paradoxical structure of desire.

The alterity, the radical heterogeneity of the other, is possible only if the other is other with respect to a term whose essence is to remain at the point of departure, to serve as entry into the relation, to be the same, not relatively but absolutely. A term can remain absolutely at the point of departure of relationship only as I.'

In order to establish both separation and relationship in the ethical relationship with the

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'Levinas, Totality and Infinity, 36.
Other, Levinas uses the structure of the idea of the infinite. The ethical command from the Other is analogous to Descartes' idea that has been somehow put in the ego. It overflows the ego's intentionality. "I am obliged without this obligation having begun in me, as though an order slipped into my consciousness like a thief, smuggled itself in." Further, responsibility is analogous to desire in that it can never be satisfied. The ego is called by the face of the Other to an infinite responsibility, a responsibility that grows as it is fulfilled. Thus, ethics is based on the tensional relationship between the responsible ego and the Other.

Politically, the structure of separation, relationship, and oscillation allows Levinas to infuse ethics into politics without abandoning the political. In modern political thought, politics has had its own justification, it is established to prevent the summmum malum, the greatest evil. In this schema, politics does not have to answer to ethics. Politics governs ethics. Levinas insists that politics must answer to ethics. The universal, violent order of politics must

"Levinas, Otherwise than Being, 13."
be restrained by the ethical relationship with the Other. Nonetheless, Levinas does not disregard politics. Against those who argue for a retreat from the political sphere to live merely an ethical life, Levinas maintains that the ethical relationship with the Other must be universalized into politics. Ethics and politics must exist tensionally, that is, in both separation and relation.

By re-establishing a tension between ethics and politics, Levinas's thought provides a corrective to several strands of modern political thought. Levinas's oscillation between ethics and politics balances the selfishness of the liberal state with the responsibility for the Other. Politics should not be established because of the *summum malum*, the ego's fear of its violent death, but from the *summum bonum*, the responsibility for the Other. Further, Levinas's radical pluralism, based on the irreducibility of the Other, balances the totality of the Hegelian state. In the Hegelian state, individuals are known only by their place in the state apparatus or their role in the unfolding of impersonal history. Levinas, on the other hand, insists that the state should respect the
irreducible alterity of the Other. Finally, Levinas's humanism of the Other challenges the predominant anti-humanisms of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Levinas concurs with the anti-humanist project of deconstructing the ego. However, while the anti-humanists have grave difficulty in establishing ethics after the deconstruction of the ego, Levinas finds in this deconstruction the very source of ethics. In Levinas's philosophy, the ego is called into question because of the approach of the Other. The ego is unable to appropriate the Other. Instead, the ego is called out of itself to respond to the Other. In grammatical terms, the ego's relationship to the Other is not in the accusative case, but in the imperative case. Thus, the ego's alienation does not lead to the nihilism of anti-humanism but to a new foundation for ethics.

Levinas's adaptation of Plato's paradoxical structure of desire has transformed the way that metaphysics, ethics, and politics are conceived. Metaphysically, Levinas demonstrates "how a nontotalitarian transcendence is possible and how its recognition leads to a radical transformation of the
very project of philosophy." Ethically, Levinas reverses the focus of philosophy from the self to the Other. "In a most dramatic reversal of the principles of modern ethics, Levinas accords the Other that priority which was once unquestionably assigned to the self." Finally, Levinas has changed the focus of political thought from the sumnum malum to the sumnum bonum.

He is among the few philosophers to offer profound suggestions specifically regarding the ontology of war and peace, and the essential nature of the political. Furthermore, his suggestions offer an interesting challenge to Anglo-Saxon empirical individualism, the traditions of the social contract or natural law, and especially to the dominance of rationalism and cognition in the domain of the political and social theory.7

Such a radical re-thinking of philosophy is bound to provoke some opposition. The following sections examine the three most prominent objections to Levinas's thought.

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'Speperzak, To the Other, 129.

'Bauman, Postmodern Ethics, 85.

The Questioning of Levinas: Judaism

A common criticism levelled against Levinas's heteronomous philosophy is that it is merely a defense of his Judaism. For example, Salemohamed claims that Levinas's philosophy is "not much more than a justification of theology." He claims that although Levinas seems to analyze ethics from a stance that precedes ontology, his ethics are but a servant for his Judaism. Levinas vehemently objects to this criticism. He insists that his philosophical works are separate from his Jewish works. "Ultimately my point of departure is absolutely non-theological. I insist upon this. It is not theology that I am doing, but philosophy."

However, the question of the Jewish influence on Levinas's philosophical thought is very complex. There are, at least, two meanings of Judaism in Levinas's writings. First, Levinas, in his philosophical works, refers to Judaism as a metaphor for the an-archical, transcendent, and ethical moments.

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"Salemohamed, "Levinas: From Ethics to Political Theology," 192.

'Levinas, "Transcendence and Height," 35.
in any tradition, including even the Western philosophical tradition. Second, Judaism refers to the religion of Yahweh as expressed in the Bible and the Talmud. Of course, there is a relationship between these two types of Judaism. Levinas, the philosopher, cannot be expected to be unaffected by the recurrent themes in his Talmudic studies, just as he cannot be expected to purge his Talmudic commentaries of all philosophizing. In fact, Levinas often speaks of a common inspiration for both. For Levinas, philosophy and theology are both based on common pre-philosophical experiences, including man's homelessness, the desire to explain this homelessness, and the relationship with other people, the feeling of community. Thus, Levinas's philosophical and theological works are intertwined. However, the relationship between these two meanings of Judaism in Levinas's works is beyond the scope of this essay.¹⁰

Nonetheless, to argue that Levinas's philosophy is but a justification of his religion is an argument

¹⁰Much excellent work has already been done on this topic. See, for example, Chalier, "Emmanuel Levinas: Responsibility and Election," and Handelman, Fragments of Redemption, 263-336.
for trivial minds. It is not a refutation. Levinas's philosophical works need to be analyzed on their own merit. As the present essay has shown, it is possible to develop Levinas's philosophy without relying on the Judaism of Yahweh.

The Questioning of Levinas: Non-Philosophy

Another criticism of Levinas's thought is that he has failed in his attempt to conduct non-ontological philosophy, what he calls "non-philosophy". This argument is most forcefully made in Derrida's early essay, "Violence and Metaphysics." Chapter 4 explored how Levinas, in Otherwise than Being, responded to Derrida's main objections. In many ways, Levinas's later thought was influenced by Derrida's criticisms and Derrida, in his most recent works, shifted his thought closer to Levinas's heteronomic ethics. Their philosophies have converged. However, one key difference remains. Levinas and Derrida disagree on the role that non-philosophy can play in philosophy. Both insist that it is the philosopher's duty to try and break from the grasp of philosophy, to move philosophy toward a beyond that can temper the violent excesses of philosophy. Yet, Derrida claims that
ultimately it is impossible to break out of the philosophical tradition. The totality will subsume everything, including all elements of non-philosophy. Levinas disagrees. He claims that it is possible to conduct non-philosophy.

This difference between Derrida and Levinas is partially, perhaps mostly, attributable to their divergent definitions of philosophy. For Levinas, philosophy usually refers to ontology. "Philosophy is disclosure of being, and being's essence is truth and philosophy." Therefore, metaphysics, in its more radical forms, such as the face-to-face relationship with the Other, is already outside of philosophy's border. Metaphysics "is the ultimate relation in Being. Ontology presupposes metaphysics." For Derrida, on the other hand, philosophy includes both ontology and metaphysics. Metaphysics is well within the margins of philosophy. Since Derrida's definition of philosophy is more encompassing, Derrida finds it more difficult to step outside of philosophy. With such an all-encompassing interpretation of philosophy,

11Levinas, Otherwise than Being, 29.

12Levinas, Totality and Infinity, 48.
Derrida's attempts at non-philosophy must break radically with traditional thought. Non-philosophy would probably exist on a separate plane from metaphysics. Conceivably, such a radical non-philosophy would require the overturning of method itself. At this extreme, might non-philosophy assume the form of parody?

For Levinas, on the other hand, non-philosophy is not foreign to the tradition of philosophy. Instead, Levinas argues that non-philosophy cannot be encompassed in philosophy itself, and yet, can be found squarely in the philosophical tradition. For Levinas, non-philosophy appears in the constant refutations of skepticism and in the an-archical, ethical moments in the Western philosophical tradition.

These disagreements between Derrida and Levinas have important consequences for their metaphysical, ethical, and political thought. Metaphysically, Levinas's non-philosophy is more stable than Derrida's. In other words, the disruption of philosophy is more complete. Non-philosophy does not only assume the negative role of skepticism, but it
provides a refuge against the totality. It may not be possible for the philosopher to remain permanently in the non-philosophical realm, but it is possible to temper the excesses of totalizing philosophies with non-philosophy. "It is not always true that not-to-philosophize is still to philosophize. The forcefulness of the break with ethics does not evidence a mere slackening of reason, but rather a questioning of the validity of philosophizing which cannot lapse again into philosophy."

The divergent views of Levinas and Derrida on non-philosophy also have important consequences for their ethical and political thought. Derrida, in his attempt to conduct non-philosophy, is pushing thought to a place without structured meanings, a value-less, apolitical world. Without a shelter, non-philosophy must be re-absorbed into the totality. Derrida cannot find a foundation outside of the totality on which to build ethics. Without such a place, ethics cannot temper politics. Derrida must choose between nihilism or abandoning politics to its own justification. Levinas, by insisting on the permanency of

Levinas, "Ideology and Idealism," 238.
non-philosophy, has discovered a foundation for ethics and this ethics can temper the excesses of politics. The ethical foundation that Levinas discovers is the anarchical responsibility for the Other. The relationship with the transcendent Other cannot be encompassed within ontology. It is non-philosophy.

The fact that philosophy cannot fully totalize the alterity of meaning in some final presence or simultaneity is not for me a deficiency or fault. Or to put it another way, the best thing about philosophy is that it fails. It is better that philosophy fail to totalize meaning—even though, as ontology, it has attempted just this—for it thereby remains open to the irreducible otherness of transcendence.

The Questioning of Levinas: The Primacy of Ethics

The most important criticism of Levinas's thought; the one that attacks the core of his philosophy, has been concisely stated: "Levinas fails in his attempt to ground first philosophy in ethics." This charge is usually presented in one of three forms. First, on an empirical level, many claim that Levinas has developed an interesting

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1"Levinas and Kearney, "Dialogue with Emmanuel Levinas," 22.

ethics, but what use can it be when no one acts as if they are infinitely, asymmetrically, and concretely responsible for the Other? The second version of this criticism, and the most common, is: how can ethics exist before the ego? After all, common sense tells us that the ego must exist before it can respond to the Other. The third version of this attack asks how can the responsibility for the Other be anarchical, when it seems to function as an arche in Levinas's thought?

The first objection, that no one acts as if they are radically responsible for the Other, cannot be refuted theoretically for it is an empirical question. However, Levinas's theoretical stance must be clarified. Having lived through Nazi prisoner of war camps, he was well aware that not all people will act as if they are infinitely, asymmetrically, and concretely responsible for the Other. Levinas's thought is not a description of the way that humans usually act. Instead, it describes the way that people act when they are truly human. Is not the human action, par excellence, the responsibility for the Other? "I believe that it is in saintliness that
the human begins; not in the accomplishment of saintliness, but in the value.\textsuperscript{16}

Levinas's radical responsibility for the Other is not a description as much as it is a prescription. Levinas is providing a goal for ethical action. To be truly human, the ego should respond to the Other. "There is a utopian moment in what I say; it is the recognition of something which cannot be realized but which, ultimately, guides all moral action."\textsuperscript{17} This ethical relationship for the Other is a utopian moment, but not in the sense that it never occurs. It is utopian, because when it does occur it seems out of place; "always other than the ways of the world."\textsuperscript{18} Although they may seem out of place, there are those who are infinitely, asymmetrically, and concretely responsible for the Other.

I remember meeting once with a group of Latin American students, well versed in the terminology of Marxist liberation and terribly concerned by the suffering and unhappiness of their people in Argentina. They asked me rather impatiently if I had

\textsuperscript{16}Levinas et al., "The Paradox of Morality," 172-3.
\textsuperscript{17}Levinas et al., "The Paradox of Morality," 178.
\textsuperscript{18}Levinas and Kearney, "Dialogue with Emmanuel Levinas," 32.
ever actually witnessed the utopian rapport with the other that my ethical philosophy speaks of. I replied, "Yes, indeed--here in this room."19

The second version of the primacy of ethics question is, how can ethics precede the ego? After all, without an ego to respond, it is impossible to have responsibility. To answer this charge, Levinas (like Descartes) posits a double origin. Levinas is not arguing that the Other exists prior to the self in a strictly chronological way. Levinas holds that the ego exists contemporaneously with the Other. However, the responsibility for the Other exists prior to ontology, prior even to the existence of the ego. Responsibility does not originate in the ego, but originates in the Other. Before conceptualizing the world, including the Other, the ego is called to respond. "This saying to the Other--this relationship with the Other as interlocutor, this relation with an existent--precedes all ontology; it is the ultimate relation in Being. Ontology presupposes metaphysics."20 By claiming that there is a double


20Levinas, Totality and Infinity, 47-8.
origin, Levinas opens himself up to the next criticism: how can his philosophy be an-archical if it creates another arche?

The final version of this critique is that Levinas's ethics cannot be an-archical because it functions as yet another arche. In philosophical thought, an arche usually serves two functions. First, an arche is posited as a first cause or origin of the world, such as the unmoved mover in Aristotle's *Metaphysics*. In this way, philosophizing about an arche is an ontology, the reduction of all beings to a starting point, an origin. Archai also serve as principles that guide human affairs. In this sense, archai would include Plato's good beyond being, Locke's state of nature, and even Marx's historical materialism. In this second sense, Levinas's ethical relationship with the Other is an arche. The face-to-face relationship with the Other guides both ethics and politics.

However, Levinasian ethics is an arche unlike any other. It is an an-archical arche. The face-to-face relationship with the Other may be the principle by which to guide human actions, but it is not a first
cause or an origin. It is a guiding principle which disturbs all first causes or origins. Indeed, Levinas's arche undermines the very language of first causes. "It undoes thematization, and escapes any principle, origin, will, or arche, which are put forth in every ray of consciousness."\textsuperscript{21}

Why does Levinas insist on the an-archical status of the face-to-face relationship with the Other? Why does he insist on transcending any philosophy based on ontology? In a word, ontologies kill. Even during Plato's time, the search for an ontological arche was "something like a battle of gods and giants going on between them over their quarrel about reality."\textsuperscript{22}

Since Plato's time, philosophy has become a raging battle between theories of being; an "ontologomachy". This battle assumed added weight in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries when it became mixed with ideologies and nationalism. Ontologomachies became world wars and cold wars. The final answers of ontologies were recast as final solutions.

\textsuperscript{21}Levinas, \textit{Otherwise than Being}, 101.

\textsuperscript{22}Plato, \textit{Sophist}, 246a.
Levinas's an-archical ethics transcends the ontologomachies. An an-archical ethics calls into question any final answer, be it an ideology, ontology, or the state. "Anarchy cannot be sovereign, like an arche. It can only disturb the State--but in a radical way, making possible moments of negation without any affirmation. The state then cannot set itself up as a Whole."23

The Questions of Levinas

Often lost in the close analysis of various aspects of Levinas's thought is how much Levinas has re-oriented the philosophical tradition. To put Levinas's thought back in perspective, this essay will conclude with a series of questions that Levinas asks the Western tradition. It seems fitting to give the last words to Levinas.

Metaphysically, Levinas asks whether the dominant theories of knowledge are adequate. Can philosophy, as the thinking of Being or the intentionality of consciousness account for all of reality? Is there something that transcends our philosophical knowledge?

23Levinas, Otherwise than Being, 194 n. 3.
In agreement with Plato and Plotinus who dared to pose, against all good sense, something beyond being, is not the idea of being younger than the idea of infinity? Should we not concede that philosophy cannot confine itself to the primacy of ontology. . . . And that intentionality is not the ultimate spiritual relation?24

Ethically, Levinas asks whether that which lies beyond our philosophical knowledge is the face of the Other. If so, then by reducing the other to an object, or even a genus of a species have we not done violence to the Other?

Is it certain, however, that the ultimate and peculiar sense of man lies in what is exhibited, in what is manifested or in manifestation, in unveiled truth or in the noesis of knowledge? . . . Is it certain that man has no sense beyond, precisely what man can be and what he can show himself to be?25

Does not the non-thematizable face of the Other, call the ego's selfishness into question and lead the ego to a responsibility that exceeds its own self-preservation? Does not the face of the Other call the ego to justify its very existence, to force it to ethical action?

24Levinas, "Transcendence and Height," 20.

One can uproot oneself from this responsibility, deny the place where it is incumbent on me to do something, to look for an anchorite's salvation. One can choose Utopia. On the other hand, in the name of spirit, one can choose not to flee the conditions from which one's work draws its meaning and remain here below. And that means choosing ethical action.2

Politically, Levinas asks whether politics has its own justification. Does not politics, left to itself, become tyrannical? Is there not something that stands outside of the scope of the ego, the totality, and history that can temper the tyranny of politics? Should it not be the goal of political thought to infuse ethics into the violent realm of the political? Instead of looking at world-historical figures, should we not look at the history of the widow, orphan, and stranger?

Is it not reasonable from now on for a statesman, when questioning himself on the nature of the decisions that he is making, to ask not only whether the decisions are in agreement with the sense of universal history, but also if they are in agreement with the other history?27


27Levinas, "A Language Familiar to Us," 201.
Books by Emmanuel Levinas


Essays by Emmanuel Levinas


Secondary Works


Peperzak, Adriaan. To The Other: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas. West Lafayette, IN: Purdue University Press, 1993.


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VITA

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Title of Dissertation: An-archy and Justice: An Introduction to Emanuel Levinas's Political Thought

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