***Totality and Infinity* - Emmanuel Levinas**

Preface

Levinas begins by acknowledging “the permanent possibility of war…” (p.21), noting that “war suspends morality” (p.21), and then, since the “art of foreseeing war and of winning it by every means” (p.21) is politics, asking whether morality is even possible (whether we are “duped by morality” (p.21)).

The violence of war is less about injury and death, and more about “interrupting [peoples’] continuity, making them play roles in which they no longer recognize themselves, making them betray not only commitments but their own substance, making them carry out actions that will destroy every possibility for action… War… destroys the identity of the same.” (p.21) This destruction takes place by subsuming the individual to the totality. One acts in ways for the greater good, for a hoped-for future, a whole of which one is merely a part. This is the image of Being (totality) revealed in war. Even peace doesn’t overcome this because the “peace of empires issued from war rests on war.” (p.22) That is to say, it rests on a totality. To overcome this, a “primordial and original relation with being is needed.” (p.22)

Philosophy, which relies on reason, evidence, and experience, (since these things concern the world in which war is the norm) rests on precisely this foundation, on war, remaining concerned with the totality. Philosophers therefore “found morality on politics.” (p.22) *Eschatology*, as Levinas envisages it on the other hand, “institutes a relation with being *beyond the totality* or beyond history, and not with being beyond the past and the present… It is a relationship with *a surplus always exterior to the totality*, as though… the concept of *infinity*, were needed to express this transcendence with regard to totality…” (pp.22-3) Eschatology, then, is primarily the “breach of the totality, the possibility of a *signification without a context*.” (p.23) This is precisely what *ethics* is for Levinas. This means that Levinas is rejecting the authority of *objectivity*, while at the same time, denying that eschatology is affirmed only by faith or opinion. On the contrary, the exterior is the foundation for opinion.

Eschatology cannot be founded in experience “for infinity overflows the thought that thinks it.” (p.25) But, Levinas will argue genuine experience is “a relation with the absolutely other… [thus] the relation with infinity accomplishes experience in the fullest sense of the word.” (p.25) This kind of experience, then, will “not oppose to the experience of totality the protestation of a person in the name of his personal egoism or even of his salvation." (p.25) Subjectivity features in *T&I*, then, not as an “egoist protestation against totality” or an “anguish before death”, but as “founded in the idea of infinity.” (p.26)

Ultimately, eschatology rests on knowledge, but a knowledge that is concerned with exteriority, the infinite, the transcendent. This knowledge will be revealed in the face of the Other.

A key distinction, then, is the one between the idea of the totality and the idea of infinity. But the idea of infinity is not the apprehension of infinity itself, as if infinity existed first and was then comprehended. Rather, “…infinity is produced in the relationship of the same with the other… The idea of infinity is the mode of being, the *infinition*, of infinity. Infinity does not first exist, and *then* reveal itself. Its infinition is produced as revelation, as a positing of its idea in *me*.” (p.26) Importantly, the idea of infinity is not a representation of infinity.

Intentionality, then, as the situation where “thought remains an *adequation* with the object, does not define consciousness at its fundamental level. All knowing qua intentionality already presupposes the idea of infinity, which is preeminently *non-adequation*.” (p.27) Consciousness is a going beyond of the adequation in which being and representation are seen as equal. It is therefore a going beyond of *phenomenology*. It is also a going beyond of Heideggerian *disclosure*. The Other cannot be understood in terms of disclosure, nor as a bringing to light (*a la* phenomenology).

Truth is nothing other than the “aspiration to radical exteriority” (p.29), which is also what Levinas calls metaphysics. The essence of ethics is precisely this ”*transcendent intention*… the metaphysical transcendence by which a relation with the absolutely other, or truth, is established…” (p.29)

Section I

The Same and the Other

A. Metaphysics and Transcendence

*1. Desire for the Invisible*

Metaphysics is a directedness towards, or desire for, the other; but not just the other as in things around me but not me, the other as “*something else entirely*… the *absolutely other*.” Things around me that I desire can “satisfy” me “as though I had simply been lacking them”, or as Levinas expresses it another way, “I can “feed” on these realities”. In this way I actually reabsorb their otherness, or *alterity*, thereby eradicating it, reducing everything to the same; i.e. me. Need lies at the heart of this form of desire and represents “the consciousness of what has been lost… essentially a nostalgia, a longing for return.” Metaphysical desire on the other hand, or “Desire”, is a “desire that can not be satisfied.”

*2. The Breach of Totality*

The word ‘transcendent’ perfectly captures what Levinas means by the “absolute exteriority of the metaphysical term”. The transcendence of the metaphysical other is expressed by a distance, which is unique among distances in that it “enters into the *way of existing* of the exterior being.” The characteristic of the other is also its content. The point is that “the metaphysician and the other can not be *totalized*.”

This alterity we have identified in the transcendent other is only possible if it is other with respect to a term whose essence is to be “I”. What this means is that the being we are calling the “term” “is a being whose existing consists in identifying itself, in recovering its identity throughout all that happens to it.” Of course, such a being is that of the human variety. The subject is identical to itself in a way that no other being is, in that it is conscious of itself or as Levinas puts it, “The I that thinks hearkens to itself thinking”, and in this sense, contains a kind of alterity at its core. This alterity however, is not the transcendent alterity we were discussing earlier. Indeed, “faced with this alterity the I is the same, merges with itself”. Even a self that negates itself, turns on itself in repugnance, is still an identity; “the negation of the I by the self is precisely one of the modes of identification of the I.”

The relation between the I and the world, although it appears to be one of alterity, is actually what Levinas calls a *sojourn*. He talks of *dwelling* *at home with oneself*, where the world is “not a container but a site where *I can*”. Everything in the world belongs to me, it is com-*prehended* or capable of being possessed. In coming into such a relationship with the I, it loses its character of alterity.

The identification of the same (the I with itself) we have been talking about is the “concreteness of egoism” and the important thing about it is that it doesn’t “establish its identity by simple *opposition to the other*, [because if it did] it would already be a part of a totality encompassing the same and the other.”

So, how does the ego enter into a relationship with the other without removing its alterity? It is not through a representation or by merely encountering a being in another locality (as in our relation to the world which we have seen is a *sojourn* in which the alterity is merely formal); rather, the relationship that is uniquely and truly other comes through encountering the Other (person).

The Other is absolute alterity which I can never approach as, or reduce to, the same or a totality. “The collectivity in which I say “you” or “we” is not a plural of the “I.”” Indeed, Levinas uses the term “Stranger” to refer to the other person because he (or she) is completely beyond me; “Stranger also means the free one. Over him I have no *power*.”

The metaphysical relation we have called *transcendent* and described as *Desire*, the “relation whose terms do not form a totality… [is the one] proceeding from the I to the other, as a *face to face*”. In an interesting conclusion, Levinas proposes to call this “bond that is established between the same and the other without constituting a totality”, *religion*.

*3. Transcendence is not Negativity*

Metaphysics, or the movement of transcendence, is not a negativity. The resistance that matter puts up to our machinations does not make matter alterity. In any relation where “negator and negated are posited together, [they] form a system, that is, a totality.” Likewise, any situation where a person resists their situation does not make the situation other, they “oppose their condition while remaining attached to its horizons… The alterity of a world refused is not the alterity of the Stranger”.

*4. Metaphysics Precedes Ontology*

Knowledge or theory establishes “a relation with being such that the knowing being lets the known being manifest itself while respecting its alterity and without marking it in any way whatever by this cognitive relation.” However, theory can also be used in comprehension which, as we have seen, approaches “the known being such that its alterity with regard to the knowing being vanishes.”

This latter method works by proceeding through a “third term, a neutral term… in it the shock of the encounter of the same with the other is deadened.” This third term may be a concept (which absorbs the being in the general), sensation (which merges objective qualities with subjective affection), or *Being* in general. Theory as comprehension of beings is *ontology*. Ontology therefore “reduces the other to the same [promoting freedom by]… not allowing itself to be alienated by the other.”

Theory which respects the other brings about something Levinas considers important; *critique*. Critique “calls into question the freedom of the exercise of ontology” leading it beyond theory and ontology. It is capable of this because it does not “reduce the other to the same… but calls into question the exercise of the same.” When this calling into question “is brought about by the other” it is called *ethics*. Ethics is the concrete production of the calling into question of the same, or the I, by the other.

Most of Western philosophy has been ontology, “a reduction of the other to the same by interposition of a middle and neutral term” to ensure its comprehension. The result is that instead of apprehending individuals as individuals, they are grasped in general.

Phenomenology is another method in which alterity is dissolved. This time through the “Being of existents… [as] the *medium* of truth”. Husserl in particular talked about the *horizon* which was equivalent to the *concept* of classical idealism; “an existent arises upon a ground that extends beyond it, as an individual arises from a concept.” Heidegger carried on this focus. ‘To affirm the priority of *Being* over *existents* is to… subordinate the relation with *someone*, who is an existent, (the ethical relation) to a relation with the *Being of existents*, which… subordinates justice to freedom… the Heideggerian ontology affirms the primacy of freedom over ethics.” All of this neutralises the existent as other, reducing it to the same, in order to grasp it. It preserves the sovereignty of the I by possessing the other through thematisation and conceptualisation, that is to say, ensuring freedom. This is what Levinas means when he says “*Being* before the *existent*, ontology before metaphysics, is freedom… before justice.” Justice, we will see later, arises only in the relation with the other that remains other.

*5. Transcendence as the Idea of Infinity*

Levinas calls the relation with transcendence an “idea of infinity”. The thing special about the idea of infinity is that “its *ideatum* [the real object] surpasses its idea”. The thing itself (infinity) is always more than the idea we can have of infinity and the distance separating the two is the content of the thing itself, i.e. infinity. This description perfectly captures the transcendence; “Infinity is characteristic of a transcendent being as transcendent; the infinite is the absolutely other.” In addition, the “way in which the other presents himself, exceeding *the idea of the other in me*, we here name face.” This is not a setting forth of qualities, but a transcendence which “at each moment destroys and overflows the plastic image it leaves me” by *expressing itself*.

So how can the idea of the infinite arise in the finite? It is produced as Desire, not a desire which can be satisfied, but that metaphysical “Desire for the infinite which the desirable arouses”. This results in the possession of a world which the other can give to us. We will come back to this idea later.

To approach the other, who overflows every idea we have of him/her, in *conversation* is to “*receive* from the Other beyond the capacity of the I, which means exactly: to have the idea of infinity.” This also means to be *taught*, not in the sense of instruction, but as anything which “comes from the exterior and brings me more than I contain.”

Finally, this infinite other which overflows the idea we have of it, “puts the spontaneous freedom within us into question.” It challenges us precisely because it stands beyond our influence.

B. Separation and Discourse

*1. Atheism or the Will*

We have seen that the separation of the same and the other cannot come from a negative opposition to, or relative movement away from, it (because this would see them united as thesis and antithesis in a totality), so means it must come from a “positive movement.” This positive movement is what Levinas calls the *psychism* (what he formerly called the *hypostasis*), and it is an “*event* in being”. The *psychism* is the arising of thought, or the *cogito*, from pure being (the *there is*). It is an act of separation which actually precedes and makes possible the subsequent separation from the metaphysical other.

The *psychism* is the “separation of the separated being” which “maintains it [that being] at a distance from itself.” How? Through the production of a “chronological order” in which the “being is not *yet*”, that is to say, it is “not all at once. Even its cause, older than itself, is still to come.” Basically, Levinas is saying that the event he calls the *psychism* produces this distance within the being itself through the *cogito* (or *thought*) which allows it to reflect on itself; i.e. stand at a distance from itself. One way it does this is through thinking about its own cause which allows that cause to be “thought or known by its effect *as though* it were posterior to its effect.” One might object to Levinas treating this “as though” like a real phenomenon because it is merely “produced… only by memory or by thought”, but that is precisely his point; this so-called ‘mere’ phenomenon must be “interpreted as a revolution in being.”

The being that thinks appears integrated into a whole but this only happens once it is dead. Life gives this being, in its *interiority*, a “leave of absence” or separation that prevents it from coming to rest in a totality – “Totalization is accomplished only in history”.

For this being, memory recaptures the past, enabling it to ground itself retroactively and “assume today what in the absolute past of the origin had no subject to receive it”. Memory is an “inversion of historical time”. On the other hand, “death is… not reducible to the end of a being.” For a “historiographer the death of the other is an *end*, the point at which the separated being is cast into the totality” and dying can therefore become past. For the post-*psychism* being however, such a thing is impossible. Through its separation from itself, its interiority, it refuses to be transformed into a past. Indeed, to the being, such a thought is impossible. So, “death is… not reducible to the end of a being” for the being itself.

What this reveals is that history and historical time (in which the being becomes a totality, stripped of separation) are completely different from the time of mortal existence – “mortal existence unfolds in a dimension that does not run parallel to the time of history… Commencement and end taken as points of universal time reduce the I to the third person, such as it is spoken of by the survivor. Interiority is essentially bound to the first person of the I. The separation is radical only if each being has its own time, that is, its *interiority*, if each time is not absorbed into the universal time.”

Because of this, Levinas rejects the idea that life is folly, absurdity, flight, or cowardice. Life has meaning for the individual because it “flows on in a dimension of its own [separate from historical time] where it has meaning”.

So, in summary, the *psychism* produces the I as a being at a distance from itself and it is this feature of the being which results in a “separation so complete that the separated being maintains itself in existence all by itself, without participating in the Being from which it is separated”. This separation from the other, from all participation, is what Levinas calls *atheism*; “One lives outside of God, at home with oneself; one is an I, an egoism.” Clearly, this is prior to both the affirmation and negation of the divine. The *cogito*, “being an accomplishment of separation, is naturally atheist.” Further, we are beings with an independent view, at home with ourselves, despite not being *causa sui*, and *will* is what Levinas calls “a being conditioned in such a way that without being *causa sui* it is first with respect to its cause.” (p.59)

*2. Truth*

Truth does not undo distance. It does not result in a totality; rather, it depends on separation – “Without separation there would not have been truth; there would have been only being.” Again, Levinas distinguishes his philosophy from the “philosophy of existence” which locates truth in a “prior enrootedness in being”, thereby relying on a participation which overcomes the distance between the being and the other. Indeed, for Levinas, the very existence of the I is uprootedness and non-participation itself. And, it is only due to this separation that “the ambivalent possibility of error and of truth” arises in the first place. “Truth presupposes a being autonomous in separation”.

Truth then, is therefore “possible only as the idea of Infinity...”; that is, only possible in the relation with an absolute alterity that cannot be merged into a relation of the same. In this conception, infinity is not, of course, an object of cognition, but rather, “the desirable, that which arouses Desire, that is, that which is approachable by a thought that at each instant *thinks more than it thinks*.” Here we again encounter that distinction between Desire and need; the former comes from the “object”, it is “revelation” – while the latter is a “void” in the subject. Since Desire arises in a being without needs, Levinas calls it a “luxurious need”. This is a need which arises in a separated being; separated in the “psychism of enjoyment, in egoism, in happiness”. Curiously, this metaphysical structure means that happiness is not something added on to an existing being; rather, the “I exists as separated in its enjoyment, that is, as happy”.

Separation, arising through the psychism of enjoyment in which the ego is happy and the I identifies with itself, “the I is ignorant of the Other.” (p.62) However, above this happiness arises a “Desire that comes to it from the presence of the other. This Desire is a desire in a being already happy: desire is the misfortune of the happy, a luxurious need.” (p.62) The subject, then, needing nothing, lacking nothing, searches for truth in the other. This search occurs within *language*. “Truth arises where a being separated from the other is not engulfed in him, but speaks to him.” This leads Levinas to note that “separation and interiority, truth and language constitute the categories of the idea of infinity or metaphysics.”

Finally, Levinas sees in the distance between happiness and desire, the distance that separates politics from religion. “Politics tends toward reciprocal recognition, that is, toward equality; it ensures happiness… Religion is Desire”, that is, the surplus possible in a seeking for something which the I doesn’t *need*, a surplus which therefore lifts the being above itself.

*3. Discourse*

We have already seen that in knowledge, “the knower neither participates in nor unites with the known being”, never leaving its interiority; but this is knowledge as it applies only to the Other, the Stranger. This form of knowledge rests on *language* in a relation of *truth*, “a relation in which the terms *absolve* themselves from the relation, remain absolute within the relation.” Knowledge of things or objects, on the other hand, does not partake of such a relation. Although objective knowledge does “remain disinterested, it is nevertheless marked by the way the knowing being has approached the Real. To recognize truth to be disclosure [c.f. Heidegger] is to refer it to the horizon of him who discloses.” The disclosed being is therefore relative to us and disclosed with respect to our project. It is the relation which must always be interpreted.

The metaphysical relation with the Other, borne in a *manifestation*, is not disclosure precisely because it is forever beyond our ken, never exposed to an interpreting eye. Manifestation “consists in a being telling itself to us independently of every position we would have taken in its regard, *expressing itself*… *The absolute experience is not disclosure but revelation*”. The other expresses itself over and beyond form, in the *face*. Indeed, Levinas says the face undoes the form in which the existent is presented to us and this undoing is “to signify or to have a meaning… [and to] present oneself by signifying is to speak.” Discourse, for Levinas, is not about forming vocal utterances, rather, it is the “production of meaning”, and this can take place without words. Indeed, the “manifestation of the face is already discourse.”

Action is not discourse because, while an agent’s acts (and the works they produce) do have meaning and therefore *expose* him or her, the agent does not *express* him or herself. “Works signify their author, but indirectly, in the third person.” Levinas describes it as entering into the other’s interiority “as though by burglary; the other is surprised in his intimacy”. Language, by contrast, is not an act, it is “the coinciding of the revealer and the revealed in the face”.

Husserl, in his comprehension of the Other as an *alter ego*, and Heidegger, who grounds our relation with the Other in *being in general* or ontology, have both failed to grasp the significance of the face to face and *expression*.

The discourse of the other is different from the object of knowledge that is a fact, in the sense that the latter has already happened and is now past. Speech with the other is always his or her being *present*; it is an “*incessant* recapture of instants that flow by by a presence that comes to their assistance, that answers for them.” and this “*incessance* produces the present, is the presentation, the life, of the present.”

*4. Rhetoric and Injustice*

However, not all discourse is a relation with exteriority. A relation established with an other which does not face him or her but approaches them “obliquely” is what Levinas terms *rhetoric*. Rhetoric resists discourse and attempts to corrupt the freedom of the other by applying a category to it, by judging it as if it were a thing with a knowable nature instead of the unknowable exteriority, forever beyond my judgements. Some specific examples of rhetoric Levinas gives are propaganda, flattery, and diplomacy. Because it is a form of violence, he identifies it as *injustice*. In contrast, *justice* is precisely the “*face to face approach, in conversation.*” Truth can only arise in “veritable conversation or in justice.”

*5. Discourse and Ethics*

European thought rejected the idea of “man as measure of all things” so for it the “I could not found Reason; [instead] the I was defined by Reason.” Since Reason was prior to the I, it was therefore impersonal and universal, and separated thinkers could become rational “only in the measure that their personal and particular acts of thinking figure as moments of this unique and universal discourse.” This is clearly a reference to Hegel.

This way of thinking reduces language to coherence, “the coherence of concepts.” In this case, ironically, the function of language would then amount to “suppressing “the other,” who breaks this coherence and is hence essentially irrational. A curious result: language would consist in suppressing the other, in making the other agree with the same!” This is the opposite of Levinas’ approach in which language as *expression* preserves and maintains the other in his or her otherness. It is only in language, as revelation, that language, as a system of signs, can ever come to be. “Language, far from presupposing universality and generality, first makes them possible.”

Discourse is therefore the “experience of something absolutely foreign, a *pure* “knowledge” or “experience,” a *traumatism of astonishment*.” This something foreign can only be another human being, the Other who is free, who can only be Other because he or she is free. Such a being is “naked”. This means being completely and wholly separate; absolutely over and above me and my interests, concerns, and desires; standing in its own purity.

Likewise, things are naked “when they are without adornments: bare walls, naked landscapes.” (p.74) When things are completely “absorbed in the accomplishment of the function for which they are made… They disappear beneath their form” and have no need of adornments. It is only when things stand out in some way, when they are “not resolved into the relations that link them up to the totality” that they become apparent, exposed, naked. “For a thing nudity is the surplus of its being over its finality. It is its absurdity, its uselessness… The thing is always an opacity, a resistance, a[n] ugliness.” (p.74)

*Beauty* is something new introduced into a naked world. Art, and science(!), Levinas says clothe things with signification; they paradoxically disclose them by forms, cover their nakedness and, in giving them a new finality (one that refers to their own internality), find them a place in the world.

Language, on the other hand, enters into a relationship with a “nudity disengaged from every form, but having meaning by itself”. This nudity is the face and in its nakedness it remains completely independent – “It *is* by itself and not by reference to a system.” The nudity of the face has not lost its system (like a thing); it is beyond all systems, beyond all forms.

The presence of the Other calls into question my possession of the world. The world is no longer just for me. In the relation I establish with the Other, I find that I must offer the world to him or her in a gesture of generosity. “To recognize the Other is therefore to come to him across the world of possessed things, but at the same time to establish, by gift, community and universality.” Language is not founded in a generality of concepts, but rather, it founds possession in common. “The world in discourse is no longer what it is in separation, in the being at home with oneself where everything is given to me; it is what I give”. My relation with the Other is ultimately founded on what I give.

*6. The Metaphysical and the Human*

The metaphysical relation we have been describing is not a relation founded in the sacred (something that ought not to be approached), nor is it a relation with a numinous spirit or divine power. It is revelation, which, in turn, is discourse, and this requires the separation of atheism. Levinas is clear that the metaphysical relation is, ultimately, to be understood as a relation with a transcendent God, but it is not the one typically imagined by religion.

It might sound like he is conflating two relations here; one with God and one with the human Other, but in actuality, they are one and the same. “The dimension of the divine opens forth from the human face. A relation with the Transcendent free from all captivation by the Transcendent is a social relation.” Other people are needed for one to form a relationship with God, not as mediators, but because “the uprightness of the face to face – is necessary in order that the breach that leads to God be produced”. It is only through the social relation with the human Other that “the height in which God is revealed”; that is, the depth of the Metaphysical, divine relation, becomes manifest.

Since the relation with God is only accessible through relations with other humans, it is by nature grounded in the *ethical* (meaning with an Other) and in *justice* (in the direct and honest face to face). “Metaphysics is enacted in ethical relations. Without the signification they draw from ethics theological concepts remain empty and formal frameworks.” Levinas is critical of theology which is an attempt to *know* the fundamentally unknowable, Infinite Other. Our “relation with the Metaphysical is an ethical behaviour… not a thematization”. The subject-object relation cannot describe it, nor can God be “approached outside of all human presence.” Indeed, anything that lacks an “interhuman relation represents not the superior form but the forever primitive form of religion.”

*7. The Face to Face – An Irreducible Relation*

In this small section, Levinas simply summarises the preceding. The relation with the Infinite cannot be subsumed in a totality, not because the subject is insufficient in some way, but precisely because the Other is Infinite. This relation, Levinas calls *religion*. He rejects the trend in philosophy to unite the disparate, to totalise the separate, as fundamentally wrongheaded. The separation of the subject from the Other where “relationship subsists between the same and the other despite the impossibility of the Whole… is the ultimate structure.”

C. Truth and Justice

*1. Freedom Called into Question*

We are free but this freedom can be called into question in two ways; “either as consciousness of failure or as a consciousness of guilt.” The former, which discovers a limit to its spontaneity when it reflects on its origin, specifically whether it “could have freely chosen [its] own existence”, “founds neither theory nor truth; it presupposes them”. It proceeds from facts, from theory, from knowledge of the world. “The consciousness of failure is already theoretical.” The latter, however, is a “consciousness of moral unworthiness… [which] precedes truth”. This consciousness is not a truth nor does it arise from a consideration of facts, and so it is not dependent on them. Instead, it is a “subordination… to the Other, to the Infinite.” The first is theoretical, an attempt to *prove* freedom; the second is moral, an attempt to make freedom *just*.

In the second consciousness, we measure ourselves against (come into relation with) the other, against the perfection of infinity, which is to say, we *desire* the other. This measuring/desiring “is not a theoretical consideration; it is accomplished as shame, where freedom discovers itself murderous in its very exercise.” Why shame? Why is our freedom discovered to be “murderous”? First of all, the fact that the consciousness of guilt over our freedom arises in shame and desire is what ensures that it precedes all theory, fact, and knowledge. Shame and desire are not grounded in such things. The other is a “revelation of a resistance to my powers that does not counter them as a greater force, but calls in question the naïve right of my powers, my glorious spontaneity as a living being.” The unlimited freedom I imagined that I was turns out to be impotent in relation to the other. This consciousness manifests in *shame* because my freedom turns out, “instead of being justified by itself… to be arbitrary and violent.” This is because the other, precisely by resisting my freedom, reveals it to be a power which actually destroys its object by absorbing it and making it, with the self, into a totality. In addition, our glorious spontaneity turns out to be completely without justification. This is where morality begins, when freedom realises that it is, in fact, unjustified.

*2. The Investiture of Freedom, or Critique*

Here, Levinas rejects Sartre’s proposition that existence is condemned to freedom by holding that it is “*invested* as freedom.” To philosophise is precisely to “trace freedom back to what lies before it, to disclose the investiture that liberates freedom from the arbitrary.”

The only way for us to know ourselves critically, to free ourselves from this arbitrariness, is to begin with shame before the other, in other words, *conscience*. But what we aim at is not a knowing of oneself, as such, but a submission in morality before an Other who “measures me with a gaze incomparable to the gaze by which I discover him.”

“The I can indeed, to justify itself… endeavour to apprehend itself within a totality” vis-à-vis Spinoza and Hegel, but then the freedom “is not maintained but reduced to being the reflection of a universal order which maintains itself and justifies itself all by itself”.

Existence *for itself*, or the “know thyself,” is not where we should look to know ourselves critically. Rather, we must turn to the *questioning* of the self; “the turning back to what is prior to oneself, in the presence of the Other. The presence of the Other, a privileged heteronomy, does not clash with freedom but invests it.” The goal of reason is not to secure for ourselves a foundation but to call ourselves into question and invite us to justice.

The atheism of the “I” (separated from exteriority) prevents a proper justification of freedom, which would involve the “I” being brought into a relation of totality with exteriority from which it could draw from itself (as the totalised relation) its own existence. Instead, surrendering ourselves to the relation of submission before the other establishes a dependence which at the same time maintains independence; i.e. the face to face. The result is that, while we don’t get to a justification or a grounding of our freedom, through justice (the relation before the Other), we avoid the arbitrariness of our freedom by discovering that it is *invested* by the other.

*3. Truth Presupposes Justice*

In this section, Levinas wants to show that Truth concerning the world and objects can only be grounded in the Other.

1. *The Anarchy of the Spectacle: The Evil Genius*

Levinas considers what the world would be like for a being completely alone (without an Other), a “spontaneous freedom of the I unconcerned with its justification… a being *no longer participating* and hence drawing from itself its own existence”. How could the certitude founded in such a spontaneous freedom be called into question? Would this not be perfect truth?

Such a being would find before him or herself a world that is “an-archic, without principle”, a world that is “under suspicion of an evil genius.” The point here is that a lone being wouldn’t be able to find significance or meaning in anything; “the possibility of universal doubt” would loom everywhere. Levinas calls the abode of the lone being a “silent world”. ‘Silence’ here doesn’t mean the absence of speech; (speech, we recall, can take place in silence) rather, it means “the interlocutor has given a sign, but has declined every interpretation”.

1. *Expression is the Principle*

The ambivalence of such a world is “surmounted by expression, the presentation of the Other to me”. It is through the Other that the world is discovered. However, Levinas points out that we cannot trace a path back to the Other from the sign he or she offers. Deduction is a “mode of thinking that applies to objects already given. The interlocutor can not be deduced, for the relationship between him and me is presupposed by every proof.” (p.92)

1. *The “Cogito” and the Other*

Levinas goes on to consider Descartes’ *cogito*, which cannot be taken as the first certitude in Levinas’ eyes.In doubting the existence of objects Descartes demonstrated that it must be true that at least, this exercise of doubt exists. The problem is that “the thinking subject which denies its evidences ends up at the evidence of this work of negation… at a *different level from that at which it had denied*.” [italics added] Because the final affirmation (this doubt exists) is not operative at the level the doubt was originally aimed at (i.e. the objects in the world), it can in turn be doubted. This leaves us in an infinite negation but not a hopeless one because each turn propels us ever deeper toward the abyss of existence (the *there is*). The point is that while the *cogito*, or I, does break with participation, it cannot mark a beginning for certitude or affirmation. “It is not I, it is the other that can say *yes*. From him comes affirmation; he is at the commencement of experience.”

1. *Objectivity and Language*

Levinas claims that the objectivity of the object has been “underestimated.” Kant made things (in-themselves) meaningless until we bequeathed our *a priori* categories upon them. Then Heidegger asserted that things only had meaning in practical behaviour; behaviour which, Levinas points out, “presuppose the presence of a thought to which it appears and before which it acquires… meaning”.

Objects are not objects when they become tools or implements; rather they are “*posited* in a discourse, in a *conversation* which *proposes* the world… between two points which do not constitute a system… a totality.” In other words, objectivity (or signification or intelligibility) “does not arise from the identity of the same who remains in himself, but from the face of the other who calls upon the same.” (pp.96-7) And again: “To have meaning is to be situated relative to an absolute, that is, to come from that alterity that is not absorbed in its being perceived.” (p.97) And this relation (between two terms that cannot be totalised) is only possible as *language*. Thus: “To have meaning is to teach or to be taught, to speak or to be able to be stated.” (p.97) The object is thus posited as a theme, or signified, by the Other. This thematisation manifests the signifier, not through a logical deduction, but because “the proposition that posits and offers the world does not float in the air, but promises a response to him who receives this proposition”. The Other not only thematises the world in a proposition but stands ready to interpret it, to “come to the assistance of his discourse”. Levinas calls this *teaching*.

The importance of speech cannot be understated here. Without it there is only anarchy. “The world is *said* and hence can be a theme, can be proposed. The entry of beings into a proposition constitutes the original event of their *taking on signification*”. Indeed, since speech is the origin of all signification, “language is not one modality of symbolism; every symbolism refers already to language.”

1. *Language and Attention*

Speech is a *giving* for Levinas, a giving from the Other who “gives by thematizing” and presents the “phenomenon as given”. In doing so, what was merely apparition loses its phenomenality and becomes fixed as a theme, an object. “The proposition relates the phenomenon to the existent, to exteriority, to the Infinity of the other… The infinite, against which every definition stands out, is not defined, does not offer itself to the gaze, but signals itself, not as a theme but as thematizing, as him starting from *whom* everything can be fixed in its identify.” (p.99)

Thematisation is an “appeal addressed [by the Master] to my attention”, and it is this attention in me that responds to the appeal.

1. *Language and Justice*

Levinas thus makes a distinction between certitude and Truth. Certitude belongs to a solitary freedom, “whether it be through a priori concepts which enable me to assume the given, or whether it be by adherence of the will (as in Descartes)”. In this, one’s own freedom assumes the responsibility for the true. “As-sociation, the welcoming of the master, is the opposite course: in it the exercise of my freedom is called in question.” This situation, in which our freedom is called into question by the other, Levinas calls *conscience*. In conscience, we are unable to assume responsibility for the true because it comes to us from the Other, that is, through an “experience that is not commensurate with any a priori framework – a conceptless experience.”

“The transitivity of teaching, and not the interiority of reminiscence, manifests being; the locus of truth is society.” In this as-sociation, my freedom is challenged and questioned “by a Master who can invest it. Truth, the sovereign exercise of freedom, becomes henceforth possible.” (p.101)

D. Separation and the Absolute

While the same and the other are in a relation together, they nevertheless *absolve* themselves from this relation at the same time and remain absolutely separated. Separation is the “ultimate structure of being” and society is its *concrete* accomplishment. But, Levinas asks, is a being founded in separation not then fallenness?

To think this, one would have to make the mistake of thinking the separation we are talking about here is one based on *need*. “Need indicates void and lack in the needy one, its dependence on the exterior, the insufficiency of the needy being precisely in that it does not entirely possess its being and consequently is not strictly speaking *separate*.”

Here, Greek metaphysics reveals an insight with their conception of “…the Good as separate from the totality of essences… The Good is Good *in itself* and not by relation to the need to which it is wanting; it is a luxury with respect to needs.” In this we can “recognise the pattern of Desire: the need of him who lacks nothing, who has the idea of Infinity.” Separation is therefore not a degradation or diminution of the Infinite; rather, it is what opens us to infinity.

Separation means that an existent is free, outside of any system. Levinas notices that creation *ex-nihilo* is precisely this situation; “an existence which indeed does depend on an other, but not as a part that is separated from it. Creation *ex nihilo* breaks with system, posits a being outside of every system… Creation leaves to the creature a trace of dependence, but it is an unparalleled dependence: the dependent being draws from this exceptional dependence, from this relationship, its very independence, its exteriority to the system.”

Section 2

Interiority and Economy

A. Separation as Life

*1. Intentionality and the Social Relation*

The metaphysical relation Levinas has identified here is not realised in Husserl’s intentionality, the consciousness of… This concept involves a relation with “the object, the posited, the *thematic*, whereas the metaphysical relation does not link up a subject with an object.” Nor will it be founded “on being in the world, the *care* and *doing* characteristic of the Heideggerian *Dasein*.” Doing already presupposes the relation with the transcendent. “Metaphysics approaches without touching. Its *way* is not an action, but is the social relation.”

This section will turn from this relation to investigate the relations that are produced within the same.

*2. Living from*. . . *(Enjoyment) / The Notion of Accomplishment*

The contents, all contents, in our lives are things Levinas says we “live from”. This includes air, light, spectacles, work, ideas, sleep, etc. They are not to be thought of as Heideggerian tools or implements exhausted in a utilitarian system of references. The things in our lives are always originally experienced as contents we enjoy. In addition, “…whereas the recourse to the instrument implies finality and indicates a dependence with regard to the other, living from . . . delineates independence itself, the independence of enjoyment and of its happiness…” (p.110)

Living from . . . is independent in the sense that it is separate, a relation within the same, but it is also dependent on a content; the ‘thing’ we are living from. . . This “dependence of happiness on the content is not that of the effect on a cause” though. Rather, Levinas characterises it as *nourishment*. This is “the transmutation of the other into the same, which is in the essence of enjoyment”. The idea Levinas is trying to convey here is that “*living from* . . . is not a simple becoming conscious of what fills life. These contents are lived: they feed life. One lives one’s life”. Even where a particular content is necessary for my continued survival, it is not a mere means to an end, rather “the means is immediately sought as an end, and the pursuit of this end becomes an end in its turn.”

But enjoyment doesn’t end there. “Life’s relation with the very conditions of its life becomes the nourishment and content of that life. Life is *love of life*, a relation with contents that are not my being but more dear than my being: thinking, eating, sleeping, reading, working, warming oneself in the sun. Distinct from my substance but constituting it, these contents make up the worth of my life.” (p.112)

This prompts Levinas to say that “life is an existence that does not precede its essence.” Rather, its essence (the contents it lives from) make up its worth and this in turn constitutes existence (being). Life, as happiness, is already beyond ontology. It’s important to understand that Levinas’ notion of happiness is not the affective, psychological ‘mood’; rather, it is “the very pulsation of the I”, the essence of human life, “the simple fact of living”.

Enjoyment is an outcome which has the “character of an accomplishment, which is worth *more* than ataraxy. Pure existing is ataraxy; happiness is accomplishment. Enjoyment is made of the memory of its thirst; it is a quenching.” Levinas rejects Heidegger’s accounting of emotions as ‘moods’ or the “mode of my implantation – my *disposition* – in being, the tonus of my bearing.” For Levinas, happiness is already beyond being.

*3. Enjoyment and Independence*

We have said that enjoyment arises from a dependence which is nevertheless independent. What does this mean? Although we are dependent on something which is not ourselves: “What we live from does not enslave us; we enjoy it. Need cannot be interpreted as a simple lack… [rather] The human being thrives on his needs; he is happy for his needs… *Living from* . . . is the dependency that turns into sovereignty, into happiness – essentially egoist.” (p.114)

In short, need is capable of satisfaction, and while it is a lack, it is not suffering, because we love our needs. This means that Levinas rejects the Stoic conception of happiness being an elimination of needs; “Happiness is made up not of an absence of needs, whose tyranny and imposed character one denounces, but of the satisfaction of all needs… Happiness is accomplishment: it exists in a soul satisfied and not in a soul that has extirpated its needs, a castrated soul.”

*4. Need and Corporeity*

Need lies in the distance between the human being and the world. In detaching itself from the world (on which it still nourishes itself) this being now “disposes of its own being… It frees itself from all the weight of the world, from immediate and incessant contacts; it is at a distance.” In this independence the human being has secured, it has become a *subject* before an alterity which it then overcomes through *need*, that is to say, through possessing, through working, through having time.

This is an interesting point. Levinas says that “need is a… dependence across time… a suspension or postponement of dependence, and thus the possibility to break, by labor and by economy, the very thrust of the alterity upon which need depends.” (p.116) The fact that need is a dependence *over time* and not an instantaneous relation means that it can overcome the alterity of the world. If this dependence were instantaneous (without time) there would be no chance for the being to accomplish anything and achieve enjoyment through nourishment.

Levinas stresses again here that need (a distance I can overcome by assimilating the other in enjoyment) is different from Desire (which remains forever unsated). Indeed, the time that need requires is supplied by Desire; “human need already rests on Desire. Need has thus the time to convert this *other* into *the same* by labor.”

This is where the body comes into it. The human body is “…not only a way for the subject to be reduced to slavery, to depend on what is not itself, but is also a way of possessing and of working, of having time, of overcoming the very alterity of what I have to live from. The body is the very self-possession by which the I, liberated from the world by need, succeeds in overcoming the very destitution of this liberation… For a body that labors everything is not already accomplished, already done; thus to be a body is to have time in the midst of the facts, to be *me* through living in the *other*.” (p.117)

*5. Affectivity as the Ipseity of the I*

The ipseity (‘selfhood’ or ‘individual identity’) of the I comes in the way it remains outside the distinction between the individual and the general. The I is not a particular instance of a general concept. If it were, it would lose its ipseity, it would cease to be separate and find itself drawn into a totality. The refusal of the concept *is* the I’s interiority; it is what “drives the being that refuses it into the dimension of interiority. It is at home with itself. The I is thus the mode in which the break-up of totality, which leads to the presence of the absolutely other, is concretely accomplished.” This is an important point. The I is a consequence of the break-up of totality, or better, what that break-up *is*. And the break-up of totality comes about in enjoyment. Again, the relationship between enjoyment and the I is not what one may expect. Typically we think it is the I who enjoys, but this would be to think of enjoyment as a psychological mood. As Levinas says; “the I is not the *support* of enjoyment. The “intentional structure” is here wholly different.” He describes it by saying the I is the “pole of a spiral whose coiling and involution is drawn by enjoyment”. Enjoyment is the I simply living. “The upsurge of the self beginning in enjoyment… is the exaltation of the *existent* as such.”

Levinas also continues to distance himself from any ontological readings of his work. “One becomes a subject of being not by assuming being but in enjoying happiness, by the interiorization of enjoyment which is also an exaltation, an “above being.” The existent is “autonomous” with respect to being; it designates not a participation in being, but happiness.” (p.119) He also takes aim at the urge to rationalise the I; “When the I is identified with reason, it loses its very ipseity.” This is because it becomes part of a whole, a totality. “For the I to be means neither to oppose nor to represent something to itself, nor to use something, nor to aspire to something, but to enjoy something.”

*6. The I of Enjoyment is Neither Biological nor Sociological*

We must not think of the I in biological terms because then a person becomes merely part of a species or a genus which subsumes the individuals into a totality, a “*participation* in what exceeds [them].” Nor is the I, in its relation to the Other, to be thought of as “included within a network of relations visible to a third party. If this bond between me and the other could be entirely apprehended from the outside… the individuals would appear as participants in the totality… both included in the same concept.”

As always, Levinas stresses that the I has nothing to do with reflection. Reflection on the other means to *conceive* of the other in relation to myself and this again, ends in participation in a totality. Rather than conceiving, we *confront* the other out of our egoism or I-ness. Access to the other, to alterity, comes from living (enjoyment (other) or language (Other)).

B. Enjoyment and Representation

This section attempts to unearth the relation between Husserl’s theoretical intentionality of the objectifying self and enjoyment.

*1. Representation and Constitution*

In Husserlian intentionality, representation plays a central role because it serves to make the object intelligible to us. “To be intelligible is to be represented and hence to be a priori.” Reducing reality to its content thought reduces it to the same, which is to say, “the distinction between me and the object, between interior and exterior, is effaced… without contradiction.” (p.124) The ‘official’ definition Levinas gives for the intelligibility of representation is the “possibility for the other to be determined by the same without determining the same, without introducing alterity into it… It is the disappearance, within the same, of the I opposed to the non-I.” (p.124)

In addition, representation is what Levinas calls a “pure present”. This means that it stands beyond time and, as such, doesn’t have a past or a future. It is, in fact, “interpreted as eternity.” So, representation reduces an actual perception which flows on in time to the present. It is this reduction to the “instantaneousness of thought everything that seems independent of it… [in which] representation is constitutive.”

*2. Enjoyment and Nourishment*

The intentionality of enjoyment is completely different. Levinas describes it as a “holding on to the exteriority which… representation suspends” where “to hold on” means not to affirm but to “posit oneself in it [the world] corporeally.” This kind of relation is one in which “the same determines the other while being determined by it” and is exactly what we have been calling *living from*. . . . In living from . . . we are touching the world corporeally but in such a way that the touching is already conditioned by our position.

While representation accounts for the object as if it were constituted by a thought, reducing it to the “unconditioned instant of thought”, living from . . . is the reverse. The object that is constituted in representation, and reduced to its meaning, in enjoyment “...overflows its meaning, becomes within constitution the condition of the constituting, or more exactly, the nourishment of the constituting.” (p.128) All this means is that the act of living, which is to say, *enjoying* the world, reveals objects which exceed the representations of them we might create in thought.

In satisfaction the world loses its alterity, as it does in representation, but the way it does so is the opposite of the way it happens in the latter: “To be sure, in the satisfaction of need the alienness of the world that founds me loses its alterity: in satiety the real I sank my teeth into is assimilated, the forces that were in the other become *my* forces, become me (and every satisfaction of need is in some respect nourishment)... Yet it remains true that this relationship differs fundamentally from the inspiration of representation...” (p.129)

*3. Element and Things, Implements*

In order to answer how the “sojourn of man in the world he enjoys remain[s] irreducible and anterior to the knowledge of that world”, Levinas now turns to look more closely at how the things we enjoy come to us.

They come from a background, a *milieu*. Immediately he rejects the idea that this milieu could be a “system of operational references”. Rather, things come to me from “...a common fund or terrain, essentially non-possessable, “nobody’s”: earth, sea, light, city.” (p.131) And it is upon this that every *possessable* object rests. Levinas calls it the *elemental*.

The elemental appears to us as pure quality that lacks a substance to support it. An example is the liquidity of water. When immersed in it (swimming, for example), we live the liquidity (in enjoyment) but if we look for an object behind it, we come up empty; it is just sea (or earth, wind, sky, air, etc.). Levinas says the “element comes to us from nowhere; the side it presents to us does not determine an object, remains entirely anonymous.”

Levinas has already made clear that every object offers itself in enjoyment and here he stresses that this also includes implements, or tools. Even when using objects as implements, the handling of them always concludes in enjoyment. There is no referential system here; “the world answers to a set of autonomous finalities which ignore one another”; in using the pen for writing, we are enjoying it, independently and irrespective of its purpose. “To enjoy without utility, in pure loss, gratuitously, without referring to anything else, in pure expenditure – this is the human.” (p.133)

One might argue that there is a care for existence at the heart of our use of implements, but Levinas rejects this with reference to one of our most basic impulses; the need to eat: “But the care for nutriments is not bound to a care for existence. The inversion of the instincts of nutrition, which have lost their biological finality, marks the very disinterestedness of man. The suspension or absence of the ultimate finality has a positive face – the disinterested joy of play. To live is to play...” (p.134) In this play, we release the elemental qualities of things.

This is the truth of hedonist moralities. They don’t look for an order behind the satisfaction of need to ascribe a value to an action. Satisfaction is the end, in itself. “The need for food does not have existence as its goal, but food.” In a nice summary of this sentiment, Levinas notes that Heidegger has completely failed to take enjoyment into consideration, quipping that “*Dasein* in Heidegger is never hungry.”

*4. Sensibility*

To be in the element, to ‘know’ qualities, happens through *sensibility*, which is a *mode* of enjoyment, not in terms of intelligibility and representation. It operates through affectivity. “One does not know, one lives sensible qualities: the green of these leaves, the red of this sunset.” (p.135) One might feel that this way of being is necessarily less clear and distinct than that of intelligibility, but to think of it in this way is already to have erred. It would be to have judged sensibility by standards that are only meaningful on the plane of representation. Sensibility goes immediately to its term and is nourished, or contented, by it at once.

The idea here is that in sensibility the element within which I am, is enough for me, suffices for me. I do not need to concern myself with the infinity of understanding. “The earth which upholds me does so without my troubling myself about knowing what upholds the earth. I am content with the aspect this corner of the world, universe of my daily behavior, this city or this neighbourhood or this street in which I move, this horizon within which I live, turn to me; I do not ground them in a more vast system. It is they that ground me. I welcome them without thinking them. I enjoy this world of things as pure elements, as qualities without support, without substance.” (p.137) This last sentence is a reminder that the element is not just my object but it also supports my experience of objects.

But doesn’t the element refer to the infinity beyond it? Yes, and “in the eyes of reason the contentment of sensibility is ridiculous. But sensibility is not a blind reason and folly. It is prior to reason; the sensible is not to be ascribed to the totality to which it is closed.”

*5. The Mythical Format of the Element*

There is a disquietude which manifests in the enjoyment of the element and it arises in the way the element “overflows” sensation, which is to say, the way it takes on a temporal meaning. We have already seen that in enjoyment, quality is not a quality of something, a substance. The quality comes from nowhere and is “consequently *coming always*, without my being able to *possess* the source – [and this] delineates the future of sensibility and enjoyment.” This future is an insecurity because it comes in a “pure quality which lacks the category of substance, of something.” Again: “To be affected by a side [face] of being while its whole depth remains undetermined and comes upon me from nowhere is to be bent toward the insecurity of the morrow.” (p.142)

“The future of the element as insecurity is lived concretely as the mythical divinity of the element. Faceless gods, impersonal gods to whom one does not speak, marks the nothingness that bounds the egoism of enjoyment in the midst of its familiarity with the element.” (p.142) The way the insubstantial non-thing behind the quality, the “existence without existent”, always appears on the horizon of the element, this way of existing without “revealing itself, outside of being and the world, must be called mythical.” It is a “paganism” which must be risked however, because it is precisely in this continual approach of the nothingness of the future that separation is achieved; i.e. through enjoyment. After it has been overcome, one can return to atheism and the true transcendence.

It is important to note that the element revealed in this way is not absurd, nor one in which we find ourselves *thrown* (*geworfenheit*). The insecurity we have found here “menaces an enjoyment already happy in the element”.

This “nocturnal dimension of the future” is precisely the *there is*. “The element extends into the there is.”

C. I and Dependence

*1. Joy and Its Morrows*

The I, in happiness, is *presence at home with itself*; it is sufficiency in its non-sufficiency, an enrootedness in what it is not while also maintaining itself as independent and separated. “The uncertainties of the future that mar happiness remind enjoyment that its independence envelops a dependence.” However, Levinas is quick to point out that, despite this, enjoyment is neither illusory nor grounds for claiming our presence in the world is a dereliction of some kind. The discontent of the *there is* that menaces the I in its happiness cannot overturn or nullify the content already found in enjoyment. This is because there is no I first posited to which enjoyment is then added; rather, “only in enjoyment does the I crystallize.”

*2. The Love of Life*

Although one can “revolt against the givens of its situation”, one does so in the midst of loving life. Indeed, “every opposition to life takes refuge in life and refers to its values. This is the *love of life*, a pre-established harmony with what is yet to come to us.” We reject certain aspects of life but only because we already endorse, and love, other aspects of life.

This love is not a care for, or comprehension of, Being. It is not a representation of life nor a reflection on life. It is simply love for the happiness of being; “Life loved is the very enjoyment of life, contentment.” Here, Levinas directly disagrees with the “philosophers of existence who emphasize dereliction [and] misconstrue the opposition arising between the I and its joy” – an opposition which is due to the menacing of the *there is* that lurks behind every quality in the element. “Being is here nowise refused in its totality. In its opposition to being the I seeks refuge in being itself.” (p.146) This is why suicide is tragic, because it doesn’t solve the problems of life. Even despair in suffering doesn’t “break with the ideal of joy” because while it “despairs for being riveted to being… [it] loves the being to which it is riveted. It knows the impossibility of quitting life”.

Through labour (which we will discuss presently), the I can overcome the uncertainty we have identified here but even this is not the final signification of life, because the labour “also becomes that *from which* I live… I live from my labor as I live from air, light, and bread.” It is only when “need prevails over enjoyment” that we find the absurd world of *Geworfenheit*.

*3. Enjoyment and Separation*

Enjoyment separates by allowing the I to be at home with itself. This being at home with oneself, living from. . ., is precisely to enjoy the elemental. The interiority opened up in enjoyment is not added to a subject as “one psychological property among others. The interiority of enjoyment is separation in itself”. Levinas reinforces this theme by saying; “To be I, atheist, at home with oneself, separated, happy, created – these are synonyms.” (p.148)

This interiority/separation is necessary for the idea of Infinity, for the relation with the Other to arise. But if separation were merely a thesis (or antithesis), the separation would disappear in a totality. This leads Levinas to assert that “just as the interiority of enjoyment is not deducible from the transcendental relation, the transcendental relation is not deducible from the separated being… Neither the separated being nor the infinite being is produced as an antithetical term.” So, the “movement of separation is not on the same plane as the movement of transcendence”, and yet there must be some connection. The interiority must be completely “closed over upon itself, not deriving its isolation dialectically from its opposition to the Other” and yet still open enough “so that exteriority could speak to it, reveal itself to it, in an unforeseeable movement which the isolation of the separated being could not provoke by simple contrast… Interiority must be at the same time closed and open.” A way out of the closedness of interiority must somehow present itself to the separated being even as it is isolated and closed off. Fortunately, that is just what we have discovered in the concern for the morrow the *there is* provides, projecting disquietude into the happiness and contentment of interiority. Levinas now provides a nice chain of reasoning explaining how interiority and separation lead to the revelation of the Other which I will reproduce in full:



The “warmth of intimacy” mentioned above, what Levinas also calls the “peaceable welcome”, arises in the “gentleness of the feminine face, in which the separated being can recollect itself, because of which it *inhabits*, and in its dwelling accomplishes separation. Inhabitation and the intimacy of the dwelling, which make the separation of the human being possible, thus imply a first revelation of the Other. Thus the idea of infinity, revealed in the face, does not only *require* a separated being; the light of the face is necessary for separation.” The important point in all of this is that the idea of infinity, in founding the intimacy of the home, doesn’t provoke separation by opposition, because if it did, it would integrate it into a synthesis, thereby destroying transcendence.

D. The Dwelling

*1. Habitation*

Habitation can be understood as the “utilization of an “implement” among “implements.”” In this case, the home, as in the building in which we live, does for habitation what the pen does for writing; that is, it facilitates it. It is then, one of the finalities of which human life is composed, an end of certain human activities (the home is built in order to protect from the weather, etc.), that slots into a functional, referential whole. In addition, we can also see the home as something I can enjoy, just as I enjoy any other object in the world. However, none of this suffices to explain the significance of the home as Levinas conceives it.

The home is unique for Levinas in that it “does not consist in being the end of human activity but in being its condition, and in this sense its commencement. The recollection necessary for nature to be able to be represented and worked over, for it to first take form as a world, is accomplished as the home. Man abides in the world as having come to it from a private domain, from being at home with himself, to which at each moment he can retire.” (p.152) But the curious thing is that the home, as dwelling/habitation, as that place of commencement from which one goes to the world, is actually already situated out there, in it: “he [the human] goes forth outside from an inwardness… which is situated in that outside...” (p.152) Despite this, home, as dwelling, is more than a mere building: “...the home, as a building, belongs to a world of objects. But this belongingness does not nullify the bearing of the fact that every consideration of objects, and of buildings too, is produced out of a dwelling. Concretely speaking the dwelling is not situated in the objective world, but the objective world is situated by relation to my dwelling.” (pp.152-3)

So “consciousness of a world is already consciousness *through* that world” but so is contemplation, which looks backwards (including to the dwelling) “with its pretension to constitute” the world. In short, contemplation, which we typically think of as capable of some kind of commencement from nothing, from a clean slate, must, on the contrary, be conditioned by the dwelling, an *a posteriori* event.

Another word Levinas uses for contemplation is *recollection*, and it describes the way the I breaks away, or establishes distance, from its life lived in enjoyment. It achieves this distance through the dwelling and economic existence; “recollection, a work of separation, is concretized as existence in a dwelling, economic existence. Because the I exists recollected it takes refuge empirically in the home. Only from this recollection does the building take on the signification of being a dwelling.” (p.154) Recollection, then, is essentially reflection or representation, the way we step back from the immediate; “Recollection… designates a suspension of the immediate reactions the world solicits in view of a greater attention to oneself, one’s possibilities, and the situation.”

*2. Habitation and the Feminine*

How, in the middle of living from. . ., is recollection effected? That is, how is distance produced in the middle of a life which enjoys elements and is engaged in overcoming insecurity?

In living from. . . and enjoying the world, nourishing oneself from it, somehow “...familiarity and intimacy are produced as a gentleness that spreads over the face of things.” (p.155) This familiarity arises through recollection and habitation. However, in order for this to take place there is a prior “intimacy which familiarity already presupposes [and this] is an *intimacy with someone*. The interiority of recollection is a solitude in a world already human. Recollection refers to a welcome.” (p.155)

But we have already said that the presence of the face of the Other manifests in language and transcendence. How can the intimacy of recollection be effected in the face of the Other? For this to happen, “the presence of the Other must not only be revealed in the face which breaks through its own plastic image, but must be revealed, simultaneously with this presence, in its withdrawal and in its absence… And the other whose presence is discreetly an absence, with which is accomplished the primary hospitable welcome which describes the field of intimacy, is the Woman. The woman is the condition for recollection, the interiority of the Home, and inhabitation.” (p.155)

Living from. . . is not yet habitation and habitation is not yet the transcendence of language. “The Other who welcomes in intimacy is not the *you* of the face that reveals itself in a dimension of height, but precisely the *thou* of familiarity: a language without teaching, a silent language, an understanding without words, an expression in secret. The I-Thou in which Buber sees the category of interhuman relationship is the relation not with the interlocutor but with feminine alterity.” (p.155)

This immediately sounds like a chauvinist philosophy for, and centred around, men. How, after all, are women supposed to come to *dwell* if there is no complementary *thou* for them in the form of a masculine alterity? Or do women just not participate in enjoyment, living from. . ., recollection, etc.? To criticise Levinas like this is to have fundamentally missed his point though. As he says, “The feminine has been encountered in this analysis as one of the cardinal points of the horizon in which the inner life takes place – and the empirical absence of the human being of “feminine sex” in a dwelling nowise affects the dimension of femininity which remains open there, as the very welcome of the dwelling.” (p.158) An analogy to Levinas’ point here is that of the Chinese concept of *yin yang*. *Yin* is characterised as darkness, passivity, gentleness, *feminine*, while *yang* is characterised as lightness, activity, assertion, *masculine*, and these have nothing to do with actual men or women. Likewise, for Levinas, the feminine isn’t an actual woman; rather, it is the nature of the dwelling as an other (thou) with whom, recollection and intimacy is produced.[[1]](#footnote-2)

*3. The Home and Possession*

The home breaks the “plenum of the element” and opens a place where “the “I” recollects itself in dwelling at home with itself.” “The ecstatic and immediate enjoyment to which, aspired as it were by the uncertain abyss of the element, the I was able to give itself over, is adjourned and delayed in the home.” The distance opened up from the elements makes labour and property possible and these in turn, allow the *discovery* of the world. It is to this that we next turn.

*4. Possession and Labour*

From the security of the dwelling, “[t]he uncertain future of the element is suspended. The element is fixed between the four walls of the home, is calmed in possession. It appears there as a thing, which can, perhaps, be defined by tranquillity – as in a “still life.” This grasp operated on the elemental is labor.” (p.158)

Possession here is to be distinguished from the immediate relation of enjoyment which possesses without acquisition, merely as a living from. . . . This form of possession is also a being possessed but one which delivers us to the “disquieting future of the element.” In grasping the object (what Levinas calls *labour*) in order to possess it, the independence of the element, its being, is neutralised; “as property the thing is an existent that has lost its being... Possession masters, suspends, postpones the unforeseeable future of the element – its independence, its being.” (p.158)

Labour is accomplished by the hand; “The hand is the organ of grasping and taking… [and] the hand *relating* the elemental to the finality of needs constitutes things only by separating its take from immediate enjoyment, depositing it in the dwelling, conferring on it the status of a possession.” (p.159) Labour submerses the elemental in a plan, a project, relating it to an end, a goal, centred on the individual and in this, represents a movement, not towards transcendence, but towards oneself.

Possession and labour take things and *comprehend* them, positing them as durable, as *substance*, as a support of qualities. “Substantiality thus does not reside in the sensible nature of things, since sensibility coincides with enjoyment enjoying an “adjective” without substantive, a pure quality, a quality without support.” (p.161) The hand comprehends because it does not approach the thing as a sense-organ through enjoyment, but rather through mastery and domination. It doesn’t consume the thing it grasps, but gathers it, “keeps it, puts it in reserve, possesses it in a home.” A thing that is possessed is no longer in itself; it is mine or another’s. It is only after, and because, things have been possessed in this way that they can be exchanged, quantified and reflected in money. Thus, the notion of *economy* is introduced into habitation.

*5. Labour, the Body, Consciousness*

We have already discussed how enjoyment is paradoxically independent in its dependence on the *other* of the element. We are free, but at the same time, influenced by the world: “…what is distinctive about the sovereignty of the I that vibrates in enjoyment is that it is steeped in a medium and consequently undergoes *influences*.” (p.164) This situation, or “equivocation,” is precisely the body. “*To be a body* is on the one hand *to stand*, to be master of oneself, and, on the other hand, to stand on the earth, to be in the *other*, and thus to be encumbered by one’s body. But – we repeat – this encumberment is not produced as a pure dependence; it forms the happiness of him who enjoys it… To be at home with oneself in something other than oneself, to be oneself while living from something other than oneself, to live from . . ., is concretized in corporeal existence.” (p.164) That is to say, existence as a body.

The dependence on, or exposure to, the alterity of the other (in the element) is suspended or postponed in labour and possession, which grants the I its freedom, or independence. The ultimate insecurity we are exposed to is the expiration of life; death. Dwelling, then, is primarily a “perpetual postponement of death, in the essential ignorance of its date. Enjoyment as the body that labors maintains itself in this primary postponement, that which opens the very dimension of time.” (p.165) It is this ambiguity that arises from dwelling (the ambiguity of dependence and independence, freedom and determinism, enjoyment and labour) which the body represents. The ambiguity of the body, contained in the “imminence of defeat” (the death and determinism which haunt living from…) and the opening up of a “distance in its [death’s] regard” (recollection, labour, possession, dwelling), is precisely *consciousness*.

This means that there is no duality between lived body (in recollection) and physical body (in enjoyment) to be reconciled because “[t]he dwelling which lodges and prolongs life, the world life acquires and utilizes by labor, is also the physical world where labor is interpreted as a play of anonymous forces… The domiciled being stands out from the things only because it accords itself a delay, because it “delays the effect,” because it labors.” (p.165) (Very Bergsonian) In other words, freedom is “the by-product of life.” (p.165)

The picture here is that consciousness does not come into a body, it “is not incarnated; it is a disincarnation – or, more exactly, a postponing of the corporeity of the body. This is not produced in the ether of abstraction but as all the concreteness of dwelling and labor.” (pp.165-6) Consciousness arises, consciousness *is*, the appearance of time, that is to say, the production of a distance (a postponing) with regard to an element which is nevertheless present. “To be conscious is to be in relation with *what is*, but as though the present of *what is* were not yet entirely accomplished and only constituted the *future* of a recollected being. To be conscious is precisely to have time – not to exceed the present time in the project that anticipates the future, but to have a distance with regard to the present itself, to be related to the element in which one is settled as to what is not yet there… The indetermination of the element, its future, becomes consciousness, the possibility of making use of time.” (p.166). The ambiguity of the body produces consciousness and that ambiguity is produced in labour.

At this point, Levinas offers an interesting rejection of mechanistic determinism. Labour, as the grasping of the hand, is not merely the first cause in a sequence which terminates in an end, although this is certainly how it will appear to consciousness when it reflects on it later. The actions of the body unfold under the dominion of a cause which is, in fact, the end. The exact path to this end is, at the time, unknown, because the “…movement of the hand… is always to some measure a matter of seeking and *catching hold* of the goal, with all the contingencies this involves.” (p.167) In other words, “…the “representation” of the end and the movement of the hand that plunges toward it through an unexplored distance, preceded by no searchlight, constitute but one and the same event, and define a being that, while being in the midst of a world in which it is implanted, yet comes to this world from the hither side of this world, from a dimension of *interiority*…” (p.168) Again: “an end does not attract, is not in some measure inevitable, but is caught hold of, and thus presupposes the body qua hand.” (p.167)

*6. The Freedom of Representation and Gift*

Although the body appears to representation as a thing among things, it is actually “the *mode* in which a being, neither spatial nor foreign to geometrical or physical extension, exists separately. It is the regime of separation. The *somewhere* of dwelling is produced as a primordial event relative to which the event of the unfolding of physico-geometrical extension must be understood – and not the reverse.” (p.168)

The intellectual thesis of idealism, realised in representation, claims that the representation is the fundamental truth, the prior reality. “It maintains that in order to will it is first necessary to represent to oneself what one wills; in order to desire, represent one’s goal to oneself…” (p.168) But if impassive representation such as this were fundamentally true, where would the tension and care life is characterised by, come from? The converse, empiricism, is no more intelligible. If all we have is direct, unmediated engagement with the real world (commitment, action, care), from where would the freedom of representation arise?

The solution, for Levinas, is that representation is *conditioned* by reality, by life. Idealism, the “eternal temptation,” the fact that representation *appears* to constitute reality, results from fact of our separation. Empiricism, on the other hand, appears true only because of the “…radical character of the unrootedness of him who is recollected in a home, where the I, while steeped in the elements, takes up its position before a Nature.” (p.169) Levinas’ next question is: How can we go beyond both the mode of enjoyment (dependence – in which the empirical seems true) and that of possession (independence – in which idealism seems true) to grasp truth itself?

“To represent to oneself that from which I live would be equivalent to remaining exterior to the elements in which I am steeped. But if I cannot quit the space in which I am steeped, with a dwelling I can but *approach* these elements, possess things. I can indeed recollect myself in the midst of my life, which is life from . . . .” (p.170) This withdrawal, we have already seen, can only be effected in the “relation with the Other who welcomes me in the Home, the discreet presence of the Feminine. But in order that I be able to free myself from the very possession that the welcome of the Home establishes, in order that I be able to see things in themselves, that is, represent them to myself, refuse both enjoyment and possession, I must know how *to give* what I possess… But for this, I must encounter the indiscreet face of the Other that calls me into question. The Other – the absolutely other – paralyzes possession, which he contests by his epiphany in the face.” (pp.170-1) So, in order to go beyond possession, I must give what I possess (i.e. the world). But in order to give this, I must first have it challenged or I wouldn’t even recognise it as something which can be given. This challenge is precisely what the Other does.

The Other challenges us, teaching us in the process: “The calling in question of the I, coextensive with the manifestation of the Other in the face, we call language. The height from which language comes we designate with the term teaching… The first teaching teaches this very height, tantamount to its exteriority, the ethical.” (p.171) Once the height, the transcendence has been taught, I am then ready to proceed with the giving (of what I possess) that will free me.

How does this giving take place? First, in the world. No human relationship can take place outside of economic life in a dwelling. “The relationship with the Other is not produced outside of the world, but puts in question the world possessed.” (p.173) Secondly, through our only mode of communication with the Other; language. “The relationship with the Other, transcendence, consists in speaking the world to the Other… The *hic et nunc* itself issues from possession, in which the thing is grasped, and language, which designates it to the other, is a primordial dispossession, a first donation. The generality of the word institutes a common world. The ethical event at the basis of generalization is the underlying intention of language.” (p.173) “Language does not exteriorize a representation preexisting in me: it puts in common a world hitherto mine.” (p.174)

Representation thus earns its true freedom from the world (both as enjoyment and as possession) through a relation that is essentially *moral*, the relation with the Other: “…truth is neither in seeing nor in grasping, which are modes of enjoyment, sensibility, and possession; it is in transcendence, in which absolute exteriority presents itself in expressing itself…” (p.172)

E. The World of Phenomena and Expression

*1. Separation is an Economy*

“Egoism is life: life from . . . , or enjoyment. Enjoyment, given over to the elements which content it but lead it off into the “nowhere” and menace it, withdraws into a dwelling… In labouring possession reduces to the same what at first presented itself as other.” (p.175) Labouring and possession in the separated interiority is what Levinas calls *economic existence*. But, Levinas then asks, “…is not this interiority manifested on the outside by works? Do not works succeed in breaking through the crust of separation?” (p.175) Yes, they do, but “only if they have been clothed with the signification of language, which is instituted above and beyond works.” (p.176) Works (actions, gestures, manners, and objects) are signs which must be interpreted by the other without the author’s assistance and in this sense, “are immediately charged with equivocations”.

*2. Works and Expression*

When we question a thing, we typically ask “the question *quid*?” What is it? However, when we put this question to some*one*, someone who is presented as a face, we find not “an answer to a question, but the correlative of what is prior to every question. What is prior to every question is not in its turn a question nor a knowledge possessed a priori, but is Desire.”

Most of the time when we ask *who*, we get a *what* for an answer. *Who is Mr, X?* *He is the President of Y company.* “The answer presents itself as a quiddity; it refers to a system of relations.” The *who*, however, refers to the “non-qualifiable presence of an existent who *presents himself* without reference to anything, and yet distinguishes himself from every other existent. The question *who?* envisages a face.” (p.177) The *who* we grasp in works is not actually *expressed* in the work, is not actually *present*. Rather, he or she is “simply signified in it by a sign in a system of signs, that is, as a being who is manifested precisely as absent from his manifestation: a manifestation in the absence of being – a phenomenon.” (p.178) For Levinas, the term *phenomenon* represents a fundamental insufficiency, a lack of being.

In the midst of the totality of contentment we become aware of our own phenomenality (the fact that we are nothing more than a signification of a sign in a system of signs) “when an exteriority that does not slip into the void of needs gratified or frustrated supervenes”; i.e. in the face to face encounter. This exteriority reveals “an insufficiency… that is without possible satisfaction – not only unsatisfied *in fact*, but outside of every perspective of satisfaction or unsatisfaction.” This is precisely what we have already discovered in Desire and the relationship with the Other, the idea of Infinity.

*3. Phenomenon and Being*

I am a free interiority which is limited by an exteriority. This contradiction is reconciled in “the man open to teaching.” Teaching is not simply what Levinas calls *maieutics*, the Socratic form of instruction based on a cooperative, argumentative interaction in which knowledge is imparted; rather, it is “the placing in me the idea of infinity.” In this, we can clearly see Levinas’ goal of replacing the Socratic with the Cartesian order. The reason for this is that the Socratic method already presupposes beings who have chosen discourse. The Socratic is a later description of what is fundamentally Cartesian.

Separation requires an atheism that is so complete that it has completely forgotten the idea of infinity. In the openness of the face to face, however, while this distance and interiority remain intact, through teaching, the separated being is able to leave the plane of economy and labour in that unique relationship in which the terms remain absolute despite their relation.

Levinas is here contrasting phenomenon with being. The former is a mere image of the latter, thus: “As long as the existence of man remains interiority it remains phenomenal.” (p.182) Being refers to “a world in which one speaks and of which one speaks. Society is the presence of being.” Being, for Levinas, is the “thing in itself”. It is not hidden with respect to the phenomenon; rather, its “presence presents itself in its word… It is of itself presence of a face, and hence appeal and teaching, *entry into relation* with me – the ethical relation.” (p.181)

Speech is the way the signifier *attends* the signified. In the presentation of the face “not only verbal signs but all signs can serve as language.” However, the flip side of this is that not all verbal signs are language. Speech, as an activity, as a *work* that lacks the “absolute *frankness* of the face” behind it, attending it, can be reduced to nothing more than a sign, a “speech-activity” from which the I is missing, absent.

Section 3

Exteriority and the Face

A. Sensibility and the Face

Levinas begins here by asserting that intentionality has compromised the idea of sensation because it reduces the thing to a qualitative, subjective state. Sensation, understood like this, is an abstraction: “…sensation recovers a “reality” when we see in it not the subjective counterpart of objective qualities, but an enjoyment “anterior” to the crystallization of consciousness, I and non-I, into subject and object.” (p.188) Naturally, this will require that we return to enjoyment, our original mode of being, prior to reflective thought. Thus, Levinas advocates for a “phenomenology of sensation as enjoyment” (p.188), which, in recalling Kant’s transcendental aesthetics, he calls the “transcendental function” of sensibility because it will entail a movement ‘outside’ or ‘beyond’ our interiority.

The transcendental function of sensibility is accomplished through visual and tactile qualities, leaving “to qualities coming from other senses only the role of adjectives clinging to the visible and touched object – which is inseparable from labor and the home. The object disclosed, discovered, appearing, a phenomenon, is the visible of touched object. Its objectivity is interpreted without the other sensations taking part in it.” (p.188)

Vision presupposes the light. “The eye does not see the light, but the object in the light. Vision is therefore a relation with a “something” established within a relation with what is not a “something.” We are in the light inasmuch as we encounter the thing in nothingness.” (p.189) The hand is similar in that it “traverses the “nothing” of space”. “Thus for vision and for touch a being comes as though from nothingness…” (p.189) The point of this is that the object is apprehended, not simply as being there, but as already in a relation with the “void of openness, which is not an object. The comprehension of an existent consists in precisely going beyond the existent, into the open.” (p.190)

The void opened up by light (and space) in sensibility is precisely what Levinas calls the *there is*; pure existence. “The negation of every qualifiable thing allows the impersonal *there is* to arise again, returning intact behind every negation…” (p.190) The elemental also participates in this same voidness. It is into this void of darkness that Levinas imagines the light comes, delivering us from the horror of the *there is*. “Vision moves into grasp. Vision opens upon a perspective, upon a horizon, and describes a traversable distance, invites the hand to movement and to contact, and ensures them… The forms of objects call for the hand and the grasp. By the hand the object is in the end comprehended, touched, taken, borne and *referred* to other objects, clothed with a signification, *by reference to* other objects. Empty space is the condition for this relationship…” (p.191)

Light makes this whole process possible but it only “makes possible the signification of objects that border one another. It does not enable one to approach them face to face.” Levinas describes this as seeing “on the horizon. The vision that apprehends on the horizon does not encounter a being out of what is beyond all being. Vision is a forgetting of the *there is* because of the essential satisfaction, the agreeableness of sensibility, enjoyment, contentment with the finite without concern for the infinite.” (p.191)

Total alterity, however, as revealed in the face to face “does not refer to enjoyment and presents itself out of itself, does not shine forth in the *form* by which things are given to us, for beneath form things conceal themselves.” The revelation of the Other “cuts across the vision of forms… introduces a dimension of transcendence, and leads us to a relation totally different from experience in the sensible sense of the term, relative and egoist.” (p.193)

B. Ethics and the Face

*1. Infinity and the Face*

The Other is absolute alterity. However, it doesn’t just negate the I, “total negation, of which murder is the temptation and the attempt, refers to an antecedent relation.” (p.194) This relation with the Other can only be established by language, or *discourse*: “Better than comprehension, *discourse* relates with what remains essentially transcendent.” (p.195) Any word that attempts to capture the Other within a theme immediately fails because “…already it is said to the Other who, as interlocutor, has quit the theme that encompassed him, and upsurges inevitably behind that said.” (p.195) The transcendence of the Other Levinas describes as an “ethical inviolability.”

The ethical relationship between me and the Other does not emanate from the I; rather, it “puts the I in question.” That is to say, it “emanates from the other.” The way Levinas describes this facing position the Other takes towards me is as a “moral summons.” The moral summons, as the idea of infinity “is concretely produced in the form of a relation with the face.”

For Kant and Heidegger infinity is an ideal, the “…ideal completion of what is given incomplete…” (p.196), but importantly, without allowing for an experience of infinity. Finitude is the only experienceable reality; sensibility for Kant, being-for-death for Heidegger. Hegel returns to Descartes in giving the infinite a positive meaning, but his understanding of the infinite dissolved any “other” by absorbing every finite individual into the Absolute. Levinas, on the other hand, insists on the infinite as a relation the finite can participate in (while remaining separate, of course). “The idea of infinity, the overflowing of finite thought by its content, effectuates the relation of thought with what exceeds its capacity”. (p.197) This is what he calls the “welcome of the face”, a relation ultimately constituted with a positive structure; the ethical.

*2. Ethics and the Face*

The face resists possession, resists my grasp, but this resistance is not “produced as an insurmountable resistance” (which would render it merely a part of a totality); rather, it is because it is absolutely transcendent; there is no way my grasping could ever hope to take hold of it. And yet, the face is vulnerable to me in one way. I can no longer *take* it but I can *kill* it.

The grasp aims, not at the destruction of things, but at their preservation… their preservation *for me*. “Neither the destruction of things, nor the hunt, nor the extermination of living beings aims at the face, which is not of the world. They still belong to labor, have a finality, and answer to a need. Murder alone lays claim to total negation. Negation by labor and usage, like negation by representation, effect a grasp or a comprehension, rest on or aim at affirmation; they can. To kill is not to dominate but to annihilate; it is to renounce comprehension absolutely. Murder exercises a power over what escapes power.” (p.198) This means that “the Other is the sole being I can wish to kill.”

Again, Levinas emphasises here that the force the Other opposes me with is not merely a force of resistance. Rather, it is founded in the “…very *unforeseeableness* of his reaction. He thus opposes to me not a greater force… but precisely the infinity of his transcendence… There is here a relation not with a very great resistance, but with something absolutely *other*: the resistance of what has no resistance – the ethical resistance.” (p.199)

The encounter with the face, the “epiphany of infinity is expression and discourse.” In expression, there is no information being imparted; rather, a being presents itself, but not as an image, as a “solicitation” that accompanies itself and manifests as a face. It is “…to *impose oneself* above and beyond the manifested and purely phenomenal form, to present oneself in a mode irreducible to manifestation, the very straightforwardness of the face to face, without the intermediary of any image, on one’s nudity…” (p.200)

This expression does not “radiate as a splendor” (p.200), what we would call beauty; nevertheless, it arouses Desire: “To manifest oneself in attending one’s own manifestation is to invoke the interlocutor and expose oneself to his response and his questioning.” (p.200) This expression promotes my freedom and arouses my goodness by imposing an order of *responsibility*. The way Levinas describes this is to say: “The being that expresses itself imposes itself, but does so precisely by appealing to me with its destitution and nudity – its hunger – without my being able to be deaf to that appeal.” (p.200) Thus, there is a vulnerability in the moral summons.

“This bond between expression and responsibility… [is the] ethical condition or essence of language” and is a function prior to disclosure of being. “Preexisting the disclosure of being in general taken as basis of knowledge and as meaning of being is the relation with the existent that expresses himself; pre-existing the plane of ontology is the ethical plane.” (p.201)

In addition, “the presentation of the face is not true, for the true refers to the non-true…” (p.201) and logical opposites are features of totality, not the transcendent, metaphysical relation.

*3. Reason and the Face*

The face does not do violence to the same. It’s presentation of itself is a welcoming, “pre-eminently nonviolence, for instead of offending my freedom it calls it to responsibility and founds it.” (p.203) For sure, its freedom is inhibited, but not as if it had encountered a resistance; rather it is limited as “arbitrary, guilty, and timid” and then “in its guilt it rises to responsibility. Contingency, that is, the irrational, appears to it not outside of itself in the other, but within itself. It is not limitation by the other that constitutes contingency, but egoism, as unjustified of itself.” (p.203) It is the relation with the Other which “puts into question the brutal spontaneity” of the same and “introduces into me what was not in me.” Inasmuch as this action, this interference, or limitation, on the I ends contingency, it also founds Reason. The Other is, for Levinas, the first teaching. This teaching is of infinity and rational thought refers to this teaching. Reason can only be founded in the Other.

*4. Discourse Founds Signification*

Since the Other founds reason and the relation with the Other is produced through language, “[l]anguage thus conditions the functioning of rational thought: it gives it a commencement in being, a primary identity of signification in the face of him who speaks…” (p.204) This is important because it reverses common wisdom which holds “the incontestable primacy of rational thought over all the *operations* of expression that insert a thought into a particular language as into a system of signs…” (p.205) Levinas acknowledges Maurice Merleau-Ponty who realised that “…discarnate thought thinking speech before speaking it, thought constituting the world of speech…” (p.205), merely adding speech to a world already full of significations, was a myth. Thought is already immersed in language as a system of signs even as it thinks its thoughts.

“But why is language, the recourse to the system of signs, necessary for thought?” (p.206) And what is meaning?

It is not the signs which produce signification (meaning); rather, it is “…signification (whose primordial event is the face to face) that makes the sign function possible.” (p.206) The essence of language lies not in the “corporeal operation… but in the presentation of meaning.” And: “…*the being of signification consists in putting into question in an ethical relation constitutive freedom itself*. Meaning is the face of the Other, and all recourse to words takes place already within the primordial face to face of language… Signification is infinity, that is, the Other.” (pp.206-7) Meaning, recall, arises from the Other because meaning requires being situated relative to an absolute.

“If the face to face founds language, if the face brings the first signification, establishes signification itself in being, then language does not only serve reason, but is reason.” (p.207) Levinas is explicitly rejecting the notion of reason as an “impersonal legality” because this “absorbs the plurality of the interlocutors.” (p.207) Such a universal notion could never account for discourse because how can you have dialogue within a totality that is absolute? Or, as Levinas puts it, if reason is the “internal coherence of an ideal order realized in being in the measure that the individual consciousness… would renounce its particularity as an individual and an ipseity, and either withdraw unto a noumenal sphere… or be reabsorbed in the universal order of the State” (p.208), then language would dissolve the ipseity of the individual, and at the same time, society, understood as relations between terms which absolve themselves from the relation.

On the other hand, if reason emerges from language in the face to face, if signification arises in the face, if society precedes the impersonal, universal structures of reason, “…then the pluralism of society could not disappear in the elevation to reason, but would be its condition. It is not the impersonal in me that Reason would establish, but an I myself capable in society…” (p.208)

*5. Language and Objectivity*

“A meaningful world is a world in which there is the Other through whom the world of my enjoyment becomes a theme having a signification. Things acquire a rational signification, and not only one of simple usage, because an other is associated with my relations with them.” (p.209) It is the Other that gives things their rational signification. “In designating a thing I designate it to the Other. The act of designating modifies my enjoyment and possession with things, places the things in the perspective of the Other.” (p.209) In doing this, things become detached from my own usage, alienated, rendered exterior; in short, they become objective. Given this, it is clear then that objectivity arises only from language, after I have offered “the world to the Other in speech.”

Objectification detaches one from things, but it does so in such a way that it is “as though it [the individual] hovered over its own existence, as though it were detached from it, as though the existence it exists had not yet completely reached it.” (p.209) In a sense, the subject is *not yet* in being, *not yet* existing. This distance which has opened up from self to self, is precisely self-consciousness, which, in turn, is precisely what Levinas takes to be time (the opening up of a not-yet (what we earlier called a “delay”)), that is, “the inexhaustible future of infinity” which is, of course, produced from the welcoming of the Other.

Husserl correctly identified that objectivity already contains a reference to others (in that to be objective is to be valid for everyone, thus “…the objective becomes objective only through communication.” (p.210)), but he insisted it did so within a monadic thought, a purely subjective process. Descartes, on the other hand, recognised that self-consciousness (reflection on reflection), and thus certitude and objectivity, could only be realised “because of the presence of infinity in [one’s own] finite thought…” (p.210). He discovered, precisely what Levinas’ entire book is about; namely, the “relation with a total alterity irreducible to interiority, which nevertheless does not do violence to interiority…” (p.211)

*6. The Other and the Others*

The presentation of the face in expression does not disclose an interiority. It is completely different from the phenomenon, which is able to be given and taken, discoverable and open to the grasp, able to be suspended in possession. The “…presentation of the face puts me into relation with being. *The existing of this being*, irreducible to phenomenality understood as a reality without reality, is effectuated in the non-postponable urgency with which he requires a response.” (p.212)

This response differs in another way from the reaction the phenomenon arouses in us. It differs in that the relation does not remain ‘localised’ between me and the thing. “Everything that takes place here “between us” concerns everyone, the face that looks at it places itself in the full light of the public order, even if I draw back from it to seek with the interlocutor the complicity of a private relation and a clandestinity.” (p.212) This makes this relation different from the I-Thou relation which remains private, “…forgetful of the universe…” (p.213)

The face presents itself in two aspects: as “poor one” and as Master. “The poor one, the stranger, presents himself as an equal.” (p.213) He refers to a *third party* who the Other already serves. (This “third party” is actually the whole of humanity) This seems to connect to the above point about the impossibility of secrecy in the relation with the Other. However, in serving this third party “…he joins me to himself for service; he commands me as a Master.” (p.213) But, the command to join is a command which “…can concern me only inasmuch as I am master myself; consequently this command commands me to command. The *thou* is posited in front of a *we*.” (p.213) There is a bit going on here. First, the relation cannot be hidden because it has nothing to do with the content of the communication, the discourse. The discourse alone, the presentation of the face, is enough for the relation. Second, the relation carries an importance not just for me and the Other, but for everyone. Hence, the notion that the Other “serves” humanity. Third, the Other also calls me to serve; i.e. to “preach” Levinas’ philosophy (which is Judaism). Fourth, this commandment then calls on me to command others. Hence, Levinas calls the relation with the Other, not just discourse, but “…sermon, exhortation, the prophetic word.” (p.213)

Society (the “third party” above) is a combination of fraternity and paternity. My relation with the face of the Other constitutes fraternity, and “…implies other unicities at my side.” (p.214) Levinas emphasises that his fraternity “…is radically opposed to the conception of a humanity united by resemblance…” (p.214) Paternity, on the other hand, is “the establishment of a unicity…” (p.214) Levinas goes on to say: “Human fraternity has then two aspects: it involves individualities whose logical status is not reducible to the status of ultimate differences in a genus, for their singularity consists in each referring to itself… On the other hand, it involves the commonness of a father, as though the commonness of race would not bring together enough.” (p.214) It seems here that Levinas is seeking to explain how society can be bonded together as a whole, while at the same time maintaining itself as a collection of individuals. Unsurprisingly, monotheism has this exact structure: “Monotheism signifies this human kinship, this idea of a human race that refers back to the approach of the Other in the face, in a dimension of height, in responsibility for oneself and for the Other.” (p.214)

*7. The Asymmetry of the Interpersonal*

Carrying on the theme from the last section, Levinas continues to elaborate on the way the face presents itself to me. In an interesting rejection of Kierkegaard, he says: “The presence of the face coming from beyond the world, but committing me to human fraternity, does not overwhelm me as a numinous essence arousing fear and trembling.” (p.215) In confronting this presence, I do so “both as more and as less than the being that presents itself in the face. Less, for the face summons me to my obligations and judges me. The being that presents himself in the face comes from a dimension of height, a dimension of transcendence whereby he can present himself as a stranger without opposing me as obstacle or enemy. More, for my position as *I* consists in being able to respond to this essential destitution of the Other, finding resources for myself.” (p.215) In this latter, I welcome the face with “…the resources of egoism: economically.” (p.216) This hearkens back to something Levinas said earlier about all human relationships occurring in economic life in a dwelling; in a world that is possessed. This “space” is “essentially asymmetrical” (p.216) for Levinas. I think this is because of the infinite/finite contradistinction.

*8. Will and Reason*

Discourse conditions thought. The ethical is always prior. In maintaining this, Levinas refuses idealism. Idealism “…constitutes a system of coherent ideal relations… [in which the individual’s] will is reason and its separation illusory…” (p.216) In idealism: “The Other and the I function as elements of an ideal calculus, receive from this calculus their real being… They play the role of moments in a system…” (p.216) Further, “persons are indeed defined as wills, but… the will is defined as what permits itself to be affected by the universal – where the will wishes to be reason…” (p.217) This results in a world without multiplicity and therefore a world in which language has lost its social signification, indeed, a world in which discourse would eventually come to an end because there would no longer be any interlocutors. Interlocutors no longer desire one another; rather, they desire the universal. To be sure, “…each being is posited apart from all the others, but the will of each, or ipseity, from the start consists in willing the universal or the rational, that is, in negating its very particularity.” (p.217) The philosophies of Hegel and Spinoza represent such idealist motivations. Levinas argues against this identification of the will with reason because “the ideal of a being accomplished from all eternity, thinking only itself, can not serve as the ontological touchstone for a life…” (p.218)

Then Levinas says something profound: “*The individual and the personal are necessary for Infinity to be able to be produced as infinite*.” (p.218) There is no (effective) infinite without the finite. “If the subjectivity were but a deficient mode of being, the distinguishing between will and reason would indeed result in conceiving the will as arbitrary, as a pure and simple negation of an embryonic or virtual reason dormant in an I, and consequently as a negation of that I and a violence in regard to oneself. If, on the contrary, the subjectivity is fixed as a separated being in relation with an other absolutely other, the Other, if the face brings the first signification, that is, the very upsurge of the rational, then the will is distinguished fundamentally from the intelligible, which it must not comprehend and into which it must not disappear…” (p.218) The teaching of the face, that is, the teaching of the idea of infinity, and the introduction of the new into thought, is the very work of reason, and that teaching is constituted in language, “a response to the being who in a face speaks to the subject and tolerates only a personal response, that is, an ethical act.”

C. The Ethical Relation and Time

*1. Subjectivity and Pluralism*

We have seen how the metaphysical relation is established between the same and the Other in such a way that they remain separate thereby realising a “multiple existing – a pluralism.” This is what Levinas calls a “radical multiplicity, distinct from numerical multiplicity… [which] remains defenceless against totalization.” (p.220)

Contemplation, on the other hand, is absorbed into a totality. Levinas defines contemplation as “a process by which being is revealed without ceasing to be one.” (p.221) Thus, contemplation is a suppression of pluralism. In order to preserve the multiplicity then, the subjectivity within it must arise in such a way that its being cannot reduce the subjectivity to a part in a totality. “Being must hold sway as revealing itself, that is, in its very being flowing toward an I that approaches it, but flowing toward it infinitely without running dry, burning without being consumed.” (p.221) This obviously cannot take place as a cognition or a reflection that captures the entirety of the multiplicity. It happens in the “*surplus* of the social relation… and is not measured by truth… Multiplicity therefore implies an objectivity posited in the impossibility of total reflection, in the impossibility of conjoining the I and the non-I in a whole. This impossibility is not negative – which would be to still posit it by reference to the idea of truth contemplated. It results from the surplus of the epiphany of the other, who dominates me from his height.” (p.221)

So, what form does this multiplicity take? It is not war or commerce, because these both “presuppose the face and the transcendence of the being appearing in the face.” (p.222) We usually imagine war arising from the violence in a multiplicity whereby beings *limit* one another in some way. However, limitation “is conceivable only within a totality where the parts mutually define one another.” (p.222) War, as Levinas envisages it, does not derive from such a state. In fact, “war like peace presupposes beings structured otherwise than as parts of a totality… In war beings refuse to belong to a totality, refuse community… affirm themselves as transcending the totality, each identifying itself not by its place in the whole, but by its *self*.” (p.222) In short, since war is a relation between beings exterior to totality (i.e. in a multiplicity), it cannot be the ground of this multiplicity.

But how can beings completely separated from each other engage each other in violence? Such a proposition would only be absurd if the terms were posited as *substances*, each *causa sui*. This is clearly not the case here (the fact that we don’t, and can’t, choose our own births means we aren’t *causa sui*). For “relationship between separated beings to be possible, the multiple terms would have to be partially independent and partially in relation.” (p.223) Can we call such a being, then, a “finite freedom”? No. Freedom, as “an abstraction that reveals itself to be self-contradictory when one supposes it to have a limitation, can not describe beings in the relation that does not constitute totality, beings in war.” (pp.223-4)

Rather, for Levinas, “a being independent of and yet at the same time exposed to the other is a temporal being: to the inevitable violence of death it opposes its time, which is postponement itself.” (p.224) If we were *causa sui*, we would be immortal and there could be no possibility for war or death. If we were purely mortal, we would be in a world where nothing opposed anything (because this world would lack an “I”) and we would effectively be dead already. Levinas is proposing that we are mortal, but temporal, beings. Time is “not being for death, but the “not yet” which is a way of being against death, a retreat before death in the very midst of its inexorable approach.” (p.224)

So, “the reality of the time that separates a being from its death…” (p.224) reveals to us how the plurality within which war is possible arises. Instead of a finite freedom (therefore a *limited* freedom), I am a “freedom originally null, offered in death to the other, but in which time arises as… a postponement by virtue of which nothing is definitive yet…” (p.224).

Levinas calls this capacity for postponement a “skill,” and asserts that it can take place only because of the body which is “a simultaneity of absence and presence. Corporeity is the mode of existence of a being whose presence is postponed at the very moment of his presence. Such a distension in the tension of the instant can only come from an infinite dimension which separates me from the other, both present and still to come, a dimension opened by the face of the Other.” (p.225)

The relation we have uncovered here is one that “subtends war” and is “an asymmetrical relation with the other who, as infinity, opens time, transcends and dominates the subjectivity…” (p.225) However, this relation can become symmetrical in *separation* “…where I and the other become interchangeable in commerce, and where the particular man, an individuation of the genus man, appearing in history, is substituted for the I and for the other.” (p.226) The next section will consider the “concrete form” in which the freedom of separation (in commerce) is lost and how it is maintained even as it is lost.

*2. Commerce, the Historical Relation, and the Face*

The separated will is completely separate in its atheism, a separation we have analysed as *economic*. However, this same will, through the same economic mode of existence (separation), is also exposed to the Other. “By its work the sovereign and self-enclosed will confirms the foreign will it means to ignore, and finds itself “made game of” by the Other.” (p.231) Indeed, all work undertaken by the same is, as soon as it is produced, relinquished by the subject and delivered to the Other. “The other can dispossess me of my work, take it or buy it… The work is destined to this alien *Sinngebung* [giving meaning] from the moment of its origin in me.” (p.227) “The willing of the living will *postpones* this subjection, and accordingly wills against the Other and his threat.” (p.227) But it will eventually give way and abandon its works to the Other (i.e. they will become objective) in the form of the *historian*: “History, in which the interiority of each will manifests itself only in plastic form – in the muteness of products – is economic history. In history the will is congealed into a personage interpreted on the basis of his work…” (pp.227-8). This “misconstruction” is what Levinas calls *fate*; i.e. “accounts of the survivors, who interpret, that is, utilize the works of the dead.” (p.228) This is not the face-to-face relation though.

How does this happen concretely? How is the will, “unshakeable in its happiness” and completely separate, exposed and its being taken from it? In the body.

The body is both a biological “thing” and the “point of view” of a lived body, *simultaneously*. We don’t switch between these different aspects. “The body in its very activity, in its for itself, inverts into a thing to be treated as a thing… the originality of the body consists of the coinciding of two points of view.” (p.229) The will is thus exposed to being affected as a thing by things (through being ‘corporeised’ in a body) while at the same time postponing its inevitable death as time (through the “point of view” of the lived body).

Levinas calls this the “duality of betrayal and fidelity,” both of which are held in the will itself because it is through the will’s own efforts that it preserves its fidelity (economic interiority) and loses it through betrayal (to the Other). Nevertheless, the betrayal arises in the way its works are usurped by the Other, while fidelity is “won by repentance and prayer… and the pardon which ensures it this fidelity comes to it from the outside.” (p.231) Thus, again, having an external source. Both betrayal and fidelity are made possible only by the *mortality* of the will; i.e. the way it exists corporeally as both “thing” and “lived body.”

Levinas rejects the dualisms of idealism (which would reconstitute a whole) and empiricism (which would see us as mere physical bodies, “a simple block”) in favour of the “postponement of death in a mortal will – time – [which] is the mode of existence and reality of a separated being that has entered into relation with the Other.” (p.232)

*3. The Will and Death*

Death is commonly thought of either as “a passage to nothingness or as a passage to another existence”; that is, within the alternative of being and nothingness. Levinas thinks this is a false dichotomy; “my own death places me before a category that does not enter into either term of this alternative. The sense of my death is contained in the refusal of this ultimate alternative… My death is not deduced from the death of the others by analogy; it is inscribed in the fear I can have for my being.” (p.233)

Death acquires its sense of menace or dread not through our knowledge of it but its imminence, its “irreducible oncoming movement,” and the fact that it is unforeseeable. It is not unforeseeable “due to an empirical ignorance, to the limited horizon of our understanding, which a greater understanding would have been able to overcome. The unforeseeable character of death is due to the fact that it does not lie within any horizon. It is not open to grasp.” (p.233) It will take me without giving me the chance to struggle, precisely because in a struggle I can grasp and grapple with what takes hold of me. “Struggle must not be confounded with the collision of two forces whose issue one can foresee and calculate. Struggle is already, or again, *war*, where between the forces that confront one another gapes open the interval of transcendence across which death comes and strikes without being received.” (p.233) In other words, death approaches the same way we saw war carried out, from transcendence.

This gives us a striking connection to the Other, who, “inseparable from the very event of transcendence, is situated in the region from which death, possibly murder, comes.” (p.233) Thus, everything happens “as though the approach of death remained one of the modalities of the relation with the Other… My death comes from an instant upon which I can in no way exercise my power. I do not run up against an obstacle which at least I touch in that collision, which, in surmounting or in enduring it, I integrate into my life, suspending its alterity. Death is a menace that approaches me as a mystery…” (pp.234-5) My relation with death is not the “fear of nothingness, but the fear of violence – and thus it extends into fear of the Other, of the absolutely unforeseeable.” (p.235)

The fact that death is an imminence means that it is at the same time a postponement. Death, then, “pushes on, and it leaves time. To be temporal is both to be for death and to still have time, to be against death.” (p.235) This is just another way that time arises (as postponement) from the Other.

Somewhat surprisingly, Levinas asserts that death cannot “drain all meaning from my life.” (p.236) The reason is that I am not simply a being enclosed in interiority. The Other “remains yet in relation with me and permits me to will, but with a will that is not egoist, a will that flows into the essence of desire whose center of gravitation does not coincide with the I of need, the desire that is for the Other.” (p.236) In the same way that the will postpones the betrayal of itself, it is also “on the way to death but a death ever future, exposed to death but not *immediately*, [meaning that it] has time to be for the Other, and thus to recover meaning despite death… The Desire into which the threatened will dissolves no longer defends the powers of a will, but, as the goodness whose meaning death cannot efface, has its center outside of itself.” (p.236)

*4. Time and the Will: Patience*

We have seen how the will is a contradiction; on the one hand, “an immunity from every exterior attack” (p.237) and on the other, “the permanent fallibility of this inviolable sovereignty…” (p.237); that is to say, an independent dependence, a point of view and a biological thing, a will and a body. We saw that the will was threatened by the violence of death, but this violence was delayed, postponed. Earlier, we called this postponement consciousness; that distance which separates us from the present: “Consciousness is resistance to violence, because it leaves the time necessary to forestall it. Human freedom resides in the future… of its non-freedom, in consciousness… To be conscious is to have time – not to overflow the present by anticipating and hastening the future, but to have a distance with regard to the present: to relate oneself to being as to a being to come… By virtue of time, the being defined, that is, self-identical… has not yet reached its term, remains at a distance from itself, is still preparatory…” (p.237) This allows us to take up a position with regard to our nature and, in a sense, appear as if existing prior to that very nature. Levinas describes this as the way the “identity of the present splits up into an inexhaustible multiplicity of possibles that suspend the instant.” (p.238)

The only time the ever-future threat (of the violence of death) becomes present is in physical suffering. “In fear death is yet future, at a distance from us; whereas suffering realizes in the will the extreme proximity of the being menacing the will.” (p.238) But even in this limit case, “we still witness this turning of the I into a thing; we are at the same time a thing and at a distance from our reification… Suffering remains ambiguous: it is already the present of the pain, acting on the for itself of the will, but, as consciousness, the pain is always yet to come.” (p.238) This distance from the present pain represents an “ultimate passivity” which Levinas calls *patience*: “In patience a disengagement within engagement is effected…” (p.238)

The supreme ordeal of freedom is, then, not death, but suffering. This can be seen in hatred, which seeks to inflict suffering on the Other while not reducing him or her to the rank of object. “In suffering the subject must know his reification, but in order to do so he must precisely remain a subject. Hatred wills both things. Whence the insatiable character of hatred.” (p.239) Because of this, hatred is a logical absurdity. The supreme ordeal of the will is not death, then, but suffering. The will, enduring suffering in patience, can never be absurd because “the violence the will endures comes from the other as a tyranny.” (p.239) Nevertheless, the suffering itself is “produced as an absurdity breaking out on the ground of signification.” (p.239) In this, the appearance of suffering is absurd.

Again, we see that the Other is the ground of our salvation, this time in patience. Since violence can only be produced “in a world where I can die *as a result of someone* and *for someone*… in patience the will breaks through the crust of its egoism and as it were displaces its center of gravity outside of itself, to will as Desire and Goodness limited by nothing.” (p.239)

*5. The Truth of the Will*

“Death marks the subjectivity of the will not as an end, but as supreme violence and alienation. But in patience, where the will is transported to a life *against someone* and *for someone*, death no longer touches the will.” (p.240) Levinas now asks though, is this “immunity” true or merely subjective?

First of all, this is not to suggest that there is a ‘real’ sphere out there somehow opposed to an inconsistent and possible illusory inner life, which would thereby become an epiphenomenon (retracing the problem of Cartesian dualism). The inner life is “an *event* of being, as the openness of a dimension indispensable, in the economy of being, for the production of infinity.” (p.240) So, to answer the question posed above, we must return to the inner life.

The inner life is defined by *apology*. This is a reference to the arbitrary and unjustified nature of the free will arising in enjoyment as a separated being. We have seen how the will resists the otherness of death by a non-egoist willing *for someone else*, but in order to do this, it must encounter the face, that is, demand judgement before it in order to “obtain justice. Judgement would confirm the event of the apology in its original and fundamental movement, ineluctable in the production of Infinity.” (p.240)

The problem here is that judgement, “the act of situating by reference to infinity, necessarily [has] its source outside the being judged…” (p.240); it comes from the Other, thus from being a part of “social and political institutions” (p.241) and from history. These are the two “tyrannies” Levinas mentions here. The first “consists in the submission of the subjective will to the universal laws which reduce the will to its objective signification… Henceforth it exists as though it were dead and signified only in its own heritage…” (p.242) The second is “that of works alienated…” (p.242), which refers to history. Thus, “there exists a tyranny of the universal and the impersonal…” (p.242)

But the will can affirm against this “tyranny of the universal and of the impersonal… [that he is] an irreducible singularity, exterior to the totality into which he enters…” (p.242) This is, then, a different kind of judgement, a “speech in the first person, direct discourse…” (p.242) before the Other, and one in which the will remains present at its own judgement making it an apology. “The subjectivity’s presence at the judgment which ensures it truth is not a purely numerical fact of being there, but is an apology.” (p.242) As always though, “the possibility of seeing itself from the outside does not harbor truth either, if I pay for it the price of my depersonalization. In this judgment… the singularity and unicity of the I who thinks must not be engulfed, as a result of having been absorbed into its own thought and entered into its discourse. Judgment must be borne upon a will that could defend itself during the adjudication and through its apology be present at its trial, and does not disappear into the totality of a coherent discourse.” (p.243)

Levinas goes on to frame the issue in terms of the visible and the invisible. The former representing the judgement of history, the latter the judgement in which subjectivity is apologetically present. Importantly however, we must remember that the invisible (subjectivity) manifests without ever becoming visible. The judgement of apology (invisible, concerning a subjectivity) never becomes the judgement of history (visible, referring to facts).

Such a judgement is carried out by God, but Levinas asks: how does this concretely take place? The answer is… in the face of the Other. Judgement is made, not according to impersonal, universal principles. Instead: “Judgment is pronounced upon me in the measure that it summons me to respond. Truth takes form in this response to a summons…” (p.244), and the summons, calls the being to its infinite responsibility. “The I, which we have seen arise in enjoyment as a separated being having apart, in itself, the center around which its existence gravitates, is confirmed in its singularity by purging itself of this gravitation, purges itself interminably, and is confirmed precisely in this incessant effort to purge itself. This is termed goodness.” (pp.244-5) As Levinas says later; “Goodness consists in taking up a position in being such that the Other counts more than myself.” (p.247) Thus, apology is a positive act in which one justifies oneself in one’s freedom before the Other, but only by appeal to the Other.

Truth, then, lies neither in tyranny (of universal principles or history) nor the subjective. Rather: “Truth can *be* only if a subjectivity is called upon to tell it… The call to infinite responsibility confirms the subjectivity in its apologetic position. The dimension of its interiority is brought from the level of the subjective to that of being.” (p.245) Thus, truth has nothing of the nature of correspondence to it. Instead, one is “*in* *truth* by being produced in history under the judgment it bears upon me, but under the judgment that it bears upon me in my presence – that is, while letting me speak.” (p.253)

Since truth in the judgment of consciousness goes beyond history, Levinas asserts that “truth requires as its ultimate condition an infinite time, the condition for both goodness and the transcendence of the face.” (p.247) This will be realised in *fecundity*, which is discussed in the next section.

Section 4

Beyond the Face

As the title of this section suggests, Levinas believes that there is “a “plane” both presupposing and transcending the epiphany of the Other in the face, a plane where the I bears itself beyond death and recovers also from its return to itself. This plane is that of love and fecundity, where subjectivity is posited in function of these movements.” (p.253)

A. The Ambiguity of Love

The metaphysical event of transcendence Levinas has spent the entirety of the book on thus far (the welcome of the Other, hospitality, Desire, language) is not accomplished as love. Love represents a transcendence that “goes both further and less far than language.” It is a movement toward the transcendence of the Other, but at the same time, it remains within immanence. It thus has all “the ambiguity of an event situated at the limit of immanence and transcendence… Love remains a relation with the Other that turns into a need, and this need still presupposes the total, transcendent exteriority of the other, of the beloved.” (p.254) In other words, it requires that the Other appear as the object of a need while remaining absolute alterity, “the possibility of enjoying the Other, of placing oneself at the same time beneath and beyond discourse.” (p.255)

B. Phenomenology of Eros

In love, the Other appears in an equivocation between immanence and transcendence. On the one hand, their immanence manifests in a *frailty* or *fragility*, which is what love aims at, but on the other hand, this fragility “also lies at the limit of an existence “without ceremonies,”… a “non-signifying” and raw density, an exorbitant ultramateriality.” (p.256) Levinas stretches his poetic muscle in describing this as “the exhibitionist nudity of an exorbitant presence coming as though from farther than the frankness of the face… *The essentially hidden throws itself toward the light, without becoming signification*.” (p.256) How does the Other manage to appear without appearing? Because, as Other, it “ceaselessly escapes its form toward a future… [and] slips away as though it *were not yet*.” (pp.257-8) This manner of appearing, the “simultaneity of the clandestine and the exposed precisely defines *profanation*.” (p.257) Levinas also confuses the issue by calling this *femininity*.

The primary movement in *Eros* is the *caress*. It is sensibility but also a transcendence of the sensible. Anticipation operates only in the realm of possibles, but the beloved never offers itself in this way. Thus, the caress “is not an intentionality of disclosure but of search: a movement unto the invisible… the caress seeks *what is not yet*” (p.258) Importantly, contra Sartre, it doesn’t “seek to dominate a hostile freedom, to make of it its object or extort from it a consent.” (p.258) The Beloved is neither the “body-thing” of biology, nor the “lived body of the “I can””, nor the expression of the face. “In the caress, a relation yet, in one aspect, sensible, the body already denudes itself of its very form, offering itself as erotic nudity. In the carnal given to tenderness, the body quits the status of an existent.” (p.258)

“The Beloved, at once graspable but intact in her nudity, beyond object and face and thus beyond the existent, abides in virginity.” (p.258) This, Levinas calls the “Eternal Feminine”, the “future in the present.” The passion involved in the caress (a movement towards a “not-yet-being”) which does not act because it cannot grasp possibles, Levinas calls *voluptuosity*. It is desire itself; the desire for the feminine. “Voluptuosity, as profanation, discovers the hidden as hidden.” (p.260) Love, for Levinas then, “has neither the subject-object structure nor the I-thou structure. Eros is not accomplished as a subject that fixes an object, nor as a pro-jection, toward a possible. Its movement consists in going beyond the possible.” (p.261)

Of course, *Eros* presupposes the face; there can be no love without a prior epiphany of the face in signification, but love goes beyond… into non-signification. Levinas calls this the “presence of non-signifyingness in the signifyingness of the face” and it is “the primordial event of feminine beauty, of that eminent sense that beauty assumes in the feminine.” (p.263)

Levinas then goes on to discuss the beautiful of art, in which: “The artist will have to convert this beauty [of the feminine] into “weightless grace” by carving in the cold matter of color or stone, where beauty will become calm presence, sovereignty in flight, existence unfounded for without foundations.” (p.263) “The beautiful of art *inverts* the beauty of the feminine face. It substitutes an image for the troubling depth of the future… It presents a beautiful form reduced to itself in flight, deprived of its depth.” (p.263) Poetry does the same thing, but with rhythm. In art, all we get is a signification; a superficial, immobilised instant with no depth. “Thus erotic nudity is as it were an inverted signification, a signification that signifies falsely, a clarity converted into ardor and night, an expression that ceases to express itself, that expresses its renunciation of expression and speech…” (p.263) In fact, Levinas likens it to the *there is*; “Alongside of the night as anonymous rustling of the *there is* extends the night of the erotic…” (p.258)

The metaphysical relation with the Other is accomplished in society and signification. The relationship with the feminine is realised in voluptuosity and is precisely the “very contrary of the social relation. It excludes the third party, it remains intimacy, dual solitude, closed society, the supremely non-public.” (pp.264-5) This characteristic of voluptuosity “isolates the lovers, as though they were alone in the world.” (p.265)

Levinas reasserts here (against Sartre) that *Eros* is not possession, and it doesn’t seek to reduce the Beloved to an object. It is, in a word, voluptuous. “But it is freedom desired and voluptuous not in the clarity of his face, but in the obscurity and as though in the vice of the clandestine, or in the future that remains clandestine within discovery, and which, precisely for this reason, is unfailingly profanation.” (p.265) Indeed: “Voluptuosity would be extinguished in possession.” (p.265)

However, voluptuosity doesn’t aim at the Other; rather, it aims “at his voluptuosity; it is voluptuosity of voluptuosity, love of the love of the other.” (p.266) This is how love differs from friendship. The latter “goes unto the Other… [while] love seeks what does not have the structure of an existent, the infinitely future…” (p.266)

But, as mentioned already, while love loves the love of the Other, it is “also to love oneself in love, and thus to return to oneself. Love does not transcend unequivocably – it is complacent, it is pleasure and dual egoism.” (p.266)

C. Fecundity

Love takes us beyond the face of the Other to an Other who remains on the border of the immanent and the transcendent, a non-signifying in the signifiying of the Face, but it also takes us beyond the Face in another way, to an I which is at the same time an Other. “The profanation that violates a secret does not “discover,” beyond the face, another more profound I which this face would express; it discovers the child. By a total transcendence, the transcendence of trans-substantiation, the I is, in the child, an other. Paternity remains a self-identification, but also a distinction within identification…” (p.267) Paternity, having a child, is, unlike *Eros*, a transcendence, a “transcendence of trans-substantiation.”

Through the child, a relation with the future (a future that has nothing to do with Heideggerian possibility) is established. Levinas calls this relation *fecundity*. “Fecundity encloses a duality of the Identical. It does not denote all that I can grasp – my possibilities; it denotes my future, which is not a future of the same… And yet it is my adventure still, and consequently my future in a very new sense, despite the discontinuity.” (p.268) The future Levinas is talking about here is not possibility because possibility involves the reiteration of the I: “In fecundity the tedium of this repetition ceases…” (p.268) The future here then is actually an “absolute future, or infinite time.” (p.268) What does this mean? Fecundity “continues history without producing old age. Infinite time does not bring an eternal life to an aging subject; it is *better* across the discontinuity of generations, punctuated by the inexhaustible youths of the child.” (p.268)

Next, Levinas links fecundity with the metaphysical Desire for the Other (the desire we distinguished from need right at the beginning of *T&I*). We saw how transcendence moves towards the Other with a Desire which cannot be satisfied. We now see the ultimate expression of this Desire and why it can’t be satisfied. Because the Other is not just another term, Desire doesn’t stop with him or her. “The other that Desire desires is again Desire; transcendence transcends toward him who transcends… Transcendence, the for the Other, the goodness correlative of the face, founds a more profound relation: the goodness of goodness.” (p.269) And so, in fecundity, transcendence transcends itself.

D. The Subjectivity in Eros

“Voluptuosity, as the coinciding of the lover and the beloved, is charged by their duality: it is simultaneously fusion and distinction.” (p.270) It is not *intention* because the subject is not exterior to the relation. On the contrary, voluptuosity “transfigures the subject himself…” (p.270) In what way?

Subjectivity was originally the “…virile and heroic I which in positing itself put an end to the anonymity of the *there is*, and determined a mode of existence that opens forth the light.” (p.270) In voluptuosity, this I now “owes his identity not to his initiative of power, but to the passivity of the love received… [in which he] finds himself again as the self… of an other, and not only as the self of himself.” (p.270) Despite having wrested existence from the midst of the *there is*, the I now finds that it doesn’t just possess existence but is also possessed by it. “Self-possession becomes encumberment with oneself. The subject is imposed upon itself, drags itself along like a possession. The freedom of the subject… implies responsibility… The coinciding of freedom with responsibility constitutes the I, doubled with itself, encumbered with itself.” (pp.270-1)

What *Eros* does is deliver the I from this encumberment by carrying the me (as subject) “toward a future which *is not yet* and which I will not merely grasp, but I *will be*…” (p.271). This is fecundity, which, rather than returning the I to itself in encumberment, ensures that it “is precisely as itself that the I is, in the relation with the Other in femininity, liberated of its identity, that it can be other on the basis of self as origin. In the I being can be produced as infinitely recommencing, that is, properly speaking, as infinite.” (p.272)

E. Transcendence and Fecundity

The classical idea of transcendence is self-contradictory because in it the “subject that transcends is swept away in its transcendence; it does not transcend itself.” (p.274)

Transcendence as Levinas describes it here is different because he relies on plurality appearing, not “as a plurality of subjects that exist”, a plurality “given as a number; to a subject that counts… [which therefore] is already subordinated to the synthesis of the “I think.”” (p.274) Rather, for Levinas, plurality appears “in the existing of… existents.” (p.274) That is, plurality is incorporated in the being of the existent itself. Western philosophy has valued unity and “scorned” quantity. In such an outlook, transcendence is reduced to a “simple relation” between multiple existents that unites them in a totality. It is therefore “situated outside of the *event of being*… The object [through knowledge] is converted into an event of the subject.” (p.274)

Alternatively, in the philosophy of becoming (in which existence is articulated as time rather than “congealing it in the permanence of the stable” (p.275)) the “upsurge or the projection of the future transcends – not by knowledge only, but by the very existing of being.” (p.275) This conception breaks from unity by invoking the possible and multiplicity with it. However, in this transcendence, a transcendence arising from a projection towards future possibles, the subject immediately “finds himself again in it.” (p.275) In mastering the ‘transcendence’, the subject resumes himself in power and consequently fails to transcend at all.

Levinas has sought outside these notions of consciousness (knowledge) and power for a way of founding transcendence. “The acuity of the problem lies in the necessity of maintaining the I in the transcendence with which it hitherto seemed incompatible.” (p.276) He finds this in the erotic relation and fecundity; “in sexuality the subject enters into relation with what is absolutely other… with what remains other in the relation and is never converted into “mine,” and that nonetheless this relation has nothing ecstatic about it, for the pathos of voluptuosity is made of duality… Sexuality is in us neither knowledge nor power, but the very plurality of our existing.” (pp.276-7) “Paternity is a relation with a stranger who while being Other… *is* me, a relation of the I with a self which yet is not me… In existing itself [analysed as *Eros*] there is a multiplicity and a transcendence. In this transcendence the I is not swept away, since the son is not me; and yet I *am* my son.” (p.277)

F. Filiality and Fraternity

Filiality, the father-son relationship, is the converse of paternity. It is a “rupture and a recourse at the same time.” (p.278) The son is a created freedom. In its own unique ipseity, the son is rupture or a “repudiation of the father…” (p.278) In this, the son appears to be a brand new beginning, recapturing the past at each moment from a new point, but this isn’t true. The son *is* but he “*is*, without being “on his own account”…” (p.278) The “I [of the son] owes its unicity as an I to the paternal *Eros*. The father does not simply cause the son. *To be* one’s son means to be I in one’s son, to be substantially in him, yet without being maintained there in identity.” (pp.278-9) So, rather than being a break and a new beginning, taking on the past as if for the first time, the son recaptures the past as a “recourse”, or connection, through the father.

The son, then, is neither a “continuity” because “the permanent revolution that constitutes ipseity” (p.278) resists a simple relation of identity between father and son, nor a complete rupture from the father. Thus, since “the son owes his unicity to the paternal election he can be brought up, be commanded, and can obey…” (p.279) This seems to capture the son’s filial obligations.

Further, the I produced in the son is unique but at the same time it appears “in the world… as brother among brothers… among equals…” (p.279) *Fraternity* describes this relation with these others, which places one not just “among” them but “in face of them, to serve them” (p.279) in an ethical encounter.

G. The Infinity of Time

“To be infinitely – infinition – means to exist without limits” (p.281) and this can only occur in “an existent that is not trammeled in being, that can, while remaining bound to being, take its distances with regard to being… Distance with regard to being… is produced as time and as consciousness…” (p.281) Consciousness and temporality are established when a being refuses totalisation, and this takes place in the “welcoming of alterity – concretely, as presentation of the face… The welcoming of alterity hence conditions consciousness and time.” (p.281)

It is through fecundity – multiplicity and discontinuity – that the I can partake in infinity; “an absolute youth and recommencement…” (p.282) Time is discontinuous in fecundity and it *pardons* existence: “This recommencement of the instant, this triumph of the time of fecundity over the becoming of the moral and aging being, is a pardon, the very work of time.” (p.282) Pardon implies fault, so perhaps the fault here lies in the original separated nature of the I, its “permanent revolution.”

Pardoning is a paradox for Levinas because it is retroactive. It is “an inversion of the natural order of things, the reversibility of time.” (p.283) Pardon “refers to the instant elapsed… [in such a way that it is] as though that instant had not past on… pardon acts upon the past, somehow repeats the event, purifying it. But in addition, forgetting nullifies the relations with the past, whereas pardon conserves the past pardoned in the purified present. The pardoned being is not the innocent being.” (p.283)

In an interesting twist, Levinas adds that pardon is actually constitutive of time itself. Time is not composed of indifferent, discrete instants all linking up in a “mathematical time”, nor is it a “continuous duration” either. Rather, there “must be a rupture of continuity, and continuation across this rupture.” (p.284) This is accomplished in what Levinas calls *resurrection*. “Resurrection constitutes the principal event of time… In continuation the instant meets its death, and resuscitates; death and resurrection constitute time. But such a formal structure presupposes the relation of the I with the Other and, at its basis, fecundity across the discontinuous which constitutes time.” (p.284)

Conclusions

*1. From the Like to the Same*

The identity of the individual lies not in its being “like to itself” (as if one could identify oneself as an object to a subject); thereby receiving its identity “*from the outside*” (p.289). Rather, it consists in “being the *same* – in being oneself, in identifying oneself from within.” (p.289) The movement is then from being *like itself* (subject apprehending an object) to being the *same*. The former involves reference to a totality, the latter is pure interiority.

*2. Being is Exteriority*

This is not only a rejection of “the illusions of the subjective” (p.290) which claim that “objective forms alone… merit the name of being.” (p.290) It is also a rejection of a subject-centred conception of being. The former destroys exteriority since “subjectivity itself would be absorbed into exteriority” (p.290) while the latter allows to the exterior nothing more than a relative meaning precisely because it stands opposed to the subject, thus converting it to the same.

Being is exteriority, or alterity, and, experienced in the face to face, a relation which “is established starting with a point separated from exteriority so radically that it maintains itself of itself, is me…” (p.290) Exteriority is produced, then, only in the relation from one (radically separated) human to an (infinitely other) one. Thus, it can only arise in a “necessarily subjective – field of truth.” (p.290)

“The truth of being is not the *image* of being, the *idea* of its nature; it is the being situated in a subjective field which *deforms* vision, but precisely thus allows exteriority to state itself…” (p.291) Levinas calls this “surplus of truth over being and over its idea…” (p.291) the “curvature of intersubjective space” (p.291), even going to far as to claim that it is “perhaps, the very presence of God.” (p.291)

One cannot attempt to “correct for” this curvature so as to uncover the “objective” nature of entities outside the curvature – the phenomenon – precisely because the curvature “constitutes the very mode in which the exteriority of being is effectuated in its truth.” (p.291)

*3. The Finite and the Infinite*

The relation with exteriority (metaphysics), consists in a relation between a finite separation and an infinite alterity in which the finite being is not absorbed in what faces him or her, but maintains itself in its own being. It is important to understand that the finitude cannot consist in a “nostalgia for infinity, a longing for return.” (p.292) It is, rather, what we called Desire for infinity, which requires separation.

Rather than understanding finitude as a negativity, a simple “less” in comparison to an infinite “more,” Levinas stresses that the “limitation and finitude, which separation takes on… ensure the very overflowing of infinity, or… the very overflowing of all the surplus over being – all the Good – that is produced in the social relation. The negativeness of the finite is to be understood on the basis of this Good.” (p.292) So, the very *raison d’etre* of finitude is to facilitate the infinite of exteriority, apprehended through multiplicity in the social.

*4. Creation*

Levinas rejects the theological treatment of creation which depicts “the relation between God and the creature in terms of ontology.” (p.293) The reason is that ontology’s essential aim is to reconstitute the totality which would unite, or comprehend, the multiple. It is thus unable to understand how an “infinite being would border on or tolerate something outside of itself” (p.293) or how a “free being would send its roots into the infinity of a God.” (p.293)

These problems are overcome in Levinas’ philosophy which starts from transcendence. “The absolute gap of separation which transcendence implies could not be better expressed than by the term creation… One may speak of creation to characterise entities situated in the transcendence that does not close over into a totality.” (p.293) In the transcendence that characterises the face to face the I is neither subject nor object, nor are the two terms subsumed in a totality. Their reciprocal exteriority proceeds, as if from nothingness. It is in this sense that Levinas sees this as creation. In creation, the I is for-itself without being *causa sui*, both infinite and free, but limited and subordinated at the same time. Of course, its limits don’t come from “the proximity of the Other” (p.294), which would plunge us back into a totality.

In such a formulation, the Other resembles God, which is, of course, a central idea in Levinas.

*5. Exteriority and Language*

Common sense, as well as philosophy from Plato to Heidegger, has proceeded from the “panoramic;” that is, from the notion that the whole is being and disclosure its truth. “The break-up of totality, the denunciation of the panoramic structure of being, concerns the very existing of being and not the collocation or configuration of entities refractory to system.” (p.294) This will also entail the rejection of “intentionality as an aiming at the visible” (p.294), which expresses the philosophy of panorama. “One of the principal theses of this work is that the noesis-noema structure is not the primordial structure of intentionality.” (p.294)

The relation between beings in a multiplicity founded on exteriority confirms their reciprocal separation. The relation is mediated by *language*, in which *teaching*, as “a way for truth to be produced such that it is not my work, such that I could not derive it from my own interiority…” (p.295) is produced.

The being who speaks to me doesn’t give itself to me so that I can “measure it to my own interiority, and receive it as come from myself.” (p.295) This is how vision operates. In vision, the external object is interiorised as an *adequate idea*. On the contrary, the being encountered in the face to face precisely cannot be thematised. This is precisely why the face to face cannot be reduced to the relation of a subject with an object; “…no concept lays hold of exteriority.” (p.295)

The exteriority of the Other resists thematisation precisely because “it is produced in a being who expresses himself. In contradistinction to plastic manifestation or disclosure, which manifests something *as* something, and in which the disclosed renounces its originality… in expression the manifestation and the manifested coincide; the manifested attends its own manifestation and hence remains exterior to every image one would retain of it.” (p.296) Speech goes beyond vision because “…the speaker does not deliver images of himself only, but is personally present in his speech, absolutely exterior to every image he would leave… Language is the incessant surpassing of the *Sinngebung* by the signification.” (p.296)

*6. Expression and Image*

“The presence of the Other, or expression, source of all signification, is not contemplated as an intelligible essence, but is heard as language… Expression, or the face, overflows images, which are always immanent to my thought, as though they came from me.” (p.297) The face, as the presence of exteriority, is never apprehended as an image or idea. Expression is always “measured by Desire, morality, and goodness…” (p.297)

The face is not meaningful the way works have meaning. Works have meaning, but it is a meaning independent of the author of the work. “There is an abyss between labor, which results in works having a meaning for other men, and which others can acquire – already merchandise reflected in money – and language, in which I attend my manifestation, irreplaceable and vigilant.” (p.297) Works are anonymous.

In politics, “humanity is understood from its works – a humanity of interchangeable men, of reciprocal relations… In history… the human being appears as the sum of his works…” (p.298) It is only in *justice*, where the person presents him or herself as unique, that expression becomes possible.

*7. Against the Philosophy of the Neuter*

Levinas is reacting against the “philosophy of the Neuter” which includes Heidegger’s impersonal Being and Hegel’s impersonal Reason. The Neuter is “the anteriority of the We with respect to the I…” (p.298) and Levinas’ “insistence on the separation of enjoyment was guided by the necessity of liberating the I from the situation into which little by little philosophers have dissolved it as totally as reason swallows up the subject in Hegelian idealism.” (p.298) Materialism arises, not from the sensible, but from the neuter, the loss of the I.

*8. Subjectivity*

“Being is exteriority, and exteriority is produced in its truth in a subjective field, for the separated being. Separation is accomplished positively as the interiority of a being referring to itself and maintaining itself of itself – all the way to atheism! This self-reference is concretely constituted or accomplished as enjoyment or happiness.” (p.299) Separation is essential, not something we ought to, or even could, avoid entirely. This is what we might call the inward aspect of separation. On the other hand, there is the metaphysical aspect. “To metaphysical thought, where a finite has the idea of infinity – where radical separation and relationship with the other are produced simultaneously – we have reserved the term intentionality, consciousness of…. It is attention to speech or welcome of the face, hospitality and not thematization.” (p.299) Finitude is thus, not a *negation* of the being from which it is separate. Rather, it *is* the very idea of infinity. It is only as a separate finitude that the I can welcome the infinite.

Subjectivity cannot completely be understood in terms of individuation, “an inner *identification* of a being whose essence is exhausted in identity, an identification of the same…” (p.299) Rather, subjective existence is defined by separation: “Separation is the very act of individuation…” (p.299), but we must remember that it is a separation that is not a mere *negation*, thus not a being defined in relation to a totality.

*9. The Maintenance of Subjectivity / The Reality of the Inner Life and the Reality of the State / The Meaning of Subjectivity*

When the face of the Other relates us with a third party, the We, or the State, arises, as a source of universality. “But politics left to itself bears a tyranny within itself; it deforms the I and the other who have give rise to it, for it judges them according to universal rules, and thus as in absentia.” (p.300) To resist this absorption by means of an “egoist protestation of the subjectivity” (p.300) would probably be ineffective against the universalism of Hegelian reality. Instead, Levinas opposes it, maintaining the irreplaceable unicity of the I against the State, in fecundity. “It is not to purely subjective events, losing themselves in the sands of interiority which the rational reality mocks, that we appeal to in insisting on the irreducibility of the personal to the universality of the State… The interiority opened up by separation is not the ineffable of the clandestine or the subterranean – but the infinite time of fecundity.” (pp.300-1)

*10. Beyond Being*

Exteriority is not exhausted in thematisation. Exteriority is a being open to desire, and therefore it “no longer consists in caring for Being.” (p.301) Existence has a meaning outside of the totality, a meaning which goes “beyond being”, where being is understood in this totalised sense. Where does it go? To the pluralist relation that manifests in the “goodness of being for the Other, in justice.” (pp.301-2)

*11. Freedom Invested*

Freedom is the “event of separation in arbitrariness which constitutes the I…” (p.302), but which maintains a relation with the exteriority of the face at the same time. Any other freedom would either dissolve the I into a unity as a “multiplicity of beings of a rational system in which these beings would be but objects” or immerse it in “the brutal conquest of beings outside of every system by violence.” (p.302)

One consequence of Levinas’ account of metaphysical exteriority is that the freedom of the I is “posited as requiring justification” (p.302), but this doesn’t mean he is against freedom. If freedom were foundational, justified by itself, any finitude that attached to freedom would render it absurd. In this vein, Heidegger’s ‘thrownness,’ as a finite freedom, is therefore irrational, while Sartre’s encounter with the Other threatens my freedom and “is equivalent to the fall of my freedom under the gaze of another freedom.” (p.303) For Levinas, however, the presence of the Other puts “in question the naïve legitimacy of freedom” and makes it “appear to itself as a shame for itself…” (p.303) “The irrational in freedom is not due to its limits, but to the infinity of its arbitrariness. Freedom must justify itself; reduced to itself it is accomplished not in sovereignty but in arbitrariness.” (p.303) Approaching the Other, therefore, puts my freedom in question. Levinas calls this encountering the Other in justice and submitting myself to the Other’s judgement. This fundamental relation, the face to face, is precisely *morality*.

One might object that this justification of freedom itself requires justification. This would be true if we were seeking certitude. However, “the moral justification of freedom is neither certitude nor incertitude. It does not have the status of a result, but is accomplished as movement and life…” (p.304) One cannot “prove God” because metaphysics precedes proof. “The ethical, beyond vision and certitude, delineates the structure of exteriority as such. Morality is not a branch of philosophy, but first philosophy.” (p.304)

*12. Being as Goodness – the I – Pluralism – Peace*

Metaphysics is Desire. Fecundity “releases Desire from the prison of its own subjectivity and puts an end to the monotony of its identity.” (p.304) The notion of metaphysics as desire understands “the production of being… as goodness and as beyond happiness; it is to interpret the production of being as being for the Other.” (p.304) However, this being for the other, is not the negation of the I. “Goodness does not radiate over the anonymity of a collectivity presenting itself panoramically, to be absorbed into it… [rather, it] issues from an I, is subjective… goodness is transcendence itself. Transcendence is the transcendence of an I. Only an I can respond to the injunction of a face.” (p.305)

Nevertheless, the I is not a Kierkegaardian cry against a system, “concerned for happiness or salvation…” (p.305), nor does it arise from an I initially isolated “which would then tend toward a beyond.” (p.305) Producing oneself as an I can only take place “with the same gesture that already turns toward the exterior… to respond for what it apprehends – to express…” (p.305) In short; “Transcendence or goodness is produced as pluralism…” (p.305) although obviously not a multiplicity “spread out before a possible gaze, for thus it would be already totalized, joined into an entity.” (p.305)

This unity of plurality is what Levinas calls *peace*. Peace, therefore, has nothing to do with a harmonious coherence of the elements that make it up; rather, it is “my peace, in a relation that starts from an I and goes to the other, in desire and goodness, where the I both maintains itself and exists without egoism.” (p.306)

This situation is ultimately concretised in the “marvel of the family” (p.306), which is when “the instant of eroticism and the infinity of paternity are conjoined…” (p.306)

1. I’m not sure Levinas can be let off the hook completely with this explanation. I think it could be made to work, but Levinas does muddy the water around this issue with his talk of the relation with the feminine as being an “intimacy with someone” and referring to it as the revelation of a “face”, both of which seem to imply an actual human presence (which is also an absence). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)