

From Activity to Radical Passivity: Retracing Ethical Agency in Levinas

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Introduction |

This contribution seeks to critically trace the evolution of ethical subjectivity and the concomitant notion of ethical agency in the major works of Levinas spanning a period of more than four decades. Levinas already announces his trans-phenomenological quest in an early programmatic essay titled *De l'évasion* (1935), but only truly succeeds in thinking “otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence” in his second magnum opus bearing the same name, *Autrement qu'être ou au-delà de l'essence* published in 1974. In the course of this arduous journey, he moves from the self to the Other, from the activity of economic “auto-personification” to the radical passivity of the Other-invoked ethical subject. He moves from the enjoyment of living of/from provisional alterity in the world to the traumatization of the ethical encounter with absolute Alterity, the trace of Infinity inscribed in the finite. The major themes recur again and again and in the iterability of that repetition subjectivity is pushed ever further from the unity of apperception and intentionality as the Other is inscribed in a proximity so close it succeeds in altering the very immanence of the subject in her innermost identity. Here responsibility becomes a traumatization of the ego in which the subject is cored out as if enucleated, de-posed from its kingdom of identity and substance. It is here that Levinas introduces the radically passive ethical agent as opposed to the free, rational, autonomous “I think”. It is precisely in the excess of passivity that ethical agency becomes possible, the passivity of a trauma through which the idea of the Infinite will-always-already-have-been placed in the finite.

My retracing of the development of Levinas's thinking, therefore, proceeds by way of a problematization of the ethical priority and import that Levinas accords to the self and her existential practices of self-concern in his first three major works, and the subsequent ethical devaluation of the self and complete disqualification of any existential base in the world in *Autrement qu'être* (AE). This is done in favour of the thoroughgoing deposition of the self as individuated, auto-personified, substantial self formed in the happiness of enjoyment (cf. TI, 147/120). The *jouissance* and *joie de vivre* of *Totalité et Infini* (TI) dissolve in the face of the devastatingly traumatic encounter with the Other in AE. The self's ethical conversion announces accusation, persecution, obsession and substitution for the Other. How to think

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the relational ethics of Levinas in view of a self that is “delivered over to stoning and insults” (AE, 192/110)? This contribution, in short, attempts to understand ethical subjectivity in Levinas by critically retracing his move from the activity of economic self-formation in the early works to the radical passivity of ethical agency in AE.

Problematization |

In Levinas’s early works up to and including TI, the existent’s “auto-personification”² is postulated as a necessary condition for the possibility of establishing an ethical relation with the other person: you cannot receive the Other with empty hands, without the riches of self-sufficiency. You cannot give selflessly if you are not self-sufficient. You cannot give to the needy if you are in need yourself. Being independent is not a *sufficient* condition however. Without an intervention by the Other, without a leap of faith, Levinas’s self-created, atheist self will remain self-occupied and oblivious to its ethical responsibility towards others. In its self-sufficiency, it therefore “needs” the Other to make it aware of its murderous egotistical nature. On the face of things, therefore, Levinas’s scheme threatens to collapse into the binary opposition of a *before* and *after*: “before” the Other’s intervention, the existent is doomed to fully actualize its atheist potential. It is ethically stunted and inept, incapable of initiating any semblance of a generous gesture towards others. This “before” is, however, not *unethical* but *a-ethical*, i.e. lacking an ethical sense or incapable of being concerned with the rightness or wrongness of its egoism. The gravitational pull of its egoism is all-consuming, leaving it not only incapable of relating in any other way to the not-self, but, importantly, necessarily impelled to be primarily concerned with its own continued existence. It is riveted to being — being-for-itself. “After” the Other’s intervention, on the other hand, or, put more precisely, *dia-chronically*, i.e. through-time or *through* the Other, the subject is rendered radically passive — *this* time, because introduced to time, – incapable of *not* being-for-the-Other even before being-for-itself. Levinas only fully articulates the radical (trans-)ontological consequence of this Other-orientation in AE. As Lingis explains in the “Translator’s Introduction” of the English version: “the very structure of concern for oneself, of care for oneself, is not an ontological *conatus*, which owes its origin ultimately to the advance revelation of the menace of universal death cast over being, and to the desire of being to be, to persevere in its being. It is from the first an ethical obligation, the sense that one is answerable for one’s own being too” (OB, xxxv).

The “before” of an apparently passive participation in a hopeless amorality now makes way for an always-already inherent infection or affectedness by the Other to which the consciousness of an autonomous rationally responsible ego always comes too late. It is only with the introduction of time, in this “instant”, in this “now”, which signals a radical incapacitation of the compulsion of *connatus essendi*, the urge to persist in self-preservation, that individuals can be expected to “take on” responsibility for the Other in need. This “taking on” is not, however, an autonomous action *proceeding* from a rational consciousness, but a transferential “being able” pre-ceding rational reflective consciousness. It is activity or ethical capacitation following from passivity: *radical* passivity as the *radix* or root of ethical agency.

From the perspective of a tradition of Western subjectivity, conceptualized first as the Cartesian *cogito* and subsequently as the Kantian autonomous transcendental Subject, Levinas presents us with a rather contentious conceptualization of subjectivity, which

² “In the happiness of enjoyment is enacted the individuation, the auto-personification, the substantialization, and the independence of the self” (TI, 147/120).

starts out ethically inept and ends up passively delivered over to the Other's tutelage. It could easily be construed as a notion of subjectivity that ultimately exempts the self from assuming any responsibility, ceding it to the Other. Levinas appears not only to caricaturize human ethical inaptitude (by portraying the existent as a "hungry stomach without ears" (TI, 134/107)), but also renders the ethical subject, which comes into being by virtue of the Other's invocation, radically passive. It could be argued, therefore, that the worrisome consequence of this conception of subjectivity is that responsibility becomes the *Other's* responsibility, since of its own accord the self is incapable of taking any ethical initiative.

A close reading of Levinas's early work uncovers what appears to be a binary scheme: on the one hand, Levinas constructs an "ethically challenged" subject who is incapable of saving itself by itself. After intervention by the Other, on the other hand, it is stripped of its egoism and rendered radically passive. It is now for-the-Other *despite* itself and *because* of the Other-in-the-self which predisposes it towards alterity. It is a subject divested of any responsibility, incapable of initiating a single "step to competence" (Kant 1784: 8) on its own. It is a subject who need not trouble herself — for "the Other will readily undertake the irksome work for her" (*ibid.*, modified). One cannot help but think of Kant's immature subject that he described as being incapable of making use of its own understanding not because it lacks reason but because this subject lacks the resolution and courage to use it without direction from another (*ibid.*, p. 7). The following section will reconstruct the early Levinas's conceptualization of subjectivity in an attempt to understand the conditions of possibility of ethical agency that he insists upon. We shall do from the perspective of that tradition of Western metaphysics that Levinas criticizes but which nevertheless forms the unequivocal hermeneutical horizon of our present attempts at coming to terms with his divided allegiance to Athens and Jerusalem.

The Ethical Import of Self-Concern |

Levinas is widely acknowledged as an ethical thinker par excellence, a thinker not concerned with prescriptive moral codes or morality as such but with the self's non-negotiable responsibility towards the Other.³ It is consequently quite surprising that his earliest works defend the ethical import of *self-concern* – especially since most secondary literature seem to underplay the explicit emphasis on the self and the ethical import of self-concern in these works. Not that Levinas considers the subject's egoist preoccupations to be ethical in itself. Rather, he defends egoism and the "atheism" or the absolute self-sufficiency to which it leads as a necessary condition for ethical capacitation. In these works, Levinas therefore underscores the indispensability of taking care of oneself for ethics. Only the one who has become completely self-sufficient is able to take up his/her responsibility towards others.

Levinas's earliest three works, *De l'existence a l'existant* (1947), *Le temps et l'autre* (1948) and *Totalité et infini* (1961) are primarily concerned with the transcendence or self-transcendence of the self and he presents it as a defence of subjectivity (TI, 26/xiv). In terms of the presentation of the question of self-transcendence in Levinas's work itself, it certainly precedes and (in these three early works) is never eclipsed by the question

³ Levinas's ethics is not what Hegel calls morality but neither, it seems to me, is it exactly *Sittlichkeit* (from *Sitte* meaning "customs"). For Hegel, the basis of ethics is one's belonging to (as well as being educated by) a particular community of people. For him, it is not primarily a matter of rational principle, but part of a life of shared values, feelings, and customs. In "Meaning and sense", Levinas maintains that ethics comes before culture and allows us to judge cultures (1964: 33-64). Ethics, for Levinas, is therefore not derived from one's cultural situatedness, but is a much more fundamental principle, the *first* principle.

of ethics. The problem of the subject's escape [*évasion*] from itself, from the unbearable heaviness of being to which it is riveted,⁴ is resolved in the course of these works in terms of ethics or the encounter with the Other. Levinas then maintains that the subject only comes into being as ethical subject. For him, ethics precedes ontology, that is, my existence only becomes truly meaningful when confronted by the Other. This Other paradoxically lifts my existential burden by weighing me down with responsibility. Only after the Other has made me into a better person by reminding me of my infinite responsibility towards others, do I exist in any meaningful sense of the term. In short, to be, for Levinas, is to be better than being. Ethics, in the Levinasian sense, therefore does not announce a change that the subject will bring about in herself, but signals the subject's *inability* to save itself by itself, that is, the subject's absolute dependence upon the Other. So what is the significance of being before being made better by the Other, that is, the significance of what Levinas calls the existent's economic existence?

Levinas's earliest three works consist in phenomenological analyses of the existent's coming into being and living in the world. Here the existent's formation as separated, self-sufficient and autonomous subject takes place. He describes this "phase"⁵ as essentially economic and "atheist"⁶ — not unethical as if the existent already possesses a sense for the rightness or wrongness of an act but non- or a-ethical. It nevertheless serves as an essential preparatory "stage" in the deployment of ethical subjectivity. It is here that the existent's "economics" of existence is deployed, its living off provisional alterity to service its present needs and provide for the future. Here the existent is essentially concerned with itself — a concern that will prove to be a necessary — albeit not sufficient — condition for the possibility of becoming ethical.

The Existent vs. Ethical subject as Other-invoked |

In Levinas's ethical metaphysics it is the absolute Other that "converts" the atheist existent, that breaks through the crust of egoism and interrupts its gravitational pull. For Levinas, the existent cannot save itself by itself, salvation comes from elsewhere, from beyond. However, before Levinas introduces the Other he directs our attention to a "level of life" ontologically prior to that on which the ethical encounter with the other person occurs. He describes what may provisionally be termed the "developmental stages" of the existent alone in the world. The Levinasian existent, in its incipient deployment, is engaged in certain practices that will enable it to become independent and self-converted through the necessary care of the self. This essentially *economic* existence takes the form of a *living of/from* provisional exteriority in the world to constitute an interiority. These practices enable the existent to cultivate a certain independence, which frees it from any fear of future insecurity and allows it to delight in itself — to enjoy life.

⁴ An early programmatic essay titled "De l'évasion" (1935), is concerned with this theme exactly: the escape [*évasion*] of the subject from itself. In this essay, Levinas does not yet see any solution (the question of ethics has not yet arisen) and it ends with the idea that this attempt to escape is doomed to fail.

⁵ Later it will become apparent why the use of words such as "phase" or "stage", which suggest some sort of chronological progression, is problematic in Levinas. I therefore use inverted commas to indicate this.

⁶ The existent is *atheist* therein that "it lives outside of God, at home with itself; one is an I, an egoism" (TI, 58/29). It is not immersed in a surpassing whole, as conceived in the primitive religions of magic and mythology. An independent and completely secularised I has gotten rid of all gods and sacred powers; it is atheistic because it is free. Levinas elaborates: "By atheism we thus understand a position prior to both the negation and the affirmation of the divine, the breaking with participation by which the I posits itself as the same and as I" (TI, 58/30). Here the term "psychism" describes an independent interiority which, "without having been *causa sui* is first with respect to its cause" (59/30).

In his earliest study, *De l'existence a l'existant* (EE), Levinas's primary emphasis falls on a phenomenological description of the *il y a*, which is existence (Being) *without* existents (beings), a neutral, impersonal region from which subjectivity is not yet differentiated. Hypostasis announces the existent's inception into being, its separation from anonymity followed by its resultant coming into the world: first, as a kind of system-unto-itself weighed down by an unbearable materiality, and then as being-in-the-world economically — primarily caring for itself. Economic existence is characterized by needs, the fulfilment of which leads to a “life of enjoyment”. The existent is therefore dependent upon the provisional alterity of the world but also capable of establishing its independence by mastering the elements. However, the egoism of enjoyment is marred by insecurity in respect of the availability of the elements the subject depends on. This insecurity is attended to by setting up a dwelling. The home and domesticity make labour and representation possible and thus provide security through the accumulation of possessions. I labour and produce, and through these products and possessions I secure myself against the insecurity of the future. Although the dwelling (economic) “stage” marks a step forward therein that enjoyment is now secured, it is enjoyment in solitude.⁷

Levinas sketches an inherent negativity at the heart of our existential condition — being mired in a materiality always on the brink of self-implosion and always menaced by future insecurity. The existent constantly tries to get free of itself, but its worldly existence only ever offers it a partial and temporary alleviation from its existential burden.⁸ In his following two works, *Le temps et l'autre* (TA) and *Totalité et infini* (TI), the same themes recur, but as the Other makes a more prominent appearance, self-involvement finally completely dissolves in the face of the transcendent Other. It is here through the idea of Desire, interpreted as Desire for the other person as *Other*, that the ethical relation — which Levinas also describes as a face-to-face relation — has its starting point. It is here that the existent and its immanent preoccupations are made meaningful by the transcendent Other, where the egoist existent becomes an ethical subject by virtue of a judgement that arrests its egotistical orientation, pardons it and turns it to goodness, that is, towards its infinite responsibility. Paradoxically it is also this infinite responsibility that lightens its material existential burden.

The egoist existent encounters the Other as a prohibitive law, a law that says “no” to egoism and murder: “thou shalt not kill” (TI, 198/172-173). The subject who is constituted as subject — who is “subjected” — is s/he who obeys. Subjectivization takes the form of subjection.⁹ In Levinas's scheme of things it is thus precisely by virtue of a law of prohibition instituted by the other person, in which the trace of the transcendent Other, “the Most-High” (TI, 34/4) resides, that ethical subjectivity is instituted.

⁷ The critical reader might object to Levinas's characterization of human beings as primordially alone, objecting that humans are rather essentially *social* creatures. Levinas is not denying that the individual is surrounded by people in the world. These encounters with others in the world are part of my economic existence in which they serve to satisfy my needs. Being a “social creature” in this sense does not undo egoism. True sociality only comes into being when I encounter that *Other* who imposes an infinite responsibility and makes me aware and ashamed of my egotistical ways.

⁸ To understand this we have to understand Levinas's distinction between need and desire. Our economic existence in the world is characterized by needs. To satisfy these needs we reach towards things in the world. This creates some distance between the self and its materiality, which s/he experiences as unbearably heavy. However, as soon as our needs are satisfied we collapse back upon ourselves. Desire, on the other hand, can never be satisfied which means that the movement away from ourselves towards that which we desire, remains in the beyond. This Desire is only invoked by the Other. In other words, it is only Desire for the Other as *other*, as something we cannot assimilate to satisfy our needs, that will enable the existent to escape its existential burden.

⁹ Later in AE (p. 116/147), Levinas writes: “The self is a *sub-jectum*; it is under the weight of the universe, responsible for everything”.

Levinas describes subjectivity as purely economic entity as follows: “Separation is accomplished positively as the interiority of a being referring to itself and maintaining itself of itself — all the way to atheism! ... It is an *essential sufficiency*, which in its expansion ... is even in possession of its own origin” (TI, 299/275, my emphasis). Levinas depicts interiority as a separation so radical one in no way derives one’s being from contact with the Other. It is to draw one’s existence from oneself and from nothing else. According to Levinas, this being is supposedly free to either do the right or the wrong thing. However, left to its own devices the separated I will remain so, that is, naturally inclined to retain its independence and egocentric pleasures. It does not voluntarily turn towards the Other but remains entirely deaf to the Other. In enjoyment, the I is entirely for itself — “*without ears, like a hungry stomach*” (TI, 134/107, my emphasis). It is precisely the Other, and *only* the Other, absolutely *other*, that initiates the conversion or reorientation *despite* the I. The contented closed system of egocentrism is confronted by something it cannot resist, despite its self-sufficiency. Thus a transcendent Other is needed to save this hopelessly egoist self from itself.

One is immediately struck by what appears to be a rigid oppositional structure of Levinas’s scheme. On the one hand, we have the economic existence which is completely atheist and strictly a-ethical, and which leaves the existent with no recourse to ethical behaviour. On the other hand, we have the ethical existence initiated and sustained by a transcendent Other, so radically *other* as to be impossible to objectify or conceptualize in any way. This Other subjects the egoist existent to a law that says “no” to egoism and murder and ultimately reduces it to a “bottomless passivity” (AE, 111/141). However, it is also through this Other that the existent’s existence becomes meaningful — that the ethical subject is invoked. Egoism is thus refuted, but subjectivity is rehabilitated (TI, 300/277).

This oppositional structure compels us to inquire after the nature and motivation of the ethical conversion: why would the existent as a system-unto-itself, as completely self-sufficient, lacking nothing that it cannot satisfy by its existential praxis of nourishment in the world respond to the call of the Other? As a “hungry stomach without ears”, why and how would it be responsive to a call that subjects it and demands that it gives up its happy independence? For Levinas, it is precisely because we are nothing but needy beings, content in our being needy, abstracted to the point of being “hungry stomachs without ears”, that an intervention by a radical Other is necessitated. This intervention happens *despite* the existent being a contented closed system of egoism and as something it cannot resist (TI, 62/33). He insists that the existent is able to respond precisely because of its separation and independence¹⁰ in the first instance, but also, as will become apparent in the course of TI, because it is predisposed towards the Other, because it *always-already* has the idea of Infinity. This is something that the Other “puts into” or bestows upon the self to make the self receptive to the ethical address. And precisely because it always-already has the idea of Infinity, Levinas retrospectively declares the monopolistic economy of interiority an *abstraction*, albeit a necessary moment of human existence.¹¹ Here Levinas argues that

¹⁰ According to Levinas, the position of the I consists precisely in “being able to respond to this essential destitution of the Other, finding resources for myself” (TI, 215/190). The only way for the self to be able to respond, is to be an I, that is, separated, independent, self-sufficient — finding resources for itself, that is, *taking care of itself*.

¹¹ As we shall see, Levinas distinguishes between the egotistical existent as *ipseity* and the “creature” (the ethical subject) as two different structural moments. However, he does not separate them in the latter part of TI. Once the existent has been converted into an ethical subjectivity, the movements of interiority and towards exteriority become simultaneous. This is why it is problematic to refer to economic existence as a “stage” or a “phase” in the life of the subject. “Inner life” or “interiority” is described as an *abstraction* albeit a necessary moment of human ex-

“economic life” is not a realistic portrayal of the existent’s existence, because the existent is always already predisposed towards the Other.

The critical reader might wonder, however, whether Levinas’s description of the existent’s economic existence in the world is an accurate description or whether it is an abstraction for an entirely different reason? For if we were something more than “deaf hungry stomachs”, if we were furnished with the slightest potential for ethicality, we would be able to actively participate in the ethical gesture of approaching the other person instead of passively awaiting intervention by a transcendent Other. We would no longer be condemned to the passive participation in a hopeless amorality. It is precisely this potential, as we shall see, that Levinas’s resort to the Cartesian Idea of Infinity put into the finite is meant to represent. During the economics of existence in the world, the formation of the separated, self-sufficient and autonomous subject takes place. These practices of self-care does not make the subject ethical; it makes of the subject a potential interlocutor, one who can either respond to or ignore the ethical call of the Other. It is the transcendent Other that finally enables ethical action, but without the existent’s egocentric self-formation ethics would not be possible. Ethics, for Levinas, is essentially existing for another, precisely because it is different from existing for oneself.¹² However, of its own accord, the Levinasian existent does not exist for another. As a being firmly entrenched in its hopeless egoism, it needs the Other to turn it outward to face its infinite responsibility towards others.

For Levinas, therefore, the subject’s immanent practices of egoism are not enough. It is not enough for he conceptualizes economic subjectivity as ethically inept and essentially uneducable — a subject, in other words, who cannot save itself by itself. This self is dependent upon the Other to make it aware of its egocentric ways and to enable it to be otherwise. Levinas seems to acknowledge that the ego or the existent is a split self — both revelling in self-involvement *and* uncomfortable with itself, wanting to get out of existence which is experienced as unbearably heavy. He also seems to acknowledge that this latter discomfort of the subject is also that which helps it to reach beyond pure egoist enjoyment towards the Other. What the Other then does, is to alleviate the existent’s existential weight and to purge it of its egoism. The existent’s egoism does not only prevent its ascension to ethicality but it is also the necessary condition for ethicality — a condition that is dissolved in the face of the transcendent Other when the “barriers of immanence” are crossed (TI, 27/xv).

When we look at the analyses of AE, however, the I’s economic existence is no longer maintained. The I is no longer egocentric, but subjected to the Other to the point of substitution. In fact, it only comes into being as substitute for the Other. Responsibility for the Other is the fundamental structure of subjectivity. Here ethics do not supplement a preceding existential base; the very node of the subjective is knotted in ethics understood as responsibility. Responsibility is not a simple attribute of subjectivity, as if the latter already existed in itself, before the ethical relationship. In AE, subjectivity is not for itself; it is initially for another (Levinas 1985: 95/101).

However, before Levinas crosses over to the *Other* side, as it were, he focuses our attention on the subject’s self-formation. It is in these earliest texts that the trials and tribulations of the existent’s immanent economy play themselves out — without which the existent cannot accede to ethicality. The later Levinas subsequently shifts emphasis to ethical subjectivity — disavowing any preceding existential base. Already in the latter part of TI,

istence, since it constitutes the egoity needed for “the interval of separation” and the primordial relation (TI, 110/82).

¹² See TI, 261/239: “The fact that in existing for another I exist otherwise than in existing for me is morality itself”.

Levinas maintains that radical separation of the self and a relationship with the Other are produced *simultaneously*. The existent as finite is predisposed towards the Other, because it has the *idea of Infinity*, i.e. — it *will-always-already-have-been* infected by the idea of Infinity.¹³ Despite the supposed simultaneity of auto-affection and Other-invocation, Levinas will also insist that the existent accomplishes separation positively, and not by a negation of the being from which it separates. Thus precisely it can welcome that being and be host, Levinas writes (TI, 299/276).

Retracing Levinas's Steps from EE to TI |

In Levinas's earliest study begun before the war and continued and written down for the most part in captivity, *De l'existence a l'existant* (EE), his primary emphasis falls on the existent's differentiation or separation from anonymous Being and its subsequent economic existence in the world. In *Le temps et l'autre* (TA), published in 1948, Levinas introduces the Other by way of time. It is already a move towards the later *Totalité et infini* (1961) at which point the existent's worldly preoccupations become relativized by the increasing prominence of the Other. Herein it is argued that the rupture of the egoist I, its reconditioning in the face of the Other, the re-orientation despite itself of the for-itself to the for-the-other, is effected by means of a positivity, the surplus of ethics. It is indeed accomplished by ways of a surplus rather than by a negativity or lack, which the subject would then recuperate or attempt to recuperate. The existent as self-sufficient autonomous contented being, does not answer the ethical call of the Other spontaneously. It does not lack anything and it does not need the Other. It answers the call to responsibility *despite* its enjoyment and autonomy.¹⁴ Something or someone beyond itself, greater than it, makes it give up its egotistical life. What the Other offers is judgement which leads to justice and goodness. Thus, the existent is converted and redefined not because s/he lacked something that the Other can provide, Levinas insists, but because of a Desire for what s/he does not need.

Throughout TI a certain ambiguity concerning the tension between lack or need and desire can be discerned. There is mention of the absolute surplus of the Other with respect to the same who desires him/her, who desires what s/he does not lack.¹⁵ Yet, based on Levinas's phenomenological construction of the self in EE and TA, the subject does indeed *need* the Other in the final instance to prevent it from "imploding" under the weight of its own unbearably heavy materiality. The existent's separation from the anonymous *il y a* commits it to an isolated existence characterized by materiality. In solitude, the existent threatens to collapse under the unbearable weight of its own gravity. *Living from* the world and its alimentary existence is only a partial alleviation of this heaviness. Needing to

¹³ This conviction is echoed in AE: "Why does the Other concern me? ... Am I my brother's keeper? These questions have meaning only if one has already supposed that the ego is concerned only with itself... In this hypothesis it indeed remains incomprehensible that the absolute outside-of-me, the other, would concern me. But in the 'prehistory' of the ego posited for itself speaks a responsibility. The self is through and through a hostage, older than the ego, prior to principles" (p. 117/150). According to Levinas, this is the only reason why there is pity, compassion and pardon in the world.

¹⁴ It also answers *because* of its separation since, for Levinas, only an independent atheist I is capable of answering.

¹⁵ Already in the very first pages of TI, Levinas writes: "The other metaphysically desired is not "other" like the bread I eat... I can "feed" on these realities and to a very great extent satisfy myself, as though I had simply been lacking them. Their *alterity* is thereby reabsorbed into my own identity... The metaphysical desire tends toward *something else entirely*, toward the *absolutely other*. The customary analysis of desire can not explain its singular pretension. A commonly interpreted need would be at the basis of desire; desire would characterize a being indigent and incomplete... But thus it would not even suspect what the veritably other is. The metaphysical desire... is a desire that can not be satisfied. [It] desires beyond everything that can simply complete it — the Desired does not fulfil it, but deepens it" (pp. 33-34/3-4).

sustain ourselves, we reach towards objects in the world and create some distance from ourselves, which offers a temporary relief from gravity. However, once the need is fulfilled, the otherness of the world is transmuted into part of ourselves. Nourishment is always a transmutation of the other into the same (TI, 111/83). Needs are in my power; they constitute me as the same and not as dependent on the other (*ibid.*, p. 116/89). And so I return to myself upon satisfaction and once again face the threat of imminent implosion. At this point, Levinas makes a distinction between need and desire: need is the assimilation of the other to satisfy the self; desire is no satiety, but an uncharted future before me. Desire announces the absolute Other that will offer me permanent alleviation from my materiality, since in desire I do not return to myself upon satisfaction. Desire cannot be satisfied and thus the movement from the self towards the Other remains in the beyond.

At a certain moment, according to Levinas, a dimension opens in the interiority of the I through which it will be able to await and welcome the revelation of transcendence (TI, 150/124). At a certain moment, I do not merely reach towards objects in the world to satisfy my needs, but I reach towards the Other in Desire. As a needy being, I am, paradoxically, a contented autonomous self-sufficient being that lacks nothing. At which point do I substitute need for desire and reach beyond the provisional alterity of the world to the absolute alterity of the Other? Why does the I open itself up to the Other and give up its happy independence? Why not just be deaf to the Other's call that announces only judgement? The ethical relation, precisely because it is a relation between two parties, is dependent upon the egocentric I's opening itself up. The I is essential to ethics. Can the I continue its existence without the ethical relation, without the Other? Ultimately it will implode under the weight of its own materiality. Ultimately, we may ask: Is there an element of *need* to be found in the relation which is primarily based on *desire* and which the Other initiates?

Schematically, there are a couple of moments to be distinguished in these three works concerning subjectivity and its subsistence:

(1) The anonymous *there is (il y a)* undergoes a moment of substantiation: hypostasis occurs and the subject comes into being as *ipseity*. It lives in the world ecstatically during which the immediate danger of implosion (due to its being mired in its own materiality) is temporarily postponed.

(2) In the next instance, it makes a home for itself — it dwells and thereby retreats back into a secure enclosure during which the insecurities of the future and the elemental are postponed. This period is characterized by enjoyment. The ecstatic is delayed and the self comes to itself once more. This is not a complete isolation however — the self needs to sustain itself through labour and property. The phenomenological analyses of Section 2 of TI, “Interiority and economy”, describe this concrete mode of existence (TI, 107-183/79-158). Since the Same is embodied in the form of the self-centred ego, who imposes its law (*nomos*) on the world in which it is at home (*oikos*), it is here characterized as “economy” (*oiko-nomia*). The independence on the basis of which this selfsame is capable of having a relation of *exteriority* with its Other, the Infinite, is constituted by a primordial and primitive way of being with oneself characterized as “interiority”. As Peperzak (1993: 121) explains, this independent interiority is the basis on which this selfsame existent will become capable of having a relation of exteriority with the Other.

(3) In the final instance, the self's purely egoist orientation is reoriented towards the

Other. Section 3 of TI, “Face and exteriority” (pp. 187-253/161-231) describes how the Other, in its concrete emergence as another person facing and speaking to me, reveals to the I the injustice of its self-enclosure in an egocentric world. Both appear exterior to and independent from the other and thus form a constellation that is not a totality but neither a pure dispersion without connections (Peperzak 1993: 121). Levinas describes this constellation as a non-relational relation. This relation without relation inverts the I’s self-involvement. To be egocentric means that the first thing I fear, above anything else, is my own death — my primary concern is my own existence. After the ethical reorientation, my first concern is no longer losing my own life but depriving another of his/hers. The self’s fear of its own death is replaced by a fear of murdering the Other (TI, 244/222). This is the ultimate ethical conversion initiated by the Other despite the self. However, in TI Levinas writes: “It is only in approaching the Other that I attend to myself” (p. 178/153). In the language of ontology, Levinas explains how the face of the Other that I welcome makes me pass from phenome-non to being, that is, it gives meaning to my existence. It now appears as if I *need* the Other to properly care for myself. Immediately afterwards, however, Levinas stresses the fact that exteriority does not slip into the void of needs. Such an exteriority reveals an insufficiency of the separated being that is without possible satisfaction — a hunger that nourishes itself not with bread but with hunger itself, i.e. *desire*. There seems to be a convergence of need and desire: my approaching the Other testifies to *desire* (initiated by the Other, despite the egoist I), but in approaching the Other, I also attend to myself, i.e. I also *care* for myself. This is essentially an existential practice apart from being a metaphysical move towards transcendence. On the one hand, the Other person ensures me against self-implosion, and, on the other hand, I need the transcendent Other to reveal my autonomous egology to be insufficient. The Other makes me realize that my egoist existence is not as perfect as I first thought it to be. Without the Other’s intervention, I would never come to this realization. My eyes would never be opened to the insufficiency of my self-sufficiency. The convergence between need and desire is also already briefly referred to by Levinas in EE: “Desire is no doubt not self-sufficient; it touches on need and the disgust of satiety” (pp. 45/68-69).

Accordingly, for Levinas, there is an economics of existence that underlies the subject’s ethical responsiveness towards the Other. Not that he considers the self’s self-centred practices to be equivalent to ethics. Rather, caring for the self or its egoist economy in which separation is accomplished, prepare the subject to take up its responsibility towards others. According to Levinas, I ultimately care for myself by approaching the Other. However, it is the Other that *enables* me to approach him, for the Levinasian existent is, by itself, radically unable — helpless in the face of its involuntary participation in a hopeless amorality. Without the Other’s intervention it is doomed to remain self-centred.

The early Levinas’s self, then, in its inwardness and singularity in an instant, is the condition of possibility for the subsequent reorientation towards the Other. The Levinas of AE maintains that ontology — the intelligibility of being — only becomes possible when, ethics, the origin of all meaning takes precedence.¹⁶ The social relation (ethics) therefore becomes the “base” upon which the self comes into being (ontology). Levinas already expressed the same sentiment in TI: “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; preexisting the plane of ontology is the ethical plane” (TI, 201/175).¹⁷

¹⁶ See AE, 10/12, 13/15; Bauman 1990: 16-18 and; Hand 1989: 231.

¹⁷ Also see TI, 43/13: “And as critique precedes dogmatism, metaphysics [or “transcendence, the welcoming of the other by

Elsewhere Levinas states that “the existent qua existent is produced only in morality (*ibid.*, p. 262/240). For him, ethics is first philosophy (Levinas 1985: 77/81). This means that being does not precede ethics as a more fundamental category, but that ethics, as more originary, is that which gives meaning to being. This seemingly absurd contention would mean that before I am myself or for myself, I am for others; I am only by virtue of being in a relationship of responsibility towards the other in need. Put differently, existence, in any meaningful sense of the word, presupposes a relation with another to which I give all that I own, all that I am without reserve or calculation. To be is to be responsible, that is, to give what I do not owe, to substitute myself for the guilty other.

Despite his exhaustive early phenomenological analyses of the economic existence of the existent alone in the world, for Levinas, the subject’s relationship to the other person comes “chronologically” and ontologically first. In other words, on the level of time, the ethical subject comes into being *diachronically*, that is, through time, whereas the existent alone in the world was not yet in time. Ontologically, it is only the relationship with the other person, as bearer of the trace of Absolute alterity, that begets meaningful being. Ethics, therefore, precedes ontology. Levinas’s theoretical work does indeed begin in an ontological — or in an “ontic” — explication of what it means “to be,”¹⁸ and in a new analysis of the intentional or transcending movement of our existence. These investigations ultimately lead Levinas to a region “otherwise than being,” and accordingly, beyond ontology.

So Levinas has insisted upon the anonymous and irremissible existing that precedes existents, and upon the hypostasis that ends in the mastery of an existent over existing, but which, by the same token, is shut up within the finality of the identity that its spatial transcendence in the world does not undo. In other words, in an instant and alone in the world the existent is not yet in time. To have time is to have the opportunity to begin anew, to escape the definitiveness of the instant. It is not something that the existent can accomplish on its own — the solitary subject cannot deny itself; it does not possess nothingness. Salvation, Levinas insists, can only come from elsewhere (EE, 93/159). The future is capable of resurrecting the instant anew, but only as that which introduces time by participating in the present. This is accomplished in the face-to-face with the Other. The Other gives the existent time, and time opens up a dimension to the existent shut up within itself (TA, 79/177).

According to Levinas, the relationship with the other person is a complication of our original relationship with alterity in general — the dialectic between the self and otherness in the world (TA, 82/180).¹⁹ In the world, the existent “feeds” off exteriority and effectively relocates alterity within, into its own substantivity through a dialectical transmutation.²⁰ This incipient dialectic hones the existent for the ultimate dialectic that would redefine its very egocentric constitution. At the same time, it is only by being its own creation, by accomplishing its own *ipseity*, that the “I” can be in a non-violent relationship to the other person qua Other.

the same”] precedes ontology” and on p. 48/18: “Ontology presupposes metaphysics”.

¹⁸ Levinas (1985: 38/35) defines “fundamental ontology” in the Heideggerian sense of the term. Also cf. Levinas 1987b: vii-ix.

¹⁹ Cf. EE, 37-45/55-70 and TI, 240-247/217-225 (“The truth of the will”).

²⁰ See TI, 111/83: “Nourishment, as a means of invigoration, is the transmutation of the other into the same, which is in the essence of enjoyment: an energy that is other, recognized as other, recognized, we will see, as sustaining the very act that is directed upon it, becomes, in enjoyment, my own energy, my strength, me. All enjoyment is in this sense alimentation”.

“Separation is first the fact of a being that lives *somewhere*, from *something*, that is, that enjoys ... a process of being that is deduced from itself, that is, that remains separated and capable of shutting itself up ... but also capable of welcoming this face of infinity with all the resources of its egoism: economically” (TI, 216/191).

Thus the transcendence towards the world, in which we relate to provisional alterity, is the indispensable precursor of the transcendence of expression, that is, the encounter with the absolute alterity of the transcendent Other.

Ethics, in Levinas’s view, occurs “prior” to essence and being, conditioning them. This is not because the good is to be found in a Heaven above or an Identity founding all identities, for this would again fall into onto-theo-logy,²¹ once more confusing ethics with ontology, as if what “ought to be” somehow “is”. Ethics never was or is anything. Its “being” is not to be but to be *better than being*. Ethics is precisely ethics by disturbing the complacency of being (or of non-being, being’s correlate). “To be or not to be”, Levinas insists, is *not* the question. Rather, *the* question concerns precisely what “ought to be”, that which is *better than being*. What “is” (ontology) only becomes what “ought to be”, i.e. ethics only becomes possible when the existent is confronted by the Other, and in this sense the social is beyond ontology. The existent’s solitude thus appears for Levinas as the isolation which marks the very event of being (as an escape from the anonymous *il y a*), but being only becomes meaningful when faced by the Other (as an escape from solitude) (Levinas 1985: 57-58).

Apart from his preoccupation with Infinity, Levinas spends volumes, as we have seen, meticulously describing the finite existent’s egoist existence, its coming-into-being, its living-in-the-world, and its care for itself. The existent’s auto-positing is crucial because it is that from which goodness issues:

“It [goodness] concerns a being which is revealed in a face, but thus it does not have eternity without commencement. It has a principle, an origin, issues from an I, is subjective” (TI, 305/282).

Goodness is transcendence itself, and transcendence is the transcendence of an I. Only an I can respond to the injunction of a face. The I is then conserved in goodness. More than anything else, TI is a *defence of subjectivity* (TI, 26/xiv). The ego is absolutely needed for the goodness of transcendence. Accordingly, in the face of the Other, subjectivity is necessarily present as free and conscious (independent and enjoying) hospitality.²²

Bridging the Gap between TI & AE |

Autrement qu’être ou au-delà de l’essence (AE), which was published in 1974, is generally considered as Levinas’s second magnum opus. It continues and develops the main ideas

²¹ Heidegger has shown that the history of Western thought and culture since its Greek beginnings has been an “onto-theo-logy”: theology in the guise of ontology. What is truly present is not the manifest unfolding of what is, but a being with more being than the passing show of existence. This pre-eminent being — idea, *energeia*, substance, position, concept, dialectic, will to power, will to will — is neutral, impersonal and all-encompassing, an active and transitive “exist-ing” that makes beings be. It is this Being that grants beings their *conatus essendi*, their perseverance and maintenance in being, and it grants us the openness and the light that are necessary in order to grasp them as phenomena that appear. The world is but the reflection, the re-presentation of God, substance, transcendental ego, etc. Levinas insists that ethics only comes into its own with the collapse of onto-theology. For him, the critique of metaphysics indeed ends onto-theo-logical ethics, the ethics of transcendental sanction, of other worldly principles and rules. See Levinas 1985: 1-3 (tr. Intro). Also see TI, 42-48/12-18 for Levinas’s critique of Heidegger.

²² It would be argued that this simultaneity, which Levinas insists upon, is highly problematic. For is independence and enjoyment not characteristic of economic existence in which egoism reigns supreme? And if it is, how can it be consonant with hospitality — which in Levinas is precisely a giving up of egoism, a reception of and a making room for the Other?

of TI and implicitly addresses some of the criticisms levelled against the first book.²³ It is, nevertheless, an independent whole, which goes beyond TI by approaching its problems from other perspectives. In this book, Levinas takes *responsibility* to be the essential, primary and fundamental structure of subjectivity. Responsibility is not a simple attribute of subjectivity, as if the latter already existed in itself, before the ethical relationship. The Levinas of AE maintains that subjectivity is not for itself; it is initially for another — responsibility for the Other (cf. Levinas 1985: 95-96/101-102). In other words, here subjectivity only comes into being when faced with its infinite responsibility towards the Other. There is no self-sufficient, autonomous (i.e. radically atheist) subjectivity preceding the ethical encounter

In AE the *violence* of the encounter with the Other escalates to the point of obliterating the egoist I. Indeed, in this work the obsession of the Other is portrayed as a *traumatization* — the Other violates and traumatizes the I. This trauma also comes with compensation though: while violating the I the Other frees it “from the enchainment to itself, where the ego suffocates in itself due to the tautological way of identity” (AE, 124/160). This is a problem that preoccupied Levinas from the very beginning, where he articulated his trans-phenomenological quest as a search for a *way out of Being*. In *De l'évasion* (1935) he qualifies this “need for escape” as a “world-weariness” for “the ground of suffering consists in the impossibility of interrupting it [Being/existence], and of an acute feeling of being held fast [*rivé*]” (DE, 52-53/70-71) ... “riveted to ourselves, enclosed in a tight circle that smothers” (*ibid.*, p. 66/90). Thus, “escape is the need to get out of oneself, that is, to *break that most radical and unalterably binding of chains, the fact that the I [moi] is oneself [soi-même]*” (*ibid.*, p. 55/73). In this early essay, Levinas did not yet see any solution to the subject’s need to escape from itself, from its being which it experiences as unbearably heavy, and he concludes that this attempt to escape will inevitably fail. It is only in AE, four decades later, that his thought comes full circle, that he realizes that ethics, or the relation to the Other, constitutes such an *Ausgang* — such a disengagement, disintrication or a getting-out [*sortie*].

This “getting out” is a “ripping out” of that egotistical core that makes us deaf and blind to the Other’s call. It is a freedom-*from* the gravitational pull of our self-centred core to enable the freedom-*to* see the Other’s need and to hear the Other’s call. The Other and his/her penury inscribe a debt within the self that places the latter in a deficit that fundamentally precedes anything s/he could have done or failed to do. Before any autonomous rational decision to take on responsibility or not, the self *will always already have been* culpable. The future anterior tense invokes a time that can never really be remembered since it will never have fully taken place. The debt towards the other person that faces me, haunts me from within as that kernel of alterity inscribed within my depths, that fundamentally precedes me in origin. It is that other-within-the-self that have-always-already-been there that means that the self *will always already have been* guilty. It is what continually prevents the self from ever becoming entirely self-identical. The future anterior tense designates a conditional prediction and hence a proposition that bears upon an anticipated belatedness, a split or disjointed temporality. The essence of the I in this instant, a present not yet inscribed in time, is vested in a future that will always already haunt the singular I. This inconclusive yet

²³ According to Peperzak (1993: 209), AE mainly deals with Jacques Derrida’s critique levelled in his essay, “Violence et métaphysique: Essai sur la pensée d’Emmanuel Levinas”. This essay first appeared in the *Revue de Métaphysique et de Morale* 69 (1964): 322-354, 425-473, and was reprinted in Derrida, J. (1967). *L’écriture et la différence*. Paris: Du Seuil, pp. 117-228. For the English translation see Derrida 1978: 79-153.

pre-original future becomes the I's now when the future meets it in the face of the needy Other. For Levinas, the self is only free when it comes face to face with this anticipated belated un-freedom of responsibility.

“Freedom is thus borne by the responsibility it could not shoulder, the responsibility for the neighbour, the substitution as a hostage. Freedom is born of being violated by the Other. This finite freedom is thus not primary and not initial, but lies in an infinite responsibility where the other person can accuse me to the point of persecution, driving me to a state of “deathlike passivity” (AE, 124/159).

Derived from the Latin *radix* meaning “root”, radical passivity is a passivity so radical it paradoxically lies at the very *root* of ethical action, *rooting* out the egocentrism of the I, enabling the I to become *uprooted* from its selfish ways. This is how the subjectivity and uniqueness of a responsible ego comes about in AE. It is not after an auto-affectation of a sovereign ego that “compassion” for another comes about. Rather, it is long before in being obsessed by another, in the trauma suffered prior to any auto-identification, in an unrepresentable *before*. “The one affected by the other is an anarchic trauma... In this trauma”, according to Levinas, “the Good reabsorbs, or redeems, the violence of non-freedom” (AE, 123/158).

In this conquest, which is also the liberation from our unbearably heavy materiality described in EE and TA, the I is “consumed” and “delivered over”, “exiled”, “exposed to wounds and outrage” (AE, 138/176). It is a being “torn up from itself” (AE, 142/181). Although traumatic and violating, obsession does not inflict evil for some evil undergone, that is, it is not a counter-terror, an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth. Nonetheless, here, in my ethical obligation towards the Other, I am threatened and terrorized, taken as a hostage, crushed by the height of the infinite in every human face. I am suffering a perpetual “bad conscience” — a perpetual fear, not only of the Other but also, and mainly, of myself as potential murderer. For the Other comes to define the self or the subject: “subjectivity”, writes Levinas, “*is the other in the same*” (AE, 111/141).²⁴ The uniqueness of the self is the very fact of bearing the fault of another. “The more I return to myself, the more I divest myself, under the traumatic effect of persecution, of my freedom as a constituted, wilful, imperialist subject, the more I discover myself to be responsible; the more just I am, the more guilty I am... The psyche is the other in the same” (AE, 112/143). Accordingly, for the Levinas of AE, the pre-phenomenal *ante-cedence* of the Other, within or before or beyond myself, is the true meaning of “interiority”. We have no hold over it, we are in a passive relation to it — a passivity more radical than the opposition between passivity and activity — and we can never seize it because it always comes earlier than our consciousness. Interiority is anteriority, temporal apriority (Haar 1997: 97).

Levinas describes this *hyperbolic* presence of the Other in the subject as *obsession* and *proximity* (AE, 86-89/108-113). For him, presence is neither the self-possession of the present nor consciousness present to itself and for itself, which is associated with the imperialism of the Same. The always-already there of the Other cannot be grasped or conceptualized — it is preconceptual. Consciousness always arrives *après coup*, too late. The presence of the Other is so primordial and immediate that it does not allow the subject

²⁴ In EI (1985: 108/114-115), where Levinas quotes from AE (pp. 146/186-187), he refers to the subject as “the other in the Same, insofar as the Same is for the other... Here the difference is absorbed in the measure that proximity is made closer and through this very absorption... always accuses me more. Here the Same, is more and more extended with regard to the other, extended up to substitution as hostage, in an expiation which coincides in the final account with the extraordinary and diachronical reversal of the Same into the other in inspiration and psychism”.

to await or welcome the responsibility imposed “(which would still be a quasi-activity), but consists in obeying this order before it is formulated” (AE, 13/16). Proximity is obsession, constant pressure of the Other in me and on me, an internal *assiégement* which cannot be shown. Obsession and proximity designate the absolute antecedence of the Other beneath [*en deçà*] any manifestation at the core of the subject. The Other is pre-phenomenal, immediate presence. Immediacy is also a synonym for proximity and obsession: Immediacy is the ob-ssive proximity of the neighbour (AE, 86-87/108-109). Any direct contact with the Other — the contact of the caress, or of the word [*parole*] — is obsession, that is, an extreme imposition on me, to me and in me.

Although Levinas implicitly refuses the psychopathological meaning of obsession, his portrayal of the “persecution of the Other” nevertheless suggests a measure of suffering and a quasi-paranoid sense of being stalked. He insists that obsession is not a pathological modification of consciousness, but the very proximity of human beings (Levinas 1974: 229). Obsession is neither madness nor voluntary obedience, but is rather traumatic imposition, “total exposition to the outrage of the Other” (*ibid*; AE, 101/128). The traumatization of the subject consists in being directly exposed — both internally and externally — to an evil that s/he can, must, or wants to suffer from the Other: “I am as it were ordered from the outside, traumatically commanded, without interiorizing by representation and concepts the authority that commands me” (AE, 87/110). In order words, the subject does not — because it cannot — challenge either the Other’s right to accuse and demand or it’s own complicity or guilt. Obsession is not consciousness — it overwhelms the consciousness that tends to assume it. “It is unassumable like a persecution” (*ibid.*). The extent of responsibility goes...” to the point of being delivered over to stoning and insults.”²⁵ To be persecuted means to be subjected to hostility and ill-treatment, being divested of self and delivered over to death (if it comes to that). Because the Other is the essence of the subject, the subject is originally guilty, accused and even punished without having done anything.

Accordingly, in my “responding” to the ethical call of the Other, I am necessarily and always violated by the Other. However, elsewhere Levinas also defines violence through its opposition to the basic human relations of transcendence — that is, when the “I” resists this conquest by the Other.²⁶ Here violence is equivalent to narcissism. It does not permit the Other to surprise, to accuse, or to convert me, but tries to find out to what extent the Other’s freedom can be captured, used, reduced. By implication this would mean that I necessarily always find myself in the position of either being violated by the Other or violating the Other. As the one being violating, I would avoid looking at the Other’s face and would seize persons from the perspective of universality, i.e. from the perspective of the (other) individual’s absence. On the other hand, in the violence suffered at the hands of the Other, I am concerned only about the Other’s distress (in the depth of my own self). That is what Levinas means when he writes, “persecution brings the ego back to the self”. And this “persecution is a trauma, violence par excellence without warning nor a priori, without possible apology, without logos” (AE, 197/157-158, fn. 27).

Would the strange logic of the Other as that which is deeper within the self than the self not be obliged to admit that the torturer and tortured are *one and the same*, that the highest good, the ethical command and the greatest evil (to be prosecuted to death) are

²⁵ See AE, 192/110, fn. 24. Levinas here quotes rabbinical thought to explain the extent of responsibility: cf. Rachi’s *Commentary* on Numbers 12, 12.

²⁶ Cf. “Freedom and command” (1953) in Levinas 1987b: 15-24.

one and the same principle (Haar 1997: 101)? Furthermore, how do we reconcile the fact that generosity towards the Other is always at the expense of the self, that the “passivity of wounds, the ‘haemorrhage of the for-the-other, is the tearing of the mouthful of bread from the mouth that tastes in full enjoyment” (AE, 74/93)? The painful “tearing out of the gift” (to give and to be wounded) is the Other within the Self as originally inflicting pain and suffering on the Same, as splitting the self through the primacy of its own coming to itself. This idea posits substitution, self-dispossession and replacement by the Other. As Haar (1997: 103) points out, the play on the two meanings of the Other as both “absolutely internal” and “absolutely exterior” leads to a perpetual ambiguity: responsibility evidently has no so-called moral value as that which concerns interpersonal behaviour, because it is the essence of the subject. It cannot be a communication, or a relation, for it is at first an absolutely non-relative inner movement.

If the subject is the hostage of the Other without any possible choice, if the ego is herself, deprived of every centre, “possessed by the Other” (AE, 142/181), as what and from which place can she answer to and for the Other? If the ego himself already “is” the Other how can he still face or encounter the Other? What can he or she still offer the Other if s/he has been deprived even of its own poverty, stripped of its inherent nature (egoism) as well as all of its acquisitions? The subject can hardly be expected to be hospitable if she is hunted down even in her own home. It seems impossible to call upon an individual to be responsible if he is contested in his own identity, emptied even of being someone (AE, 92/117). After all, traumatization by the Other entails being consumed, delivered over, dislocated — “holding on to itself only as it were in the trace of its exile” (AE, 138/176). The subject, originally verging on the point of implosion under the unbearable weight of its own materiality, now not only has no relation with the Other, but suffers so violent an internal pressure that it implodes (anyway), melts or drowns into the infinite absence-presence or non-relational hyperproximity of the Other.

For Levinas, ethics is ultimately the abolition of any egotism. But can the appropriate response to what the Other asks, result from an unavoidable obligation, an overwhelming requisition? According to Haar (1997), the premises of this so-called ethics — non-freedom, non-reciprocity, non-identity — can lead only to a primordial forsaking by each subject of every other. Does not the radicality of the primacy of the Other presented in AE call for the rehabilitation of the Same against the literally unbearable excess of the Other, against what Levinas himself calls the “enormity” and “incommensurability” of the “absolutely Other”? Should we not defend some kind of measure that protects the primacy and privacy of myself and yourself? For without the balance of the Same – the very Same defended by Levinas in his early works, the Other risks becoming more domineering than any Totality ever instituted by the Same.

Is the Subject Still the Condition for Ethical Responsiveness in AE? |

The validity of the premise that the subject’s economic auto-personification is a necessary condition for ethicality is evidently limited to Levinas’s earliest three works. In the preceding paragraphs I have briefly tried to sketch the nature of subjectivity in AE and it has become apparent that here the subject is no longer for itself, but initially for the Other. Its very being is defined as substitution for the Other. Its egoist economic worldly existence, in which its separation and interiority comes into being in the works preceding AE, is no longer of any consequence in AE. Levinas writes, for example, “It is through the condition of being a hostage that there can be pity, compassion, pardon, and proximity in the world — even

the little that there is, even the simple ‘after you sir’” (AE, 117/150).²⁷ In other words, the Other concerns me because I have no choice but to be concerned, for I am a hostage. Levinas thus tries to capture this disposition towards alterity within the subject with series of what he calls “termes éthiques” or even “un langage éthique”: accusation, persecution, obsession, substitution and hostage. However, the paradox here is that that which this ethical language seeks to thematize is by definition unthematizable, it is a conception of the subject constituted in a relation to alterity irreducible to ontology, that is to say, irreducible to thematization or conceptuality. Thus Levinas’s work amounts to a *phenomenology of the unphenomenologizable*, or what he calls the order of the enigma as distinct from that of the phenomenon. In other words, Levinas is trying to describe the indescribable and what has to be described, stated, or enunciated is subjectivity itself.²⁸

So how should we understand the Levinasian subject as it is deployed in AE? Levinas begins his exposition by describing the movement from Husserlian intentional consciousness to a level of pre-conscious, pre-reflective sensing or sentience. This movement from intentionality to sensing, or in the language of TI, from representation to enjoyment, shows how intentional consciousness is conditioned by life (TI, 127/100; AE, 31/39). Against Heideggerian *Sorge*, life for Levinas is not *blösses Leben*, but sentience, enjoyment and nourishment. It is *jouissance* and *joie de vivre*. Life is love of life and love of what life lives from: the sensible, material world. Levinas’s work is a reduction of the conscious intentional ego to the pre-conscious sentient subject of *jouissance*. It is precisely this sentient subject of *jouissance* that is capable of being called into question by the Other. The ethical relation takes place at the level of the pre-reflective sensibility and not at the level of reflective consciousness. The ethical subject is a sentient subject not a conscious ego.

So, for Levinas, the subject is *subject*, and the form of this subjection is sensibility or sentience. He often describes sensibility as “the way” of my subjection or vulnerability to and passivity in the face of the Other. AE’s entire argumentative thrust is to show how subjectivity is founded in *sensibility* (Chapter 2) and to describe sensibility as a *proximity* to the Other (Chapter 3), a proximity whose basis is found in *substitution* (Chapter 4), which is the core concept of AE. Substitution — where I am responsible not only for the persecution that I undergo, but even for my persecutor, where no one can take my place, but I am ready to stand in for the Other, even die for him if I must — is characterized by a traumatic, self-lacerating, even masochistic logic. The subject that suffers at the hands of the Other is also responsible for this involuntary suffering. I am absolutely responsible for the persecution I undergo, for the outrage done to me (Levinas 1996: 90), and it is this situation of absolute responsibility that Levinas describes with the phrase “le traumatisme originel”. Thus, the subject is constituted as a subject of persecution, outrage, and suffering through an original traumatism in the face of which it is utterly passive. This is a passivity that exceeds representation, i.e. the intentional act of consciousness that cannot be experienced as an object, the noematic correlate of a noesis. Trauma is a “non-intentional affectivity” that

²⁷ Critchley also quotes extensively from the 1968 version of “Substitution”, translated by P. Atterton, G. Noctor and S. Critchley. See Chapter 5 in Peperzak, Critchley & Bernasconi (Eds.) 1996. “Substitution” constitutes the fourth chapter of AE and, according to Levinas, this chapter was the germ of the work. Its principle elements were presented in a public lecture at the Faculte Universitaire Saint-Louis in Brussels, on November 30, 1967. That talk was a continuation of the lecture entitled, “Proximity” given the prior day, and which was substantially the same text as the study entitled, “Langage et Proximité” subsequently published in the second edition of *En découvrant l’existence avec Husserl et Heidegger* (Paris: Vrin, 1967). The two lectures “La proximité” and “La substitution” were given the general title “Au-delà de l’essence”.

²⁸ Cf. “The original traumatism: Levinas and psychoanalysis” is published in Critchley 1999: 183-197.

tears into my subjectivity like an explosion, like a bomb that detonates without warning, like a bullet that hits me in the dark, fired from an unseen gun and by an unknown assailant (cf. Tallon 1995: 107-121).

This absolute passivity towards the irrepresentable Other is then later described in the 1974 version of “Substitution” as transference, “*Ce transfert... est la subjectivité même*” (“This transfer... is subjectivity itself” (AE, 111/141)). According to Critchley’s reading, Levinas here understands *subjectivity to be constituted in a transferential relation to an original trauma*. In other words, the subject is constituted — without its knowledge, prior to cognition and recognition — in a relation that exceeds representation, intentionality, or reciprocity, that is to say, beyond any form of ontology. Accordingly, Critchley describes the ethical relation as the attempt to imagine a non-dialectical concept of transference, where the other is opaque, reflecting nothing of itself back to the subject. In Lacanian terms, it would seem that the subject is articulated through a relation to the Real, through the non-intentional affect of *jouissance*, where the original traumatism of the other is the Thing, *das Ding*. It is only by virtue of such a mechanism of trauma that one might speak of ethics.

If we are to accept such an interpretation of the constitution of the Levinasian subjectivity in AE, we can no longer speak of an “economics of existence” as a process of active self-formation, since in AE, there is no process of auto-identification that precedes the ethical relation. Once the existent is in full possession of its being it must *be awakened* to another reality — an awakening that can only be brought about by the absolute otherness of the human Other. Helplessly immersed in its egoism, the existent cannot extract itself from its being. Upon awakening, the existent no longer needs and feeds off provisional exteriority, but goes beyond its plenitude and *Desires* absolute alterity. Economic existence, necessary but not sufficient, serves as a forerunner of our ethical existence, which will give our lives its final signification. Only a sovereign ego, king of its castle, can be deposed. Once deposed, the subject attains the status of creature. A creature is a being simultaneously endowed with spontaneous freedom and critique, where its freedom is being called in question. It is an ambidextrous being — maintaining its egoist independence and therewith the possibility of choosing to do the wrong thing, on the one hand, while being pre-originally, and therefore, pre-consciously, guilty. A creature is both absolutely separate from the creator and radically dependent, that is, finally able to open upon the idea of Infinity. The creature is thus the egoist existent that has become an ethical subject. Once an ethical subject, one can no longer first distinguish an I, which would then tend towards a beyond. According to Levinas, the two movements become simultaneous, that is, to produce oneself as I is the same gesture with which one already turns towards exteriority. Levinas conjoins these two movements because our being is only truly accomplished through this movement towards the Other, that is, only the ethical relationship begets meaningful being. In this sense, “[i]t is only in approaching the Other that I attend to myself (TI, 178/153). However, later in AE, as we have seen, this way of attending to oneself becomes a violent encounter with another within me. The Other “wounds” the I (AE, 64/81), giving to the Other becomes a “tearing from oneself” — “the ‘haemorrhage of the for-the-other’ (74/93). This way of attending to oneself becomes a “suffering” (88/111), a “deafening trauma” (111/141).

The ethical subject comes into being by an anarchic, pre-original relation that resists representation and intentionality. Paradoxically, this ethical subject is constituted by virtue of its being torn from itself (AE, 55/71) — passively torn apart instead of actively engaged in a process of “auto-personification” (TI, 147/120). In AE the ethical relation comes into

being as a result of the annihilation of egoism. “It is the *impossibility* to come back from all things and concern oneself only with oneself” (AE, 114/145, my emphasis). This I no longer enjoys life, but suffers (AE, 88/111) — it is out of phase with itself, an identity in diastasis, gnawing away at itself in remorse (AE, 115/147). “The condition — or non-condition — of the Self [*Soi*] is not originally an auto-affection presupposing the Ego [*Moi*] — but precisely an affection by the Other — an anarchic traumatism this side of auto-affection and auto-identification. But a traumatism of responsibility and not causality.”²⁹ Thus, the subject is constituted in a hetero-affection that divides the self and refuses all identification at the level of the ego. Such is the work of trauma, the event of an unassumable past, a lost time that can never be retrieved or recuperated, a non-intentional affectivity that takes place as a subjection to the Other, a subject subjected to the point of persecution.

Thus, in AE the subject’s affective disposition towards alterity is the condition of possibility for the ethical relation to the Other. Ethics does not take place at the level of consciousness or reflection, rather, it takes place at the level of sensibility or pre-conscious sentience. The Levinasian ethical subject is a sentient self [*un soi sentant*] before being a thinking ego [*un moi pensant*]. The bond with the other person is affective.

For the Levinas up until TI, the radical shift towards the Other, the fixation on the Other that follows, is despite the Self, but never at the expense of the Self. On the contrary, the Other is shown to offer the Self salvation, to save it from its Other-reductive egoism. The Other comes both from on high and from an unassuming plane of humbleness as the poor, the widow and the orphan.³⁰ It cannot be ignored and yet uses no force and does no violence, at least not until AE. The self is maintained, but radically redefined to become other than being-for-itself despite itself. The immanent process of auto-personification that Levinas advocates as the necessary condition for the ethical conversion is abolished and substituted for Other-invocation.

Throughout his works, Levinas constructs a subjectivity that, to a certain crucial extent, is “susceptible” to the call of the Other. This reorientation of the egoist I toward being-for-the-Other is initiated by and accomplished as a result of the transcendent Other’s address. The existent is *responsive* to the Other, but not responsible for its own salvation — it comes from elsewhere. The egoist I is, from the moment of its inception, an ambivalent existent — both free and immersed in worldly enjoyment, but never free without the accompanying responsibility. It becomes something out of the nothing of the *there is*, but it is immediately mired in its own unbearably heavy materiality. Being-in-the-world, being ec-statically towards objects and nourishments in the world partially alleviates the existent’s unbearable heaviness and creates some distance between the self and the ego. Yet the danger of inevitable self-implosion remains and it is only the radical alterity of the Other that can alleviate the self’s condition and give it time. Time brings hope of a new beginning in which the definitiveness of the existent’s taking position and taking up being is uplifted. However, this is a responsibility that does not leave me time: “it leaves me without a present for recollection or a return into the self. It makes me late...” (DVI, 71/115). It is a responsibility in which “the subject is cored out as if enucleated, and receives no form capable of assuming it” (DVI, 72/116). Responsibility “is an order that slips into me like a thief, despite the taut

²⁹ This passage is quoted from the 1968 version of “Substitution” in Peperzak et.al. (Eds.) 1996: 93-94.

³⁰ Also cf. TI, 251/229: “The Other qua Other is situated in a dimension of height and of abasement — glorious abasement; he has the face of the poor, the stranger, the widow, and the orphan, and, at the same time, of the master called to invest and justify my freedom.”

weave of consciousness; a trauma that surprises me absolutely, always already *passed* in a past that was never present and remains ir-representable (75/119).

Conclusion |

Why this unreserved renouncement of freedom? Why this ethical disqualification of consciousness and of reason as if no possible good can come of it? For Levinas, ethics is taking responsibility for another as that which gives my very being meaning. Inscribed in the heart of my being is a responsibility that precedes the cold, sober, *reasonable* weighing of options that precedes the autonomous consciousness' taking responsibility for a separated being. Reflecting on responsibility from the standpoint of freedom is what informed Cain's sober, calculated coldness (cf. DVI, 71/115). For Levinas, responsibility for the Other *has to* come from what is prior to my freedom. According to him, "[i]t does not come from the time made up of presences, nor from presences sunken into the past and representable, the time of beginnings or assumptions... responsibility does not leave me time [for calculation]... it makes me too late [for evasion]" (*ibid.*). I *will-always-already-have-been* bound to the Other in a fraternity that makes liberty superfluous and equality a necessary consequence. Hence the later Levinas's disqualification of self-concern as ethically necessary.

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