Radical Passivity: Ethical Problem or Solution? A Preliminary Investigation

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Abstract

In our present-day Western society, there has been an increasing tendency towards individualism and indifference and away from altruism and empathy. This has led to a resurgence of ethical concerns in contemporary Continental philosophy. Following the thinking of philosophers such as Emmanuel Levinas, ethics has come to be defined in terms of a disinterested and selfless concern for the well-being of others. Levinas claims that taking care of others in need is not a free, rational decision, but a fundamental responsibility that is pre-consciously felt. We are passively obligated before we can actively choose to help. Levinas therefore argues that the needy other incapacitates our normal selfish ways, and that this 'radical passivity' enables us to recognise our inherent responsibility towards others in need. Levinas's own thinking on this subject is not unambiguous, however. While his early works stress the fact that we cannot care for others if we do not first take care of ourselves, his later works focus exclusively on the other as locus of our ethical responsibility. Following this line of thinking, a false opposition has emerged between an absolutised egoism and a crushing altruism that threatens to undermine the recent resurgence of ethical concerns. For how can we continue to care for others if we fail to recognise the duties we have towards ourselves? Moreover, what is the moral significance of responsible action if it is not freely chosen but passively imposed?

What is radical passivity? Why is radical passivity potentially an ethical problem, while Levinas presents it as *the* ethical solution? In order to be able to introduce and problematise the notion of radical passivity, I shall start by sketching the deployment of ethical subjectivity in Levinas's works. I shall consider to what extent a Kantian perspective can aid our problematisation of radical passivity. I shall conclude by exploring Roger Burggraeve's suggestion that the dynamics at play in Levinas can be best understood by excavating Jean Wahl's influence on Levinas's thinking.

. What is Radical Passivity?

The last few decades have witnessed a decisive ethical turn in literary, cultural and (Continental) philosophical discourses. This 'recentering of the ethical' followed rather uneasily from 'the decentering of the subject', i.e. from the critique of the ideal, autonomous and sovereign subject (cf. Garber *et al*. (Eds.) 2000: viii-ix). For how is

ethics to be recentred without its centre, without moral agency understood as sovereign rational autonomy?

Disenchanted with Man, wary of falling into the trap of moralising liberalism, with no desire to resurrect the unprecedentedly arrogant and self-righteous transcendental Ego – discovered by Rousseau and reaching its apotheosis in Husserl's phenomenology of consciousness – the kind of ethical philosophy that has come to occupy the centre stage in recent times has sworn allegiance to its post-humanist legacy. To do so, it had to find a way to radically disrupt ethical agency – an ethics in which the agent is characterised by a radical passivity and should therefore be written under erasure. This 'ethical agent' has found its most exemplary if not most influential articulation in the thought of Emmanuel Levinas.

This essay represents the first tentative steps towards a critical revaluation of ethical agency conceived in terms of radical passivity. It wants to assess the moral significance of the inversion or disruption of the traditional conception of agency associated with freedom of choice. For Levinas, on the other hand, responsibility cannot be a choice, for if there had been a choice, ethics would merely serve the needs of the self and would therefore become utilitarian (AE, 136/173-174).

What happens in radical passivity might be best explained in terms of George Bataille's fascination with the photograph of the torture of a Chinese man. The image depicts a man being dismembered and disembowelled while being kept conscious with opium. This is betrayed by the expression on the sufferer's face – at once ecstatic and intolerable. What is important in this context is *not the violence* of the image, but Bataille's reaction to it, i.e. its impact – something I cannot explain by using one of Levinas's examples such as the destitute orphan. Over-exposure to begging street children has long since desensitised us. Bataille became obsessed with this image in which ecstasy and immortal pain collide. The excruciating suffering undergone by the vulnerable other caused him to become extremely upset. It distressed him so much that he became delirious, distressed to the point of immobilisation (Bataille 1986: 244). This obsession is the 'substance' of Levinas's ethics: involuntary fascination, arresting paralysis that overcomes conscious thought. 'One does not merely observe a scene here. For when the other person is drained of all substance, when his reality *is* his erosion… then the borders between stage and audience are suspended and we are "involved", "elected", "singularized". The paralysis of the subject is an uncontrollable rapport with the other person that absolves all proper difference between Same and Other. It is an intimacy more profound than sympathy or empathy' (Wall 1999: 54).

Levinas is trying to articulate the fragile and indefinable relation with *Autrui* as *that from which I cannot distinguish myself.* More intimate (and inaccessible) than any perception, experience, or feeling, radical passivity 'gives' nonpresence. What brings about this nonpresence in Levinas, is the arresting proximity of the Other that obsesses the subject to the point of paralysis – an inability or nonintentionality that seizes us from the outside. *Autrui* is arresting and paralysing. There is an identification of the Same with the Other that enucleates the Same of sameness, rendering it other to itself (cf. *ibid.*: 52-55). This outside is so far outside that it paradoxically comes from those inaccessible, remote recesses *within* the self. This is the structure of ethical subjectivity in Levinas's mature writings: a paralysis in which the subject becomes '*sub-jectum*' (AE, 116/147), i.e. subjected to alterity 'despite itself', a necessity imposed from an outside that is paradoxically lodged *within* the depths of the soul, that is the self's very ensoulment (AE, 69/86; 112/143).

Passivity in the radical sense, before it is simply opposed to activity, is passive with regard to *itself*, and thus it yields to itself as though it were an external force. Hence, radical passivity harbours within itself a *potentia* (Wall 1999:1).[1] It is a confrontation with an other within the depths of the self. According to this view then, ethical agency follows from a force that incapacitates our egotistical (unethical) inclinations. Put differently, radical passivity runs counter to the received commonplace that, without freedom – the radical freedom to choose amongst various actions without inducement and with full impunity, like Gyges[2] – none of our choices would be morally significant. They would be like the jerks of a puppet's limbs, controlled by the strings of forces beyond its control. And what moral value does a puppet or its movements have?

2. Why is Radical Passivity Potentially an Ethical Problem rather than a Solution?

The Deployment of Ethical Subjectivity in Levinas

The first step towards unravelling the enigma of a radically passive agent consists in following the trajectory of Levinas's ethical metaphysics, which reaches its apotheosis in Levinas's second *magnum opus*, *Autrement qu' êtrement au delà de l'essence.* (1974).[3]

Levinas's turn to ethics and its concomitant invalidation of 'the autonomy of subjective freedom' (*Dialogue,* 27) was supported by a profound wariness of resurrecting the transcendental ego (AE, 57/73). His first major work, *Totalité et infini* is precisely devoted to the critique of the unquestioned valorisation of freedom. For Levinas, freedom is suspect, because it denotes 'the determination of the other by the same' and '[t]his imperialism of the same is the whole essence of freedom'. 'To welcome the Other', on the other hand, 'is to put in question that freedom' (TI, 85-87/57-59). Ethics, for Levinas, therefore constitutes the moment when the individual egoist subject's arbitrary freedom is curbed, and when it learns to recognise its responsibility to others instead of just using or assimilating alterity to serve its own egoist economy. In his second major work, *Autrement qu'être* Levinas goes on to defend the thesis that the existent's freedom has nothing to do with ethics: '[t]he responsibility for the other cannot have begun in my commitment, in my decision'. It 'comes from the hither side of my freedom, from a "prior to every memory", …from the non-present par excellence,

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1   In Latin *potentia* (power) is derived from *potest* (can).

2   Relevant in this regard is Levinas's repeated references to the myth of Gyges originally conveyed by Glaucon in Plato's *Republic* (II, 359b-360c). For Levinas, Gyges's magic ring that enabled him to become invisible is representative of the independence and interiority of the I. With the aid of the ring, Gyges became invisible and 'broke with participation'. Participation, according to Levinas, is a way of referring to the other: 'it is to have and unfold one's own being without at any point losing contact with the other' (TI, 61/32). To break with participation is to maintain contact, but no longer derive one's being from this contact: 'it is to see without being seen, like Gyges'. It is to draw one's existence from oneself, to come forth from a dimension of interiority (*ibid.*). When Gyges became invisible, the assembled shepherds spoke of him as if he was no longer there – he became an absolutely independent interiority, 'which exists non-recognized'. Gyges saw those who looked at him without seeing him, and he knew that he was not seen, that his crimes would not be seen. His position involved the impunity of a being alone in the world. Such a solitary being alone is capable of uncontested and unpunished freedom. 'The inner life, the I, separation', writes Levinas, 'are uprootedness itself, non-participation, and consequently the ambivalent possibility of error and of truth'.

3   As we shall see, there is a clear paradigm shift in Levinas's thinking between *Totality and Infinity* (1961) and *Otherwise than Being* (1974)*.* The thematics that form the focal point of AE is fully developed in *Of God Who Comes to Mind* (*De Dieu qui vient à l'iée)* (1982).

…the an-archical, prior to or beyond essence. The responsibility for the other is the lo-
cus in which is situated the null-site of subjectivity' (AE, 10/12). Responsibility can-
not be a rational weighing of options, for if there had been a choice, ethics would
merely serve the needs of the self and would therefore become utilitarian (*ibid.*:
136/173-174). A commitment already presupposes a theoretical consciousness, an in-
tentional thought that grasps and therefore violates (136/174). For Levinas, this would
go beyond the susceptiveness of passivity and reinstate the other-reductive impe-
rialisms of the self. For him, the limits imposed on the freedom of subjectivity cannot
be equated with privation (122/156-157). On the contrary, he insists that the anteced-
ence of responsibility to freedom signifies the Goodness of the Good: the necessity
that the Good chooses me first before I can be in a position to choose, that is, welcome
its choice. This is my pre-originary *susceptiveness.* My radical passivity consists in
facing a responsibility that I cannot shoulder, for something that I have not done but
which I cannot deny without denying myself. It is lodged *in* me – subjectivity is the
other-in-the-same – and imposes a necessity on the arbitrariness of my freedom and
thereby invests my freedom or unburdens me of my freedom that cannot but lead me
astray.

Paradoxically, however, the works preceding AE consist in large part in an insis-
tence upon the necessity of our subjective, pre-ethical freedom. The focal point of
Levinas's earliest three works, *De l'existence a l'existant* (1947), *Le temps et l'autre*
(1948) and *Totalité et infini* (1961) is the transcendence or self-transcendence of the
self, and Levinas expressly presents his first *magnum opus*, TI, as a defence of subjec-
tivity (*TI*, 26/xiv). In these early works, the question of the self-transcendence of the
self certainly precedes and is never eclipsed by the question of ethics. The problem of
the subject's escape [*évasion*] from itself,[4] from the unbearable heaviness of being to
which it is riveted, is resolved in the course of these works in terms of ethics or the en-
counter with the Other. Levinas then maintains that the subject only truly comes into
being – in any meaningful sense – as ethical subject, that is, after the Other has 'con-
verted' me *from* myself *to* face my infinite responsibility towards others. Levinas nev-
ertheless insists that the existent's economic existence in the world, which he considers
to be pre-ethical or egotistical, is ethically *necessary*.

Structurally we can therefore distinguish two moments in Levinas's thinking regard-
ing the subject: (1) the existent's pre-ethical 'economic' life; and (2) the ethical subject
or *creature*'s ethical life. Up to TI, economic self-sufficiency acts as necessary condi-
tion for ethical generosity. His phenomenological analyses from EE to TI describe the
existent's 'auto-personification' (*TI*, 147/120). During its 'economic life' in the world,
the existent cares for itself and forms itself as independent entity. Only as auto-posited
or self-created, i.e. radically free and self-sufficient, can it be host to the other – re-
ceive the other not with empty hands, but with something to give. In AE, Levinas will
disavow any preceding existential base, but in TI he still argues in favour of a simulta-
neousness.

In the works preceding AE, Levinas approaches subjectivity from two distinctly dif-
ferent but, in his view, complementary angles: on the one hand, he conceptualises sub-
jectivity in terms of 'enjoyment'. The egoist existent embodies the 'arbitrary' freedom
of economic existence. It is portrayed as 'without ears like a hungry stomach' (TI,
134/107) – naturally inclined to persist in the blind pursuit of its self-serving drives

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4   The question of the subject's escape from itself is dealt with extensively in an early essay, 'De l'évasion'
     (1935) (for the English translation, see Levinas 1982c).

and desires. On the other hand, this same subject is a self that does not coincide with itself. It occurs, on the contrary, as a 'diastasis' (EE, 18/16, TA, 69/163; TI, 238-239 / 215-216). Even in enjoyment it is haunted by a negativity at the heart of its existence – the effort to evade the gravity of materiality and solitude, the absurdity of being (*il y a*). In TI, it is this 'nothingness' at the centre of being that will open a dimension in interiority 'through which it will be able to await and welcome the revelation of transcendence'. This 'frontier' does *not* come from 'the revelation of the Other… but *somehow from nothingness'* (TI, 150/124, *my emphasis).* In TI, the ethical subject is therefore still host to two conditions at the same time – both an independent egoist self (i.e. radically free) *and* capable of 'self-critique', which makes the call of the Other *audible* to the 'deaf' existent.[5] In the works that follow, Levinas will disavow the subject's economic existential base and with it the subject's capacity for 'self-critique'. Its susceptiveness to the Other then does not come from any inner dimension of heteronomy, but from the Other, from the idea of Infinity that the Other puts into the subject. This is not a choice made from a position of radical freedom like Gyges (TI, 61/32), but the radical passivity of a being chosen.[6]

There is thus a clear paradigm shift – that is nevertheless not a hard break – between TI and AE from egoism and freedom to ethics and the subjection of freedom, which is commensurate with Levinas's move to radical passivity.[7] Did he manage to find a viable explanation for the possibility of ethicality in this amoral, indifferent world, or did he throw out the baby (radical freedom) with the bathwater with his turn to radical passivity? It is here that a Kantian perspective might be useful: the general consensus is that Levinas's move from economic life to ethical life coincides with Kant's supplement of the hypothetical imperative with the categorical imperative. However, this reading does not account for Kant's insistence that moral virtue derives from an incessant struggle against our inclinations, a struggle that presupposes the freedom of Gyges (cf. Morals*,* 7:405/66-67). It is this freedom (described as 'non-freedom' (AE, 123/158-159)) that Levinas's disposes of in AE. Following Adriaan Peperzak, Levinas's break with pre-ethical, arbitrary freedom can be challenged if the following is true:

> [t]he "fact" of the other is the revelation of the infinite, because it breaks the totality of my world and urges another orientation upon me – an orientation that coincides with my desire for the absolute.

If this is an accurate representation of Levinas's thought, it suggests a certain coincidence of myself-as-desire with myself-as-the-host-of-another (Peperzak*,* 213). If pre-ethical freedom as the desire for happiness (self-actualisation or -transcendence) coin-

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5   The negativity at the heart of the existent's being causes it not to coincide with itself. The existent thus appears as a *diastasis*, as a being standing apart from itself. Since the existent is not in equilibrium, it is driven outside itself and thus susceptible to alterity. For the later Levinas, this relation would be based on need and would therefore not be ethical. As we shall see, he solves this problem by replacing this 'nothingness' at the centre of being with the pre-original anarchic presence of 'the other in the same'.

6   Subjectivity understood as 'an identity in diastasis' (AE, 115/147) therefore returns in AE as if to rectify – after psychoanalysis and structuralism – a supposedly oversimplified account of subjectivity as 'enjoyment'. This rectification seems to forget that the subject never coincided with itself, not even in enjoyment.

7   In TI, the ethical subject is presented as both an independent egoist self (i.e. radically free) *and* responsible. Myself-as-desire (egoism) coincides with myself-as-host-of-another (ethics). Although Levinas will continue to insist on both, there is a clear paradigm shift between TI and AE from the freedom of economic life to the subjection of freedom that is characteristic of ethical life.

cides with ethical freedom as the desire for the absolute, ethics and 'economics' are inextricably linked. Levinas explicitly states that we cannot concretely care for others without the necessary resources acquired through the satisfaction of our needs. Also Kant can be read as opposing the idea of a universe in which goodness and happiness remain irreconcilable, for it would run counter to the necessary presuppositions and demands of reason.

Assessing Radical Passivity from a Kantian Perspective

For Kant, freedom is freedom from an over-determination by our egotistical drives and desires, and the law that imposes a necessity upon this (radical) freedom, liberates freedom to be ethical. In Levinas's terminology, it 'invests' freedom with another orientation towards the Other – it frees us to take up the responsibility we bear towards others. For Kant and Levinas, radical freedom can be equated with puppetry, since the existent is strung along by its drives and desires – *involuntarily* egotistical.

Both Kant and Levinas respectively claim, in other words, that necessity is not inconsistent with liberty. According to Kant, we are free when we are not *solely* determined by our desires and needs. Freedom cannot be equated with the absence of determination. A wholly undetermined will would be random and chaotic – it would not allow for responsibility, nor consequently for praise or blame. Kant argues that the only viable way to think of a free will is to think of it as a will whose choices are determined by a law that is internal to its nature. A perfectly rational or 'holy' will is determined only by itself, by its own inner lawfulness, and is therefore free. We finite beings, on the other hand, have to contend with our desires. Hence for us the operation of the law in our rational will is not automatic. We feel its operation within us as a constraint, because it must act against the pull of desire. In finite beings, Kant says, the moral law 'necessitates' rather than acting necessarily (Groundwork, 4: 413-414/81). For Kant, then, pre-ethical, arbitrary freedom co-exists with necessity, and moral virtue is conceived as a struggle against our inclinations (cf. Morals, 7: 405/66-67).[8]

A free will in the Kantian sense is, in other words, a will whose volition or decisions are governed by an internal directive. At first sight, Kant's insistence upon this autonomous will – not ruled by anything outside itself, whether external authority or internal motive, conscience or inclination – seems to be opposed to the heteronomous responsibility Levinas insists upon. However, in Kant, as in Levinas, I am incapable of establishing the law to which I find myself subject (Peperzak, 212). The general consensus is therefore that Kant's moral law functions analogously to radical passivity. However, as we have seen, in Kant, freedom and necessity (law) co-exist in the struggle between what we want to do and what we ought to do (Morals, 7:405/66-67), whereas in Levinas, pre-ethical freedom is uneducable or irreconcilable with necessity (EE, 93/158). Kant's practical philosophy therefore uncovers the ethical necessity of radical freedom (contra Levinas).

In his introduction to *Otherwise than being,* Alphonso Lingis typifies the relationship between Kant and Levinas as follows:

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8   In this sense, Kant's practical philosophy points us towards a critical revaluation of radical passivity in Levinas. A thoroughgoing revaluation of radical passivity could potentially furnish us with a fundamental framework for reflecting on the resurgence of ethics in contemporary Continental philosophy, literary and cultural theory. This is the long-term objective of this research, and therefore falls beyond the scope of the present essay.

> Levinas does not express this situation according to the Kantian typology, as a
> veritable constitution of autonomy out of this inaugural heteronomy of the law
> – where I must act as though it is I myself that give myself the law to which I
> am subject (AE, xxxiv).

In this passage, the emphasis is very much on 'I must act as though' for, as Peperzak
points out, Kant might have given autonomy pride of place, but he was well aware that
before I become aware of it, *I* am not able to establish the law by which I discover my-
self to be ruled. Kant's conception of the moral law might then not be so far removed
from the extreme passivity, the expropriation and enucleation that is paradoxically
constitutive of the self in the later Levinas. For Kant's moral law seems to function as
a kind of inaccessible noumenal dimension – 'transcendent', 'unintelligible', 'inscruta-
ble' – *within* the subject, paradoxically ordering it from the outside, as it were.[9]

Lingis continues:

> 'Yet he [Levinas] calls the Kantian formula remarkable, and reinterprets it to
> mean that the Law I recognize is first formulated in my own words of obedi-
> ence – the "Here I am". Here I exist as the author of what was put to me despite
> myself and unbeknownst to myself' (AE, xxxiv-xxxv).

Of course, in neither Kant nor Levinas does the I figure 'as the author' (of the law).
What is at stake in Levinas's notion of disrupted agency, is precisely 'despite myself
and unbeknownst to myself'. 'The neighbour assigns me before I designate him. This
is a modality not of a knowing, but of an obsession, a shuddering of the human quite
different from cognition… I am as it were ordered from the outside, traumatically
commanded, without interiorizing by representation and concepts the authority that
commands me'. The Other's hold over me arises on the ground of the antecedent rela-
tionship of obsession. Obsession is not consciousness, but overwhelms the conscious-
ness that tends to assume it. 'It is unassumable like a persecution' (AE, 87/109). The
Other's hold over me precedes any contract that could have been concluded between
free and conscious subjects. This implies that, in face of another, the I no longer stands
in the nominative, but in the accusative, as is literally apparent in the French expres-
sion, '*me voice*'.[10] The English translation, 'here I am', renders the subject in the ac-
tive nominative, whereas '*me voice*' relegates the I to the position of passive accusa-
tive. My being before the Other is not the outcome of my initiative and conscious ac-
tion. I am before the Other in spite of myself – passively.

Until now, I have given a rather critical assessment of radical passivity, placing the
emphasis on the impoverished notion of freedom on which radical passivity is pre-
mised. What, then, would be the advantages of a passive ethical agent? Following
Roger Burggraeve, I shall now turn to Jean Wahl's influence on Levinas – specifically
his distinction between trans-*a*scendence and trans-*de*scendence. It will shed some
light on why Levinas argues in favour of radical passivity, and explain the strange

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9   The subject is ordered from the outside, and yet commanded from within. As we shall see, this is the
    very strange and paradoxical confluence of the 'from on high' and 'from below' of transcendence in
    Levinas.
10 More radically, Levinas maintains that the 'I is passivity more passive than any passivity, because it is
    from the outset in the accusative, oneself – which had never been in the nominative – under the accusa-
    tion of another, although without sin' (DVI, 68).

enigma[11] of an ethical appeal that emanates from within the subject *while* ordering it from the outside.

3.   Why is Radical Passivity Potentially an Ethical Solution rather than a Problem?

 Jean Wahl's Influence: Transascendence vs. Transdescendence in Levinas[12]

Following his mentor, Jean Wahl (1888-1974), Levinas conceives of the relation between the self and Other in terms of a double movement – a trans-*a*scendence and a trans-*de*scendence.[13] Reacting against all intellectualistic systematism, Wahl sought a direct and intense contact with reality through feeling. According to him, 'immediate contact with the real is accomplished in the very contraction of feeling; 'a bare, blind contact with the Other'' (PN, 117/173). Feeling therefore involves a movement outward towards the other outside oneself, i.e. trans-ascendence. It is an ascending move in which a being departs out of its being, surpassing itself in the process. In other words, the subject reaches beyond itself towards the other than itself. According to Wahl, without something outside or beyond itself, the human condition would be wretched. What gives human life meaning is transcendence: '[d]esire, the source of happiness, of existence above existence, is not a simple lack, a simple emptiness. The appetite for life increases and confirms man's existence' (*ibid.*: 112/167). This movement of desire is not, however, a movement towards and an assimilation of the desired object. It is a movement 'without closure, without conclusion' (OS, 74/109), so that feeling becomes an inexhaustible, infinite desire (PN, 113-115/168-169).

 In this transascendent movement, then, the person is lifted above itself, 'going-beyond' itself without falling back upon itself (OS, 74/109). This infinite desire for the Other that carries the subject beyond itself is described by Levinas as 'the primordial feeling'. Precisely by virtue of being a feeling, this encounter with the Other is not only an outward dynamic, but also has an inward impact on the subject itself. '[T]his desire for infinity… consequently *leaves the subject in immanence.* Is not this the immanence which Jean Wahl… called 'the greatest transcendence', asks Levinas, '…that which consists in transcending transcendence, that is relapsing immanence' (*Existence humaine et transcendence* (Neuchâtel: Editions de la Baconnière 1944: 38)' (CPP, 62-63, footnote 4).[14] There is thus another movement discernible here. Apart from a trans-ascendent or upward dynamic, there is also mention of a 'relapsing immanence'.

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11 In 'Phenomenon and Enigma' (CPP, 61-74), Levinas calls the other's way of manifesting himself *without* manifesting himself an 'enigma' referring back to the etymology of the Greek term (i.e. an obscure or equivocal word, a riddle).

12 I am indebted to Roger Burggraeve, who brought the significance of Jean Wahl's influence on Levinas's thinking to my attention. I am thinking of two presentations in particular, which he gave in Rome and Nijmegen (21 September 2006) respectively (and discussions with him that followed these lectures) on the Levinasian movement from exteriority to the interiority of the Infinite. My own analysis draws heavily upon Burggraeve's research.

13 Levinas explicitly acknowledges Jean Wahl's influence in *Totalité et infini* (see footnote 5, p. 35/5). He has also dedicated two studies to Wahl's thought: 'Jean Wahl et le sentiment' (1955) and 'Jean Wahl. Sans avoir ni être' (1976). These two essays are respectively translated as 'Jean Wahl and Feeling' (in PN, 110-118) and 'Jean Wahl. Neither Having nor Being' (in OS, 67-83).

14 In TA and TI, Levinas solves the problem of 'the preservation of the ego in transcendence' in terms of fecundity. Fecundity introduces a multiplicity and a transcendence *in* existence. The I is not swept away in transcendence, since the son is not me; and yet I *am* my son. If the I were swept away, it would fail to transcend itself. The fecundity of the I is its very transcendence. By a total transcendence, the transcen-

The latter, instead of going up and away, is suggestive of a downward or backward movement – a trans-descendence. For Levinas, this movement of descent into the underground of the I spells the ethical redefinition of the self. In other words, the ascending intentionality of feeling; the direct and intense contact with the Other, is linked with a descending movement into the subject itself. Insofar as the 'blind, bare contact' with the Other is a primordial feeling – a 'jolt, a shiver, a spasm' (PN, 114/169) – this contact likewise brings about a fundamental change in the subject itself. Before exploring this descendent movement further, let us take a closer look at transascendence.

Transascendence, the Face and the Idea of Infinity

The trans-acsendent movement, then, sets the subject on the upward path to God, starting from the face of the other person that addresses me and imposes the responsibility I bear towards others. How does the other person succeed in affecting me in this way? According to Levinas, the encounter with the other person coincides with the 'epiphany of the face', i.e. the face consists in a manifestation of God. In order to 'embody' an expression of this nature and magnitude, the face clearly cannot be reduced to a person's facial expression. Instead, the face is 'invisible' – irreducible to a person's appearance or representation (TI, 194/168). Precisely because the other defies all fixating representations, it can show itself – 'express' itself beyond what is seen or understood. This expression is a confrontation, because it interrupts our reductive perception and representation of the other (cf. CPP, 20-21).

   The other is capable of affecting me in such a fundamental way, because his/her expression consists in putting the *idea of infinity* in me, a finite being (cf. E&I, 91-92 / 96-97). The idea of infinity, writes Levinas, 'designates a height and a nobility, a transascendence'… it 'designates a relation with a reality infinitely distant from my own reality' (TI, 41/11-12). In other words, this move upward towards goodness (ultimately God) does not emanate from within the separated being. This trans-ascendent move is driven by exteriority (TI, 61/33).

   The other's appeal therefore arouses in me the idea of God, or the divine. It concerns an idea that has 'penetrated' or been put into me by means of the epiphany of the face, which means that it radically precedes me as origin or initiative. The epiphany 'inflicts' a radical passivity that paralyses my egotistical preoccupations, and paradoxically enables me to take on my altruistic duty (DVI, 64/106).

   The 'taking on' of my altruistic duty is not to be equated with taking initiative. Radical passivity effectively means paralysis that enables ethical action. This action is not the subject's 'doing' but the result of the Other's enabling intervention. The subject of freedom, power and agency no longer exists. This is the subject of egocentric self-absorption and irresponsibility. Face-to-face with the Other, the existent and its immanent preoccupations are made meaningful by virtue of a judgement that arrests its egotistical orientations, pardons it and turns it to goodness, i.e. towards its infinite responsibility. Something happens to the subject in face of the Other – an ethical re-definition to be understood as a downward or backward movement, a descent to the underground of the 'I' itself. This brings us to trans-descendence.

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dence of trans-substantiation, the I is in the child, an other. Paternity remains a self-identification, but also a distinction within identification – a structure unforeseeable in formal logic (TI, 277/254).

Transdescendence and the Dissolution of the Self

Apart from the upward movement of desire for the Other, the subject is also driven inward towards its interiority. It thus triggers 'contraction and interiorisation'. Two contradictory dynamics are united in their tension in feeling. This primordial feeling, then, is a dynamism of immanence *par excellence*, thanks to transcendence or the contact with the Other. Paradoxically, this means 'to transcend transcendence towards immanence' (PN, 115-116/171-172). It is only to the extent that subjectivity transcends itself towards the other than itself, that it is subjectivity (OS, 76/112). To overcome oneself, one's very underground has to be redefined.

This feeling is not that of 'affective warmth', but 'something savage, dense, opaque, dark, 'blind, bare contact… with the Other' (PN, 114/170, 116/172). 'To revert to oneself', writes Levinas in AE, 'is not to establish oneself at home… It is to be like a stranger, hunted down even in one's home, contested in one's own identity and one's very poverty… It is always to empty oneself anew of oneself… like a hemophiliac's hemorrhage. It is to be on the hither side of one's own nuclear unity' (AE, 92/117).[15] Levinas also refers to an 'expulsion' – the subject is expelled, 'without fatherland, already sent back to myself, but without being able to stay there'. This is to be understood as 'an upsurge in me of a responsibility prior to commitment' (AE, 103/130). This commitment is not a conscious pledge, but a passivity of 'an attachment that *has already been made*, as something irreversibly past, prior to all memory and recall' (AE, 104/131, my emphasis). This is 'the passivity of a trauma… a deafening trauma… the passivity of being persecuted.' Subjectivity comes to itself, traumatically suffers itself because subjectivity is precisely '*the other in the same'* (AE, 111/141, DVI, 83/122). This foreign kernel nestled in the deepest depths of myself – that has always already been there – puts in question all affirmation for oneself (cf. AE, 104/132).

The immanence of the self is characterised by a transcendence that lies deeper than that immanence; or in Kantian terms, the autonomy of the subject is characterised by an irreducible heteronomy that goes deeper than the subject and that is *always already* present and active therein. The idea of Infinity – as something put into the subject that was not there before – therefore leads us to discover in the deepest recesses of ourselves something that has *always already* been there – the other in the same (DVI, 65/106).

How can something that is introduced from the outside by the epiphany of the face also and at the same time, always already be in the deepest interior depths of the self? Following Wahl, Levinas insists upon the ambiguity of transcendence: trans*de*scendence opens up the perspective of trans*a*scendence, and vice versa. The '*au-delà'* (beyond) is at the same time an '*en deça'* (hither side), in the sense that it simultaneously displays a double dynamism of ascending and descending: an unthinkable interchange of high and low indifferent to hierarchy (OS, 81/119). It is precisely this ambiguity that guarantees the utter incomprehensibility of transcendence as that which is both 'supra-human' and 'infra-human'.

Although never explicitly stated, AE provides ample evidence of the influence of Wahl's idea of trans-descendence on Levinas's thinking. It is here that Levinas fully

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15 In AE (114/145), Levinas also refers to 'recurrence' as 'the contracting of the ego', which 'retreats to the hither side of its point of departure', 'gnawing away at this very identity – identity gnawing away at itself – in remorse'.

develops 'this awakening of the *Same* by the *Other*' as a deafening trauma. It is also here that he explains in repetitive waves of enigmatic verse the 'non-synchronizable diachrony' (AE, 93/118).[16] I cannot evade this encounter, because it is anachronistic – the debt precedes the loan, the responsibility precedes the guilt (AE, 112/143). Something is put in us that was not there before, *while* forcing us to discover in the depths of the self; something that precisely has always already been there. It is *an-archical.* Anarchy does not mean disorder as opposed to order. Anarchy troubles being over and beyond these alternatives. Anarchy is persecution. Obsession as persecution designates an inverted consciousness. This inversion of consciousness is 'a passivity beneath all passivity' (AE, 101/127).

Herewith we are brought back to our initial description of radical passivity, as the subject being passive with regard to *itself,* submitting to itself as though it were an external force. In this sense, ethical agency in Levinas does not follow from a free rational decision, but from an inner force that incapacitates freedom understood as involuntarily egotistical. In Levinas, then, subjectivity becomes the 'temple or the theatre of transcendence' (DVI, 76/120) but only at the expense of the very arbitrary freedom that constitutes the ambivalent possibility of truth and error – the freedom that makes us human.

4. Conclusion: Ethics as a Liberation from Freedom?

At first sight, then, Levinas's conception of ethical subjectivity as 'the other in the same' (AE, 25/32, 111/142) seems to resemble Kant's understanding of a free will. However, as we have seen, Levinas caricaturises pre-ethical freedom as uneducable or irreconcilable with necessity. Moral virtue, for Levinas, suggests not a struggle with, but an incapacitation of pre-ethical freedom. For him, 'the autonomy of our subjective freedom' is ethically irrelevant (Dialogue, 27). Freedom does not precede but derives from heteronomous responsibility.[17] 'Real' freedom, for Levinas, is a liberation from that pre-ethical egoist freedom that cannot but lead me astray.

Certain critical suspicions remain, however. To what extent, for example, does disrupted agency suggest something other than an ability that follows from the inability to follow a different course of action? Does not radical passivity derive its *potentia* or moral force from Levinas's insistence upon an initial non-free freedom, or unfreedom, understood as the existent's involuntary egocentrism? We shall have to assess whether radical passivity in Levinas's scheme is premised on an understanding of freedom as irreconcilable with necessity, whether any moral significance can be attributed to radical passivity, if it does not coincide with at least a minimum of radical freedom, instead of merely incapacitating it. So far Levinas's thinking left us with two equally undesirable alternatives: either you choose for the self and freedom, which necessarily amounts to an absolutised egoism in Levinas's scheme of things, or you choose for the other – a crushing altruism in which all duties towards the self must necessarily be forsaken.

On the other hand, one might ask oneself whether Levinas has not perhaps found the only viable way of thinking ethical agency in a largely indifferent Western world. In today's narcissistic and anomic world, even brothers desert each other. 'The sober,

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16 Also cf. AE (122/157): 'There is diachrony: an unabridgeable difference between the Good and me, without simultaneity, odd terms'.

17 In this regard, Levinas enigmatically writes: "if no one is good voluntarily, no one is enslaved to the Good" (AE, 11/13).

Cain-like coldness consists in reflecting on responsibility from the standpoint of freedom or according to a contract' (DVI, 71/115). Why does the other concern me, asks Levinas. For him, this question is only relevant and meaningful '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 'pre-history' of the ego posited for itself speaks a responsibility. The self is through and through a hostage, older than the ego, prior to principles. What is at stake for the self, in its being, is not to be. Beyond egoism and altruism it is the religiosity of the self' (AE, 117/149).

   Levinas is convinced that communication or openness towards the other would be impossible 'if it should have begun in the ego, a free subject, to whom every other would be only a limitation that invites war, domination, precaution and information' (AE, 119/151). For him, 'the condition for, or the unconditionality of, the self does not begin in the auto-affection of a sovereign ego that would be, after the event "compassionate" for another'. On the contrary, the responsible ego is only possible in being obsessed by another, in the trauma suffered prior to any auto-identification, in an unrepresentable *before*'. For Levinas, 'the violence of non-freedom' is redeemed by the Good (AE, 123/158-159) – a sacrifice of freedom for the sake of responsibility, for the little goodness there is in the world, 'even the simple "After you, sir"' (117/149).

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