

The Problem with Levinas

Simon Critchley, Alexis Dianda

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Front Matter

Title Page

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Preface—All that Fall

In the "emancipated" man of modern society, this fracturing reveals that his formidable crack goes right to the very depths of his being. It is a self-punishing neurosis, with hysterical/hypochondriacal symptoms of its functional inhibitions, psychasthenic forms of its derealization of other people and of the world, and its social consequences of failure and crime. It is this touching victim, this innocent escapee who has thrown off the shackles that condemn modern man to the most formidable social hell, whom we take in when he comes to us; it is this being of nothingness for whom, in our daily task, we clear anew the path to his meaning in a discreet fraternity—a fraternity to which we never measure up.

Lacan, "Aggressivity in Psychoanalysis"

The occasion for this book was a fall. Literally. A bump in the middle of the night. Staying in an unfamiliar house on the first night of a short vacation one June a couple of years back, while looking for the bathroom in pitch-blackness at 4:15 a.m., I fell down twenty steps into a basement and suffered a four-part fracture to my proximal humerus. Needless to say, this wasn't very humorous. I will spare you the gory details, which even involved cadaver bone being used surgically to reconstruct my joint (I am part corpse), but it meant that I spent the entire summer, about three months, unable to write or do much else.

During the spring semester, I'd been teaching Emmanuel Levinas' work for the first time in many years and it slowly began to dawn on me that I had something new that I wanted to say. For the first time, I began to see clearly the problem that Levinas' work was trying to pose, and I also began to see my problem with his answer. I first tried to articulate this line of thought in a long, final lecture of my course at The New School and again during a series of seminars at the European Graduate School in the very first days of June. My plan was to spend the summer writing out my ideas, but then I fell, lived on a diet of painkillers, and had to restrict myself to making mental notes. Handwriting was impossible (it was the shoulder of my writing arm) and typing was one-handed and impossibly slow. I just began to store up more and more material in my head. It was really quite an odd experience.

In the last days of July, I was meant to teach a summer school course at Tilburg, in the Netherlands. I didn't want to go but I had to. I needed the money. To tell the

truth, I was still in pretty bad shape. I decided to take a risk, abandon my previous teaching plan, and try and lay out my new thoughts about Levinas surrounded by lots of books, notes, and scraps of paper but without any script. Two lectures became three and eventually four, and I'd like to thank the students for their patience, their attentiveness, and their questions. Thanks to Ivana Ivkovic, the lectures were recorded. Alexis Dianda very kindly offered to transcribe the lectures and then edited them expertly. This book is hers as much as it is mine. Once the transcription was made and the frame and form of the argument became explicit, I rewrote the text, but it still retains the oral style of its original delivery, even if this is a fiction, a conceit. The rewriting of the book was also highly influenced by a class I taught at The New School on mysticism, and I'd like to thank the enthused students and my co-teacher and friend, Eugene Thacker. Finally, I'd like to thank Peter Momtchiloff for agreeing to publish this book with Oxford University Press and my anonymous readers for their criticisms and suggestions.

I will leave it to the reader to judge the wisdom of this enterprise. All I can say in my defence is that having read and thought about Levinas obsessively for the past thirty-odd years, I found that the apparently improvised and "live" form of the lectures enabled me to express a significant number of things that I have long wanted to say about his work and some rather new things that sometimes surprised me. My inquiry into Levinas was based around five questions, as clear as they were vague. They are the following:

1. What method might we follow in reading Levinas?
2. What is Levinas' fundamental problem?
3. What is the shape of that problem in Levinas' early writings?
4. What is Levinas' answer to that problem?
5. Is Levinas' answer the best answer or might there be other answers?

*

So, was it a happy fall, a *felix culpa* with a second Adam atoning for the sins of the first? Hardly, and for reasons we don't need to go into. But there was something more in this fracturing of the body than a straightforward accident, an orthopaedic trauma requiring a surgical solution. As Lacan says, the fracture reveals a crack: the self-punishing character of the modern, "emancipated" individual and their desperate need to escape the social hell of their surroundings. This "being of nothingness" certainly described my condition. Perhaps it also describes Levinas'. Despite the criticisms of Levinas—which are, of course, attempts at self-criticism—to which I am led in these lectures, I have tried to approach his writing and thinking in a spirit of "discreet fraternity," a fraternity to which I know I will never measure up.

Abbreviations of Levinas' Works

ED	"Essence and Disinterestedness." In Basic Philosophical Writings. Trans. and ed. Adriaan T. Peperzak, Simon Critchley, and Robert Bernasconi. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996, pp. 109–27.
EE	Existence and Existents. Trans. Robert Bernasconi. Norwell, MA: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1988.
EP	"Enigma and Phenomenon." In Basic Philosophical Writings. Trans. and ed. Adriaan T. Peperzak, Simon Critchley, and Robert Bernasconi. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996, pp. 65–77.
IOF	"Is Ontology Fundamental." In Basic Philosophical Writings. Trans. and ed. Adriaan T. Peperzak, Simon Critchley, and Robert Bernasconi. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996, pp. 1–10.
OE	On Escape. Trans. Bettina Bergo. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003.
OTB	Otherwise than Being, Or Beyond Essence. Trans. Alphonso Lingis. Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1998.
RPH	"Reflections on the Philosophy of Hitlerism." Trans. Seán Hand. Critical Inquiry 17:1 (Autumn 1990), pp. 62–71.
SUB	"Substitution." In Basic Philosophical Writings. Trans. and ed. Adriaan T. Peperzak, Simon Critchley, and Robert Bernasconi. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996, pp. 79–95.
TH	"Transcendence and Height." In Basic Philosophical Writings. Trans. and ed. Adriaan T. Peperzak, Simon Critchley, and Robert Bernasconi. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996, pp. 11–31.
TI	Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority. Trans. Alphonso Lingis. Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1973.
TIH	The Theory of Intuition in Husserl's Phenomenology. Trans. A. Orianne. Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973.
US	"The Understanding of

Lecture One

Hegel or Levinas?

I want to begin by placing these thoughts under the sign of a problem highlighted in the final lines of Derrida's "Violence and Metaphysics" and once again in that essay's final footnote. When "Violence and Metaphysics"—effectively a monograph on Levinas—was first published in 1964, both Levinas and Derrida were pretty obscure figures. Derrida was in his early thirties and already writing with an astonishing level of analytical and critical brilliance. The essay was published in revised format in 1967 in *Writing and Difference*, and it ends with the following remark:

Are we Greeks? Are we Jews? But who, we? Are we (not a chronological, but a pre-logical question) first Jews or first Greeks? And does the strange dialogue between the Jew and the Greek, peace itself, have the form of the absolute, speculative logic of Hegel, the living logic which reconciles formal tautology and empirical heterology after having thought prophetic discourse in the preface to the *Phenomenology of Mind*? Or, on the contrary, does this peace have the form of infinite separation and of the unthinkable, unsayable transcendence of the other? To what horizon of peace does the language which asks this question belong? From whence does it draw the energy of its question? Can it account for the historical coupling of Judaism and Hellenism? And what is the legitimacy, what is the meaning of the copula in this proposition from perhaps the most Hegelian of modern novelists: "Jewgreek is greekjew. Extremes meet"?¹

The first thing to note is that this passage summarizes the entire reading strategy of "Violence and Metaphysics," which can be understood as asking a very simple question: Hegel or Levinas? Is difference always referable to a notion of identity, even if this is the identity of identity and non-identity (this is what Derrida means by reconciling "formal tautology and empirical heterology"), or can there be a thought of difference or an experience of difference that falls outside of Hegel's speculative logic? The argument of "Violence and Metaphysics" is, very crudely, that in criticizing the notion of totality, Levinas thinks he's stepped beyond Hegel. The notion of totality is identical to the notion of philosophy—it's an idea Levinas borrows from Franz Rosenzweig. In *The Star of Redemption*, Rosenzweig argues that philosophy, from Ionia to Jena, from Thales to

¹ Jacques Derrida, "Violence and Metaphysics," in *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1978), p. 152.

Hegel, is premised on the reduction of multiplicity to totality. Philosophy is based on the sameness of thinking and being that yields the conceivability of the All, of totality.

Levinas thinks he's stepping beyond Hegel with Rosenzweig, but Derrida shows that every attempt to step beyond Hegel falls back into the orbit of the Hegelian dialectic. That's the strategy. It's not that Levinas is wrong, but what he's trying to do cannot be done philosophically. To try and speak philosophically about an experience of otherness is to always collapse the other into the same, and thus for Hegel to have the last word. The attempt to give voice to difference, otherness as such, what's called "heterology" in "Violence and Metaphysics," is something that philosophy tries to name but that exceeds philosophy. The word Derrida uses to describe this in "Violence and Metaphysics" is "empiricism," the pure thought of absolute difference.

We can therefore summarize this extraordinarily long and wonderful essay with the question: is Hegel right or is Levinas right? "Jewgreek is greekjew? Extremes meet." Then we get the final footnote.

But Levinas does not care for Ulysses, nor for the ruses of this excessively Hegelian hero, this man of nostos and the closed circle, whose adventure is always summarized in its totality. Levinas often reproaches him. "To the myth of Ulysses returning to Ithaca, we would prefer to oppose the story of Abraham leaving his country forever for an as yet unknown land, and forbidding his servant to take back even his son to the point of departure" (*La trace de l'autre*).²

This is Levinas 101. Philosophy as ontology is always a return to the same, always Ulysses returning to Ithaca after ten years of wandering around the Mediterranean getting into all sorts of trouble, eventually returning home to find out whether or not his wife has been faithful. We oppose that to the story of Abraham, who leaves his country forever and goes into the desert, the story of exile and wandering. That's the Levinasian narrative. Then Derrida says,

The impossibility of the return doubtless was not overlooked by Heidegger: the original historicity of Being, the originality of difference, and irreducible wandering all forbid the return to Being itself which is nothing.³

First, the dispute is over the identification of Heidegger with the idea of return. That is indeed true: there is no nostalgia, no call to a return to the Greeks, or indeed Being itself. That's not Heidegger's thought, which is a more an Eckhartian itinerary of errancy and wandering in the desert. Oddly, Levinas here is in agreement with Heidegger. Derrida is obviously being méchant, as the French would say. Inversely, there is the thought that the theme of return is un-Hebraic, but that's also méchant. Obviously we could cite the Hebraic idea of Aliyah, which is usually understood as return, although the word literally means "ascent." Israel is founded on the idea of the right of return. Seen this way, Judaism is about return; Zionism is about return (although Levinas' more subtle understanding of Zionism is based on diaspora and

² Derrida, "Violence and Metaphysics," fn. 92.

³ Derrida, "Violence and Metaphysics," fn. 92.

exile and tied to the idea of responsibility). It's not as if there is a straightforward opposition between a Greek idea of return and a Jewish idea of exile. There can be, indeed there is, a Jewish idea of return and a Greek idea of exile. The ideas of Jew and Greek are themselves problematic; they're something Derrida just picks up and uses in order to frame his essay.

Philosophy and Sexual Difference

"Violence and Metaphysics" begins with a strange quotation from Matthew Arnold's *Culture and Anarchy*. Arnold says that our world moves between two forces: Hellenism and Hebraism. Whoever can understand this movement of forces will understand our culture. However, the culture being referred to here is England. That's right, England! That's Arnold's point. The problem with England is that it's too Hebraic. It's a culture of the letter, a culture of the book, a culture of conscience, and of duty. What England does not have is Hellenism; it does not have "sweetness and light," the Italian Renaissance, and French *pâté*. In order for there to be a proper balance in culture, English Hebraism needs to be balanced by Hellenism.

What Derrida is working with here is a highly questionable, nineteenth-century cultural archetype that he doesn't really reflect upon. He continues, and this is the part I want to focus on:

It is true that "Jewgreek is greekjew" is a neutral proposition, anonymous in the sense execrated by Levinas, inscribed in Lynch's headpiece "Language of no one," Levinas would say. Moreover, it is attributed to what is called "feminine logic": "Woman's reason. Jewgreek is greekjew." On this subject, let us note in passing that Totality and Infinity pushes the respect for dissymmetry so far that it seems to us impossible, essentially impossible, that it could have been written by a woman. Its philosophical subject is man (*vir.*). (Cf., for example, the *Phenomenology of Eros*, which occupies such an important place in the book's economy.) [A section of *Totality and Infinity* about which Derrida said earlier in the essay, he's not going to talk about—SC] Is not this principled impossibility for a book to have been written by a woman unique in the history of metaphysical writing?⁴

It's a very interesting thought, and this is partly what Irigaray will pick up on in her reading of Levinas. It's not that philosophical discourse is masculine, it's that philosophical discourse covers over masculinity under the guise of neutrality, under the guise of the concept. You know, when someone says, "It doesn't matter whether you're a man or a woman, philosophy is just a series of problems with a set of concepts. A good argument is a good argument irrespective of gender or biology." That's what we're talking about here.

⁴ Derrida, "Violence and Metaphysics," fn. 92.

Now, the fact that Levinas' text is marked as masculine is an innovation in "the history of metaphysical writing," as Derrida says in a very Heideggerian formulation. It's the strategy of metaphysics to disguise the fact of gender under the anonymity of the concept. The paradox of Levinas' work is that it has an explicit male signature. That's its radicality, as Irigaray will say. It's also a feature of his work that makes it hugely problematic. Levinas' text is a text marked by sexual difference or, as Derrida would more hyperbolically say, essentially marked by sexual difference. Sexual difference is a problem. Some would even say it is the problem. Irigaray, in the introduction to *An Ethics of Sexual Difference*, raises the question of sexual difference as the question of our time, the question we pass over in silence.

Sexual difference is one of the major philosophical issues, if not the issue of our age. According to Heidegger, each age has one issue to think through, and only one. Sexual difference is probably the issue in our time which could be our "salvation" if we thought it through. But, whether I turn to philosophy, to science, or to religion, I find this underlying issue still cries out in vain for our attention.⁵

It's a very Heideggerian moment. Heidegger will say at the beginning of *Being and Time* that the question of our time is the question of Being; and yet, not only do we not raise this question, we are not even perplexed by it—it's a question marked by silence. For Irigaray, the question of sexual difference is the question of our time, the question that "cries out in vain for our attention."

It's under the question of sexual difference that I want to think about Levinas' work. This is going to come back to the centre of Lecture Four, though there is a lot more we could say on the topic now. We could, for instance, dispute the reading of Ulysses contained in the final footnote to "Violence and Metaphysics." Joyce's Ulysses is not about νόστος (nostos), returning home or homecoming, but what we could in bad Greek call ἀνόστος (anostos), never returning or the absence of home. I think that one of the things that makes Joyce's Ulysses so compelling is that it's a book about the absence of home rule: the impossibility of home rule both as a central political concept in the context of Irish history in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and also about the impossibility of home rule in relationship to the οἶκος (oikos), the dwelling. If you recall, the Jewgreek and greekjew, Leopold Bloom and Stephen Dedalus, finally meet and go back to Bloom's house at the end of Ulysses. They both take a piss in the garden, their streams of piss intersect, and they depart without any reconciliation, Hegelian or otherwise. Upstairs is Molly Bloom, menstruating, sexually fantasizing, engaged in a completely other discourse, what Lacan would call another jouissance, a different experience of enjoyment. Ulysses is staging the impossibility of home rule. Stephen Dedalus says, "Home also I cannot go." Stephen Dedalus is someone who has already left home. Ulysses is the story of a son, Stephen, who has renounced a father and a father without a son, Rudy, the dead son of Leopold Bloom. It's a story of

⁵ Luce Irigaray, "Sexual Difference," in *An Ethics of Sexual Difference*, trans. Carolyn Burke and Gillian C. Gill, ed. Luce Irigaray (London: Continuum, 2005), p. 7.

the absence of home rule told in relationship to this experience of another enjoyment, Molly Bloom's endlessly wonderful exuberance.

Sexual difference is the sign under which I want to put this set of thoughts, and then see where it all goes. That's what I have here and, again, we'll see whether it works or not. I'm not sure whether it will. I've got the skeleton of something but there's no muscle or fat, there's just a pile of bones and many, many, small pieces of paper. Let's see what happens.

Why Philosophy? The Problem of Method

The first question I want to consider is, what method might we follow in reading Levinas? The argument of the Preface to *Totality and Infinity* is very interesting. Basically, what Levinas claims is that we live in a world of war. We live in a time of war, within a frame of war, and Levinas is against that war, which is both the war of all against all in the Hobbesian sense of the war in a state of nature and the actual war between states that fatally punctuated Levinas' life. Against war we can posit peace, and not just any peace but a messianic peace. Levinas writes,

Morality will oppose politics in history and will have gone beyond the functions of prudence or the canons of the beautiful to proclaim itself unconditional and universal when the eschatology of messianic peace will have come to superpose itself upon the ontology of war. (TI 22)

What on earth does that mean? Levinas calls Franz Rosenzweig's *The Star of Redemption* "a work too often present in this book to be cited" (TI 28). If you read *The Star of Redemption* alongside Levinas, then you will begin to get a sense of how important it is. What makes Levinas different from Rosenzweig is that Levinas wants messianic peace (a discourse that is prophetic in the Biblical sense), but his conviction in *Totality and Infinity* and throughout all of his work is that whatever messianic peace means, it has to be translated into philosophy, it must become philosophical.

We might open a parenthesis at this point—a huge parenthesis that in many ways covers the whole of Levinas' work—and ask the question, why does it have to be philosophical? Levinas never answers that question. You can make exactly the same argument and say that the history of the world is a history of war, totality, and brutality, and that philosophy is bound up with that (in Hegel, for instance), and that's why we need to leave philosophy behind. That's more or less Rosenzweig's strategy. It's also the strategy of another book written in the First World War, Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*. Philosophy can only meaningfully reduce itself to propositions of logic that are reducible to tautology or to the empirically verifiable propositions of science. The point of the *Tractatus* is to show that what can be made sense of is just not very interesting. What's actually important is something (ethics, aesthetics, religion) about which nothing philosophical could be said—at least in the early Wittgenstein.

But Levinas wants to insist on the translation of that thought into philosophy or, as he will say later on, to translate the Bible into Greek. Why? It's a question that haunts his entire work. Let's go with the thought. We need to translate the Bible into philosophy. What does philosophy mean? For Levinas, philosophy means phenomenology. What does phenomenology mean? Phenomenology, what Levinas takes from Husserl, means the application of the method of intentional analysis. What does intentional analysis mean? It means "the search for the concrete" (TI 28). That is, not the empirically concrete but the concrete understood as the structuring a priori principles under which both we and the world are constituted. Levinas writes,

Notions held under the direct gaze of the thought that defines them are nevertheless unbeknown to this naive thought, revealed to be implanted in horizons unsuspected by this thought; these horizons endow them with a meaning—such is the essential teaching of Husserl. (TI 28)

Intentional analysis is the movement from what appears to be the case (i.e., the empirical) to the a priori structures of the empirical that the latter presupposes. That's what the concrete is. To rephrase that in Heideggerian terms, our everyday experience of life in the world might well be as a subject or things with brains who oppose a world of objects, and that might be the way things appear in a naturalistic world view. Heidegger's point is that the concrete a priori structure of naturalism is what we are as Being-in-the-world. Intentional analysis is the attempt to look through the empirical to the a priori structure. These are what Heidegger called the "existentials."

Again, philosophy is identical with transcendental method, with the deduction from the empirical to its a priori structures. Why am I labouring that point? For the simple reason that that is the Levinas 101 story: Levinas has this intuition we can call, for want of a better word, a religious intuition, and it's the same intuition we could find in thinkers, like Rosenzweig, couched in the language of messianic eschatology. But Levinas wants to translate that intuition philosophically and believes phenomenology is the method that will allow him to do so. Therefore, *Totality and Infinity* is a phenomenology of the deep structures of experience, what he calls "experience in the fullest sense of the word" (TI 25).

Against Aristotle: The Meaning of Drama

We always have to look out for footnotes. They're very important and always symptoms of some deeper anxiety. The first footnote in *Totality and Infinity* that isn't merely a reference to some other work or a later section in the book is the following:

In broaching, at the end of this work, the study of relations which we situate beyond the face, we come upon events that cannot be described as noeses

aiming at noemata, nor as active interventions realizing projects, nor, of course, as physical forces discharged into masses. (TI 28 fn.⁽¹⁾)

This is really interesting. At the end of *Totality and Infinity*, in the section entitled "Beyond the Face" that we will turn to in Lecture Four, Levinas says that we stumble upon something that is neither reducible to "noeses aiming at noemata" nor the relationship between an intentional act and an intentional object, which is the basic correlational structure of Husserlian phenomenology; but neither is it reducible to the relationship between "active interventions realizing projects" (an allusion to Heidegger or Sartre) or "physical forces discharged into matters" (a reference to a naturalistic view of things). None of that's going to work. He continues, and this is important.

They are conjunctures in being for which perhaps the term "drama" would be most suitable, in the sense that Nietzsche would have liked to use it when, at the end of *The Case of Wagner*, he regrets that it has always been wrongly translated by action. But it is because of the resulting equivocation that we forego this term.

(TI 28 fn.⁽²⁾)

Where did Nietzsche come from? Remember that it's 1961 and as Levinas is writing these words, the Eichmann trial is unravelling and Wagner is banned in Israel and isn't really on anybody else's playlist. It's a surprising allusion to say the least. Returning to the text interrupted by the footnote, Levinas claims that what he's trying to describe in *Totality and Infinity* is not explicable in terms of the Heideggerian concept of truth as disclosure (*Erschlossenheit*, as Heidegger will say). Disclosure, he says, is a "play of lights" (TI 27). He will also say, a little further down, that "No prior disclosure illuminates the production of these essentially nocturnal events" (TI 28). The Heideggerian idea of truth as disclosure is a "play of lights," bringing things to the light, bringing things into the *Lichtung*, the space of the clearing of Being, the lighting of Being.

What Levinas is trying to describe is something nocturnal, something bound up with the night, with sleep and the absence of sleep, with insomnia. The relation of the same to the other, Levinas says, it is not reducible to knowledge of the other and not even "to the revelation of the other to the same" (TI 28), which is a fundamentally different from disclosure. What Levinas is trying to describe is accessible neither through the language of disclosure nor that of revelation. Something is revealed but it is a study of conjectures in Being, namely, it is still ontological. We will come back to that. It is something that is best described by the word "drama."

What exactly does Nietzsche say? If you go to *The Case of Wagner*, this is what you will find:

⁽¹⁾ Derrida, "Violence and Metaphysics," fn. 92.

⁽²⁾ Derrida, "Violence and Metaphysics," fn. 92.

It has been a real misfortune for aesthetics that the word drama has always been translated as action [Handlung]. It is not Wagner alone who errs at this point. The error is world-wide and extends even to the philologists who often know better. Ancient drama aimed at scenes of great pathos—it precluded action (moving it before the beginning or behind the scene). The word drama is of Doric origin, and according to Doric usage it means "event," "story"—both words in the hieratic sense. The most ancient drama represented the legend of the place, the "holy story" on which the foundation of the cult rested (not a doing but a happening: dran in Doric actually does not mean "do").⁶

Nietzsche was, of course, a philologist, a good one—but he was also a self-consciously bad one at times. He knew when he was making mistakes. Socrates helped Euripides write his plays! He knew that was crazy. Drama is normally understood as action. As Aristotle said in the *Poetics*, tragedy is μίμησις πράξεως (mimesis praxeôs), the imitation of action. If Aristotle said it, it must be true, right? Everyone loves Aristotle; such a relief after Plato. Imitation of action, it makes perfect sense. But Nietzsche thinks this is a huge mistake. The idea that drama or tragedy is an action is an error. Drama (δρᾶμα, drâma), the Doric not the Attic word, is not πράξις (prâxis). Rather, δρᾶμα means event or story, which is related to ἱερός (hieros), which means priestly or sacred. Drama is the representation of a holy story. It's perfectly obvious what Nietzsche is saying here. If tragedy were about action, then there would be action in tragedy, right? The problem is there isn't action. In drama there's inaction. The action happens elsewhere, offstage. You never see the action in tragedy, only the inaction onstage. So, what does Aristotle mean when he says that tragedy is μίμησις πράξεως? Tragedy should be μίμησις ἀπράξεως (mimêsis apraxeôs), imitation of inaction. Drama is about an event or a story in relation to an action that is displaced. Oedipus puts out his eyes offstage. Agamemnon, Cassandra, and Clytaemnestra are murdered offstage. An exception is Ajax, who kills himself with his sword onstage, but in tragedy we don't get to see most of the nasty stuff.

Returning to Levinas' footnote, the thought here (and it's just a thought) is that in "Beyond the Face," and maybe elsewhere too, Levinas is trying to write a drama, a holy story. I don't mean that as a judgement or critique. My thought is to try and approach Levinas' work as a drama and see what might show up. It may be more "disclosive" (to use a bad word) than approaching Levinas' work as philosophy or phenomenology.

Moral Ambiguity

Although it is only now becoming better known, Levinas had serious and persistent literary ambitions. In the 1920s, he wrote a significant number of poems in Russian. During his captivity in Germany for five long years, 1940–5, Levinas expressed the

⁶ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Case of Wagner*, in *The Birth of Tragedy and The Case of Wagner*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (Toronto: Random House, 1997), p. 174.

desire to write two novels called *Triste opulence* and *Irréalité et amour*. Fascinatingly, the third volume of Levinas' *Oeuvres complètes* was published in French in 2013 and includes his literary sketches, drafts, and five sets of notes on eros. They are absolutely compelling.⁷ There are two truncated drafts of stories, possibly the beginnings of a novel, one called *Eros* and the other *La Dame de chez Wepler*. Although the precise dating of these texts is hard to determine, it would appear that Levinas was still working on drafts until 1961, the same time as he was finishing *Totality and Infinity*. Both texts deal with the memory of the collapse of France after the German occupation in 1940, where this ruination of the nation is experienced by the narrator of the stories as an awakening of eros in a situation where suddenly, as Dostoevsky said (and Levinas cites him), "everything is permitted." The pulling down of the drapery of the state and the sudden exhilaration of both the absence of authority and the presence of barbarism seems to awaken a complex sexual (avowedly heterosexual) desire in Levinas. It is difficult to describe these literary texts as successful, and it is hard for us to read them other than symptomatically, but they show that Levinas' literary ambition never left him and he conceived of his own activity in intensely dramatic terms.

I'm suggesting here that we think of Levinas' work not as philosophy in the usual sense, but as drama. In a book on philosophy and tragedy that I've been failing to finish for years, I develop the view that the core of tragedy is the experience of moral ambiguity, where justice is on both sides and one is swayed one way and then the other. The lesson of tragedy, the truth of what Plato would see as its lie, consists in the ability to bear moral ambiguity. This means that justice is not one but is at least two, and the experience of tragedy is watching one conception of justice turn into its opposite and then turn inside out. Justice is conflict.

What we have in the 31 extant Greek tragedies—though thankfully most don't correspond to any simple model of tragedy—is an experience of ambiguity. The most classical examples of this would be the *Oresteia* and the *Antigone*. In the *Antigone*, for example, there is an *ἄγων* (*agôn*), a conflict, around the meaning of the term *νόμος* (*nomos*), the law. Is law something that human beings organize and administer, as Creon will claim, or is law something that the gods decree, as Antigone will claim? The drama is a staging of conflict that—and here I would both agree and argue with Hegel—does not aim towards the victory of either side but is the dramatization of the collision between those two claims. Drama is the enactment, the literal enactment, of ambiguity, of moral ambiguity. And here's a separate but hugely important claim for me: this is why Plato/Socrates in books 2 and 3, and once again (and why once again?) in book 10, of the *Republic* has to shut drama down, kick Homer and the tragic poets out of the philosophically well-regulated city. The tragic poets, through the illusory, theatrical depiction of extreme states of rage, grief, and lamentation, introduce an

⁷ Emmanuel Levinas, *Eros, littérature et philosophie*, vol. 3 of *Oeuvres complètes* (Paris: Grasset et Fasquelle, 2013). Of particular note is the preface to this volume by Jean-Luc Nancy, where he explicitly describes Levinas' work as a drama (pp. 13, 27).

ambiguity into the soul, they lead spectators to be in contradiction with themselves in a way that philosophy has to master. Philosophy is an activity of self-mastery that requires the extensive regulation of affects like grief and laughter.

I want to reverse those Platonic arguments and to see drama (I'm using the term in the way Nietzsche and Levinas are using it) as a challenge to philosophy, as another way of thinking about philosophy. I think the problems we suffer in philosophy are problems due, at least in part, to an inadequate understanding of drama. If you see Levinas as a dramatist—a reading Levinas himself here justifies by offering it and then snatching it back—it opens up a very different reading of his work, one that I will try and develop in these lectures. Levinas claims he will understand the pages of "Beyond the Face" as drama, but because of "the resulting equivocation" he will forgo the term. We will not forgo that term. We will follow through on Levinas' own covert understanding of what he is up to. The thought I'm trying to announce here is that if you think about philosophy as drama, and in particular a drama that is concerned with the staging of the question of eros, as Levinas says here, then it might get us somewhere interesting. When we get to the Song of Songs in Lecture Four, it is clear that this extraordinary text is a drama about eros. It's a staging of the erotic.

Let's look to the appearance of the word "drama" at the beginning of *Otherwise than Being*.

Being's interest takes dramatic form in egoisms struggling with one another, each against all, in the multiplicity of allergic egoisms which are at war with one another and are thus together. War is the deed or the drama of the essence's interest. (OTB 4; my emphasis)

You could find a thousand examples like this. What Levinas is describing is a kind of Hobbesian theatre of death, which is the drama of the state of nature, the war of all against all. It's like the Jacobean machine plays of Webster, who saw the skull beneath the skin. That is a place where drama pops up in Levinas: the drama of politics. Often drama will appear in Levinas in relation to Plato, and here's another quotation: "From the irony of essence probably come comedy, tragedy and the eschatological consolations which mark the spiritual history of the West" (OTB 176). Here's another reference to drama in "Enigma and Phenomenon": "Does not the invisibility of God belong to another game, to an approach which does not polarize into a subject-object correlation but is deployed as a drama with several personages?" (EP 67) Is not the relationship to the divine to be understood dramatically? A divine comedy? This is something that comes up repeatedly. Drama can describe the drama of the war of all against all, the drama of the relationship to the divine; it can pop up all over the place. Once you begin looking for the word "drama" in Levinas' work, you find it everywhere.

The Seduction of Facticity

This is the suggestion: a new method of reading Levinas that understands him theatrically, as a dramatist. The nice thing about that is that if you read Levinas as a dramatist, then all of those analytic anxieties about argument, rigour, and those tedious phenomenological niceties about whether or not this is this really Husserlian enough just slip away. You think, "Ah, great, it's drama, it's ambiguous. Hurrah!" That's way too cheap. I know, and I don't mean it like that. But drama, I think, is a method, and Levinas intends it in reference to Nietzsche as a kind of holy story of the conjunctures in being. But let's look at something much more specific that will take us directly into our second question: what is Levinas' fundamental problem? The notion of drama gives us a clue to what I see as the driving problematic of Levinas' work, a problematic that is also often described in dramatic terms as comedy but more often as tragedy. The dramatic problem of Levinas is, in a word (and I'll make good on this), what looks like a comedy ends up being a tragedy. That's Levinas' reading of Heidegger in a nutshell, and this is the point where we have to begin to approach our good old friend Martin, or, as we say in New York, Martini Heidegger—the question of being shaken, but not stirred.

The text I want to begin with here is "Is Ontology Fundamental?." It's a very important text. It's the first text where Levinas introduces the idea of the ethical, which is introduced not as the substantive noun "ethics" but as the adjectival "ethical." Levinas' claim in "Is Ontology Fundamental?" is—to make this clearer if you don't know this text well—that any comprehensive relationship to beings or to things is an ontological relationship. Any relationship to any thing that is a relationship of understanding is ontological. Are all relations to things relations of comprehension? If, for example, I say "Coke Zero" and I lay that concept under an intuition of a Coke Zero bottle, then I have grasped it as an ontological relation. Are all of my relationships to things in the world like my relationship to my Coke Zero bottle? The philosopher always chooses medium-sized dry goods as examples. Such is the poverty of philosophy. But there is one thing, one example of a relation that is not reducible to comprehension, and this is what Levinas calls the relation to Autrui, the Other, which is described with the adjective ethical. The relationship to the other person is not reducible to comprehension. That is Levinas' apparently descriptive phenomenological claim. That relation to the Other, irreducible to comprehension, is described with a number of terms in "Is Ontology Fundamental?." He describes it as a relation of prayer, for which we can use the term "religion." He also says—and this is where the adjective is introduced—he says, "we accept the ethical resonance of that word and all its Kantian echoes" (IOF 8).

"Is Ontology Fundamental?" was published in 1951. In the previous few years Levinas is writing very little. He writes a few things about his experience of captivity after he gets back from the war, but none of it gets published because nobody really cared. *De l'existence à l'existant*, which had been written in captivity during the war, was

published in 1947 by Georges Blin in Editions de la Revue Fontaine after being refused by the much more prestigious Gallimard. In contradistinction to the intellectual context of the Libération in France, dominated by the existentialism of Sartre and Camus, the book was published with a red banner around it with the words "où il ne s'agit pas d'angoisse" (where it is not a question of anxiety). Then he gives these lectures at the Collège Philosophique of Jean Wahl in 1946–7, I think, published as *Time and the Other* in 1948, and then he goes quiet. During these years Levinas is engaged in a period of intense Talmudic study with his rabbi, the enigmatic Monsieur Chouchani, Levinas' live-in teacher of Talmud. Levinas, remember, was an administrator in a Jewish high school in Paris. The family had the use of an apartment on top of the school, and the rabbi moves in. It must have been cozy. Apparently, Chouchani was a very disorderly Uruguayan, who also happened to be a genius. Levinas isn't writing much philosophy in those years.

In 1951, with "Is Ontology Fundamental?," we begin to get the full articulation of the break with Heidegger and the first announcement of ethics. But, importantly, ethics is not a substantive term; there's not an ethics in Levinas. Ethical is a term used to describe a relation to another, a relation that cannot be reduced to comprehension. That's the thought, and that's really all he says in this paper. Levinasian ethics is adjectival, not substantive.

Let me back up a bit into the essay because we need to work out Levinas' philosophical background more carefully. Why was Heidegger so seductive? Why was Heidegger such a powerful figure for Levinas? For Levinas, the basic advantage of Heidegger's ontology over Husserl's phenomenology is that it begins from an analysis of the situation of the human being in everyday life, what Heidegger, after Wilhelm Dilthey, calls "facticity." Facticity is the key concept that Levinas takes from Heidegger. It should be in flashing lights: facticity. To talk transcendental for a moment—and why not, it's Monday afternoon—what is the condition of possibility for the Heideggerian project? The condition of possibility for the Heideggerian project, which is a project into the meaning of Being, is that there is an understanding of Being. We couldn't ask for the meaning of something without an understanding of it. The condition of possibility of the Heideggerian project is what Heidegger calls *Seinsverständnis*, the understanding of Being, which is vague and average but, as Heidegger says, can be phenomenologically clarified. That's the work of *Sein und Zeit*, to clarify phenomenologically that vague and average understanding of Being. Heidegger doesn't get there. He doesn't even get 20 percent of the way there. As he says, *Sein und Zeit* is a fragment. That's the thought.

Who cares about ontology? Who cares about metaphysics? Levinas does. It matters because, for Heidegger, the investigation into the meaning of Being does not presuppose a merely intellectual attitude but a rich variety of intentional life, emotional and practical as well as theoretical. What Heidegger does is not to raise anew the question of Being—any fool could do that. As a proper understanding of Heidegger would have to conclude, it's not really Heidegger's issue. What's important is the linking of what

he calls fundamental ontology to the rich variety of intentional life, practical as well as theoretical (although Heidegger refuses that distinction).

What Levinas fundamentally agrees with is Heidegger's critique of what Levinas calls "intellectualism" or what we might call "theoreticism." Ontology is not an intellectual issue, it's not something I intuit contemplatively in some sort of Aristotelian βίος θεωρητικός (bios theôrêtikos); it's a practical, finally embodied, affective process. The fundamental agreement between Levinas and Heidegger can be found in his critique of Husserl in his doctoral thesis from 1930, *The Theory of Intuition in Husserl's Phenomenology*, which was the first book published on Husserl in any language. If you read the conclusion to the doctoral thesis, what really jumps out is the Heideggerianism of Levinas' critique. Husserl's phenomenology is a right method of doing philosophy, Levinas suggests, but the problem is that it's intellectualist and anti-historical. There is no understanding of facticity and there's no understanding of historicity. Levinas takes that aspect of his thinking from Heidegger and it reappears in all his subsequent works. (Of course, this is a critique of Husserl that any Husserlian worthy of the name could refute in about thirty seconds with reference to *Ideas II* and the *Krisis* manuscripts).

At War with Oneself

Let's skip forward to *De l'Existence à l'Existent*. This title is badly translated as *Existence and Existents*. The title should be "From Existence to the Existent," from *Sein* to *Dasein*—that's what Levinas means here. If Heidegger's work moves from *Dasein* to *Sein*, from *Bewusstsein* (consciousness) to *Dasein* to *Sein*, then Levinas' work moves in exactly the opposite direction, from *Being* to *Dasein*, to the existent. This also means that we move from the ontological to the ontic. At the end of the introduction he makes a deep remark that people read way too quickly. He says,

If at the beginning our reflections are in large measure inspired by the philosophy of Martin Heidegger, where we find the concept of ontology and of the relationship which man sustains with Being, they are also governed by a profound need to leave the climate of that philosophy, and by the conviction that we cannot leave it for a philosophy that would be pre-Heideggerian. (EE 19; my emphasis)

What Levinas claims is that his work is dominated by the thought that we have to "leave the climate" of Heidegger's philosophy. What does the word "climate" mean? I like to link it, in a sense, to an ethos, which can be thought of as the climate or environment for thinking. Levinas' claim is that there is a profound need to leave the ethical climate of Heidegger's thinking, but we cannot leave it for one that would be pre-Heideggerian. What does that mean? It means that once we accept Heidegger's paradigm shift in philosophy, there's no turning back. What is that paradigm shift? That paradigm shift is a shift from an intellectualist or theoreticist philosophical discourse to one that is fundamentally founded on the idea of Being-in-the-world, and Being-in-the-world is something thrown and factual. There's no way back before Heidegger. It's important

to note that because if Levinas is at war with Heidegger, which he is on most pages of his work (particularly after the war, as it were), then he's at war with himself. He's at war with that part of Heidegger that is and continues to be convincing. That's what makes it interesting. Heidegger was a Nazi. Big deal. There were lots of Nazis. Who cares? There were Nazis and there were non-Nazis. It's not intrinsically important that Heidegger was a Nazi. It's only important if, like Levinas, you think that he was philosophically right. Levinas was completely persuaded by Heidegger's philosophy. Levinas was a Heideggerian.

Levinas finished the book on Husserl in 1930. It ends with a Heideggerian critique of Husserl and then he begins to write a book on Heidegger. He's halfway through the Heidegger book, it's all going very well, and then news comes from across the Rhine that Heidegger has joined the National Socialists (a political party with dark designs on people like Levinas) and has become Rector of Freiburg University. The drama of Levinas' relationship to Heidegger only has importance if you think Heidegger is right. If, like the people at *The New York Review of Books*, you think Heidegger is just some bullshit artist, then it's of no consequence at all. It's just fake liberal outrage. For Levinas, Heidegger was right. He was right because of this insight into facticity, which I will try to bring out more clearly.

Furthermore, I think there's also something deep here, in the sense in which I think that the correct philosophical attitude is to be at war with yourself. If you're not, you're either not being honest or you're not doing good work. If you know what you think, then it's just going to be boring. You have to begin from the idea that you don't know but you think, and that what you think is probably conflicted at some deep level. Writing is a way of staging that and maybe working it through. Derrida makes a nice remark—I don't cite Derrida enough these days—in his last interview with *Le Monde*. He says, "Je suis en guerre contre moi-même."⁸ When he gave the interview, he knew he was dying of pancreatic cancer and he's at war with the idea that philosophy can provide a consolation in the face of death. This is precisely the road Foucault travelled in those last couple of years. Dying of AIDS, he reads Seneca and we end up with a neo-Stoic discourse: philosophy is a way of life. Derrida would say, "That won't do, it's too easy." For Derrida, there's constant war. For Levinas, the relationship to Heidegger comes out as this crazy polemic: "He's a pagan, he's a Nazi." Yet, it's also self-directed. It has to be otherwise it would have no interest. When you lose your cool, when you start to rage at your mother, or your mother, or your mother, what comes out is not just directed at her. You're usually just spouting off against a mirror. It's you, but you usually don't see yourself. That's what it means to be at war with yourself. It's neurosis, it's fine; it keeps us alive.

⁸ Jacques Derrida, "Je suis en guerre contre moi-même [I'm at war with myself]," interview in *Le Monde*, 19 August 2004.

Heidegger's Comedy Turns Tragic

The essential contribution of Heideggerian ontology is the critique of intellectualism. Ontology is not, as it was for Aristotle, a contemplative theoretical endeavour. At the end of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, as we all know, philosophy can lead to the *bios theôrêtikos*, the contemplative life, the theoretical life. Ontology is, according to Heidegger, grounded in a fundamental ontology of the existential engagement of human beings in the world, which forms the "anthropological" preparation for the question of Being ("anthropological" is in quotes because that was always the accusation used against Heidegger by Husserl and others).

Levinas' version of phenomenology "seeks to consider life as it is lived" (TIH 155). This is the dream, and this is why he rejects Husserl's phenomenological reduction. He says that the phenomenological reduction is an "act in which we consider life in all of its concreteness but no longer live it" (TIH 155). The Levinasian fantasy, let's say, is a fantasy of philosophy as a consideration of life as we live it. That's what Heidegger seemed to offer to so many other people in that period: Hannah Arendt, Karl Löwith, Hans-Georg Gadamer, Herbert Marcuse, and all the rest of his students. The overall orientation of Levinas' early work might be summarized in the following sentence from the opening pages of his doctoral thesis: "the knowledge of Heidegger's starting point may allow us to understand better Husserl's endpoint" (TIH 155). I'm going to lay that out in more detail when we get to the material in the next lecture because to get that clear I'm going to have to go a little further into Being and Time. The thirty-second version would be that, for Heidegger, the human being's fundamental means of disclosure is *Stimmung* (mood or attunement), which discloses us as *Geworfen* (thrown). The idea of mood disclosing one as thrown is the idea of facticity. Facticity is that disclosure of oneself as stuck to oneself. Being is being riveted to oneself. That's the Heideggerian thought Levinas hears more than anything else.

Let's go into "Is Ontology Fundamental?" and then back to drama. The problem with Heidegger, which is really the problem for Levinas, is its dramatic quality. Specifically, how what appears to be comedy ends up being tragedy. At the beginning of "Is Ontology Fundamental?," in the section entitled "The Ambiguity of Contemporary Ontology," he says,

The identification of the comprehension of being with the plenitude of concrete existence risks drowning in existence. This philosophy of existence, which Heidegger for his part refuses, is only the counterpart, albeit inevitable, of his conception of ontology. (IOF 3)

This means that Levinas has already read and digested Heidegger's "Letter on Humanism" from 1946 that was published in 1949, where he criticizes the "philosophy of existence" or existentialism. Levinas continues,

The historical existence that interests the philosopher insofar as it is ontology is of interest to human beings and literature because it is dramatic. When philosophy and life are intermingled, we no longer know if we incline toward philosophy because

it is life or hold to life because it is philosophy. The essential contribution to the new ontology can be seen in its opposition to classical intellectualism. To comprehend the tool is not to look at it but to know how to handle it.

(IOF 3–4; my emphasis)

The fundamental relationship to things is not "Oh gosh, I'm a philosopher, and my thoughts correspond to objects in space." Rather, it's to pick up a cricket bat and beat the baby seal to death with it until the bat breaks and it becomes *vorhanden* rather than *zuhanden*, objectively extant and not just handy. Don't you just love my examples? The fundamental relationship to things is practical handling, not theoretical spectating. *Handeln* or action becomes handling. *Dasein* is a being with hands, that handles. To comprehend our situation in reality is not to define it epistemologically, but to find ourselves practically in an affective disposition or mood. To comprehend beings is to exist. All this indicates, it would seem, is a rupture with the theoreticist privilege of Western thought from Aristotle to Kant to Husserl. To think is no longer to contemplate but to commit oneself, to be engulfed by that which one thinks, to be involved, *Bewandtnis*. It's a term that people often pass over in their reading of *Being and Time*: involvement. It's the key concept to understanding what *Being-in-the-world* is. This is the dramatic event of *Being-in-the-world*.

We get the drama back with Heidegger. The advantage of contemporary ontology is that it takes us to the dramatic event of *Being-in-the-world*.

The comedy begins with the simplest of our movements, each of which carries with it an inevitable awkwardness. In putting out my hand to approach a chair, I have creased the sleeve of my jacket. I have scratched the floor, I have dropped the ash from my cigarette. In doing that which I wanted to do, I have done so many things I did not want. The act has not been pure, for I have left some traces. In wiping out these traces, I have left others. Sherlock Holmes will apply his science to this irreducible coarseness of each of my initiatives and thereby, the comedy may well turn tragic. (IOF 4)

Levinas is such a great phenomenologist in the early work. To all those who read Heidegger with Hubert Dreyfus and those crazy California kids, it's like Heidegger is some kind of comedy. "I learned to drive a car really well." "I'm an authentic expert at making omelettes." It's just so fatuous. Those endless, bloody baseball analogies. (Oh god! I've just used one). "It's as if *Being-in-the-world* is just awesome, man." "Whoa, isn't it great, *Being-in-the-world*!" "Yeah!" To which I would counter that everyone knows that *Being-in-the-world* is crap. All things are most definitely not shining. This is how the comedy turns tragic in Levinas' thought. He continues,

When the awkwardness of the act turns against the goal pursued, we're at the height of tragedy. Laius, in order to thwart the deadly predictions, will undertake precisely what is necessary for them to be fulfilled. In succeeding, Oedipus contributes to his own unhappiness like the prey that flees the noise of the hunter across a field covered in snow, thereby leaving the very traces that will be its ruin.

(IOF 4)

Isn't that a lovely image? That's the tragedy of Being-in-the-world. We are responsible beyond our intentions. It's impossible for the regard that directs the act to avoid the non-intended actions that come along with it. I've been walking around for the last five weeks with my arm in a damned sling and I keep knocking things over. I reach out for that thing and inadvertently I knock this thing over because everything is back to front. The paragraph I just quoted is my life. Things turn against us. It's a mess. That's to say our consciousness and our mastery of reality through consciousness does not exhaust our relation to reality, to which we're always present through all the density of our being. "Consciousness of reality does not coincide with our habituation in the world—it is here that Heidegger's philosophy has produced such a strong impression on the literary world" (IOF 4). Any examples come to mind? Anyone? [Student: "Sartre's The Wall."] The Wall, the short story that takes place during the Spanish Civil War. Pablo Ibbieta is caught and imprisoned, they try to extract information from him and he gives them a false story and off they go. He expects to get killed when they find out the story was false, but then it turns out that the story was true. Pablo laughs so hard that he cries. He's released from detention. That's maybe what Levinas means by "the literary world"—but it's kind of a put-down too, a slight. It's haughtiness. The ambiguity of contemporary ontology is that what looks like comedy becomes tragedy. That's the thought.

Levinas entirely accepts the Heideggerian critique of intellectualism. His thinking moves on the terrain of fundamental ontology. He then tries to move upon that terrain but in a different direction from Heidegger. You know how many times Levinas spoke about Heidegger in public in his lifetime? Twice. Once in 1940, shortly before the Germans invaded France and he was taken prisoner, in the seminar of Jean Wahl, and in 1987 at the time of the Heidegger Affair in Paris, when he was persuaded by Miguel Abensour to give a talk on Heidegger and politics. Of course, being Levinas, he refused to talk directly about the question and instead he focused on a particular passage of Being and Time where Heidegger says that to die for another person would simply be to sacrifice myself.⁹ The other's death is secondary to my own death, which is primary. So, the analysis of Being-towards-death in Heidegger is dominated by the idea of my own death. It's non-relational. Levinas says no, it's relational. That's the most significant disagreement with Heidegger, but it is a disagreement that is had on the terrain of Heidegger's philosophy.

The Theology of Clothes

I want to turn now to "Transcendence and Height." This paper from 1962 is particularly interesting because it lays out the theses of Totality and Infinity in a very

⁹ Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Mcquarrie and Edward Robinson (New York: Harper & Row, 1962), p. 284. See Levinas, "Dying For," in *Entre Nous*, trans. Michael B. Smith and Barbara Harshav (London: Continuum, 1998), pp. 179–88.

economical form with particular reference to epistemological questions, specifically, the relationship between idealism and realism. Picking up the question of drama and the passage we discussed about what appears to be comedy becoming tragedy, I want to jump into the text and see where that goes.

Instead of seizing the Other through comprehension and thereby assuming all the wars that this comprehension presupposes, prolongs, and concludes, the I loses its hold before the absolutely Other, before the human Other (Autrui), and, unjustified, can no longer be powerful [the French is "ne peut plus pouvoir," which can also be translated as "no longer able to be able"—SC]. It is not that the I becomes conscious of its nonjustification and the powerlessness of its power such that it, looking down on itself, already settles down in its good conscience, in its nonculpability, to take refuge in itself where there would remain a fragment of the world untouched by original sin. The event of putting into question is the shame of the I for its naïve spontaneity, for its sovereign coincidence with itself in the identification of the Same. This shame is movement in a direction opposed to that of consciousness, which returns triumphantly to itself and rests upon itself. To feel shame is to expel oneself from this rest and not simply to be conscious of this already glorious exile. The just person who knows himself to be just is no longer just [Le juste qui se connaît juste n'est plus juste]. The first condition of the first as of the last of the just is that their justice remains clandestine to them.

(TH 17)

Levinas is constantly playing on the idea of seizing, which is linked to the idea of grasping, greifen, Griff. The German verb greifen (to grasp) is cognate with begreifen (to conceptualize). Therefore, the Concept in Hegel's sense of der Begriff is an act of cognitive grasping or seizure. To conceptualize is to literally lay hold of something. That's the association Levinas is always making with his idea of ontology: comprehension is the motion of the hand, grabbing and seizing.

I focus on that paragraph because I want you to get a sense of what, in paper after paper, Levinas is continually opposing: the idea of the I or the self that coincides with itself, the ego that coincides with itself, $I = I$, the subject that posits itself in Fichte, the thinking thing that is certain that it exists in Descartes and is the same as its existence, or whatever formulation one might choose. What Levinas will call "idealism" is the self that coincides with itself and the world. For Levinas, what Heidegger decisively shows is the implausibility of any idealistic thesis. We're not beings that coincide with ourselves, we're not beings that constitute ourselves, we're beings that are divided against ourselves, and that's the importance of shame.

I will say a word about shame because it's a very important concept in Levinas, but also in general. I'm all about shame. Shame is an inversion of intentionality. It's a movement in a direction opposed to that of consciousness. Consciousness always goes like this: there's me in here with my thoughts and then there's the world over there. The question of epistemology is the question of how we link up mind with world—Good Lord, philosophers even write books called *Mind and World*, it's that easy. Levinas

says shame moves in the other direction: shame comes over us. Shame is the reversal of intentionality. To feel shame is to expel oneself from any rest, any complacency—a complacency that Levinas will describe politically and polemically (and we'll see this in Lecture Two) as "bourgeois." As people say in protest situations, "Shame on you!" Shame is something that is on you, coming from outside. Obviously this is the drama of the primal scene, the Garden of Eden where Adam and Eve do whatever they do and then experience themselves as they are seen from outside by Angel Gabriel, or whoever it is that pops up. They are seen and they experience shame. They experience shame in particular at their nudity. So, there they were naked—not nude, it's not as dirty—and they have sinned, and they experience shame. They have become naked and their bodies must become covered. This is the theology of clothing. Clothing is something we use to cover the shame that comes over us, befalls us. It's not that we were nude in paradise because, according to some Catholic theologians, we were wearing the garments of grace, we were clothed. In terms of the theology of clothing, which is a really, really interesting topic, this is why white is the baptismal colour. By wearing white you put back on your garments of grace. You throw off your animal skins and you put on your garments of grace.

Beyond the Tragedy of Finitude

Shame is something we experience from the outside. For Levinas, the point is that the idea of self-coincidence or consciousness as resting in oneself, the "I think, therefore I am," is sundered or opened up by the Heideggerian critique. We could run through that whole discussion in Levinas but I won't. There is just one thing I want to mention towards the bottom of the page.

Hence, to be I signifies not being able to escape responsibility. This surplus of being, this existential exaggeration that is called being me—this protrusion of ipseity into being is accomplished as a turgescence of responsibility. (TH 17)

Let's go back to our previous line of thought. Throughout this page and the next there's a counter-Sartrean argument about commitment and engagement. I'll briefly mention a difficulty with the translation here—and this is my own fault, after all I did co-translate the text, although I was younger and even more stupid back then. The word "engagement," which should simply be translated as "engagement" is translated as both "engagement" and "commitment." If you read page 18 of "Transcendence and Height," the word "engagement" appears five times (translated as both "engagement" and "commitment"). It's an important word. If, as in Sartre, we get the idea of free engagement, the engagement of freedom, then in Levinas we get an engagement that is engagement of responsibility prior to freedom. This is, for Levinas, morality and the resurgence of responsibility. He says, "To discover within the Same such a pulsation is to identify the I with morality" (TH 18). The moral subject, the ethical self, for Levinas, is a subject who is not at one with itself, not at rest, not at peace, who does

not experience well-being or authenticity. The ethical subject is a being who is engaged to a kind of perpetual dissatisfaction, an odd one though. Further up the page we get the following:

Such an engagement is happy; it is the austere and noncomplacent happiness that lies in the nobility of an election that does not know its own happiness, tempted as it is "by the slumber of the earth" ("and yet Lord, I am not happy...").

(TH 18)

It's an unhappy happiness or a happy unhappiness. Election is a strong term for Levinas, and it's also a strong term in Judaism—the idea of chosenness. Levinas flips it: chosenness is not being special or being given exclusive right to something. On the contrary, election is being picked out to carry an excessive burden. Election is something you'd really rather not have. Jewish chosenness is not something you get to choose. It's something that one is—it is factual.

This is what I wanted to get to. "Consciousness as a conscious grasp is a possession of the Other by the Same" (TH 18). Consciousness is a conscious grasping, a laying hold of things in the world, the possession of the other by the same, what Levinas calls "alchemy."

The I dominates the Other and is in a position to withdraw itself through an epoche of all engagement in being which it rediscovers as an intentional object, "bracketed" and entirely at its disposal. Total self-knowledge is total immanence and sovereignty. Consequently, the impossibility of a total reflection and of a total disengagement, as affirmed by the philosophy of existence against the idealist subject, leaves that subject in the situation of *Geworfenheit*. (TH 18)

If what Levinas is against is the idea of the reflective constitution of the ego, the "I think, therefore I am," self-positing or whatever, that he identifies with an idealist notion of the subject that is henceforth rendered impossible, then the subject is left in a situation of thrownness. "This means that no problem is fully determinate at the moment when the subject takes it up and that its freedom is already fatally compromised by commitments which were never contracted" (TH 18). Subjectivity and its freedom are always compromised by fate, by commitments we never contracted. Like, for example, that fate Oedipus discovers he was contracted to before his birth. "The resultant guilt of the subject [Schuld, guilt, debt, lack] thus has no ethical significance: it results from the alienation of liberty and not from the unscrupulousness of its very exercise. Such a guilt has tragic and not ethical overtones. It is finitude" (TH 18). Levinas is making two moves here. The first is that any classical notion of the subject is rendered impossible through Heidegger's critique. We're not self-constituting, self-reflectively aware, self-positing, or whatever. We find ourselves in this world. Into this world we're thrown, as Jim Morrison might have said. This means that we're in a situation of guilt and of lack. Guilt is not seen as feeling bad for having done bad things but as ontological indebtedness. That's exactly the sense of guilt that Nietzsche talks about in the *Genealogy of Morals*. Guilt originates in debt, which is why being in debt is such a bad thing, as every graduate student at The New School knows. But,

Levinas says, this has no ethical significance. It is tragic and it is finitude. To come back to the dramatic terms here, note the identification of tragedy with finitude. The question Levinas' work poses is the following: can there be a drama beyond the tragedy of finitude? The second move he makes in the paper is to introduce the concept of the infinite. Heidegger was right. He shatters the idealist notion of the subject, but he leaves himself and us with the indebted guilt of our finitude. All Heidegger's Dasein, the being constituted by guilt and debt, can do is to project from that onto the horizon of its Being-towards-death and to momentarily achieve mastery over the everyday.¹⁰ However, that mastery always falls back into facticity.

Heidegger's formulation of what it means to be human is that Dasein exists factically or that Dasein is a thrown project. We can exist, we can become authentic; we can, as it were, rise up into existence and become momentarily ecstatic, but we always fall back. Authenticity is just a modification of inauthenticity. For Levinas, that drama is tragic. That's the Heideggerian tragedy, which is indeed perhaps why Heidegger describes that drama with an interpretation of tragedy. If you know Heidegger's reading of Antigone in the Introduction to Metaphysics, that's what's going on there. The human being is the uncanniest one who holds himself out into the nothing and shatters himself against death. He can ride the seas and climb the mountains, all of which comes to absolutely nothing. This is the Heideggerian plot of every Werner Herzog movie, from *Aguirre—The Wrath of God*, to *Woyzeck*, to *Fitzcarraldo*, through to *Grizzly Man*, all the way through. The heroic male character pulls himself apart from a deadening influence of the community, the *das Man*, and he rises up and confronts his finitude, becomes Klaus Kinski crazy, and then is shattered against death. That's the Heideggerian story from this Levinasian point of view. It's not at all the whole picture, but it's got some persuasive force.

The problem for Levinas is that having decisively criticized the classical, disengaged notion of the subject (as someone like Charles Taylor would say), how does the self escape the tragedy of finitude? How do we escape the tragedy of the ego's imprisonment in its finitude? What's the problem of Levinas' philosophy? The problem is how to escape. It's that simple. The escape route sketched in the work from the mid-1950s and 1960s is through the notion of infinity. We'll look at different escape routes as we proceed, but the issue is that we're stuck to ourselves. We are irredeemably riveted to ourselves and that's tragic. How can that be overcome? In thinking about Levinas' method in terms of drama and then looking at the theatrical motifs, hopefully what I've shown now is that the drama of Levinas' work turns on the relationship between comedy and tragedy, from the tragedy of finitude to the comedy of escape.

What's going to happen in the next lecture is that we're going to see this problematic emerge in a really powerful way in Levinas' other early writings. The two texts I'm going to look at are his little essay on what is called "Hitlerism" from 1934 and the longer essay, "On Escape," from 1935. These are both brilliantly insightful texts that

¹⁰ See, for example, paragraph 71 of Heidegger's *Being and Time*.

will take us to our third question, which addresses the shape of that problem in Levinas' early texts, and then we'll move on and address Levinas' answer to the question.

A Happy Ending

Question: How should we think of this escape?

SC: The escape is going to be an escape from tragedy to comedy. Levinas, you could say, wants to write a comedy. He wants to write a comedy as an idea of life and continuation, that's the thought. To let the cat out of the bag (not that it's much of a cat or indeed much of a bag), this is why the figure of the child is so important for Levinas. Heidegger's critique of the disengaged theory of the subject leaves Dasein stuck to itself in its facticity. So, can there be a way of being me that is not stuck to myself? For Levinas, that's the experience of fecundity that moves through eros. The child is the actualization of fecundity and ultimately a kind of redemption.

Question: Is this close to the figure of the child in Nietzsche's Zarathustra? Is this movement a movement from tears to laughter?

SC: Yes, in a sense. It's a movement from the tragedy of finitude to the comedy of infinitude. But in order to make good on this idea of being stuck to oneself, we need to read Levinas' essay on Hitlerism because the latter elicits a political and metaphysical structure that celebrates our being attached to ourselves, celebrates our being riveted to ourselves. Any politics that affirms such attachment is barbaric, Levinas insists, and the alternative is liberalism. The problem is that liberalism is a failure. For Levinas, liberalism is the political corollary of idealism. Liberalism takes idealism's idea of the subject and makes it a political subject of rights. I am a subject in the world with rights and I can choose this or that. Liberalism was decisively defeated with the advent of Hitlerism.

The radical question that Levinas doesn't pose in the 1930s but that is implicit in his work is, given the failure of liberalism's comedy, can there be an anti-fascist drama? That is, of course, also Bataille's question. That's what Bataille keeps trying to figure out in his different fantasies, in his different groups. Throughout his life, particularly in the 1930s and 1940s, Bataille experimented with different forms of informal anti-fascist, anti-liberal institutions, from Contre-Attaque, the Collège de Sociologie, and the Collège Socratique through to the more mysterious Acéphale. Now, I am not preaching human sacrifice in a forest anytime soon (at least, I am not going to admit that in public), but I find Bataille an interesting example to think about in terms of experimenting with institutional forms that respond to Levinas' basic dramatic problem.

Listen to this quotation from the end of the introduction to *Otherwise than Being*:

[I]f philosophizing consists in assuring oneself of an absolute origin, the philosopher will have to efface the trace of his own footsteps and unendingly efface the traces of the effacing of the traces, in an interminable methodological movement staying where it is. (OTB 20)

If philosophy is the idea of an absolute origin—the self-certainty of the *res cogitans* in Descartes, the self-positing of the subject in Fichte, the transcendental ego in Husserl—it is condemned to an endless act of reinvention, wiping the slate clean and beginning again...and again...which is what Husserl kind of ended up doing: yet another bloody introduction to phenomenology. One reads him and thinks, here we go again. But listen to this. We could spend days on these lines, but I know it is really time to finish:

Unless, that is, the naivety of the philosopher does not call, beyond the reflection on oneself, for the critique exercised by another philosopher, whatever be the imprudences that that one will have committed in his turn, and the gratuity of his own saying. Philosophy thus arouses a drama between philosophers and an intersubjective movement which does not resemble the dialogue of teamworkers in science, nor even the Platonic dialogue which is the reminiscence of a drama rather than the drama itself. It is sketched out in a different structure; empirically it is realized as the history of philosophy in which new interlocutors always enter who have to restate, but in which the former ones take up the floor to answer in the interpretations they arouse, and in which, nonetheless, despite this lack of "certainty in one's movements" or because of it, no one is allowed a relaxation of attention or a lack of strictness. (OTB 20)

What Levinas is imagining is an idea of philosophy as a drama between philosophers that is neither a dialogue of people working in a team nor a Platonic dialogue, which is a reminiscence of another drama, namely, Attic drama, tragic drama. I find this idea of philosophy as a drama between philosophers fascinating and potentially transformative. I've been trying to understand Levinas' work as a kind of drama in those terms, in particular a drama with Heidegger. Will we get a happy ending? We will see.

Lecture Two

Hitlerism Against Liberalism

We looked at questions one and two yesterday and described Levinas' fundamental problem in the following way: how can the tragedy of finitude in Heidegger's terms become some other kind of drama, a drama which I called a comedy yesterday? The third question, what we'll address today, is, what is the shape of this problem in Levinas' early writings? There's a short way of answering this question, but the longer way is really interesting. These early texts are so fascinating that I want to spend some time laying this out.

I want to begin with the 1934 essay "Reflections on the Philosophy of Hitlerism." The term "Hitlerism" is not Levinas' own. "Hitlerism" is a term he says was imposed by the editors of the journal *Esprit*.¹ The context here is important. The journal *Esprit* was a recently founded French journal that began, I think, in 1932 and was the voice of the non-conformist Catholic Left. "Reflections on the Philosophy of Hitlerism" is the first inkling of the problematic Levinas will continue to face throughout his work: the tragic enchainment of the body to itself. This problematic also identifies a massive issue within liberalism. Liberalism is the constant political analogue to the classical idea of the subject. If what Levinas is always criticizing is an idealist notion of the subject, namely, the subject as the sameness of mind and world, the subject as self-constituting, self-positing, self-legislating, and constituted by reflection, then the political analogue to idealism is liberalism. That's the way Levinas sees it, and I think he's right. The problem within liberalism is that the emphasis upon freedom collapses into doubt and deceit. In a word, as we will see, liberalism leads to irony, and what we crave in response to this irony is sincerity and authenticity. The idea that liberalism leads to irony is a very familiar idea. You can find a recent iteration of that view in, say, Richard Rorty. But it's an idea that goes all the way back to the origins of liberalism in the religious wars of the early modern period and the collapse of any substantive conception of community, or what Hegel calls *Sittlichkeit*. Liberalism leads to fragmentation and anomie and its critics assert that what is required is some kind of authenticity, both in terms of social life and personal commitment of the kind formerly found in religion, especially Christianity.

¹ See the French edition, Emmanuel Levinas, *Quelques réflexions sur la philosophie de l'hitlérisme* (Paris: Payot & Rivages, 1997), that contains a long, useful, and detailed introduction by Miguel Aben-sour.

How might one respond to Hitlerism beyond liberalism? That is Levinas' question here. To reiterate what I was talking about yesterday, Heidegger permits Levinas the space for a critique of traditional philosophy. Specifically, this is traditional philosophy understood as intellectualism, theoreticism, or idealism. I've emphasized this idea already. The concept in Heidegger that permits this critique is the concept of facticity, which is the key concept for Levinas. The larger task of which this is a part is the overcoming of the tragic self-enclosure of Dasein in its finitude. How does one do that? That finitude is precisely what Levinas describes in 1934 as the philosophy of Hitlerism.

My claim is going to be that insofar as Levinas' philosophy, from the beginning to the end, is dominated by the shadow of Heidegger's thought, it's defined and threatened by "Hitlerism" until the very end. That's an enigmatic statement but I'll try to make it clear. Let's go into the 1934 essay. I want to discuss this essay in relationship to its invocation of what Levinas calls "elemental Evil" in the letter to Arnold Davidson that appeared as the prefatory note to the English translation of the 1934 essay published in 1990 by *Critical Inquiry*. Incidentally—and this is a complicated line of thought, or more complicated than it might initially appear—Giorgio Agamben, in *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, writes that Levinas' essay on Hitlerism "may well even today still constitute the most valuable contribution to an understanding of National Socialism."² Agamben is no friend of Levinas. There is a kind of twisted smile in this thought that I want to keep in mind without making explicit.

By the by, it seems to have taken some people quite a long time to work out what National Socialism was about. In many cases it took many years. "We didn't realize," they say. "We were fed up with Weimar Germany having such a low currency and high inflation. Something needed to be done. We just thought that the Nazis had this great aesthetic sensibility and that Hitler was a really good dancer." Sorry, I've morphed into Mel Brooks. It's springtime for Hitler and Germany, winter for Poland and France. The point I'm making is that it did take some people a very long time to work out what was going on with National Socialism, but Levinas got it immediately.

Elemental Evil

Heidegger is nowhere named in the 1934 essay, but it's clear he's being addressed. Let's look at the prefatory note from *Critical Inquiry*.

The article stems from the conviction that the source of the bloody barbarism of National Socialism lies not in some contingent anomaly within human reasoning, nor in some accidental ideological misunderstanding. This article expresses the conviction that this source stems from the essential possibility of elemental Evil [the emphasis here should be on the word "elemental"—SC] into which we can be led by logic and

² Giorgio Agamben, *Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen, vol. 1 of *Homo Sacer* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995), p. 151.

against which Western philosophy had not sufficiently insured itself. This possibility is inscribed within the ontology of a being concerned with being [*de l'être soucieux d'être*]*—*a being, to use the Heideggerian expression, "*dem es in seinem Sein um dieses Sein selbst geht.*" Such a possibility still threatens the subject correlative with being as gathering together and as dominating [*l' être-à-reassembler et à-dominer*], that famous subject of transcendental idealism that before all else wishes to be free and thinks itself free. We must ask ourselves if liberalism is all we need to achieve an authentic dignity for the human subject. Does the subject arrive at the human condition prior to assuming responsibility for the other man in the act of election that raises him up to this height? This election comes from a god—or God—who beholds him in the face of the other man, his neighbor, the original "site" of the Revelation.

(RPH 63)

The source of barbarism in National Socialism is not contingent or some ideological aberration; the barbarism stems from the possibility of elemental Evil, an elemental Evil that is inscribed within fundamental ontology, where the being of *Dasein* is defined by care (*Sorge*) or "*de l'être soucieux d'être.*" (Heidegger's *Sorge* is translated as *souci* in French.) This, the possibility of elemental Evil, is inscribed in Heidegger's fundamental ontology. That's the claim. As such, this possibility threatens the possibility of freedom or the separation between the realm of nature and the realm of freedom, which is the business of Kant in the critical project. Levinas sees the political expression of this idea of freedom in liberalism, the very liberalism that was destroyed in Germany in 1933. The dominant philosophical paradigm in Germany and France (though not in Britain—we were obviously much cleverer) in these years was a neo-Kantianism that was attached to a version of liberalism that was represented in France by philosophers like Léon Brunschvicg and in the German-speaking world by someone like Ernst Cassirer. There's a lot more to say about that. However, the link between liberalism and Kantianism would have been perfectly obvious in this period.

What is Levinas saying here? He's not saying that Heidegger is a bad boy Nazi and we need to return to liberalism. That's The New York Review of Books approach: they're all Nazis because they corresponded with Heidegger or because they went to the same dry cleaners; they're all Nazis and we need to salvage liberalism. That's not what Levinas is saying. On the contrary, reading between the lines, something very different emerges. In his "*Is Ontology Fundamental?*" the ethical break with Heidegger is marked and named for the first time. Levinas begins by asserting that the great novelty of Heidegger's ontology is in its thinking of facticity, the distinction between empirical facts available to a theoretical consciousness or a knowing subject, and the life of *Dasein*, a human being inseparable from our enrootedness, our being riveted in the factual life of the world. The key discovery of Heidegger and his decisive advance beyond Husserl, which is why we cannot go back to a pre-Heideggerian philosophy, lies in his critique of intellectualism or theoreticism. What Heidegger's phenomenology provides—and I completely agree with this—is the hermeneutic of facticity. That's what's brilliant about Heidegger. I couldn't give a monkey's uncle about the question

of Being. Who cares about Being? Enough already. But facticity, a philosophy of life as it is lived practically and not as it is spectated upon theoretically, is really interesting.

As we're going to see in a little segue at the end of this sequence, geographically that means Germany not France. The text I haven't mentioned to you yet is a fascinatingly weird short essay from 1933 called "The Idea of Spirituality in French and German Culture." If you read that together with the Hitlerism text and "On Escape," you begin to get a sense of what Levinas is up to. Idealism and liberalism equals France; facticity, being rooted to oneself, and the body, equals Germany. He makes that argument stick through a discussion of Thomas Mann's *The Magic Mountain*. There's a political-philosophical geography at work that is really striking and a little crazy. The problem with liberalism is that it simply extends the unthinking privilege of theoretical consciousness onto the political domain, producing a subject of rights. This is why liberalism cannot think the elemental Evil at the heart of National Socialism. We need something more. We need to embrace Heidegger's thinking of facticity against the abstractions of liberalism and also be able to push that thinking in another direction, namely, we need to push that thinking beyond the tragedy of finitude towards responsibility for the other in their height, in their election, and ultimately, in their divinity, *A Dieu*. Such is Levinas' hope. Such is the hope that drives his divine comedy. But Levinas' ethico-political hope cannot be identified with liberalism, although he often gets interpreted in this way, which is something that I really hate.

The Marxist Critique of Liberalism and a Critique of Marxism

The possibility of avoiding elemental Evil does not lead to a defence of liberalism or yet another return to Kant. It requires another thinking of the elemental; it requires another thinking through of facticity. If you look to the French of the Hitlerism essay, the word *élémentaire* appears all over, and that's the real issue. This is the point: fascism is on to something deep and liberalism is screwed. Fascism touches something elemental about us and who we are, and it has to be transformed—that's Levinas' project. He does that and he gives us an entire philosophy of the elemental that people tend to ignore because they don't really read Levinas closely. This is part two of *Totality and Infinity*, the part on enjoyment, which for me is the most brilliant part of the book. It's where we get Levinas describing enjoyment and what he calls *vivre de* (living from): nourishment, eating good soup, gorging myself on the world. This all leads to an interesting conclusion: National Socialism is right in its basic intention, it's right in its critique of disembodied liberalism. What it sees is something obscured by liberalism, it sees the elemental enrootedness of the human being. An extraordinary thing about Levinas' essay is that already, in 1934, after having intended to write the first book on Heidegger in any language and having broken off his intention when

he heard the news that Heidegger had taken over as Rector at Freiburg University, Levinas is thinking about National Socialism philosophically, not politically in terms of some whimsical and sentimental whining: "Oh it's horrible, they treated us so badly." Specifically, he's thinking about how it awakens elemental feelings. National Socialism is a philosophy of the elemental.

Some people, Samuel Moyn for instance, think Levinas later came to regret this view and that he conferred a false philosophical dignity on National Socialism.³ I disagree with that. I think the analysis of Hitlerism is essential to Levinas' project and must be taken really seriously. National Socialism cannot be thought in terms of the opposition between racist particularism and liberal universalism. One way of thinking about National Socialism is that it is racism and particularism: it is national, it is for Germans, and it is not for human beings generally. We can oppose that with a universalism where we're cosmopolitans in some psychotic universe. I am not a cosmopolitan. I'm as far from a cosmopolitan as you can imagine. Rather, what National Socialism produces is a new form of universalism, a bio-political universalism. This is the connection with Agamben—bio-politics as the unity of politics and life. National Socialism offers the philosophical intuition into this unity.

A central thought in the Hitlerism paper is that Judaism, Christianity, and liberalism share a common trait. What is that common trait? It is the idea of freedom from the limitations of historical existence, a freedom that frees us from the tragedy of being stuck in an immovable time and history. Levinas' thought, and again this is a thought you can find in a number of different thinkers, is that Christianity finds its modern articulation in liberalism. He writes,

If the liberalism of these last few centuries evades the dramatic aspects of such a liberation, it does retain one of its essential elements in the form of the sovereign freedom of reason. The whole philosophical and political thought of modern times tends to place the human spirit on a plane that is superior to reality, and so creates a gulf between man and the world. It makes it impossible to apply the categories of the physical world to the spirituality of reason, and so locates the ultimate foundation of the spirit outside the brutal world and the implacable history of concrete existence. (RPH 66)

What is the single task of Kant's critical project? It's the separation of the activity of reason from the realm of nature or the separation of freedom from causal necessity, what he sometimes calls "the causality of freedom." If Kant can do that, then he has achieved his purpose. Liberalism is the translation, the political-theological translation, of the Judeo-Christian heritage. In the world of liberalism we're no longer weighed down by history, we're free. Levinas goes on to claim (this is also really fascinating) that the first doctrine to contest this view was Marxism. The relationship of Levinas to Marxism is very important but it has been grossly misunderstood. If you want to

³ See Samuel Moyn, *Origins of the Other: Emmanuel Levinas between Revelation and Ethics* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2005), ch. 3, esp. p. 97.

follow this through, one text to look at is "Judaism and Revolution" in the Talmudic Readings. In that text he tries to pick through, on the basis of a reading of a passage of the Talmud on labour law, the relationship between Marxism and ethics, and shows a very tight relation between exploitation and persecution. Marx's analysis of alienation under the conditions of capitalism requires an ethical supplement. Levinas is a hyper-Marxist. So, "Marxism was the first doctrine of Western history to contest this view of man" (RPH 66).

As a result Marxism is opposed not just to Christianity, but to the whole of idealist liberalism, wherein "being does not determine consciousness," but consciousness or reason determines being.

As a result of this, Marxism stands in opposition to European culture or, at least, breaks the harmonious curve of its development. (RPH 67)

That's why Levinas likes Marxism, but the break is not complete. Levinas goes on to complain that Marxism, despite its critique of liberalism, remains a child of the bourgeois revolution of 1789 and, insofar as it is a secular version of the triumph of history, remains a child of liberalism. What Levinas goes on to say is that insofar as Marxism is a critique of liberalism, it is also the perfection of liberalism—the perfection of liberalism through a secular and embodied eschatology. Within Marxism, redemption does not consist of the separation of the sphere of freedom from the sphere of necessity but in their identification. Though we could contest this interpretation, Levinas claims that Marx retains the salvific narrative wherein history is organized in relation to a certain telos, namely, the goal of proletarian revolution: communism. For Levinas, that's a Christian thought, or a Judeo-Christian thought. Marxism doesn't fully break with liberalism. The break that goes beyond Marxism occurs with the rethinking of the body, and this is what's really brilliant in this essay.

Embodiment and Racism

What is the body? Within Greek, Christian, and liberal thought (we're speaking at the level of the abstractions that Levinas employs here) the body is an obstacle that has to be overcome. The body restrains the wings of the spirit or the soul and threatens to confine rationality within the nets of nature and biology. Think about Plato or Plotinus and the idea that the soul is the pearl trapped in the shell that is the body. The whole adventure of Western philosophy, from Platonism and neo-Platonism through to Christianity—the re-transcription of Platonism through Augustine into Medieval thought—is premised upon the separation between the soul and the body. That's what Paul is about too, the separation of flesh from spirit, *σάρκός* (*sarkos*) from *πνεῦμα* (*pneuma*). I'm all about going back to pneumatics. The question is how we think of spirit and spiritualization.

If Western thought has been committed to the separation or separability of soul and body or reason and nature, then the philosophy of Hitlerism begins from somewhere else. It begins from the feeling of identity between the self and the body.

The body is not only a happy or unhappy accident that relates us to the implacable world of matter. Its adherence to the Self is of value in itself. It is an adherence that one does not escape and that no metaphor can confuse with the presence of an external object; it is a union that does not in any way alter the tragic character of finality. (RPH 68)

Note the linking of the body to tragedy.

The importance attributed to this feeling for the body, with which the Western spirit has never wished to content itself, is at the basis of a new conception of man. The biological, with the notion of inevitability it entails, becomes more than an object of spiritual life. It becomes its heart. The mysterious urgings of the blood, the appeals of heredity and the past for which the body serves as an enigmatic vehicle, lose the character of being problems that are subject to a solution put forward by a sovereignly free Self. Not only does the Self bring in the unknown elements of these problems in order to resolve them; the Self is also constituted by these elements. Man's essence no longer lies in freedom but a kind of bondage [enchaînement]. To be truly oneself does not mean taking flight once more above contingent events that always remain foreign to the Self's freedom; on the contrary, it means becoming aware of the ineluctable original chain that is unique to our bodies, and above all accepting this chaining. (RPH 69)

The Being of being human no longer lies in freedom but in bondage: bondage to the body, enchainment, or being-riven to oneself. We'll see this in much more detail in the essay "On Escape," where Levinas also speaks of being riveted to the self and elaborates on its structure. He continues,

From this point on, every social structure that announces an emancipation with respect to the body, without being committed to it [qui ne l'engage pas], is suspected of being a repudiation or a betrayal. (RPH 69)

Think about that in terms of classical republican debates on French identity. Frenchness does not mean being a body that looks this or that way, is this or that colour. Frenchness consists in being French, speaking French, and being a subject of the rights that all French people have. Frenchness is independent of the body, race, or ethnicity. That's what's become suspect in a Hitlerist regime. The philosophy of Hitlerism is the destruction of the philosophy of Frenchness. Levinas goes on:

The forms of a modern society founded on the harmony established between free wills will seem not only fragile and inconsistent but false and deceitful. The assimilation of spirits loses the grandeur of the spirit's triumph over the body. Instead, it becomes the work of forgers. A society based on consanguinity immediately ensues from this concretization of the spirit. And then, if race does not exist, one has to invent it!

This ideal of man and society is accompanied by a new ideal of thought and truth. (RPH 69)

This is, incidentally (actually, not so incidentally), the central claim of "On Escape" from the following year. The political expression of Hitlerism is a community of consanguinity bound together by the mysterious urgings of the blood and the appeals to heredity and the unity of race. Ask yourself the question, if this was true of National Socialism, then of what modern political regime is this most true? It's Israel, obviously. Israel is the best contemporary bio-political expression of the philosophy of Hitlerism. Of course Jews should be the last people to give credence to the category of race.

Frenchness means you live in France, that you speak French. It's an abstract, ethereal, conceptual identity. German identity is based on blood, the *jus sanguinis*. Although the citizenship laws have been amended, but only fairly recently, German citizenship is still based on parentage and therefore on blood. For Levinas, that is Hitlerism. The identity of self and body, the bondage of self to body, is the unity of both in terms of race. I don't want to get sidetracked into questions of race, but I've been thinking about them in a separate context. Race is unreal at one level and totally real at another. It is a vague, questionable, and arguably spurious scientific category, yet race is an undeniable existential reality. The brilliant American parodist of conservatism, Stephen Colbert, says he "doesn't see race." That's the quintessential racist position. So, what kind of thing is race? We might say that race is an existential concept within a hegemonic regime of visibility. Blackness exists insofar as it is the subject of a gaze and subjectively produced by that objectifying regard: 'Look, mom, it's a black guy!' Insofar as it is seen and felt, race exists.

Why Europe is So Great

Levinas' thinking here is blisteringly radical. Hitlerism represents a radical critique of liberalism insofar as it denies the gap between the self and the body, reason and nature. Writing for *Esprit*, the left-Catholic journal, Levinas might be imagined to defend liberalism. However, he says that liberalism harbours a danger within itself, a danger that's really powerful: that of reducing everything to a game, a spectacle, something from which I can aesthetically distance myself. Liberalism is the political life of the aesthete. I choose my political party as if I were choosing dessert or my taste in works of art. Liberalism runs the risk of aestheticism. The flipside of aestheticism, as Durkheim showed a long time ago, is anomie—a society that is anonymous, atomized, alienated. Liberalism risks accepting what Levinas calls "degenerate forms of the ideal." It is in relationship to such a degenerate society that Hitlerism appears to promise sincerity and authenticity. You might think I'm making that up, so I'll cite it:

Such a society loses living contact with its true ideal of freedom and accepts degenerate forms of the ideal. It does not see that the true ideal requires effort and instead enjoys those aspects of the ideal that make life easier. It is to a society in such a condition that the Germanic ideal of man seems to promise sincerity and authenticity. (RPH 70)

In a world of ironists, liberals, and aesthetes, in a world of kitsch and the baroque, in our world, we crave authenticity, something serious and committed, and that's what fascism offers. Never forget that. Hopefully you haven't all just become fascists.

Chained to his body, man sees himself refusing the power to escape from himself. Truth is no longer for him the contemplation of a foreign spectacle; instead it consists in a drama in which man is himself the actor. It is under the weight of his whole existence, which includes facts on which there is no going back, that man will say his yes or his no. (RPH 70; my emphasis)

As we read these words, who are you thinking of here? Nietzsche, of course. This recalls his affirmation in the preface to *Zarathustra*, the "Yes" of *Zarathustra*.

Here is the final extraordinary move in the argument: from a liberal or Christian universality that is formal or spiritual to a Hitlerist, embodied, materialist universality based on expansion through force. This is why the contrast between liberal universality and racist particularism is so fatuous. The conflict is really between two notions of universality: formal universality and forceful universality. The final move in the argument asks the question, is National Socialism or Hitlerism a particularism? No, it's a universalism that makes itself universal through force, through war and conquest. What the essay ends up with is a conflict between two notions of universality: the liberal ideal of universality that is formalistic, where there are rights that are universalized, where liberals can complain that not everybody has them, and an embodied universality or Hitlerism that enforces universality through force. He says, "And yet the new type of truth cannot renounce the formal nature of truth and cease to be universal" (RPH 70). Hitlerism is still a claim to universality.

In vain is truth my truth in the strongest sense of this possessive pronoun, for it must strive towards the creation of a new world. *Zarathustra* was not content with his transfiguration; instead he came down from his mountain, bringing a gospel with him. How is universality compatible with racism? The answer—to be found in the logic of what first inspires racism—involves a basic modification of the very idea of universality. Universality must give way to the very idea of expansion, for the expansion of a force presents a structure that is completely different from the propagation of an idea. (RPH 70)

Universality becomes expansion through force that is based on propagation of a common heritage. What Levinas doesn't say but which is implicit is that is the way liberalism universalized itself anyway. Liberalism universalized itself through war and conquest. It didn't just say, "We've got these rights, they're great. Come join us, we've got this cool thing called civilization." This claim about civilization was first made after 1815, at the end of the Napoleonic Wars: "In the name of civilization we will beat you into submission because if you're not civilized, you're a barbarian or a savage." That was the categorization: civilization, barbarism, and savagery. Europe was civilized, the Orient was barbaric, and Africa was savage. This changes around 1815, and this is based around the research of the historian Mark Mazower, who has written a book

on the history of the idea of civilization.⁴ "Civilization" becomes an ideological term after 1815 as a replacement for the idea of Christendom. Europe used to be about the defence of Christianity. You used to kill people who weren't Christians, and then at a certain point this becomes more difficult—not completely, but sort of. You can't just kill people for not being Christian, so you kill them for not being civilized. In the words of Kurtz in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, "Exterminate all the brutes!"

Civilization requires expansion through force and the extermination of the brutes. Perhaps this is the distinctive characteristic of European "civilization." We just developed better and better technologies of extermination. The unity of that project we call "Europe" is the idea of extermination that begins with the extermination of the Guanches by the Spanish in the Canary Islands in the late fifteenth century. Europeans just got better and better at wiping people out, killing at a distance. It's not personal, it's hygiene. In a sense, that's what Levinas is saying. Of course, if you follow this line, my line, then the distinction between liberalism and Hitlerism collapses, which Levinas doesn't go on to do but I think we should risk. What was Hitlerism? Hitlerism was the extension of the logic of colonialism within a different territory. The Germans wanted what the French and the British had, but the French and the British had already divided up the big chunks of the world. The Germans thought they could do the same thing in Eastern Europe because the Germans thought it was obvious that those people were natural slaves, i.e., Slavs. They adapted the techniques of colonial rule, namely, the concentration camp—which the Spanish introduced in Cuba and the British in South Africa—and they extended it to Europe. I find aspects of the way in which the Holocaust is discussed intensely limited. You still see this at The New School and elsewhere: the Holocaust is unique because it happened in Europe. Wow! How shocking! It's nonsense. That's never been the issue. Europe was always a question of lines of flight, movement, domination, exploitation, extermination, colonialism, and imperialism. What happened under the Third Reich is just a modification of the deep logic of colonialism. But that's me. Levinas doesn't go that far. He remained a Europhile until the end.

The Bio-Politics of Fascism

Where does this 1934 essay leave us? The philosophy of Hitlerism is a fundamental ontology and its new insight is a claim about the fundamentality of facticity. Hitlerism and Heideggerianism are elemental: they renounce the spiritual, rational, or formal universality of Christianity and liberalism in the name of the identity of the self and the body, the unity of Dasein with the world, Dasein with Mitsein, and ultimately, the people (*das Volk*) and history as heritage (*Erbe*). I think this is why Levinas uses the word "heritage" on page 70 of "Reflections on the Philosophy of Hitlerism." Such

⁴ Mark Mazower, *Governing the World: The History of an Idea, 1815 to the Present* (New York: Penguin, 2013).

an elemental philosophy is not particularist but advances a conception of universality based on expansion, force, war, and conquest rooted in the identity of the people united by blood and race.

As you all know, Heidegger defended the "inner truth and greatness of National Socialism," its "Wahrheit und Größe," in 1935.⁵ It was a remark made in 1935 in a book published in 1953 called *Introduction to Metaphysics*. Although he lied about it, Heidegger edited this manuscript quite significantly. For example, in the original version of the manuscript there was a whole debate with Carnap's critique of Heidegger called "Overcoming Metaphysics Through Logical Analysis of Language." That debate has interested me a lot. I did my M.Phil thesis on that in France years back. When Heidegger revised the lecture transcript for publication, he cut the debate with Carnap out but left in the phrase, "the inner truth and greatness of National Socialism." This inclusion provoked the consternation of a very young German philosopher who had been educated by Heideggerians and was writing his first review article for a German newspaper, which he called "Mit Heidegger gegen Heidegger denken."⁶ His name was Jürgen Habermas. Habermas thought, "For God's sake, how could someone talk about the inner truth and greatness of National Socialism in 1953?" But, in a sense, Heidegger was perfectly consistent in his line of thought. He asserts the "inner truth and greatness" of National Socialism, of Hitlerism, at the same time as asserting that he criticized National Socialism through its critique of biological reductionism. So, the Heideggerian line is that there was a possibility in National Socialism for a thinking of technology and a confrontation between the human being and planetary technology, but he always refused the biological reductionism of National Socialism, its racism. That's the way Heidegger defends himself. He'll say something like, "Look at my Nietzsche lectures, I always criticized Rosenberg and those stupid ideologues of National Socialism."

Levinas' intervention might begin to lead us to doubt, or at least begin to press hard at, the distinction between facticity and biological facts. Heidegger insists on that distinction. In Agamben's terms, Hitlerism is a bio-politics where the exception becomes the rule in a generalized state of exception governed by force—essentially, the force over the body of the *Homo Sacer*. Agamben, like the good Heideggerian he is (a consistent Heideggerian with a lot of Foucault, Benjamin, and Schmitt added in), wants to maintain the hard and fast distinction between facticity and biological facts. Agamben will defend the passion of facticity and wants to distinguish that from biological facts. Levinas, on the basis of this essay, might be said to have his doubts. Doesn't the philosophical discourse on facticity open the possibility for a bio-politics of racism, of the enchainment of the self to the body, of both self and body to biological discourses on race? That's at least a question we must consider. One huge issue that comes out of the Hitlerism essay that might seem tangential but I think is important

⁵ Martin Heidegger, *Introduction to Metaphysics*, trans. Gregory Fried and Richard Polt (New Haven: Yale University, 2000), p. 152.

⁶ Jürgen Habermas, "Mit Heidegger gegen Heidegger denken: Zur Veröffentlichung von Vorlesungen aus dem Jahre 1935," *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 170, 25 July 1953.

is a question about the stability of the distinction between facticity as an existential concept and biology. This is something we can also apply critically back to Levinas. I won't go into this now but when we get to Levinas' discussion of eros and sexuality he will say, "The biological origin of this concept nowise neutralizes the paradox of its meaning, and delineates a structure that goes beyond the biologically empirical" (TI 277). Heidegger, Agamben, and Levinas, despite their differences, still insist, in different ways, on the stability of the distinction between facticity and biology. Who knows, they might be right, but this is a question we should think through rigorously and honestly.

If politics has been transformed or reduced to the regulation of life, to bio-politics, what Levinas calls "Hitlerism," if the exception has become the rule, then the elemental Evil Levinas talks about in the Preface to "Reflections on the Philosophy of Hitlerism" is not a characteristic of just one regime. This is the consequence of Levinas' argument. I say "consequence" because Levinas doesn't really want to draw this conclusion himself because it opens up questions I don't think he can answer. Hitlerism is not characteristic of one regime, but is a tendency within modern politics, a bio-political tendency. Hitlerism is not an exception, but an exception that proves the rule—a rule that threatens to drown the whole world. If liberalism is not enough to achieve an authentic dignity for the human being, as Levinas says, against such a bio-political regime, then how might we respond to this situation politically and philosophically? Such is Levinas' question. What do we do?

Levinas is led towards an alternative elemental philosophy that eventually describes a way out of egotistical and tragic finitude. That's what he describes in beautiful detail in *Totality and Infinity*. Agamben moves hesitantly towards a separation between the sphere of law and the sphere of life. In a sense, Agamben says that the bio-political is the truth of politics in our contemporary era, and that means that the only exit from the societies we inhabit, societies that are increasingly regulated, where the rules and regulations are at the level of biological organization, is some kind of separation of law and life. This is usually where Agamben's books finish, and where we're usually left wondering what that would look like. Apparently, it looks something like early Franciscanism.

French Philosophy is Not Pornography

Another brief word on this odd little text, "The Understanding of Spirituality in French and German Culture." We don't know whether or not Levinas spoke or wrote Lithuanian. Most people thought he didn't because for a long time it was assumed that anyone who spoke Lithuanian was a peasant or something like that. People who lived in the cities, like Levinas' family, spoke Yiddish or Russian. Yet, this text in Lithuanian turns up in print about twenty years ago, apparently written by Levinas in the summer of 1933, right after Heidegger becomes Rector and the National Socialists

seize power. It's the only Lithuanian text we have, though some have said Levinas was highly competent in Lithuanian. It reads like a text written for a student magazine, and it's very interesting for that reason. The topic of the essay is the contrast between French and German culture. German culture is embodiment, the body, the concrete I; French culture is rationalism, liberalism, intellectualism, Descartes, the separation of mind and body. He talks about French and German pornography. He says, "A Frenchman does not philosophize when he is writing pornography. Most of the time he is satisfied with a happy Epicureanism which takes pleasures for what they are."⁷ This sounds like a dubious empirical claim. Linked to this, just a few lines below, and this is very strange, is a discussion of psychoanalysis.

Another characteristic of the German interest in the human spirit is the interest in psychoanalysis. The presentation of sexual life as a psychological factor does not interest us philosophically. It does not teach us anything. Even less worthy of attention are the various fantastic dogmas of Freud's system and their implications, his key to dreams and therapy... (US 5)

Psychoanalysis is pornography. Moreover, it's a German sickness. He continues on the next page: "Recalling the French understanding of the spirit, it is not surprising that psychoanalysis had few followers in France" (US 6). (I wonder what the young Dr Lacan might have thought of this pronouncement.) Then Levinas talks about the German philosophy of life, *Lebensphilosophie*, and he's thinking of Dilthey, Scheler, and Heidegger. He says, "Today Heidegger's philosophy has an exceptionally large influence among German university students." He goes on,

It is no coincidence that extremist political parties, which are presently so strong in Germany, are enchanted with this notion of spirit. They do not trust reason because reason opposes their vitality; they do not listen to reason which says "yes" when their existence screams "no." Germans believe that pain is more real than reason, which wants to smother pain, and that truth is not the impartial observing of eternal ideas, but a horrible cry of an existence struggling to survive. (US 6)

So much for our German friends. Of course, what Levinas says here is crazy, but you can see how, even before the Hitlerism essay, he is experimenting with a political geography of Frenchness and Germanness, liberalism and Hitlerism.

Escape: The Ur-Form of Levinas' Thought

Now we're going to go on to "On Escape." Can there be escape? Let me put the problem in the boldest terms: when Levinas uses the word "being" what does he mean? I think what he means is that being is the facticity of existence. It's that to which we're riveted, chained, in bondage to. Facticity is a tragedy, which is why we both need to leave the climate of Heidegger's philosophy and why we cannot leave it for a philosophy

⁷ Emmanuel Levinas, "The Understanding of Spirituality in French and German Culture," trans. Andrius Valeičius, *Continental Philosophy Review* 31 (1998), p. 5.

that would be pre-Heideggerian, such as is expressed in the classical idea of the subject in intellectualism, theoreticism, idealism, and the political corollary of these views in classical liberalism. So, the critical question I think Levinas is trying to raise is, how do we escape this tragic structure? We're riveted to the fact of existence and that is tragic. How do we escape without falling back? That becomes the question of how we find access to the otherwise than being. If being is the facticity of existence, escape is the exit to the otherwise than being. Think about it that simply and forget any metaphysical neo-Platonic sounding theses about the Good beyond Being, although there's plenty of that in Levinas.

At this point I want to go into the essay "On Escape" and lay it out very carefully. Gadamer wrote an essay about a lecture Heidegger gave in 1924 called "The Concept of Time," which was a talk given in Marburg to the theology faculty, including the great Rudolf Bultmann. Gadamer claims that this twenty-page essay is the Ur-form of Being and Time, the primal form of Heidegger's entire project. I think Gadamer was right about that. By analogy, I think "On Escape" is the primal form of Levinas' entire problematic. In the book *On Escape*, there is a particularly irritating and arrogant introduction by Jacques Rolland. It's also right in many ways, which is even more irritating. It's rather pompous in that French way: they give you banalities with huge ceremony, as though you were watching a magic show in a theatre. Rolland's argument is that what is glimpsed in "On Escape" sets the agenda for Levinas' work throughout his career. The answer to the question is given in *Otherwise than Being*, in particular in the chapter "On Substitution." I think that's absolutely right. That's what I'm going to look at in detail tomorrow, where I'm going to set up the problematic of Levinas' work in an even deeper way, and we'll look at the answer he gives to that problem in the late work, which means that there is not just a continuity but a kind of call and response between the early and late work.

On Escape begins with a letter from Levinas to Jacques Rolland, dated December 1981, where Levinas speaks in a very interesting way about the intellectual situation of the essay. He situates it "on the eve of great massacres" (OE 1), where "the very justification for this text was forgotten." He also quite movingly says that his words were "growing silent" (OE 2), that the words in the essay harbour "forebodings" and those forebodings are for what happened in the Second World War. While it's indeed true that Levinas doesn't write very much in the 1930s, what he did write is very important: we have the doctoral thesis, the beginning of the book on Heidegger (which is abandoned and of which two excerpts remain), then we have the Hitlerism essay, a couple of review pieces, and the essay "De l'évasion." There are other odds and ends, and then he's in captivity until 1945 while Sartre and de Beauvoir are running around gay Paris preparing their intellectual coup d'état and Merleau-Ponty is putting the finishing touches to the *Phenomenology of Perception*. Resistance is the great lie of French intellectual life at the middle of the twentieth century—but that's a separate topic.

Being Riveted and the Need for Excendence

In a gesture that would become typical, Levinas begins with the presentation of the position he will try to undermine. In "On Escape" this appears through the idea of being as sufficiency and the figure of the bourgeois (OE 49). There's a persistent critique of the bourgeoisie and of bourgeois existence in Levinas. The bourgeois is understood as he who is sufficient to being and who lives in peace. Levinas then goes on to identify bourgeois existence with philosophy.

And Western philosophy, in effect, has never gone beyond this. In combatting the tendency to ontologize [ontologisme], when it did combat it, Western philosophy struggled for a better being, for a harmony between us and the world, or for the perfection of our own being. (OE 51)

This is idealism and such idealistic mind and world talk is, for Levinas, the expression of bourgeois sufficiency. On this view, finitude is something that is perceived as a limitation that needs to be gone beyond in a notion of infinite being, in relationship to God or nature. This is the classical conception of transcendence. The picture that Levinas is setting up early in the essay is the idea of sufficiency between mind and world that opens up onto the idea of the infinite understood as God. Then there's a shift in key.

And yet modern sensibility wrestles with problems that indicate, perhaps for the first time, the abandonment of this concern with transcendence. As if it has the certainty that the idea of the limit could not apply to the existence of what is, but only, uniquely to its nature, and as if modern sensibility perceived in being a defect still more profound. (OE 51; my emphasis)

What does "modern sensibility" mean here? Who does Levinas have in mind? Again, Heidegger is silently intended. Levinas claims that we've abandoned this concern with transcendence. Incidentally, when he says "as if," he thinks he's making an argument. It's a strange tic that persists from his very early work. The "as if" accompanied by a series of questions is judged by Levinas to be an argument—and that's how we know Levinas is a hack, right! "If only he'd had the chance to study at Princeton," I hear you whine. Anyway, when you see the "comme si" structure, you should pay attention. Levinas' texts usually begin with the position he disagrees with and you get that for a page or two, then a series of questions, then a transition to another position that he will seek to defend. Those questions will all function as argumentative shifts: it's as if we've abandoned the concern with transcendence. Then he will tell us that:

The elementary truth that there is being—a being that has value and weight—is revealed at a depth that measures its brutality and its seriousness. The pleasant game of life ceases to be just a game. It is not that the sufferings with which life threatens us render it displeasing; rather it is because the ground of suffering consists of the impossibility of interrupting it, and of an acute feeling of being held fast [rivé]. (OE 52)

The contemporary situation with respect to being is understood as escape. This is still a vague claim in the essay but it's motivating everything else. It's as if we're held fast to being and we want to escape.

Then we get (I won't go into the detail of this now, but it's important, particularly in the 1930s French context) the whole discussion of Bergson. The Bergsonian position was hegemonic in this period, and not just in the French-speaking world. Remember that Bergson was one of two philosophers to win the Nobel Prize for literature. The other was Russell. Lord knows how Lord Russell won. I mean, he's not exactly a literary genius. Then Levinas says,

With the vital urge we are going toward the unknown, but we are going somewhere, whereas with escape we aspire only to get out [sortir]. It is this category of getting out, assimilable neither to renovation nor to creation, that we must grasp in all its purity. It is an inimitable theme that invites us to get out of being. A quest for the way out, this is in no sense a nostalgia for death because death is not an exit, just as it is not a solution. The ground of this theme is constituted—if one will pardon the neologism—by the need for excedence. Thus, to the need for escape, being appears not only as an obstacle that free thought would have to surmount, nor even as the rigidity that, by inviting us to routine, demands an effort toward originality; rather it appears as an imprisonment from which one must get out.

Existence is an absolute that is asserted without reference to anything else. It is identity. But in this reference to himself [soi-même], man perceives a type of duality. His identity with himself loses the character of a logical or tautological form; it takes on a dramatic [my emphasis—SC] form, as we will demonstrate. In the identity of the I [moi], the identity of being reveals its nature as enchainment, for it appears in the form of suffering and invites us to escape. 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]. (OE 54–5)

It's about getting out or excedence, getting the hell out of the cell of one's identity. Identity is enchainment and it appears to us as suffering, inviting us to escape and break the chains that bind us to existence. We have to flee the brutality of existence. Levinas completes this thought in this typical move: "the need for escape...leads us into the heart of philosophy. It allows us to renew the ancient problem of being qua being" (OE 56).

Being qua being is obviously an allusion to the beginning of book Γ (Gamma) of Aristotle's *Metaphysics*. There is a science that investigates being qua being and that discipline is what the German school of Wolff called, in the eighteenth century, "ontology." There are two aspects to this. Aristotle says that there is a science that investigates being qua being, he calls it *πρώτη φιλοσοφία* (*prôtê philosophia*) in a book Andronicus of Rhodes called "Beyond" or "After the Physics" because it came after the *Physics* in the order of Aristotle's manuscripts. *Metaphysics* begins with a problem of library classification. The *Metaphysics* is concerned with first philosophy, concerned with being qua being. *Metaphysics* is ontology. There is another science in Aristotle

that is concerned not with being qua being but with beings as a whole, that's what Aristotle called *θεολογία* (theologia), theology, and what Heidegger translates as "das Seiende im Ganzen," beings as a whole. When Heidegger says metaphysics is onto-theology, people say, "Oh, Lord, what's that?" This is just a little forgivable ignorance. Onto-theology is a straightforwardly descriptive claim about Aristotle. Aristotle claims there are two ways of thinking about being: Being as such (das Sein als solches), which is what a later tradition calls ontology, and beings as a whole, which is what Aristotle calls theology. Metaphysics is onto-theology. Insofar as it's ontology, it is concerned with the meaning of Being or, more properly, as Brentano alerted Heidegger, with the manifold meanings of the concept of Being. Secondly, metaphysics is also concerned with beings as a whole, theology, i.e., beings in their different ontic manifestations and modifications. One of the great promises of Heidegger's early work that was never fulfilled was the writing of a theology in this specific sense, namely, an ontic-theology. Once Heidegger had done fundamental ontology, he promised—in 1928 in the *Metaphysical Foundations of Logic*, the brilliant final Marburg lecture series—to go back and complete the work of regional ontology, to go back to the everyday and flesh the whole thing out from the standpoint of fundamental ontology. This would have been a philosophical investigation into the ontic-existential dimensions of life. That would have meant a discussion of animality, a discussion of sexual difference, a discussion of embodiment, and so on. But he abandoned that plan and changed course. It's a tantalizing moment in Heidegger. All Heidegger's doing in his work is metaphysics thought essentially. The idea that Heidegger's project is anti-metaphysical is stupid. Anyone who says that is illiterate. It's metaphysics thought essentially in terms of its understanding of Being as such, which is the condition of possibility for metaphysics. The problem is that metaphysics has not understood the question of Being. It has only understood the question of Being insofar as it seeks to offer the determination of the meaning of Being as God, or as a thinking thing, or as Geist, or as will to power, and in those determinations of the meaning of Being that make up the history of metaphysics you don't think the question of Being. And questioning is the piety of thinking. Anyhow, that's what Heidegger is up to. It's really a simple project. In this way, Levinas is a good student of Heidegger.

The need for escape...leads us into the heart of philosophy. It allows us to renew the ancient problem of being qua being. What is the structure of this pure being? Does it have the universality Aristotle conferred on it? Is it the ground and the limit of our preoccupations, as certain modern philosophers would have it? On the contrary, is it nothing else than the mark of a certain civilization, firmly established in the fait accompli of being and incapable of getting out of it? And, in these conditions, is ex-cendence possible, and how would it be accomplished? What is the ideal of happiness and human dignity it promises? (OE 56)

The question of ex-cendence, of escape, leads Levinas to the basic question of philosophy, the question of Being as such.

Desire and Malaise

In section two of "On Escape" we get a shift in tone, but the question of Being is still very much in mind. The purpose of "On Escape" is to describe the structure of need. What does Levinas mean by need? Well, the French word for "need" is *besoin*, and this is a bit of a problem. What Levinas means by need in this essay is better understood, I think, as desire. Desire makes more sense here. Let's just say he's talking about need but he's thinking about desire. A need is something like this: I need coffee and I go and get a coffee. Need has a finite end. Desire is something else. I want coffee, and I want it to be a mocha, with a marshmallow, and I can't get it in this country, and this place is horrible, and I want to go somewhere else, somewhere with a beach where I can also get a massage. That's desire. When you see "need" in the essay, think "desire." Thinking of the Symposium, where in Aristophanes' speech desire is thought of as *πενία* (*penia*, poverty), Levinas says need is not a limitation or a lack. Rather, need will enable us to discover the purity of the fact that already announces itself as escape or evasion.

The task of section three then is to answer the following questions: What is need? What is the satisfaction that accompanies need? Need is revealed in malaise. The word "malaise" means being ill at ease. Malaise is a refusal to remain in place, a desire for escape. Malaise is the best French translation of the wonderful German term *Unbehagen*. Freud uses the term *Unbehagen* in *Das Unbehagen in der Kultur*, which it is oddly translated into "Civilization and its Discontents." Freud's thought, Freud's only thought, is that desire is at odds with culture, producing a constitutive malaise. That's what Marcuse and others pick up on. Somehow desire and culture do not match up, and that's why life is such a disaster. Explains a lot, no?

Need is revealed in malaise, being ill at ease, being unable to remain in place. All the misery in the entire world comes from an inability to sit quietly in a room, says Pascal.⁸ It's true. We just can't sit there, we've got to go to a window and vainly look for something interesting, or pick at that scab on our arm, or go for a walk, or a smoke, or a walk and a smoke. If only we could remain in place, but we can't. That's desire. Now, what's going on in desire or need? The desire Levinas is thinking about is sexual, in my view. The clue for that is where he says the "needs that we do not lightly call 'intimate' remain at the stage of a malaise, which is surmounted in a state closer to deliverance than satisfaction" (OE 59). He's talking a lot about sex in this essay, at least male sexuality; but it's rather discreetly dealt with, thank God. He's not writing pornography. His point is that satisfaction does not satisfy. Satisfaction leaves us with disappointment. It leaves us with what he calls a "dead weight in the depths of our being" (OE 60). I'm not going to illustrate this with sexual examples because that would be in extremely poor taste. You can all insert whatever you want into this

⁸ Blaise Pascal, *Pensées*, trans. William Finlayson Trotter (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1958), II., p. 139.

ellipsis. "A dead weight..." Desire desires desire. Desire is not satisfied, it just deepens. Desire is that thing that hollows itself out.

Then we get an interesting remark about asceticism:

What gives the human condition all its importance is precisely this inadequacy of satisfaction to need. The justification of certain ascetic tendencies lies there: the mortifications of fasting are not only agreeable to God; they bring us closer to the situation that is the fundamental event of our being: the need for escape (OE 60).

So, asceticism, classically understood (all the Catholics out there should be thinking of St. Antony, you know Athanasius' Life of St. Antony, which is a wonderful text. I mean, who doesn't want to be an Egyptian Desert Father? Who doesn't want to escape from the Alexandrian decay of the world? Antony, of course, is the Christian translation and transformation of pagan Socrates), reveals the nature of Being and the nature of our desire to escape. Asceticism reveals the desire to escape from desire, or at least suspend or transform that desire through the achievement of a separation of *σάρκός* (sarkos) from *πνεῦμα* (pneuma), flesh from spirit. The function of asceticism within, say, the Desert Fathers through to later religious tendencies in monasticism and mystical practice is always to achieve a distance between self and body. Let's go back to the Hitlerism essay. Today, fasting has become totally embodied. We don't fast because we believe in the soul; we fast because we only believe in the body. We fast in order to cleanse the body. We detox to make this body-thing a temple, to make it the supposedly beautiful thing it is. This makes no sense sitting here in a stupid sling with a bloody fractured shoulder, let me tell you. But it also makes no sense in traditional asceticism. This is why when ascetics were fasting, they were also cutting themselves, lacerating themselves, cutting off bits of their bodies, throwing themselves into rivers or ovens, deliberately falling down stairs on vacation, anything they could find. This was particularly strong in this part of the world, in Brabant and Flanders, which had many of the best mystics, like Hadewijch of Antwerp, Mary of Oignies, Christina the Astonishing, Elizabeth of Spaalbeek, the list goes on. We will get to mysticism in Lecture Four.

Pleasure and Shame

Section four is about pleasure: "Pleasure appears as it develops" (OE 61), it deepens, and it has no end. I would quote this whole section but I don't want to cite too much. It really is brilliant. "The [human] being feels its substance somehow draining from it, it grows lighter, as if drunk, and disperses" (OE 61). Pleasure is the "concentration in the instant," where the self is carried away, where it believes itself to be in complete ecstasy. What pleasure offers—and this is why I think the pleasure here is erotic rather than the pleasure of a cup of coffee, even a mochachino—is the possibility for the self to be carried away in complete ecstasy, a complete transport. That's what we're after in the circuits of pleasure, the experience of transgression in Bataille, or the fire of

life in Artaud. But that pleasure is disappointing and I find myself once again simply factually existing.

The analysis here is phenomenologically really powerful in a nicely obvious way. Pleasure is an escape that fails. I am riveted to the fact of who I am. I am this thing. Whatever you think about yourself—worthless piece of shit or centre of the universe—in pleasure you can try and overcome that, push it aside, and try and attain something other through *ἐκστασις* (ekstasis). For Levinas, ekstasis always falls back and you find yourself existing once again. Pleasure is not passive. It is an ecstatic leap, an attempt at an escape, a loosening of the malaise of identity. In pleasure I have my desire, at least there seems to be an object to my desire, and that object has an exit sign written above it. I run towards it but then I'm disappointed. I run away and I find myself at the airport. It's still me! At the moment of the apparent triumph of pleasure, pleasure falls back. What Levinas is describing, what he's fascinated by, if you know his work more generally (in *Existence and Existents* and other texts), are these kinds of moods that have a to-and-fro structure. Pleasure is the escape from Being that falls back. It's like the analysis of fatigue and effort in *Existence and Existents*. I experience fatigue and I make an effort, and effort falls back into fatigue. This is the negative dialectic of selfhood.

When pleasure disappoints, what does it fall back into? It falls back into shame. Shame is the subject of section five. At the moment of pleasure's apparent triumph it reverts into shame. A being that has gorged itself in pleasure falls back into the agonizing disappointment of shameful intimacy. This is the basic structure of Steve McQueen's gnawingly powerful parable of sex addiction, *Shame* (2011). One seeks to free oneself in the ecstasy of pleasure but one finds oneself riveted to oneself more tightly than before. Shame is the feeling of our basic nudity.

Consider the naked body of the boxer. The nakedness of the music hall dancer, who exhibits herself—to whatever effect desired by the impresario—is not necessarily the mark of a shameless being, for her body appears to her with the exteriority to self that serves as a form of cover. Being naked is not a question of wearing clothes. (OE 65)

The body can be dressed and full of shame or naked and shameless. In shame I experience my being as a weight. That's how section five finishes: being is a burden for itself. Then we get, in section six, a treatment of nausea—this is three years before Sartre's novel of the same name. What is nausea? This analysis of nausea is just brilliant. What you don't get in the later Levinas, and this is a point Jay Bernstein rightly made to me years ago, is the brilliant descriptive phenomenology of the early work. In "On Escape," you get an extended analysis of the phenomenology of emotions that makes perfect sense and is very powerful.

Nausea is a wonderfully pure way of thinking about the way in which we're stuck to ourselves. In the persona of Álvaro de Campos, Fernando Pessoa writes the following:

I feel like vomiting, and like vomiting my own self..

I feel a nausea such that, if I could eat up the universe to throw it up into the sink, I'd eat it.

With a struggle, but it would be for a good purpose.

At least it would be for a purpose.

Such as I am I have no purpose and no life...⁹

Álvaro de Campos was this desperate Walt Whitman figure in the universe or, better, pluriverse of Pessoa's heteronyms. What is nausea? Nausea is the fact of being stuck to yourself. The thing to think about here is when you've actually been nauseous. Let's do practical phenomenology for a moment: imagine that you're at the point of wanting to vomit but you cannot. Your body is absolutely suspended around the idea of desiring to vomit, but you can't and you're caught, you're sweating, you're shaking, you wish you were dead. That's the experience of awful bodily suspension that Levinas is trying to describe. That's what it's like to be riveted to yourself. Meaning, for Levinas, that in nausea, I'm bound to myself in a way where even death becomes impossible because death would be a relief from nausea: I am this worthless piece of shit, I am this worthless piece of shit, I sleep a little, I wake up, I am still this worthless piece of shit. I'll kill myself. I can't. I am a coward and a worthless piece of shit. Now, we need to attach this analysis of nausea to Levinas' analysis of death in *Existence and Existents* and elsewhere.

I Love Phaedra

There is a wonderful discussion of Phaedra, of Racine's *Phèdre*, in *Existence and Existents*, which is also one of my favourite plays. I love Phaedra with a horrible, sick intensity. Who is Phaedra? Phaedra is the daughter of Pasiphaë. Allow me to offer a contemporary paraphrase:

"I'm Phaedra."

"Where are you from?"

"I'm from Crete. My mother was enamored of this white bull and so had the great artificer Daedalus construct this cow-like structure in which she was able to crouch in order to have sex with it."

"Oh, so that's your mother. Who's your dad?"

"My dad is Minos, he's the King of Hades. He decides who gets in and out of Hades and what their punishments are."

"Really? Awesome."

That's Phaedra. She's something. Phaedra begins to burn with desire for her stepson, Hippolytus. She's married to Theseus, who is a kind of useless jerk, the way all these Greek men are, especially in Euripides, and Phaedra is a titanic, extraordinary, and slightly foreign figure from Crete, whose mother was definitely a barbarian. Phaedra is consumed with desire for Hippolytus, her stepson (there's not a biological relation). She wants him, and what she wants in wanting him is the desire of her mother that is

⁹ Álvaro de Campos, "At Long Last...No Doubt About it," in Fernando Pessoa and Co., *Selected Poems*, trans. Richard Zenith (New York: Grove Press, 1998), p. 187. Thanks to Philip Schauss.

coming through her. She realizes this, though she cannot bear to be consumed by the desire, so she thinks about it.

"Well, I'll kill myself."

Then what happens?

"I kill myself and then I go down to Hades. But who would I meet in Hades? My father, Minos, the one who holds the urn of doom."

And what's Minos going to say? "What brings you down here, Phaedra?"

"Well, Dad, I was consumed by the same desire my mother had. You know, when she and the bull had that thing that made the Minotaur. Well, guess what, the same thing happened to me. I mean, I felt the same thing for my son but I didn't do it. But I couldn't bear the desire, so I topped myself."

What's her Dad going to say?

"Fine, just come in. Don't worry about it. I've got some of your favorite yogurt and cream soda in the fridge. Help yourself."

No, not exactly. She's going to go head first in a pot of cow dung or Minotaur shit for many millennia.

The point being that there's no escape. There's no escape for Phaedra, who is tied to existence in life and for whom death is not an exit. This is linked to a theme that rebounds between Levinas and Blanchot in different ways like a ping-pong ball. In Blanchot's work, you find him ceaselessly returning to the thought of death's impossibility. He makes the following terrifying remark about suicide:

Just as the man who is hanging himself, after kicking away the stool on which he stood, the final shore, rather than feeling the leap which he is making into the void feels only the rope which holds him, held to the end, held more than ever, bound as he had never been before to the existence he would like to leave.¹⁰

The paradox of suicide is that the attempt to escape binds us ever tighter to existence. All that we feel is that rope that rivets us to ourselves. Death is impossible. That's Levinas' thought, Blanchot's too. Death is not a possibility of impossibility, that's Heidegger's thought. Death is the impossibility of possibility.

The Impotence of Being

I didn't mean to go off on one with Phaedra, but it's interesting because she is a creature of desire that experiences both shame and being riveted to her self. She's an incredibly powerful example of Levinas' thinking—well, she's more than an example. Where does this all go? This is Levinas' fascinating and provisional conclusion:

Thereby, nausea posits itself not only as something absolute, but as the very act of self-positing: it is the affirmation itself of being. It refers only to itself, is closed to

¹⁰ Maurice Blanchot, *Thomas the Obscure*, trans. Robert Lamberton (New York: Station Hill Press, 1973), p. 36.

all the rest, without windows onto other things. Nausea carries its center of attraction within itself. (OE 68)

Where does that take us? It leads to the following ontological conclusion.

Therefore, one might say, nausea reveals to us the presence of being in all its impotence, which constitutes this presence as such. It is the impotence of pure being, in all its nakedness. (OE 68)

If this essay raises the question of being qua being, that big Aristotelian, Heideggerian onto-theological question, we can say that the being of being in the experience of escape is impotent. Being for Levinas is impotence and impotentiality experienced in the face of death's impossibility. I find that an extremely provocative thought. I won't do this now, but at some later point I will illustrate that with some quotations from Samuel Beckett, which will not be difficult to do. "There is rapture, or there should be, in the motion crutches give;"¹¹ "If I had the use of my legs, I would throw myself out of the window. But perhaps it's the knowledge of my impotence that emboldens me to that thought."¹² This is Beckettian logic. It's a logic of impotence. There's more we could say, but implicit within this line of thought is a critique of Heidegger. For Heidegger, Being is potency and possibility. Dasein is the being who can, who is able, and who can do it. Dasein can do it. Dasein is possessed of *Seinkönnen*, the ability-to-be. I can make that possibility integral to my projection. I internalize it ontically in the form of conscience and that gives me my self-constancy, my subjectivation, and that's what it means to be authentic. Authenticity flows from this potency, from this ability. What Levinas is trying to do here is stress the impotency of being. "The nature of nausea is nothing other than its presence, nothing other than our powerlessness to take leave of that presence" (OE 68).

Being, he then goes on to say in the next section, "is an experience of powerlessness," but a powerlessness that is not lack (OE 69). At the base of need or, better, the ground of desire, is not a lack but a plenitude. What Levinas is thinking about here is that being is not orientated towards the fulfilment of a lack, which, as I already said, is a way of thinking about Aristophanes' position in the Symposium. Rather, being is the attempted release or escape from an unbearable plenitude. Another way of putting that thought is that being is imperfect insofar as it is being. If finitude means that being is a burden to itself that we desire to escape, then being is finite. Levinas also goes on to say that being is brutal. It is the experience of brute weight, a burden we have to carry.

For limitation is the mark of the existence of the existent. This weight of the being that is crushed by itself, which we revealed in the phenomenon of malaise, this condemnation to be oneself can also be seen in the dialectical impossibility of conceiving the beginning of being—that is, of grasping the moment where being takes up this weight—and of being nevertheless driven back to the problem of one's origin. (OE 70)

¹¹ Samuel Beckett, *Molloy* (New York: Grove Press, 1955), p. 86.

¹² Beckett, *Molloy*, p. 60.

Being has always already begun. We find ourselves thrown and the beginning point or the origin is something that recedes from us. Levinas is very closely working through Heidegger's idea of facticity. We are not self-constituting or self-legislating beings. We do not authorize ourselves. We are authored by something that is outside of our control. The fantasy of philosophy is a fantasy of authorship—"I think, therefore I am." For Levinas, I am, but I wish to God that I was not—that I could not be, that I could escape being me.

Is There a Way Out of Barbarism?

We're closing in on paragraph seven, where we're going to get a beautiful little twist in the argument. One thing before that: "we will reserve the problem of eternity for a later study, which will have to sketch the philosophy of escape" (OE 70–1). (Always note this gesture in writing, and please be suspicious of it: "in my future work, which will constitute a dialectical trilogy, I plan to write a systematic ontology of time and eternity." It never happens. Try and censor yourself when you feel yourself writing such sentences. Be honest.) The point he's making there is interesting though: eternity is not that which we escape towards; eternity is the intensification or radicalization of the fatality of being to which we're riveted. This is an amazing thought. He completes section seven with the following line: "And there is a deep truth in the myth that says that eternity weighs heavily upon the immortal gods" (OE 71). The gods are not free. The gods in their eternity are imprisoned too. The prison of the gods is worse than your mortal prison because it just goes on and on and on. Horrible. Eternity is not a release; it's just an intensification of being riveted. Eternity is a prison. This is how Hamlet feels, and he was pretty smart.

Here's the twist. In section eight, we turn back to the theme of idealism, and Levinas insists it's a failure. When idealism believes it has surpassed being in thought, it finds itself invaded by being on all sides. Let me turn to the last lines of the essay. He's said that idealism is a failure, liberalism is a failure, we're stuck to ourselves, pleasure falls back into shame, nausea is the experience of my self, being is impotence, death is not an exit, and neither is eternity. Things are looking a little bleak. Tragic even. Levinas writes,

And yet the value of European civilization consists incontestably in the aspirations of idealism, if not in its path: in its primary inspiration idealism seeks to surpass being. Every civilization that accepts being—with the tragic despair it contains and the crimes it justifies—merits the name "barbarian." (OE 73)

What's he saying? One more step.

Consequently, the only path open for us to satisfy idealism's legitimate demands without nevertheless entering into its erring ways is that on which we measure without fear all the weight of being and its universality. It is the path where we recognize the inanity of acts and thoughts incapable of taking the place of an event that breaks up

existence in the very accomplishment of its existence. Such deeds and thoughts must not conceal from us, then, the originality of escape. It is a matter of getting out of being by a new path, at the risk of overturning certain notions that to common sense and the wisdom of the nations seemed the most evident. (OE 73)

The final move in the essay is to say that the value of European civilization consists in the aspirations of idealism, the aspirations of liberalism, the aspirations of Frenchness in that political geography we considered earlier on, the aspiration to overcome or surpass being. Any civilization that accepts being and the tragic despair that it contains is barbaric, i.e., Hitlerism, Heideggerianism. Then Levinas raises the question of trying to get out of being by a new path. What is that new path? We have absolutely no idea. The essay ends at that point. The problem Levinas leaves us with is the following: how are the legitimate aspirations of liberalism and idealism consistent with the fact that it's completely ontologically wrong? Can there be some new path? That's what he spends the rest of his philosophical career trying to figure out. That's what we're going to get to tomorrow. No path is here described. All the exits seem blocked and the walls are slowly closing in, most Edgar Allen Poe-like.

Levinas in Captivity

A last thought, and this is something we can pick up separately if you wish, is Levinas' persistent critique of the bourgeoisie. Bourgeois existence is rooted in the idea of self-sufficiency: being at home, being at rest, being at peace, experiencing well-being, going to yoga classes, having regular detox, workouts at the gym three times a week. This is where we could propose a reading of Levinas' text written about his experience of captivity during the Second World War. You can find this in a little text called "Captivité" from the first volume of the *Oeuvres complètes*, which has the most hideous cover imaginable. Although I'd like to, I won't read the whole thing. Levinas writes,

Si paradoxal que cela puisse paraître, ils ont connu dans la close étendue des camps une amplitude de vie plus large et, sous l'œil des sentinelles, une liberté insoupçonnée. Ils n'ont pas été des bourgeois, et c'est là leur vrai romantisme.¹³

What he says is that the prisoner is not like someone at home in Bromley, Beckenham, Billericay, Basingstoke, Braintree, or Biggleswade (yes, there is a town called Biggleswade), with his little house and his garden with his guinea pigs. The prisoner is always at the point of leaving, at least in their mind's eye. The world of the prisoner is not the world of the prison; it's the entire globe. He says, "the life of the prisoner oscillated from Benghazi to London, from Saint-Nazaire to Stalingrad, from Singapore

¹³ "As paradoxical as it may seem, in the narrow expanse of the camps they knew a wider range of life and, under the eye of the sentinels, an unexpected freedom. They were not bourgeois and this was their true romanticism." Emmanuel Levinas, "Captivité," in *Carnet de Captivité et autres inédits*, vol. 1 of *Oeuvres*, ed. Rodolphe Calin and Catherine Chalié (Paris: Grasset, 2009), p. 202.

to Bucharest.”¹⁴ Meaning that the prisoner in the camp, trying to find out news of what’s happening in the war, in the world, has this huge geography, and the prisoner is fascinated by what’s going on. Has someone got a radio? Can we find out what’s happening in the Western Campaign? Or in the East? Or the South? Or in Norway? The paradox here is that the absence of freedom is the condition for freedom. Then he talks about what it means to be a prisoner: namely, to have no possessions, to have nothing of one’s own. He says, “there remains the bed,” “3×1 meters squared,” which the guard can search at any moment, in order to look for anything.¹⁵ The bed, which is the only thing you have, in which you curl up in sleep and try to escape, still isn’t yours. In conclusion, “we learned the difference between having and being.” They learned how little space and how few things were necessary in order to live. Yet, Levinas insists, “We learned freedom.” The prisoner experienced “a new rhythm of life.” Levinas concludes with an amazing phrase: “Nous avons mis le pied sur une autre planète, respirant un atmosphère d’une mélange inconnu et manipulant une matière qui ne pesait plus.”¹⁶ The experience of captivity allowed an escape from the prison of terrestrial existence. Recalling the words of Cyrano de Bergerac, it was a voyage to another planet.

The idea is that the experience of captivity shows the flipside of being riveted to oneself. In the most meagre and mancipated existence, there is still the possibility of freedom, or the imagining of emancipation. That is, freedom is not the absence of extreme constraint, but is precisely the acceptance of the fact of imprisonment and the poverty that comes with it. Without constraint, without captivity, freedom rapidly becomes the meaningless exercise of arbitrariness.

Question: What type of freedom is this Levinasian notion of captive freedom? It sounds just like stoicism to me. What kind of ethics is this?

SC: I don’t have an answer. I hope it’s not stoicism. I just hate stoicism. It’s a kind of ideological default position for imperial administrators, like Seneca, and globetrotting entrepreneurs. Stoicism is completely consistent with bourgeois existence, which is why stoicism does such good business, and why high-flying executives love to read Marcus Aurelius. Levinas constantly and polemically opposed Sartre’s idea of freedom with what he called “invested freedom”—freedom as invested by responsibility. This is very different. You still get the idea that the condition of possibility for any kind of freedom is its absence, which has to be invested by responsibility to the infinite demand of the other.

This text on captivity gives us a very different phenomenology of the camp than what has become the standard ideological narrative, the Spielbergian narrative or whatever. We get an idea of the camp as the condition for liberation. Which reminds me of a story that I owe to British Rail, which is a disaster of course. In late Spring 1996, I was stuck on a train with Paul Ricoeur on the way to a conference in Stoke-on-

¹⁴ Levinas, “Captivité,” p. 202.

¹⁵ Levinas, “Captivité,” p. 202.

¹⁶ Levinas, “Captivité,” p. 202. “We placed a foot on another planet, breathing an atmosphere that was an unknown mixture and manipulating a matter that no longer had any weight.”

Trent. Strange place, Stoke. I was sitting next to Ricoeur and recall that he smelled really badly. I mean, like, he just hadn't washed. It was alarming. But it was okay, he wrote tons of very good books. I used to be particularly attached to his book on Freud. Anyhow, we were stuck on this train for hours. Just sitting there. No announcements. Nothing. The back and forth of chit-chat gave way to silence. Then I summoned the courage to ask him about the Second World War, as he was a captive too. He was captive as a POW as a French officer, but as a non-Jew he didn't have to work. Levinas was a POW and therefore wasn't sent to an extermination camp because he was an officer in the French Army and that was respected at least to a certain extent. But because he was a Jew he had to work. He did hard labour in the forest. I asked Ricoeur whether he knew of Levinas during these years, as they were already acquainted. He said he couldn't remember, which was itself interesting. But then he went on to say how great life was in the POW camp. "It was great," he said. "We got sent books. It was a constant reading group. We just got to study all the time." He translated Husserl's *Ideas I*, he worked constantly, and was surrounded by this intense intellectual atmosphere. He was smiling as he was saying this, I recall. I didn't know how to reply. Fortunately, at that very moment, the train began to move.

Lecture Three

The Break-Up of Fate

Today we'll try and answer question four: what is Levinas' answer to the problem set by his work? We could formulate that question more precisely and ask how does one escape Being's tragedy? How might Being be transformed into a comedy, perhaps even a "divine comedy," to borrow an expression of Levinas' from "God and Philosophy"? It's a question of how to escape the thrownness of Being. By "Being" I don't mean something numinous, ethereal, up in the heavens. I just mean the facticity of existence: Being's seemingly insurmountable facticity that renders it impotent. We saw in "On Escape" that the question of Being is answered by a claim to Being's impotence and impotentiality. Can there be a projection that projects beyond my thrownness? Am I just stuck with myself? Am I endlessly riveted to myself? The claim is that Heidegger's work, despite its claims to authentic projection, remains locked within the tragedy of finitude. Despite Heidegger's claims about free projection and about what he calls "resoluteness," "constancy of the self," and so on, he remains mired in the tragedy of finitude, and this has no ethical sense for Levinas.

So, can there be a new path out of being? Can there be, as Levinas puts it, an otherwise than being? The answer to the problematic that Levinas sets out with such clarity and phenomenological power in "On Escape" and the other early work is the defence of a form of subjectivity structured as substitution. Now, when we get to our final question—is Levinas' answer the best answer, or might there be other answers?—we'll look at Levinas' other answer to that problem in *Totality and Infinity*, and this will take us in the direction of the concepts of eros, fecundity, and pluralism. For now I want to look at *Otherwise than Being, Or Beyond Essence*, the great 1974 book that some consider Levinas' most important philosophical work. To put matters really simply, Levinas' claim (and he'll never put it this way because he just doesn't say things like this) is that we escape evasion through what cannot be evaded, and what cannot be evaded is responsibility for the other. That's how I understand the logic of the later work: subjectivity is structured as responsibility for the other. The response to the question of evasion or escape is bound up with a relationship to that which cannot be escaped, namely, responsibility.

Let me paraphrase the overall argument of *Otherwise than Being* by picking up on some moments from the introduction. You can read this either in Lingis' translation or in the slightly cleaned-up version, "Essence and Disinterestedness," which you can

find in *Basic Philosophical Writings*. What we did in our translation was put capital letters where there were capital letters in French, organize the punctuation and syntax, and try and turn Levinas into what we might loosely call "English." We also added some footnotes that I think are really helpful for the uninitiated. Paraphrasing the introduction to *Otherwise than Being*, we might say that what Levinas means by this awkward locution "otherwise than being" is the break-up, the escape, from Being's fatality. Is Heidegger a fatalist? Yes. Levinas writes, "The breakup of a fate that reigns in essence, in that its fragments and modalities, despite their diversity, belong to one another, that is, do not escape the same order, do not escape Order, as though the bits of the thread cut by the Parques were knotted together again" (OB 8). Notice the implicit link to tragedy, which is always linked to fate, the three goddesses or Fates, Moirai (Μοῖραι). What is otherwise than being? It is subjectivity not defined by fate. That's the claim.

How to Build an Immonument

So, how is subjectivity understood? It's understood as a non-coincidence of the self with itself, an otherness in the self, a substitution, what he calls a "null-site" (a non-lieu is a term that has a legal meaning, referring to a non-suit or a dismissal of charges) or a "non-place" (which is how Augustine ends up in his quest of trying to find a place for God in his memory in book X of the *Confessions*). You can find this view in the epigraph to *Otherwise than Being* from Pascal: "...That is my place in the sun.' That is how the usurpation of the whole world began."¹ Any claim to place is horror. Place is site, is paganism, it takes us back to Hitlerism. Levinas' most extreme critique of Heidegger is that what Heidegger offers is a paganism of the site, an enrooted paganism of place. There can be no place for Levinas. We could go into a little riff on that: you could link this idea of place to the concept of property, from the beginning of Rousseau's *Discourse on Inequality*, where he says,

The first man who, having enclosed a piece of ground, to whom it occurred to say this is mine, and found people sufficiently simple to believe him, was the true founder of civil society. How many crimes, wars, murders, how many miseries and horrors Mankind would have been spared by him who, pulling up the stakes or filling in the ditch, had cried out to his kind: Beware of listening to this imposter.²

The horror that is civilization, which culminates in Hitlerism, begins with an assertion of place, of my place, of my property. That's also part of Levinas' deeply anti-Heideggerian polemic, insofar as Heidegger is about place, what he calls "Ort,"

¹ Blaise Pascal, *Pensées*, trans. William Finlayson Trotter (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1958), II, p. 112.

² Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Discourse on the Origin and Foundations of Inequality Among Men* or *Second Discourse*, in *The Discourses and Other Early Political Writings*, trans. and ed. Victor Gourevitch (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), p. 161.

especially the "der Ort des Wohnens," the place of dwelling. Incidentally, this is why architects love Heidegger. They can build ugly buildings, read ten pages of Heidegger, and feel good about themselves. Levinas is against architecture. Bataille is also against architecture. Architecture is fascism. I sort of believe that. It's one big phallic, fascistic phantasy. New York's brand new Freedom Tower points pointlessly towards the sky like a huge robot schlong. Levinas is so anti-place that he would even reject the less fascistic, more soft-focus, phenomenological discourse on place that one can find in someone like Edward Casey. Now, Casey's work is fascinating, but Levinas would be against the recovery of any and all discourses on place.

At the heart of this polemic is the following idea: "The responsibility for the other is the locus in which is situated the null-site of subjectivity" (OTB 10). This null-site is called the "immemorial." We could also link this to the business of Holocaust memorials and the whole debate that surrounds them. I think Levinas would prefer to talk about Holocaust immemorials. How do you build an immemorial? How do you construct an immemorial? Such is perhaps Levinas' question.

There was a fantastic project in the Bronx in the summer of 2013 called the "Gramsci Monument." The artist, Thomas Hirschhorn, built this precarious, flimsy, slightly ramshackle monument to Gramsci that lasted for eight weeks or so. It was made of wood, glue, and tape, and it kind of looked like shit. I loved it, and loved hanging out in it. The monument was dismantled at the end of the summer. That was the idea. It shouldn't last. It was a precarious, indeed Levinasian, monument that, for Hirschhorn, is all about responsibility for the other and being with others. Why is there this obsession with memorialization that is always about a place and, to speak crudely, the organization of visibility, image, and impersonal phallic power? The immemorial, by contrast, is unrepresentable, invisible, and intensely personal. Conceived temporally, Levinas says that this null-site is a kind of lapsus, a kind of gap or delay: "It is the very fact of finding oneself when losing oneself" (OB 11). Subjectivity is a non-place and a non-time—a time that is out of time—a gap or pause, a holding of breath. A suspension. What Levinas is doing here is admittedly weird. In this strange state "[a]ll the negative attributes, which state the beyond of essence, become positive in responsibility, a response answering to a nonthematizable provocation and thus a nonvocation, a trauma" (ED 118).³ In this queer argument—substitution, non-place, a time out of time—all the negative attributes become positive. Meaning that Levinas' seemingly negative language of obsession, hostage, persecution, trauma, and the rest becomes a positive ethical language. I cannot overemphasize the strangeness of what Levinas is up to. In many ways it's the kind of creative de-familiarization that I think we need both with respect to Levinas and to his ideas. The way we can get away from the reduction of Levinas' work to a series of moralistic banalities is through nothing more complex than a reading of his texts, which is what I am trying to do in these lectures.

³ Emmanuel Levinas, "Essence and Disinterestedness," in BW 118; OW 12.

Ethics Back to Front

At the end of the chapter on substitution Levinas talks about what he calls "ethical language." He writes, and please pay close attention,

The ethical language we have resorted to does not derive from a special moral experience which would be independent of the description hitherto developed. It proceeds from what Alphonse de Waelhens called nonphilosophical experiences, arising from the very meaning of the approach that cuts across knowledge, from the face that cuts across the phenomenon. Phenomenology is able to follow the reversion of thematization into an-archy in the description of the approach. Ethical language succeeds in expressing the paradox in which phenomenology suddenly finds itself, since ethics, beyond politics, features at the level of this reversion. (SUB 92)

We know what "ethical language" means, right? It's about duty, obligation, being good, you know the kind of thing. There are even books called *Being Good*, *How to be Good*, *Being a Good Manager*, *Being Good to Your Guinea Pigs*, and so on. This is what we usually think of as ethics. Now, by contrast, Levinas' ethical language is trauma, hostage, obsession, persecution. It is a negative language that becomes positive; a language that in many ways expresses the paradox that Levinas wants to stage at the level of phenomenology, which, for him, means philosophy. If you were putting together an ethical language, these are not exactly the first terms you would use, right? "Good morning and welcome to the first class of your introduction to ethics. Today's topic is persecution!" Just think about the evaluations you'd get. No. When you teach ethics, you are meant to exhume the three corpses of ethics—Aristotle (virtue ethics), Kant (deontology), and Mill (utilitarianism)—and teach these dead things until students are completely ethically indifferent. Such is the normal business of moral philosophy. But I digress.

For Levinas, the negative becomes positive. What he's trying to describe is (or better, is mobilized within) an ethical language. A useful way of thinking about Levinas is not in terms of arguments or verifying propositions but in relation to a certain accumulation of terms, a rhetorical intensification through forms of repetition, invocation, and multiplication. Levinas is a rhapsodic thinker. He's not Freddie Ayer. As Derrida rightly says, Levinas' movement of thinking is like a wave on the beach, always the same wave crashing on the beach over and over again with repeated force and intensity.⁴ Levinas has one point to make and he keeps coining different terms in order to make it. He doesn't explain the language he uses, he doesn't provide definitions of concepts; he just adds another term to a previous term. It's beautiful to dance to, although a little frustrating when you can't hear the music or if you have no sense of rhythm. What Levinas is trying to describe is something that occurs prior to understanding, prior to comprehension, a debt contracted before freedom. It's a trauma that can only be traced through its effects, which are only felt *après-coup*, after the fact, belatedly.

⁴ See Derrida, "Violence and Metaphysics," p. 124.

What might we say about that? Perhaps some of you are interested in psychoanalysis. I certainly hope so. Now, if there is a term in Levinas' ethical language that would allow one to make a link to the discourse of psychoanalysis, then it is "trauma." Levinas' claim is that the ethical subject—I've not really begun to explain that properly (give me time!)—is a traumatized subject. What that means psychoanalytically can be thought of in relationship to what Freud says about trauma in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, which is really very simple. Some people think the psyche is governed by the pleasure principle. I used to believe, Freud says, that the psyche was a kind of hydraulic mechanism, a machine that throws up wishes that it wants satisfied. The satisfaction of a wish is pleasure, and pleasure is experienced as a maintenance or a lowering of excitation in the organism or the psyche. That's what he says in *The Interpretation of Dreams*.

Trauma totally screws that up. This is exhibited to Freud in the First World War through war neurosis, shell shock, or what we now call post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). In cases of PTSD, the psyche is not oriented towards the fulfilment of wishes that result in pleasure. Rather, the psyche is organized in relationship to a trauma, and that undergoes a repetition, and that repetition is a repetition of trauma. The traumatic neurotic will wake up night after night with the same dream of falling down the stairs on vacation (ha bloody ha), of being tortured, being shot at, being eaten by rats (orally or anally), or whatever the trauma is. The wish that is exhibited in trauma is a wish not for pleasure but for the repetition of pain. To go beyond the pleasure principle is to assert that what trauma yields is compulsive repetition, and the compulsion to repeat overrides the pleasure principle.

Of course, this conclusion pulls away one of the founding pillars of Freud's work, arguably the founding pillar: the primacy of the pleasure principle. Contrary to a stupid but common doxa, Freud was a scrupulously honest thinker and realized that the evidence of traumatic neurosis meant that the structure of his thinking had to be revised. I think you can map the structure of trauma, repetition, and the death drive directly onto Levinas. I tried to do that in some work on that relationship a long time ago, which I can't go into here. What Freud infers from the repetition compulsion is that trauma produces the repetition compulsion and the latter is drive-like, *Triebhaft*. The repetition of trauma is the repetition of suffering, but also the repetition of something that also perhaps assuages suffering—that's the flipside. The baby in its cart throws out the toy and says "Fort"—it's a German baby—and then the parent picks up the toy and the baby says "Da."⁵ That movement of throwing out the toy and the toy coming back is a repetition compulsion, which is a way of dealing with absence, in this case the pain of the absence of the mother. So, repetition is also a form of sublimation. We'll come back to that. That will take us onto the shores of psychoanalysis, where I'm always happy to get stranded.

⁵ See Sigmund Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, vol. 18 of *The Standard Edition of The Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud* (London: Hogarth Press, 1920–2), pp. 14–17.

Levinas' Anarchism

In Levinas' ethics everything seems to be in reverse. It's a question of trying to think of that which precedes essence. That which turns the subject inside out and back to front, where ethical language seems to be turned on its head and negatives become positives. It's a strange moral universe. Let me say a few more words about this ethical subject. The main argument of the Introduction to *Otherwise than Being* is, to use Levinas' word, evasive. But if you read through a lot of the blah, blah, blah, the argument is, I think, simply that the ethical subject is not a subject in general; it is me. The ethical subject is particular and singular. Another way Levinas will put this is that the self "n'est pas le Moi, c'est moi."⁶ When Levinas talks about the ego, it's not the Cartesian *res cogitans*, the Kantian transcendental unity of apperception, or the Fichtean active ego, it's me, *c'est moi*. This is something that is possibly picked up from Dostoyevsky's *Underground Man*, a radically singular creature. Perhaps all of Levinas is in Dostoevsky.

Substitution is not a fusion with the other, it is—and this is a heavy word—expiation. What does that mean? In the secondary literature on Levinas people will often just repeat Levinas' language as if that's enough, as if that's any sort of elucidation. A lot of writing on Levinas simply takes up his rhapsodic intensifications and repeats them. Such is the pious, lazy discourse of the convert. It's not philosophically responsible. So what does expiation mean? Expiation means atonement. Atonement is a heavy concept in Judaism where you have, for example, the Day of Atonement, *Yom Kippur*. (I note in passing that the only holidays we have at The New School are the Jewish holidays, even though we're a secular school. Let's call it a paradox.) But this is an atonement that is never at one. The self is sundered, open, in a radical passivity. This is what Levinas repeatedly calls "a passivity more passive than all passivity" (see, for example, OB 14, 15, 146). What does that mean? It's a good example of Levinas' ethical language. You can get a sense of what he's talking about. He wants to emphasize passivity but not the kind of passivity that's opposed to activity. Levinas wants a passivity that's more passive than all passivity, an ultra-passivity that might itself be a kind quasi-activity or a passivity that's beyond the opposition of activity and passivity. It's a phrase Blanchot picks up on in *The Writing of the Disaster*.⁷ This passivity that's more passive than all passivity is what Levinas calls—and here's yet another sequence of seemingly negative terms in an ethical language—vulnerability, exposure, and persecution.

The otherwise than being is not, as I said earlier, some grand neo-Platonic, crypto-Plotinian, metaphysical thesis, although it can sound like that, and Levinas does make it sound like that sometimes. Levinas does have a deep debt to Plotinus, neo-Platonism, and Plato. When he uses the word "trace" the word is taken from Plotinus' *Enneads*, the *ἵχνος* (*ikhnos*), the trace of the good beyond Being that Levinas picks up from

⁶ Emmanuel Levinas, *Humanisme de l'autre homme* (Livres de Poche edn, Montpellier: Fata Morgana, 1982), p. 111.

⁷ See Blanchot, *The Writing of the Disaster*.

the centre of the Republic. He uses the neo-Platonic language, but I find it obfuscating. What Levinas is describing is not some big metaphysical thesis. He's describing a dramatic movement of passivity in the self, the dramatic movement of passivity that is the self. The otherwise than being is something that is existential, something performative, even if that performativity is a powerless performativity, a performance of impotentiality, that can't do it, that is not virile like Heidegger's *Dasein*.

There's a useful thought in Derrida's late work, what he called "performative powerlessness," that emerges, funnily enough, when he was trying to think through some aspects of speech act theory in relationship to Habermas. Actually, it wasn't that funny. A performative is something I can perform: "I name this ship 'The Queen Mary'." That's a performative. You have the power to perform that act. But then again, there's a powerless performative. This is something Judith Butler is very close to in a lot of her work, Stanley Cavell too. This is the passivity Levinas calls "anarchic": a way of being affected that is not some principled auto-affection, some archic self-positing of the subject, but rather something that "slips into me like a thief" (OTB 148).

The whole discourse on anarchy in Levinas is interesting, but also misleading and slightly confusing. We might want to link it to political ideas of anarchism but Levinas' thought is that what's anarchic is what is without principle. Take Fichte's *Wissenschaftslehre*, for example, where we get the idea of the subject as self-principled through its own activity. The self is the activity of the subject that legislates for itself and that wills itself into being. That would be an archic subject. The Cartesian subject is also an archic subject, although for Descartes there's always God to underpin the subjective certainty of the ἀρχή (arkhê). Anarchy cannot, therefore, be a new ordering principle, a new arkhê. It cannot reign. It can only take place as the disruption of order and not a new order. "Anarchy, unlike arkhê, cannot be sovereign. It can only disturb, albeit in a radical way, the State, prompting isolated moments of negation without any affirmation" (BW 180, fn.⁽³⁾). Just as positives become negatives in Levinas' ethical language, anarchy is negation without affirmation.

Now, politically, anarchism is affirmation. One way of interpreting the anarchy symbol, the "A", is that anarchy is also an order or an organization. Anarchy is not disorder but a different way of ordering, one not based on state and capital but on a different cooperative understanding of the social bond. Levinas isn't talking about that idea of anarchy. Anarchy does not reign. Anarchy, for Levinas, is the disruption of order, not a new order. However, I have talked about anarchism as a political programme and have tried to link Levinasian ethical anarchism to political anarchism in *Infinitely Demanding* and elsewhere, which is also a critique of Levinas' statist and androcentric vision of justice, politics, and everything that gets subsumed under the heading of "the third party" (le tiers). But that's me, not Levinas.

⁽³⁾ Meister Eckhart, *Mystic and Philosopher*, translated with commentary by Reiner Schürmann (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1978), p. 216.

Waving Goodbye to the Principle of Non-Contradiction

I've given a summary in my words of introduction to *Otherwise than Being*. The final bit of weirdness we need to delve into, which is an important bit of weirdness, is that this experience of the self—as trauma, persecution, vulnerability, outrage, obsession, hostage (ethical language!)—is an enigma that can only be stated enigmatically. What does that mean? There's a 1965 paper, "Enigma and Phenomenon," that is helpful here. First, what are phenomena? They are the things phenomenologists phenomenologize about, right? But what is a phenomenon? According to Heidegger in the introduction to *Being and Time*, the phenomenon is what shows itself (was sich zeigt). Now this Levinasian self does not show up, it's an enigma. An enigma has different meanings, but one of those meanings comes from the Greek word, αἴνιγμα, meaning riddle or, according to Liddell-Scott, a "dark-saying." An enigma becomes a phenomenon because it must become a said. Language is a fate, but there is a dimension of "experience" that precedes it. As Levinas would put it, the ethical Saying always congeals into a Said that betrays it. This is an important point we've not really covered yet.

In Levinas' later work, by which I mean *Otherwise than Being*, the model of the face disappears. It's there in footnotes and shows up here and there, but it's by no means central. The face gets replaced by the distinction between the Saying and the Said. Crudely, the Saying is ethical and the Said is ontological, meaning that the Said is propositional. The Coke Zero bottle is on the table, it's a proposition, it's a constative, and I can assert its truth or falsity. The Saying has a different linguistic register. Levinas' point is that the Saying has to be said. In order to be articulated or expressed, it must be said in a book, an essay, or a sentence, and insofar as it is said, it is betrayed. That betrayal is necessary. This is why Levinas will insist that the otherwise than being has to be articulated ambiguously.

In *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas already broke with what he called "formal logic." Formal logic, in his understanding, is a logic governed by the principle of non-contradiction. Now, the ethical relationship to the other is a contradiction. The contradiction is that I am both a being who is separate, who is absolute, who is an ego, a stomach "without ears" (OB 134), and a being that can enter into relationship with another. The key thought in *Totality and Infinity* is very simple; it's the thought of what he calls, "the absolute relation." All other theories of intersubjectivity (Hegel, Husserl, Heidegger) are theories where I require the relationship to the Other in order to complete my subjectivity: my ego requires the alter ego, the Other (Husserl); my Dasein is Mitsein, being-with-others (Heidegger); self-recognition is obtained through absolute otherness (Hegel): I need the other in order to become myself. Levinas breaks with that entirely. For him, self-recognition is simply self-recognition. That's what I'm doing when I'm eating my yogurt in the morning. I hate the Other. I don't need the Other. I want yogurt and I want it now! That's why the Other is the only being I can

wish to kill—they might steal my yogurt. I do not need the Other in order to complete my egoity or subjectivity. I am who I am. The Other is an entirely other world, and I can enter into a relationship but also absolve myself from that relationship. The contradictory thought in Levinas' early work is the absolute relation, what he also calls, in a phrase Blanchot picks up in his magisterial *The Infinite Conversation*, "le rapport sans rapport."⁸ That's the entire thought of Totality and Infinity. The ethical relation is the relation without relation, a relation where I can absolve myself from the relation. If you can get that thought straight, then you've understood the kernel of Totality and Infinity.

In *Otherwise than Being* that contradiction becomes an ambiguity at the level of language. Levinas knows that when he tries to say what he wants to say philosophically, he will betray it and it will become a Said. The only way Levinas can therefore proceed is apophatically, through negation, like Pseudo-Dionysius' "Mystical Theology," the negative theologians, or whatever. Personally, I think that the formal connection between negative theology and Levinas has been a little overdone. I think Jean-Luc Marion, who explores this connection, is, well, saying nothing interesting. He formalizes everything, drains it of any existential life, and leaves it phenomenologically desiccated, like dried coconut. But some people like dried coconut. Now, there is a certain discipline of negation in Levinas that is apophatic and has certain linguistic similarities to non-desiccated mysticism as it has been practised over the millennia. One can approach the attributes of God through negation because God is ultimately not graspable within discourse, and this is because God himself is nothing. That's where apophatic mysticism really pushes things. God is nothing and I am nothing. Mysticism is a question of what Eugene Thacker calls "ascending negations." We meet each other in the desert, the wasteland, what Eckhart calls "the Godhead," where God is no longer God and man is no longer man. This is why Eckhart writes in the wonderful *Poverty Sermon*, "Therefore we beg God to rid us of God."⁹ That's why the Pope at Avignon posthumously condemned Eckhart as a heretic in 1328. I love Eckhart, and we will come back to him towards the end of these lectures.

Ethics can only be articulated ambiguously, enigmatically. Listen to Levinas in the final page of the introduction to *Otherwise than Being*: "This diachrony is itself an enigma: the beyond being does and does not revert to ontology; as soon as it is pronounced, the beyond, the infinite, becomes and does not become the meaning of being" (ED 125; OTB 125). Can he really be saying this? Should we send it to the analytic philosophy thought-police for bullshit checking? But we forget that there are respectable logicians who have abandoned the principle of non-contradiction. It's a kind of whimsical idea that all logic is wedded to the principle of non-contradiction. It's something non-logicians tend to think must be true because Aristotle said it and,

⁸ Maurice Blanchot, *The Infinite Conversation*, trans. Susan Hanson (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), pp. 46–8, 73, 132, 158. (The relation without relation.)

⁹ Meister Eckhart, *Mystic and Philosopher*, translated with commentary by Reiner Schürmann (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1978), p. 216.

you know, we all love Aristotle. There are logicians like Graham Priest who have developed paraconsistent logic or dialethism that has long since waved goodbye to the principle of non-contradiction. Both A and not-A could be simultaneously true and untrue. I know this will sound like New Age claptrap bullshit, but if you make your way through the fields of string theory and parallel universe or multiverse hypotheses (as I tried last year), then you enter a way of modelling the universe where everything has to be both true and not true. It has to be, otherwise these multiverse models make no sense. There are physicists like Brian Greene who are totally happy with that. In order for any parallel universe hypothesis to be conceivable, then it has to follow that what might be true in this universe can be untrue in some parallel universe, and vice versa. It seems to me that philosophers believe all sorts of strange things about science that scientists don't.

The Weak Syntax of Scepticism

For Levinas, ethics is articulated ambiguously in terms of the circulation of the Saying and the Said. But what do these terms mean, the Saying and the Said? Though you won't find it in Levinas, this is my gloss. The Said is what we're doing now. It's the discourse we use; it's the propositional discourse of totality, ontology, and comprehension. The Saying is that pre-propositional experience of language that takes place in relation to the Other. As soon as the Saying is expressed philosophically, it becomes the Said. It is betrayed in being translated, "Traduire, c'est trahir," as Levinas repeatedly says. In other words, there is no pure Saying. The Saying has to be expressed, and when it's expressed, it's expressed as a Said. Does that mean there's a straightforward contradiction in Levinas' approach? That's the central argument in Derrida's "Violence and Metaphysics." Derrida's claim is that Levinas wants to proclaim the primacy of ethics (the good beyond being, responsibility to the other), but he is obliged to do so philosophically, with propositions. Therefore, Levinas' attempt to leave ontology requires ontology. In other words, he's a nice guy, his heart is in the right place, but he's confused. He wants the Saying but he has to do it within the Said, and so he contradicts his purpose. So there is, as they used to say *ad nauseam* in Frankfurt in the 1980s, a "performative self-contradiction" in Levinas' thought.

Now, Levinas was not that dumb. Levinas' response to Derrida's critique was to introduce a model for thinking about the problem of ethical language through the distinction between scepticism and the refutation of scepticism. You can find this towards the end of *Otherwise than Being*, in those few pages called "Skepticism and Reason." Very crudely, Levinas' argument is the following: the moment the sceptic begins to speak, they've been refuted. We know this because we've all read Plato's *Protagoras* or the other Socratic dialogues where the sceptic/the sophist says "all truth is subjective." Socrates replies, "Well, in order to say all truth is subjective, you're appealing to the objective conditions of possibility that make communication possible! These

conditions aren't subjective so you've contradicted yourself. So, shut up!" Scepticism is, by definition, self-contradictory and self-refuting. It cannot withstand philosophical refutation. Levinas thinks that's right. Incidentally, I'm very interested in ancient scepticism. It's an area of the history of philosophy that isn't properly appreciated. Of course, we have to remember that Plato's Academy itself fell under the influence of scepticism through the teaching of Arcesilaus and Carneades. Now, to argue for the primacy of the ethical Saying is, in a sense, to try and defend a sceptical position, yet scepticism is refuted. But Levinas' deeper point is that in being refuted, scepticism still returns. In refuting scepticism, scepticism comes back. Levinas describes scepticism as *le revenant* (the revenant, ghost, or spectre). Scepticism is what philosophy exorcizes and yet it still returns, like a ghost. This is why Levinas will say, and this is another phrase Blanchot was fascinated with, "Language is already skepticism."¹⁰ Within the propositional discourse of philosophy, subtending the discourse that Derrida defends against Levinas, there is a dimension of ethical Saying to the Other that cannot be silenced. I think it helps if we don't think about scepticism in the modern sense of epistemological scepticism, namely, the scepticism answered by Descartes, raised again by Hume, and answered by Kant. This is the scepticism that Heidegger sees as a pseudo-problem in philosophy—how do we know the other is in pain? How do we know the external world is really there? What Levinas means is closer to ancient scepticism, which is not a theoretical worry about the external world, but a life praxis, an orientation for living that begins in the suspension of judgement that the sceptics called the *ἐποχή*.

One way of thinking through Levinas is in terms of his relation to Lacanian psychoanalysis, which is of course a very different bunch of bananas. Lacan knew far too much. Really, he was a kind of genius. Philosophers have a hard time reading him because they're often arrogantly impatient readers. The distinction between the Saying and the Said corresponds to the demarcation in Lacan between the order of enunciation (the subject's act of speaking) and the *énoncé* (the formulation or translation of this speech act into a statement or proposition). In a couple of places, certainly in *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, Lacan even describes ancient scepticism as a praxis comparable to psychoanalysis. What this might mean is that psychoanalysts, like sceptics, have to listen to what is beneath propositional discourse, beneath the Said. The sceptical utterance would be the Saying that underpins the Said. Psychoanalysts have to listen for that, and this requires turning the ear a certain way, tuning the ear, attuning the understanding. Philosophers are very bad at that because we're all such passive-aggressive narcissists. We don't listen because we think we already know. Levinas is asking us to adopt another kind of orientation in language and praxis.

The headline here is that Levinas responds to Derrida by internalizing the latter's critique into his philosophical praxis and introducing a different model of language: the Saying and the Said, scepticism and its refutation. It becomes a question of ethics

¹⁰ Blanchot, *The Writing of the Disaster*, p. 77.

as the articulation of an enigma or, better, ethics as a drama of ambiguity. This takes us back to drama and back to theatre. Whatever ethics signifies, it can only signify enigmatically and dramatically. To go back to a passage I already partially cited,

Philosophy thus arouses a drama between philosophers and an intersubjective movement which does not resemble the dialogue of teamworkers in science, not even the Platonic dialogue which is the reminiscence of a drama rather than the drama itself. (ED 126–7; OTB 20)

Levinas is trying to write a drama but his chosen method of articulation for that drama—philosophy as phenomenology—is, perhaps, not the most felicitous.

Another way of thinking about what Levinas is attempting—consider it a short, tragi-comical parenthesis—would be to think about this language of ambiguity in relationship to what Beckett called “the syntax of weakness.” What Levinas is attempting to do linguistically, performatively, can be thought of in terms the following set of sentences from Beckett:

But my good-will at certain moments is such, and my longing to have floundered however briefly, however feebly in the great life torrent streaming from the earliest protozoa to the very latest humans, that I, no, parenthesis unfinished. I’ll begin again. My family.¹¹

And this:

And would it not suffice, without any change in the structure of the thing as it now stands as it always stood, without a mouth being opened at the place which even pain could never line, would it not suffice to, to what, the thread is lost, no matter...¹²

And finally:

I resume, so long as, so long as, let me see, so long as one, so long as he, ah fuck all that, so long as this, then that, agreed, that’s good enough, I nearly got stuck.¹³

Beckett’s sentences are a series of weak intensities, a series of antithetical inabilities, unable to go on and unable not to go on. “I could go on, I can’t go on.” Of course, this has become a kind of Badiouesque fridge magnet cliché. It’s a double inability that describes the weakness of our relationship to finitude. If you understand Levinas’ language as ethics and then try to insert it in a programme alongside virtue ethics, deontology, and utilitarianism, it’s going to be bad news. You can’t do that. What Levinas is doing requires a deeper level of linguistic reflection. His ethical intent is closer to the drama that Beckett is describing in these sentences than the truisms of moral philosophy.

¹¹ Samuel Beckett, *The Unnamable*, in vol. 2 of Samuel Beckett: *The Grove Centenary Edition: Novels*, ed. Paul Auster (New York: Grove Press, 2006), p. 315.

¹² Beckett, *The Unnamable*, p. 377.

¹³ Beckett, *The Unnamable*, p. 392.

Escaping Evasion through that which Cannot be Evaded

I now want to turn more closely to question four and consider Levinas' answer to the problem posed by his early work. This will take us deep into the logic of what Levinas calls "substitution," and what I will argue is its strange identity claim. How does substitution fit into the structure of Levinas' later work that I've been trying to describe? Now, there are two versions of "Substitution." There's the 1974 version that you find in *Otherwise than Being*, which is longer and even crazier than the version you can find in *Basic Philosophical Writings*, which is a translation of the version published in 1968, and was based on a lecture given in Brussels in 1967. When we prepared *Basic Philosophical Writings*, we chose the lecture version because it's slightly less confusing than the longer version, but only slightly. It's a wild text. The footnotes alone are completely out of control, repetitive, and all over the place. It contrasts very strongly with a text like "On Escape," which is more of a classical phenomenological essay that unfolds within a certain narrative structure. "Substitution" is more like a modernist poem, fragmentary, imagistic, episodic, and non-linear.

Let me say a word about this maddening and obscure text and then raise some doubts. The basic hypothesis that substitution raises is that if our fundamental relationship to Being is one of evasion, one of flight, as we saw in detail, then substitution as responsibility for the other is that which we cannot evade. We cannot evade responsibility. That's Levinas' point. Substitution is recurrence, an obsessional description of a subjectivity as that which cannot be evaded or escaped. The crude, initial claim I'm making is that we escape the logic of evasion through that which cannot be evaded. Levinas writes,

The impossibility of slipping away is the very singling out of the subject. The notion of hostage overturns the position that starts from presence (of the ego to the self) as a beginning of philosophy. I am not merely the origin of myself, but I am disturbed by the Other. Not judged by the Other, but condemned without being able to speak, persecuted. But we have shown that it is necessary to go further: to be substitutable for the persecutor; whence the idea of responsibility preceding freedom. (SUB 94)

If *Otherwise than Being* is an argument for subjectivity, a subjectivity that is singular—i.e., me—then the claim here is that my singularity is that which I cannot evade. This is what is meant by the idea of the subject as hostage (otage). I'm taken hostage by the Other, taken against my will. Hostage is linked to the verb *ôter* (to remove myself). The argument Levinas is making is that I cannot remove myself from responsibility. I am, therefore, a hostage. There is a link between the inability to remove oneself and being held hostage. As Levinas will say repeatedly, the subject is obsessed. Etymologically, an obsession derives from the Latin terms *sedere* (to sit) and *ob* (against). Obsession is that which sits over and against me. An obsession is not something that I have, it's something that sits over against me, faces me. Psychoan-

alytically, that's what obsession is. It's not simply that I'm endlessly cogitating, but it feels like my being is completely hemmed in and I'm paralyzed by something out there. This is what Freud calls *Hemmung*. Inhibition hems me in. Obsession haunts me. Obsession is a ghostly structure, and a ghost is not something in your head—ghosts are real. Just ask Hamlet. Levinas is lining up a series of terms in "Substitution," a series of synonyms that are meant to be some kind of argument: obsession, hostage, outrage, substitution, trauma, persecution, and even psychosis. Each of these terms has packed within it a particular kind of experience. Perhaps the key concept in the discussion of substitution is the notion of recurrence, which I will come to presently.

The Structure of Otherwise than Being

I'll talk about the structure of *Totality and Infinity* a little bit later. I want to turn now to *Otherwise than Being* which, although it is a much less systematic book, has a clear structure. The introduction (chapter one) lays out the whole argument and introduces the central terms and concepts. Chapter two is called "De l'intentionnalité au sentir" ("From Intentionality to Sensibility"). Again, it's a movement where we go from intentionality, that is, from an understanding of consciousness and consciousness' relationship to objects, to an argument for sensibility. Other phenomenologists, of course, have made that argument. Do I hear anyone say Merleau-Ponty? When Levinas writes about Merleau-Ponty in a couple of short, interesting pieces, it's the theme of sensibility that he picks up on. So, the first phenomenological move is the reduction from consciousness to sensibility. Chapter three is called "On Proximity," meaning that, for Levinas, the deep structure of sensibility is proximity to the Other. We go from intentionality to sensibility: the deep a priori structure of sensibility is proximity to the Other, which is not proximity to the Other in the sense in which it was in *Totality and Infinity* (the other as another person), it's an alterity that is internal to subjectivity. Then in chapter four, "Substitution," the deep structure of proximity is revealed as substitution. Substitution is the central concept, and that's why Levinas calls it the "centrepiece of the book" in the opening "Note" to *Otherwise than Being* (OB xli). Now, the centrepiece of that centerpiece, as it were, turns around a series of other concepts, one of which is recurrence, to which we will turn presently. After chapter four, we build back from that discussion of ethical subjectivity as substitution to the level of the third party, and that's where the discussion of justice and politics comes in. In chapter five, after having reduced the Said of philosophy to this notion of substitution, which is the Saying of the book, Levinas moves back to the Said in an account of justice, the third party, and the rest. This is what I call "the justified Said." That is, the Said that is justified with reference to the Saying that breathes through it. Then we get a little discussion of scepticism and its refutation, which I have already mentioned, and then *Otherwise than Being* is done. Well, almost. There are those final ten pages of the book. In those ten pages something really weird happens called "Au dehors" ("To

the Outside”), where he starts to talk about lungs, breathing, and other body parts, trying to say what he’s said in his book in another form. It’s called “Autrement dit” (otherwise said), where Levinas tries to articulate the argument in a different register and sketches the dimensions of what I call the pulmonary subject, where the breath of spirit or *pneuma* becomes the materiality of the lungs.

We’re going to look now at the concepts of substitution and recurrence. Substitution, both the text and the concept, is the centre of the centre of Levinas’ later work, and the central concept within the centerpiece is recurrence. How do we understand recurrence? It’s a question of moving from what Levinas calls “the ego [le moi] to the self [le soi].” In moving from the ego to the self, we slip from consciousness to that which precedes it. What is this self? What or who is this one-self or *soi-même*, as he calls it in French? My question, my critical question, is a very stupid one: when Levinas talks about the ego or the self as *le soi-même*, then is the *soi-même* *le même*? Is the one-self the same? Is this a claim to sameness? (Sameness in French is *la même*.) Is the *soi-même* a claim to sameness, to oneness, and thus a claim to identity?

At the beginning of “Substitution” Levinas asks, “Does consciousness exhaust the notion of subjectivity” (SUB 82)? The answer is no. What Levinas is after is a pre-conscious notion of the self, but does that notion of the self entail a claim to identity? My suspicion is that it does, and this is where I disagree with my Doktorvater, Robert Bernasconi, who is incidentally one of the nicest people in the whole world.

And here is some advice: Always choose your PhD advisors carefully because the structures of graduate school often replicate domestic structures. Families of abusers abuse, and PhD advisors who were abused abuse. It’s the truth. I don’t mean physical abuse but mental abuse, what the comedian Marc Maron calls “thinky pain.” If you get someone who was mentally abused as a PhD student, they will abuse PhD students unless they go through a rigorous psychoanalytic procedure. Okay, I’m joking, and I know my jokes are not always the best. Anyhow, I had the best relationship with Robert. I guess I loved him. We talked about music and football. But he never said anything much about my work. Not a word really. He was a completely silent, Heideggerian Catholic back then. But he always had the original texts, indeed two or three different versions of the original texts. He also had these little index cards with lots of odd words written on them. You know, every use of the word “Schweinsteiger” in Heidegger combined with cross-references to Hegel. I copied this habit and spent years writing words on index cards and storing them in piles and little boxes. I still have them. Although Robert didn’t say anything, he knew what was good work and what was not. He had perfect judgement. Students are always asking for feedback. I never got any feedback from Robert and that was exactly what was needed. I knew what I had to do, at what level he expected me to work. That was it. Maybe your PhD advisor shouldn’t give you loads of feedback and supposedly wonderfully helpful criticism. Maybe he or she should just not be a jerk. So, choose your advisor carefully.

In Itself One: This is Not a Metaphor

Levinas is opposing two notions of the subject: the *pour-soi* [for-itself], that what you can find in Sartre, with what he calls the *en-soi*. If the wrong idea of the subject is a subject that is for-itself, the Sartrean–Hegelian idea of the subject, then he is opposing that to an idea of the in-itself. It's a question of "the 'rhythm' or the 'pulse' of ipseity" (SUB 83). Recurrence, whatever it means, means a recurrence of oneself. Levinas' thought in "Substitution," and the entire book of which it is the kernel, is that subjectivity is a recurrence of oneself. What does that mean? He uses the most extraordinary language here. He writes, "The oneself which lives (we are almost tempted to say, without metaphor, which palpitates)..." (SUB 84). To make that point about metaphor crystal clear, he simply repeats it.

The expression "in one's skin" is not simply a metaphor for the in itself. It relates to a recurrence in the dead time or the between-time separating inspiration and expiration, the diastole and systole of the heart beating softly against the lining of one's own skin. The body is not merely an image or a figure; above all, it is the in-oneseff and contraction of ipseity. (SUB 87)

If that's not clear enough, he repeats it once again: "Backed up against itself, because the self is in itself without recourse to anything, in itself as one is in one's skin (and this incarnation is not metaphorical, since to be in one's skin is an extreme way of being exposed, different from things)" (SUB 88–9). To be in one's skin is an extreme way of being exposed. And this is not a metaphor! This raises the question, what is not a metaphor? We've all read that bit of early Nietzsche where he says that all language is metaphor. When someone says "metaphor," I always think of those men at Venizelos Airport in Athens with *μεταφορά* written across their backs: transportation. Metaphor is transport. Levinas does not want his words to fly. He wants us to understand what he's saying literally, in a really obvious way. One is literally in oneself. One is in one's skin as the "heart beating against the lining of one's chest." You could conclude from that, though Levinas doesn't, that the in-itself is the body. The body is not a metaphor. It's a bloody body. I think that's what Levinas is saying. This stuff that I am wrapped in is skin. I'm a bag of skin. You too. The French signifier *peau* is skin, but it's also something in-itself. What Levinas is trying to push at here is something like an in-itself that is a body. The self is a body-self. This is what Levinas also calls "a nameless singularity by bestowing it with a role, the fulcrum of the mind is a personal pronoun" (SUB 85). The in-itself is not a metaphor. That heart beating against a chest is not a name: it's not Bill or Jane, it is he, she, or s/he. It's a pronoun, a pronominal movement. We could then get into the whole question of pronouns in Levinas. It's a term he uses from the mid-1960s onwards to describe the relationship to the divine that he calls "Illeity." This is a pronominal naming of God. The name of God is not God. God, as he will say, has many proper names (Yahweh, Adonis, Trevor) but none of them are names of God. If the divine means anything for Levinas, and it's linked at some level to what he's talking about here, it's a kind of pronominal divinity.

To go back to the in-itself in one's skin, let's ask how is one in one's skin? Is one doing well in one's skin or is one doing badly? Surprise, surprise, it's the latter: "The ego is in itself not like matter is in itself, which, perfectly wedded to its form, is what it is" (SUB 86). If you want to bring Saint Thomas symptomatically into the house, the answer would be that the human being is matter, matter is the principle of individuation, but the human is a union of form and matter. In Aquinas' view, we are well in our skin. For Levinas, we are not like that. We are not well at all. The ego is in itself like one is in one's skin,

that is to say cramped, ill at ease in one's skin, as though the identity of matter weighing on itself concealed a dimension allowing a withdrawal this side of immediate coincidence, as though it concealed a materiality more material than all matter. (SUB 86)

Just as Levinas spoke of a passivity more passive than all passivity, he now talks about "a materiality more material than all matter." I understand this to be a materiality that is at odds with any idea of form: a matter that exceeds any kind of formal arrangement. A matter that doesn't fit into form, that is irritating: "The ego is an irritability, a susceptibility, or an exposure to wounding and outrage, delineating a passivity more passive still than any passivity relating to an effect" (SUB 86). The in-itself is in itself as one is in one's skin, which is to say badly, cramped, and ill at ease. This is pretty much exactly how I feel speaking to you in this damned sling.

What I want to push at now is a particular phrase that hit me a few months ago when I was trying to think about these pages from "Substitution." It's just so enigmatic.

Without foundation, prior to every will, the obsessional accusation is a persecution. It strips the Ego of its self-conceit and its dominating imperialism. The subject is in the accusative, without recourse in being, expelled from being, that is to say, in itself. In itself one. (SUB 88)

"In itself one"? The French sentence reads "En soi un." This is hardly a classical French sentence. What does it mean? At this point Levinas spins off into a discussion of Plato's Parmenides—that easiest of dialogues that we all know, love, and completely understand. I'm joking. The first hypothesis in the Parmenides is that the one breaks apart into the many. This leads me to a hypothesis, and I'd like to know what you think about it because I'm really out on a limb at this point. At the heart of the heart of Levinas' later project (which is the structural heart of the later work, and maybe the whole of his work) we find a discussion of the bodily heart that is not a metaphor; we find ourselves at the level of the beating heart, the lining of the chest, and the lungs. His project is not a departure from the notion of identity but a rethinking and deepening of identity at an unconscious level. It's prior to reflection, it's prior to thought, it's prior to activity, it's prior to spontaneity, and all those things, but it is still a claim to identity: the subject is in itself one.

To cite another phrase that will try and make good on that claim—Levinas' text is like spaghetti at this point—Levinas says, "In its persecution, the ego returns to the self, not to reflect on the self but to denude itself in the absolute simplicity of

identity" (SUB 88). What is this absolute simplicity of identity? He goes on, "The absolutely individuated identity of the interior, in-itself, without recourse to any system of references" (SUB 88). What he's referring to with "references" here is Heidegger: the world as the referential totality of things referring to other things. The world is full of Zeug, and Zeug is referentially structured: pen to paper to desk to floor to room to building. Whatever the in-itself is, identity is prior to that system of references, prior to world, independent of world. To quote once more: "To be sure, this identity cannot be individuated as the 'pole' of a self-identifying consciousness, nor even as an existence which, in its existence, would care for itself" (SUB 88). This identity is not reducible to Husserl's idea of the subject or Heidegger's idea of Dasein. "The reflexive pronoun 'itself,' or the self remains the great secret to be divulged. The return upon the self proper to reflection already implies the initial recurrence of the 'itself'" (SUB 88). "Substitution," it seems to me, makes a very strong claim for a pre-conscious, non-conscious, un-conscious conception of identity, an identity that repeats, that throbs, that insists, that contracts. It's an identity that's not just like a heart beating, it is a heart beating, it is a lung breathing, it is my blood flowing.

This is the precise point where I disagree with Robert Bernasconi. In his prefatory note to "Substitution" in *Basic Philosophical Writings*, Robert claims that "In Totality and Infinity the philosophical concept of identity remained largely intact." By contrast, he goes on, "In 'Substitution' the identity of the I is under challenge" (SUB 79). However, I want to claim that substitution is not a challenging of the concept of identity but a deepening of it. This is the force of Levinas' claim about the subject in-itself as "in itself one." I want to invert Robert's line of thought and claim that if there is a real challenge to the concept of identity, then that takes place at the end of Totality and Infinity. We will consider that line of thought in the next lecture.

Four Problems: Prescription, Agency, Masochism, and Sublimation

So much for question four. Let me recapitulate: Levinas' question is, can we escape the tragic fatality of being? His answer is his claim about substitution. My concern is that I'm not sure substitution is a way out of the tragic fatality of being. It still seems to me to be a claim to identity, however that's understood. I wonder whether the claim that the response to evasion is a responsibility that cannot be evaded is the most persuasive way for making the case that Levinas wants to make. I want to suggest another possibility of escaping identity in Levinas, and this will take me into Totality and Infinity. Specifically, I want to look closely at the whole drama of those conjunctures in being that are described in "Beyond the Face," especially the concepts of eros and fecundity that I will also problematize. Before doing that, let me lay out

four more problems I have with Levinas' concept of the subject as substitution and the conception of ethics of which it is the heart.

(1) Substitution risks reducing ethical subjectivity to what appears to be a descriptive fact about the subject. Your ego might be a Heideggerian or a Hegelian, but pre-reflectively you are still a pre-conscious subject of substitution and recurrence. There's a problem in Levinas that is also a wider problem that has to do with the relationship between phenomenology (if Levinas can still be said to be doing phenomenology—an enigmatic phenomenology perhaps) understood as a description of a state of affairs and phenomenology as a normative inquiry. This is a question Lyotard brought to Levinas with great power in the essay "Levinas' Logic" and other places as well, for example, in *The Differend*, an unjustly neglected book in my view. The problem is that it appears as if we're ethical despite ourselves. Despite what you think—you might be a Buddhist living in Palo Alto and committed to wholeness, or an Aristotelian living in the Oxfordshire countryside with a small circle of friends with whom you have endless supper parties (I hate the word "supper")—you're still a Levinasian! In a word, Levinas' commitment to phenomenology risks conflating description with prescription and generating the latter out of what appears to be the former. As a consequence, Levinas has no explanation for the motivation to act morally.

(2) This raises a second worry about the nature of Levinas' ethics: namely, can there be ethics in the absence of conscious agency, as Levinas insists in "Substitution"? What I mean is that if one is a Kantian (believe me, such creatures exist, but only in universities), then I choose to beat myself up with the moral law. It's my free volition. Not only that, for Kant, the highest expression of freedom is the determination of the self by the moral law. For Kant, ethics has to presuppose an act of freedom otherwise it is sheer heteronomy. Now, in Levinas it doesn't. It would appear that to be the subject in substitution is something that is the case regardless of any consent on one's part. What I am getting at here can be explained in terms of the theory of ethics I developed in *Infinitely Demanding*, where I claim that, at its core, every moral theory requires two concepts: approval and demand. To become a moral subject is to subject oneself to a demand, for me an infinite demand, but that demand demands approval. Approval is absent in Levinas' work. What you get in Levinas is a wonderfully rich description of the demand, indeed the infinite demand of the other's face in all its precariousness, but no account of the approval that would bind a subject freely to that demand. If ethics does not include some dimension of conscious agency, then it risks becoming sheer coercion. To that extent, though this hasn't really been at all understood, *Infinitely Demanding* is a critique of Levinas.

(3) A third problem can be put under the heading of masochism. Let me tell you a story. Almost twenty years ago, after Levinas' death, I found myself invited to speak in various synagogues in the London area. As a non-Jew, I was quite proud to be invited. Anyhow, I was in this synagogue in North London speaking to some people, among whom were Holocaust survivors. I tried to explain Levinas' claim in "Substitution" that I am not only responsible for the persecution I undergo, I am also responsible

for my persecutor. These were very civilized, polite people. But their response was more or less "What! I'm responsible not just for the persecution I've undergone but the persecutor too? That's crazy." I think that reaction is right. This is also a line of criticism that was developed by Michel Haar, a great French philosopher who died too young and who has not been widely enough read. Levinas goes too far. What Levinas says is hyperbole. Furthermore, it's a hyperbole that feeds an excessive masochism. This brings to mind a wonderful short text by Freud called "The Economic Problem of Masochism." Morality implies masochism: to give myself the law is a masochistic act. Freud says that Kant is a masochist. To be clear, Freud doesn't intend that as critique, it's just the way it is. Furthermore, when Kant tries to name the moral feeling that accompanies the moral law, he calls it *Schmerz* (pain). Morality hurts, but it feels good. In other words, goodness feels bad in a good way. But ask yourself, what's the alternative to being a masochist? A pervert. The basic opposition we have in psychoanalysis is between neurosis and perversion. Let's imagine we're all neurotics. Freud will say, at a certain level, "Thank God for that." It can get excessive and it can get too narcissistic, self-destructive, Hamlet-like, or whatever and we know that. But if you have neuroses, then at least you can do something with them. Normal human misery is often underrated. The masochist is the subject of the law and the neurotic is the subject of the law. I am neurotic because of the law that I accept, to which I am inadequate, and which beats me up. You accept the law, you internalize it, and it produces a certain neurotic structure that can be either unhealthy or healthy, however you define health (I don't have a clue). But if the masochist is the subject of the law, then the pervert is the law. The pervert decides the law. The best example of perversion is paedophilia. It's so hard to get paedophiles into therapy or any kind of rehabilitation (whatever these euphemisms might mean) because, in a sense, the pervert is the law. They are convinced that their love-object, their victim, wants what the law wants. They assume children implicitly want the kind of sexual activity the pervert forces them into. They're begging for it. They're asking for it. The same logic can be at work in cases of rape. "The woman was asking for it. I just gave her what she wanted." Therapeutically, the pervert is a huge problem because they do not see anything wrong with what they do. The pervert is perfectly happy and what could be better than that? Their conscience is clear. With the neurotic, you're in business. The question is, how much neurosis? In my view, every conception of morality works within an economy of masochism. The question is, how much masochism? There's this lovely line at the end of Lacan's Seminar 17, *The Other Side of Psychoanalysis*, where he says that his goal is producing the feeling of shame. Not too much, he says, but just enough.¹⁴ You don't want people to drown in shame. This is my feeling about masochism. We need just enough but not too much. Levinas simply goes too far.

(4) My fourth problem also has a Lacanian inflection. There are two topics in Lacan's Seventh Seminar, *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*: ethics and sublimation. I

¹⁴ See Jacques Lacan, *The Other Side of Psychoanalysis*, trans. Russell Grigg, vol. 17 of *The Seminar*

have argued in the past that there is an interesting formal homology between the structure of ethical experience in Lacan and Levinas. The details needn't concern us but the second topic, sublimation, is even more important. There is no dimension of sublimation in Levinas. What is sublimation? Well, thereby hangs a long tale that I don't want to tell here. As Lacan says, in handing down the term to us as perhaps the central therapeutic concept in psychoanalytic theory, Freud's mouth was sewn shut. But let's just say that sublimation is what takes the place of an impossible happiness. The best miserable neurotics like us can hope for is the kind of aesthetic transformation of passion that sublimation enacts. Lacan defines sublimation as the taking up or elevation of the object and transforming it and giving it the dignity of what Lacan calls the Thing, something that has a certain sublime quality. The object becomes elevated into something thingly and even kingly in sublimation. From Klein onwards, sublimation is also the register of the aesthetic in psychoanalysis. The point I'm making here, which is important to me though I'm not making it as clearly as I'd like to, is that if there is an excessive masochism in Levinas' discourse, where I'm not only responsible for my own persecution but also my persecutor, then that extreme ethical masochism lacks a dimension of aesthetic sublimation. What is aesthetic sublimation? It would be the ability to produce a new kind of screen or a new kind of medium through which the ethical would be articulated. Now Lacan, in different texts and seminars, will turn to drama, he will turn to Hamlet, he will turn to Antigone, or he will turn to Paul Claudel, James Joyce, and others for discourses that sublimate that ethical orientation in a variety of ways. Of course Joyce was a pervert, but that's another matter. So, the ethics of psychoanalysis requires a discourse of sublimation. Where is the discourse of sublimation in Levinas? Now, one might respond that Levinas' books themselves are works of sublimation. We might say that there is a sublimation in Levinas' language itself, its literariness, its musicality, its rhythmic quality. This is why I have placed such a great emphasis on drama in Levinas and sought to understand his method dramatically. Drama is a way of addressing the problem of sublimation in Levinas. One might also think about Levinas' whole discourse on the third party and justice as a discourse of sublimation. We move from the ethical to the screen of the political, which is also a kind of sublimation. But despite these possible candidates, I think sublimation is a big problem in Levinas and there is a serious under-determination or under-theorization of the aesthetic in his thinking. Obviously the cause for this under-theorization is our old friend Heidegger, and the latter's occupation of the discourse of the artwork, especially the discourse of poetry. Levinas is suspicious of Heidegger's sacralization of poetry. Of course, there are exceptions. Obviously, Blanchot and his idea of "the space of literature" is a place where Levinas and the language of literature intersect. Also, despite his Heideggerian problems with poetry, Levinas makes some very interesting remarks about Paul Celan. I think you could read Levinas' work in conjunction with "Meridian," Celan's miraculous speech from 1960, where he gives the

of Jacques Lacan (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2007), pp. 204ff.

most prescient definition of poetry as an act of freedom, a step taken in the presence of human beings, that is, in relation to majesty of the absurd. Celan would be the poet of anti-poetry, able to register the ethical in Levinas' sense.

Love Song

In the next lecture I want to go into the drama of "Beyond the Face" that we get at the end of *Totality and Infinity* because it's the most haunting and beautiful part of Levinas' work. It also poses a question for me. I've got my doubts about substitution as an answer to the problem Levinas' work poses and that leaves us looking for another way of answering that problem. In particular, we'll look to the discussion of eros and fecundity and try to follow through its peculiar logic. Then I want to raise a huge question about the answer Levinas gives in his phenomenology of eros and fecundity. In order to raise that question, I want to borrow some of the insights from Luce Irigaray's "Fecundity of the Caress" and the shorter paper called "Questions to Emmanuel Levinas" that will allow us to pose some sharp critical questions.

To fold this back to where we began, just in case the itinerary is a little tortuous, I began with that final footnote from "Violence and Metaphysics" where Derrida says it would be impossible, essentially impossible, for *Totality and Infinity* to have been written by a woman. The discourse on eros and fecundity is a male discourse on eros—although how are we to understand that notion of maleness? In a final move in the next lecture I want to move towards the *Song of Songs*, as another topos of the erotic, maybe an ideal topos, a u-topos or eu-topos, another place for thinking about the erotic relation. The problem with Levinas' discourse on eros is very simple: it's that the lover, the *amant*, is masculine and the beloved, the *aimée*, is feminine. The erotic relationship is always conceived of as a relationship between masculine and feminine, where masculine is active and feminine is passive, where masculine is form and feminine is matter (or what Levinas calls "ultramateriality"). Despite the beauty and power of what he's doing, which blows me away every time I read it, what you get in Levinas is a redux of the most classical, metaphysical biology of Western philosophy that begins with Aristotle. I want to contest that. The female lover is not the passive recipient of the male lover but is also an active participant. The *Song of Songs* then becomes an extraordinary example of a discourse and a space, a drama between two active lovers, which are coded broadly but not essentially as masculine and feminine, although there are other characters as well, some brothers, not to mention the daughters of Jerusalem.

The *Song of Songs* is a song, a love song, maybe a nuptial song, a polyphonous song. There's a young man and a young woman. Love is happening. That's for sure. Is it chaste love? It's not that chaste. There's a landscape, Jerusalem itself, and the whole sweep of holy land from Lebanon to the Red Sea—a somewhat over-determined landscape. There's also a domestic landscape, the house and the brothers. The figure absent from the *Song of Songs* is the father. There is also no mention of God. The household

is not paternally but maternally regulated. As we will see, this extraordinary little text was the foundational text for Christian mysticism, from Origen onwards, a text that has been hugely important in Jewish mysticism but with a different orientation.

You read the Song of Songs and you think that it's obviously a love song. There are allegorical explanations that say this is the love of the Church for Christ, Christ for the Church, God and Israel, Israel and God. What a load of rubbish, you might object. This poem is about sex. I want to say yes and then no. I want to consider the way in which the sexual discourse of the Song of Songs is transformed, in particular in the Christian interpretation through several mystics, in order to show that something even more interesting is going on. When the mystics get hold of this text, it becomes something more than sexual. What's also on my mind here is Bataille's Eroticism. Everyone thinks Bataille is some kind of dirty pornographer, but the higher sensual experience that allows for what he calls "sovereignty" is mystical experience. Eroticism is ultimately interesting only insofar as it serves mystical experience. That's a very striking thought. Of course, at this point Levinas would be turning in his urn, screaming from his grave. The tradition of Judaism that he comes from is resolutely anti-mystical. There are, of course, traditions of Kabbalistic and Hasidic Judaism of which someone like Martin Buber would be a very important representative. Levinas is from a highly rationalistic Lithuanian tradition that is all about text interpretation. All of that Kabbalistic crazy stuff is off the table.

One question Irigaray insinuates to Levinas is, why is he so suspicious of mysticism? There's a simple answer to that. He's suspicious of ideas of enthusiasm, fusion, and of union. But I want to use Irigaray's question like a lever in order to try and open up a different picture of what might be going on in eros and perhaps in the ethical relation as well. Perhaps it will also permit a less traditional, less unitive picture of mysticism to emerge. Let's see.

Lecture Four

Levinas' Marvellous Family

Now we turn to the fifth and final question: is Levinas' answer to his problem the best answer, or might there be other answers? I raised doubts about whether substitution was the best way out of Levinas' problematic, what we're describing as the tragic fatality of being. I want to suggest another possibility and then, in turn, problematize it. That's going to take us into Totality and Infinity, to the way in which the problem of facticity, finitude, and being riveted to oneself is faced and overcome in that extraordinary book (the book I remember reading on the train from Colchester to London early in 1983 and thinking "this is how I want to do philosophy!"). Specifically, I want to focus on the description Levinas provides of "Beyond the Face" as a "drama of conjunctures in being" in the footnote we discussed from the preface of Totality and Infinity in Lecture One (TI 28, fn.⁽⁴⁾).

Before we get into that, I'll say a quick word about the structure of Totality and Infinity. The book is presented in four parts. The first is a formal description of the concepts that are operationalized in Totality and Infinity: metaphysics, ontology, sameness, otherness, infinity, transcendence, and so on. The second is the phenomenology of the separated ego, what Levinas calls, in *De l'existence à l'existent*, the "hypostasis" of the subject or taking up "position," which is described in Totality and Infinity as the ego of enjoyment, atheism, nourishment, or living from. Those pages are amazing and often ignored, especially by overly masochistic Levinasians, who it would appear have a hard time with pleasure. In the third part, Levinas shows how it is that the pre-conscious, pre-reflective ego is called into question by the relationship to the Other: what's antecedent to the ego of enjoyment is its capacity for a relation to the Other, a relation that Levinas qualifies as ethical. Finally, in the fourth part, "Beyond the Face," Levinas describes eros, fecundity, fraternity, pluralism, and the rest. My claim is that these concepts, especially pluralism, provide the conditions of possibility for all of the concepts and structures of Totality and Infinity. Levinas' entire phenomenology finds its condition of possibility in a drama of "conjunctures in being." Let me explain that more clearly.

To borrow Marx's famous image about standing Hegel on his head, I see Totality and Infinity as a direct inversion of Hegel's Philosophy of Right, which allows us to see

⁽⁴⁾ Georges Bataille, *The Accursed Share*, vol. 3, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Zone Books, 1993), p. 256.

things aright. Hegel's Philosophy of Right has a tripartite structure: we begin with the family, the family is overcome in civil society, and then society is overcome into the level of the state. The state is both the incorporation and overcoming, the *Aufhebung*, of what was found in the family and civil society. The point being that, for Hegel, the telos of the analysis is the state. In Levinas, we go in exactly the opposite direction. We begin with the state, which is totality, war, and administration, and we deduce from the state a series of social relations that in "Beyond the Face" end up as a defence of the "marvel of the family" (TI 306). (I am not convinced that the family is so marvellous, but let's leave that aside for the moment.) Hegel begins his analysis with the family that is overcome into civil society and finally the state. Levinas moves from the state, through the social relation to the experience of the family. In so doing, he raises the question about the nature of the familial. I find the familial very compelling because it's something that disgusts most graduate students, and it disgusted me when I was a graduate student. Of course the discourse of the familial has been co-opted by a conservative, heteronormative discourse, but does that exhaust the meaning or meanings of the familial? No, I think there's a sense in which there is an enduring theatre of the familial and that drama is being revealed to us in these pages.

"Beyond the Face," the fourth and final part of *Totality and Infinity*, is the truth of the three preceding sections. It's the deep, a priori, genetic structure of the book. So, it's important. Now, I want to push at a possibility suggested by Levinas in his extraordinary discussion of eros. More specifically, Levinas opens a space for eros and its phenomenology that is extremely radical and path-breaking but then makes eros serve paternity, paternal eros, and patrilineal succession. In other words, eros opens a space that is then immediately closed down through an assertion of paternity that serves the father and the relation between fathers and sons. My query is that maybe another possibility suggests itself. Maybe in the account of eros something else happens, a disruptive nonsensicality, something lascivious, sovereign, and excessive. This is what Luce Irigaray catches sight of in her text "The Fecundity of the Caress." She sees something in these pages that is ultimately, let's say, reactionary and conservative, but another possibility also opens up. "The Fecundity of the Caress" is a critique of Levinas, but it is not only a critique, it's a kind of brilliant, mimetic inhabitation. We'll talk about Irigaray in more detail in a while. Incidentally, I also think that Irigaray also closes down that space with her finally nostalgic metaphysics of communion, ecstasy, and female gods. We'll get into all of this soon enough.

The Problem of Eros

Now we're into the really speculative part of these lectures and I genuinely don't quite know what I want to say—this is not an affectation. Much like John Cage, "I have nothing to say, and I'm saying it." The way I like to work is to move as carefully as I can towards a point where I really don't know what happens next, and we're at that

point right now. For me, that's what philosophy is about. If you know where you're going, why go there? Become an accountant or something.

The problem with "The Phenomenology of Eros" is very simple. It's announced in the first lines of the text:

Love aims at the Other; it aims at him in his frailty [faiblesse]. Frailty does not here figure the inferior degree of any attribute, the relative deficiency of a determination common to me and the other. Prior to the manifestation of attributes, it qualifies alterity itself. To love is to fear for another, to come to the assistance of his frailty. In this frailty as in the dawn rises the Loved, who is Beloved [l'Aimé qui est Aimée]. (TI 256)

In "The Phenomenology of Eros," the lover is gendered. There is an active masculine lover (l'amant) and a feminine beloved (l'aimée). "The Phenomenology of Eros" is a description of the relation between a lover and a beloved, a lover who is gendered masculine and a beloved who is gendered feminine. In a way, Irigaray's only point in her text is that we can conceive of another possibility of the feminine lover, a lover who is une amante, an active female lover. The problem here, as I said yesterday, is that the masculine lover is active and the feminine beloved is passive, so the erotic relation (as it so often is classically) is not just a matching of masculine to feminine but a matching of actives to passives. In addition, the masculine is identified with form and the feminine is identified with matter or what Levinas enigmatically calls in the "Phenomenology of Eros" "ultramateriality." So, Levinas repeats the most classical version of the metaphysics of sexual difference that we could find in Aristotle and in the subsequent philosophical tradition. If you want evidence of that, just look at Genevieve Lloyd's classic, *The Man of Reason*, from 1984. Irigaray wants to insert an active female lover, une amante in the place of the passive feminine beloved. That's basically the line of critique.

Eros, for Levinas, is ultimately the passage or conduit (again, that's hardly a neutral term) through which the father finds transcendence for himself in his relation to the child who is always conceived (in both the biological and the conceptual sense of the term) as his son. What's most revealing about Levinas' discussion of fecundity is the silent slippage, what our French chums would call un glissement de sens, that takes place between two terms: child and son, enfant et fils. The term fils always has a relationship to the filial and to filiality, to the thread, to continuation. The son is that which continues, that which ensures succession. The enfant is un fils. The question is, why is the enfant not une fille, a daughter? Eros is a moment of discontinuity through the medium of the feminine, and the feminine is always conceived, as it were, classically, as a medium, as material mediation, and media. That's why you need women, so men can continue the immaterial life of form. Unfortunately, the continuation of formal, male existence needs to pass through the feminine medium of materiality. Otherwise men would just reproduce themselves through the word, through the λόγος (logos), which is the Socratic fantasy that drives philosophy in the *Phaedrus* and the *Symposium*: reproduction of beauty through the word alone. This is always a fantasy

of fathers and sons. This is a question of real fathers and, even more acutely, symbolic fathers, such as philosophy teachers surrounded by their beautiful boys, their disciples. And in case anyone was wondering, girls can be boys too. Let's not forget that. I could say a lot more about the topic but we would get sidetracked.

The main point is that eros permits a patrilineal, a pater-familial, order of succession. Levinas' radical discourse on eros nevertheless clings to the rock of patriarchy. Such is Irigaray's critique. It takes us back to the first move I made in the argument of Lecture One and to Derrida's final footnote to "Violence and Metaphysics" quoted earlier, where he says that it would be essentially impossible for *Totality and Infinity* to have been written by a woman. Eros is that unstable and wonderful space that Levinas opens up in his discourse only to close it down by subjecting it to the order or paternity, fraternity, and ultimately, in the very last paragraphs of *Totality and Infinity*, in the final move in the argument—the order of forgiveness and reconciliation (TI 282–5). At this point Levinas seems to miraculously turn back into the very Hegel he so vehemently opposed.

Into the Abyss, the Inexistent

As I've tried to show in these lectures, the problem of Levinas' work is the tragedy of finitude. I project freely onto my Being-towards-death and become authentic. Then I fall back into inauthenticity and the everyday. I project once again onto Being-towards-death and lift myself up, just for a moment, and then slip back again. It just goes round and round. Loop the loop. But I don't defy the ground of my being: facticity. The way I can escape from this tragedy is through the infinity of a relationship to the child. That's Levinas' thought. The child is the comedy. It's a beautiful yet flawed thought. Rousseau aside (and I'd want to lay what he says about children pretty far aside), philosophy doesn't have a very good track record when it comes to thinking about children. Now, at The New School, we have various *δόξαι* (doxai) (and we always use the Greek term) that numerous pilgrims attribute to the divine powers of Santa Hannah della Scuola Nuova, our Patron Saint. One of the most confused of these concerns natality. We get an overblown and sterile picture of Heidegger as "the philosopher of death" who is then pitted against Arendt, "the philosopher of birth." Of course, this is—to use the precise, technical English expression—a load of bollocks. All Arendt is doing with the idea of natality is picking up and deepening what Heidegger was doing with what he calls "generationality" in the final paragraphs of the discussion of historicity in *Being and Time* with a series of intriguing allusions to Dilthey. The point is that Heidegger is also a thinker of birth. Being-towards-death is the condition of possibility for generational futurity and is, therefore, a Being-towards-birth. I don't think Arendt is a thinker of birth in any interesting or particularly untraditional way. The radical thinker of birth is Levinas. At one level, what Levinas does is very original, for he thinks of the child as establishing a radical pluralism that escapes the traditional understanding of pluralism

as a manifold of individuals that survives into Arendt's work. At another level, Levinas' thought of the child is deeply problematic because he reclaims the child as a son.

What happens to the daughter? Derrida's second essay on Levinas from 1980, "At this Very Moment in This Work, Here I Am," centres on the question of the daughter in Levinas. If you get the chance, look at this text. It's a wonderful example of Derrida's later, more performative, parasitic style of writing. His claim (although it's not really a claim because Derrida isn't really in the business of offering claims at that point in his work) is that the daughter is the crypt within Levinas' work, both in the sense of the secret and the tomb. The daughter is a crypt, an entombed, perhaps stillborn, daughter. It is over this crypt that the edifice of Levinas' work is built.

Let me make a confession. I've got some really strange stuff on Levinas' "The Phenomenology of Eros," both because these pages are extremely difficult, poetic, and compelling and they require and repay really careful textual attention. If there's one thing I want to emphasize with Levinas, it's really careful textual attention—it's the least we can do for him. A full analysis of the first pages of "The Phenomenology of Eros" would take a long time to lay out, so I'm not going to do that. Let's ask instead, what kind of phenomenology is the phenomenology of eros? The phenomenology of eros is something "essentially hidden" (TI 256), which is how Levinas characterizes the feminine. Why is the feminine essentially hidden? Well, it just is. Levinas does not exactly explain why. Furthermore, the feminine is the essentially hidden that throws itself towards the light "without becoming signification" (TI 256). Whatever the feminine might be, it is not a phenomenon that we can designate with a meaning. What Levinas is describing here is a phenomenology of the inexistent, a phenomenology at the limit of being and non-being. There is a kind of dialectic of eros, what Levinas sees as an equivocation at the heart of erotic experience. Such an equivocation oscillates between, on the one hand, fragility or weakness, indeed he uses the peculiarly passé terms of "swooning" and "fainting," and, on the other hand, "profanation," immodesty, and what he calls "ultramateriality." There is an equivocation in eros between fragility or vulnerability and "exhibitionist nudity" (TI 256). One question that Irigaray raises for Levinas is, why is the erotic identified with and identical to profanation? Why is that the case? Why is eros opposed to the sacred? Might not the relation between lovers be sacred? For Levinas, it's a phenomenology and so that's just the way it is. Eros equivocates between the fragile and the tender on the one hand, and the entire weight of what is not yet being on the other. He writes, "the movement of the lover before this frailty of femininity, neither pure compassion nor impassiveness, indulges in compassion, is absorbed in the complacency of the caress" (TI 257). This is important. The caress is the phenomenological register of the equivocation of eros. The caress is something that goes beyond the sensible, grasps the ungraspable, grasps what is not yet. The caress searches for something that slips away, it forages like a little boar in the Italian woods looking for truffles. I could go on but I won't, you'll be pleased to hear.

If you really go into these pages from the "Phenomenology of Eros" in the detail they merit, you will find so much going on that's both deeply attractive and oddly repellant. Levinas' discussion of eros is also loaded with literary references. Though I don't believe in some separate category of "the literary;" it's just the way we talk. He writes, for example,

Alongside of the night as anonymous rustling of the there is extends the night of the erotic, behind the night of insomnia the hidden, the clandestine, the mysterious, land of the virgin, simultaneously uncovered by Eros and refusing Eros—another way of saying: profanation. (TI 258–7)

The two sets of locations where literature or the poetic really erupt in Levinas are in the descriptions of the *Il y a*—where we get multiple references to Racine's *Phèdre*, Shakespeare's witches in *Macbeth*, Maupassant's *The Horla*, and so on—and in the erotic. If you're a good reader and you've got the time, there's a whole buried reading of Baudelaire in there—there's one poem in particular, Baudelaire's "Le Gouffre," that he keeps coming back to, and there are also references to Mallarmé. We can't go into that because it would take us too long. Actually, that's nonsense. Never believe that. Derrida used to always do that. "Oh if I had time to do this and that and the other, I would, and I want to thank this person and that." Four hours later and he was still talking. So what I just said is nonsense. Okay, the key lines from Baudelaire are the following:

And my spirit, haunted by vertigo, is jealous
Of the insensibility of nothingness
—Ah! Never to go out from Numbers and Beings!
(Ah! Ne jamais sortir des Nombres et des Êtres)¹

For Levinas, eros is a descent into what he calls "abyssal experience" or "pure experience" (TI 261). We could link the latter to what Derrida calls empiricism, by which he means a heterology that cannot be articulated philosophically. The moment that the empiricist speaks philosophically she is undone. Such is Derrida's early critique of Levinas. Pure or abyssal experience is not Hegelian. It does not issue in any concept. It is, rather, an experience of that which is not yet, what Levinas called "moins que rien" (less than nothing), which is not yet nothing, which is less than being, which avoids the dialectics of being and nothingness. So, the phenomenology of eros is a phenomenology of what is less than being, a phenomenology of the inexistent. Given that phenomenology can only describe that which is, i.e., phenomena, this is a paradoxical enterprise. Maybe it's a doomed enterprise, but that's what Levinas is trying to describe. It's not easy.

For Levinas, the caress is the point of contact with that inexistent, with that thing that expresses itself, which we cannot disclose or bring into the light of the Heideggerian clearing of being. Philosophers, like the obsessional neurotics they are, grasp things: "I

¹ Charles Baudelaire, "The Abyss," in *The Flowers of Evil*, trans. William Aggeler (Fresno, CA: Academy Library Guild, 1954).

understand this”; “I grasp that”; “I get it.” The movement of the caress opposes the grasp because it is a contact that doesn’t comprehend or subsume. So, what Levinas is trying to describe is a non-subsumptive relationship to alterity, like reflective judgement in Kant or non-identity in Adorno, although those links to Kant’s third Critique have been somewhat overdone. The caress aims at what is not yet, but this is not the not yet of a project in the Heideggerian sense. The caress reaches towards a non-existence that is not an avatar of what is. It aims, and this is the force of the allusion to Baudelaire, at what has taken leave of “Numbers and Beings.” It aims at an abyss, un gouffre, a gulf, what Levinas often refers to, in one of the very few English expressions in his writing, as a “no-man’s land.” Eros is not the Platonic ascent described by Diotima in the Symposium, it is a descent, a downgoing into an abyssal experience that grasps nothing. The caress caresses but doesn’t possess. The caress is not possession, it does not issue in any concept, it moves beyond the possible into the impossible. And this impossible is not the possibility of impossibility with which Heidegger describes finitude. It is the impossibility of possibility. Please keep that in mind because it’s important for a move I’m going to make at the end of this lecture when I talk about Bataille. If there’s one thing that Bataille is about, it is the impossible because this is in many ways his definition of sovereignty. As he will say, “Sovereignty is nothing.”²

Why You Should All Have Children

That’s eros. I told you it was weird. I’m describing it poorly but we’ve got to move on. What does eros yield? What does it produce? In a word, fecundity. What is fecundity? Fecundity is the production of the child. Why is the production of a child important? We could spend a lot of time on this passage, and note the way in which the language of being riveted to oneself from *On Escape* returns.

In power the indetermination of the possible does not exclude the reiteration of the I, which in venturing toward this indeterminate future falls back on its feet, and, riveted to itself, acknowledges its transcendence to be merely illusory and its freedom to delineate but a fate. The diverse forms Proteus assumes do not liberate him from his identity. (TI 268)

Proteus shifts. He’s a shape-shifter, he’s the Dalai Lama, he’s Aleister Crowley, he’s Lana del Rey, he’s everything, but he returns to himself, to his identity. But in fecundity the tedium of this repetition ceases. That’s the thought. In fecundity I cease to repeat the stale fact of who I am. The I becomes other and young and the I begins again as an other. This is not just the thought of the child, it’s also the thought of youth. The concept or the category of youth is very important for Levinas, in particular when he’s thinking about his response to 1968, which he sees as entirely a question of the philosophical category of *la jeunesse*.

² Georges Bataille, *The Accursed Share*, vol. 3, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Zone Books, 1993), p. 256.

In fecundity repetition ceases. I cease to endlessly repeat my stale project. We can think about those stale projects in terms of the oscillation of melancholy and mania. I am melancholically stuck to myself. I'm depressed. Such is the eternal truth of Hamlet. As a way of shoving depression to one side I manically swell up. I have a few beers and I feel like a god. Everyone is my friend and I'm really cool. Then I wake up in a melancholy hangover, only to repeat the same pattern the next night. It's mania followed by another melancholy hangover. What is so wrong in my life that I must get drunk every night? It is this kind of repetition that Levinas is describing. That's how he hears what it means to be a Heideggerian. Yet, in fecundity repetition ceases.

How does it cease? Levinas' thought is that in fecundity we leave identity behind or, more accurately, there is a "duality of the Identical" (TI 268). The idea is that in the duality of the identical I escape the fate of being me, the tragic fate of being riveted to myself. The argument in these pages of Totality and Infinity is astonishing and terribly bold, and note another reference to drama:

Fecundity is part of the very drama of the I. The intersubjective reached across the notion of fecundity opens up a plane where the I is divested of its tragic egoity, which turns back to itself, and yet is not purely and simply dissolved into the collective. (TI 273; my emphasis)

Tragic fate always falls back onto itself like Ajax onto his sword. And yet the escape from this fate is not the dissolution of the self into the collective, a little like Nietzsche's early vision of the Dionysian as the overcoming of the principium individuationis. I don't go from my tragic egoity into some fantasy of the primal horde, or the unity of the people, or even some fantasy of the monastic community, such as one can find in Alasdair MacIntyre, Antonio Negri, or more recently, Giorgio Agamben. No. Levinas writes, "Fecundity evinces a unity that is not opposed to multiplicity, but, in the precise sense of the term, engenders it" (TI 273). It is a question of a plurality that is neither individuality nor collectivity.

In fecundity I am myself and no longer myself. Through the child I escape the fact of being riveted to myself. Levinas writes,

The profanation that violates a secret does not "discover," beyond the face, another more profound I which this face would express; it discovers the child.
(TI 267)

Why is eros a profanation? Why does it violate? And why is it a violation of a secret? I want to press at each of these assumptions. He continues, "By a total transcendence, the transcendence of trans-substantiation, the I is, in the child, an other." Remember that this is the question Molly Bloom asks Leopold Bloom early in the day in *Ulysses*: "What does transubstantiation mean, Leopold?" As if he would know. I mean he's not exactly Catholic. Levinas goes on,

The I is in the child, another. Paternity remains a self-identification, but also a distinction within identification—a structure unforeseeable in formal logic. Hegel in the writings of his youth was able to say that the child is the parents, and in the *Weltalter* Schelling was able for theological needs to deduce filiality from the identity

of Being. Possession of the child by the father does not exhaust the meaning of the relationship that is accomplished in paternity, where the father discovers himself not only in the gestures of his son, but in his substance and his unicity. My child is a stranger (Isaiah 49), but a stranger who is not only mine, for he is me. (TI 267; emphasis added)

We're talking about the child, right? So, where did the son come from? It just slips in. It's the silent substitution of son for child. This is Derrida's point; this is also Irigaray's point.

In the next paragraph Levinas writes, "Fecundity encloses a duality of the Identical" (TI 268). Fecundity produces a duality of identity that divests me of my tragic egoity. Once again, I am no longer riveted to myself through the child. This is his ultimate response to Heidegger: the assertion of fecundity. We could expatiate on this if we wished. Why do people have children? What's going on in having a child? Is the idea of having a child the idea that you get to begin again, sinless, another start, someone who's not going to be as fucked up as you are? Is it a chance at a kind of newness? Who knows? Isn't such a view a little hard on the child? Isn't it an awfully heavy burden to bear, to somehow redeem the sins of your parents? Was Phillip Larkin finally right? "Get out as early as you can, And don't have any kids yourself."³ But for Levinas, the tragedy of finitude is overcome through the relation to the child. Therefore, contra Larkin, have as many kids as you can afford. Breed, sinners, breed.

Pluralism, the Break with the One

The philosophical inference Levinas wants to draw from fecundity is important: "For our logic rests on the indissoluble bond between the One and Being, a bond that is incumbent on reflection because we always envisage existing in an existent. Being qua being is always for us monadic" (TI 274). Levinas' thought is that "the tradition" (again, I don't believe in "the tradition"; all traditions are retrospectively constructed fantasies) is committed to an idea of being as one. That's the position Levinas always links to Parmenides. In Parmenides' Poem (I'm sure you all read it regularly. If you don't, you should be ashamed of yourself) you find that there is a choice offered to the enigmatic protagonist between being and non-being. That's the path you face: being is one, it is compared to a well-rounded sphere. The Parmenidean thesis, which is rather a pre-thetic thought insofar as it is proto-philosophical poetic thinking, is that being is one, is unity. Levinas' thought is that from Parmenides to Heidegger being is always thought of as one. For example, Heidegger frequently refers to being in the sense of *das Ereignis*, as the singular as such, the *singulare tantum*. Levinas is involved in a polemic against henology, that is, any idea of being reducible to τὸ ἓν (to hen), the one, as Plotinus will say. Intriguingly, this puts Levinas in the same

³ Philip Larkin, "This Be the Verse," in Larkin, *High Windows* (London: Faber and Faber, 1974).

ontological camp as Deleuze and Badiou, both of whom break with the idea of being as unity, either through a material multiplicity (Deleuze) or through formal multiplicity expressed mathematically (Badiou). Levinas is in the being-as-multiplicity camp. This upsets the Badiouians, but that's okay as they're such a bunch of obsessional boys. Levinas goes on,

Pluralism appears in Western philosophy only as a plurality of subjects that exist. Never has it appeared in the existing of those existants. The plural, exterior to the existence of beings, is given as a number; to a subject that counts it is already subordinated to the synthesis of the "I think." Unity alone is ontologically privileged. (TI 274)

Although Levinas doesn't have Arendt in mind (they only met once, in Chicago, while receiving honorary degrees. After watching her sing along enthusiastically to the American national anthem, Levinas was apparently heard to mutter, "*Cette femme est folle*" ["That woman is crazy"]), this is how he would respond to her thinking of plurality: it is a plurality of individuals. Levinas' thought is more radical: plurality is being's multiplicity. We are plural. Plurality isn't some kind of political idea of pluralism where we have a plurality of citizens, agents, or actors. Rather, plurality is something that ontologically structures our relation to and through the child. Also, and perhaps more importantly, because we're all children too, we're structured plurally. We are not ourselves. We are ourselves and we are not ourselves. We are children, big children. Such is our undeniable and plural facticity.

In many ways, this is where the main argument of *Totality and Infinity* winds up. "Fecundity is to be set up as an ontological category" (TI 277). To fast and superficial readers of Levinas, this reference to an "ontological category" might appear confusing. Levinas still uses the language of ontology in *Totality and Infinity*, even claiming that "Being is exteriority" (TI 290), while at the same time invoking Plato's "Good beyond Being" (TI 292). In an extraordinary passage, he writes,

In a situation such as paternity the return of the I to the self, which is set forth in the monist concept of the identical subject, is found to be completely modified. The son is not only my work, like a power or an object, nor is he my property. Neither the categories of power nor those of knowledge describe my relation with the child. The fecundity of the I is neither a cause nor a domination. I do not have my child; I am my child. Paternity is a relation with a stranger who while being Other ("And you shall say to yourself, 'who can have borne me these? I was bereaved and barren...' " Isaiah 49) is me, a relation of the I with a self which yet is not me. In this "I am" being is no longer Eleatic unity. (TI 277)

Hopefully you can see what Levinas is doing here. The unifying concept of the history of philosophy is the idea of being as one. That connects Parmenides to Heidegger. When Heidegger says, "Being has been sent from the pre-Socratics to us as progressively forgotten,"⁴ Levinas says, "Yeah, and that concept of Being is one, *singulare tantum*."

⁴ Martin Heidegger, *Identity and Difference*, trans. Joan Stambaugh (Chicago: The University of

Although Levinas is never explicit about this, it is as if he has absorbed Heidegger's thesis of the history of metaphysics as the history of being's oblivion and twists it one stage further. Heidegger is not outside the tradition—he is its culmination. To speak in code, Heidegger is for Levinas what Nietzsche is for Heidegger: not a twisting free from metaphysics but metaphysics' culmination.

The Denouement of Levinas' Comedy

Where are we going? We're nearly at the end of "Beyond the Face," which contains a very revealing account of fraternity. In another of his silent substitutions, Levinas, as always, attempts to think human solidarity in terms of fraternity. But fraternity is always—literally—a relationship between brothers, and brothers are sons. Relations of solidarity amongst women are only conceivable though the model of fraternity. Sorority, therefore, would just be a modification of fraternity. So, contained in Levinas' politics of friendship, as Derrida would say, is a very classical idea of brotherhood. To risk sounding a little dogmatic, there are two main ideas of brotherhood in the history of philosophy and people usually either go with one or the other. If you're a Greek at heart, you read Aristotle's *Ethics* and you say fraternity is the brotherhood of my friends. Aristotle insists that one should not have too many friends, maybe five or seven. I mean the Greeks were not damn barbarians with tons of pals. The second conception of fraternity is the Christian one. We see it worked out beautifully in Augustine's *Confessions* around the grief that he feels for the death of his friend in book IV. But that grief is pagan, and has to be replaced by a properly Christian politics of friendship. The Christian can have no particular friends because, by virtue of God, he is a friend of all human beings. That is, fraternity is universalized in Christianity and I should have no particular attachments. When Augustine feels sorrow for the death of his friend, the problem is the particularity of the attachment. If you're a Christian, then you shouldn't be excessively attached to your friends because, first and foremost, you're attached to God. By virtue of God, you're attached to everybody. In renouncing particular attachments through the concrete universal of Christ, the Christian also has no enemies. Everyone is my friend. Incidentally, this is why Carl Schmitt will claim that Christianity is essentially de-politicizing, because politics always requires an enemy. When it comes to the concept of fraternity, you either go Greek (and it's a question of how many, three, five, seven, or fifteen friends) or you go Christian and universal and say we're all friends (Facebook falls somewhere in the middle). On both views, fraternity is a band of brothers and the fundamental understanding of the political unity of the state or the community is in relationship to fraternity and brotherhood. The modern, allegedly secular, conception of fraternity that is one of the three pillars of the French Republic, along with equality and liberty, is simply the political translation of the Christian conception of friendship.

Totality and Infinity ends with a discussion called "The Infinity of Time." I want to spend a minute on these few pages because this is Levinas' happy ending. This is his comic denouement. There's nothing wrong with a happy ending! Remember what Hegel says in the Aesthetics: a happy ending is great. People who don't like a happy ending are just too attached to their misery and tragic melancholy and should be ignored (I think of Adorno, although his misery is almost comical. I think he was secretly as happy as a clam). So, there's a happy ending in Levinas, a divine comedy, a notion of divine justice, maybe even a theodicy.

"There must be a rupture of continuity, and continuation across this rupture" (TI 284). That's what the child allows. The child is both discontinuous and continuous, both me and not me. It's a future that is the future but not my future. For Heidegger, the future is always my future, my projection, my resoluteness, my finitude. In Levinas we see a future that is not my future, an infinity of time. Levinas writes, and note the references to drama,

The essential in time consists in being a drama, a multiplicity of acts where the following act resolves the prior one. Being is no longer produced at one blow, irremissibly present. Reality is what it is, but will be once again, another time freely resumed and pardoned. Infinite being is produced as times [les temps], that is, in several times across the dead time that separates the father from the son. It is not the finitude of being that constitutes the essence of time, as Heidegger thinks, but its infinity. The death sentence does not approach as an end of being, but as an unknown, which as such suspends power. (TI 284; my emphasis)

"The dead time that separates the father from the son." This would be the mother, right? A strange thought. But the claim is that the ego, the I, is a drama in several acts. This is also a claim about the history of philosophy. From Parmenides to Heidegger, philosophers are all writing a one-act drama whose hero is a character called Being. Based on his ontological pluralism, Levinas is trying to write a drama with a multiplicity of acts where the following act resolves the preceding one and anticipates the next.

Forgiveness, Reconciliation, Messianism: The End of Totality and Infinity

We're here working through the final paragraphs of Totality and Infinity, just prior to the "Conclusions," and a very strange thing happens. Two powerful Hegelian themes are introduced: forgiveness and reconciliation. The thought is that in fecundity we are forgiven, pardoned for a fault or a fate. We're even allowed happiness, what Levinas calls "the strange happiness of reconciliation" (TI 283). Reconciliation in German is *Versöhnung*, which implicitly passes through the son (Sohn). Reconciliation is recon-

Chicago Press, 2002), pp. 36, 57.

ciliation through the figure of the son, which is, of course, the mediating function of the person of Christ. Christ is the figure who reconciles, who mediates. Dialectical mediation is unthinkable without Christ. It is essentially Christological. This is why being an atheistic Hegelian is so limited. It's not that it's wrong *per se*, but it can only have such a limited grip on the truth of Hegel's thinking. Going back to Levinas, he does not only mention reconciliation, he goes on to appeal to resurrection. That's right, resurrection! "The nothingness of the interval—a dead time—is the production of infinity. Resurrection constitutes the principal event of time" (TI 284). Through the son I am both reconciled and resurrected. My life goes on after what appeared to be my death.

The infinity of time is the temporality of discontinuity and continuity. This is the time, or more properly times ("Infinite being is produced as times [les temps]" [TI 284]), of my relationless relation to the child, of the father to the son. But then, in the final paragraph of the book, Levinas suddenly returns to a theme announced and put to one side in the Preface—the messianic. In messianic time, the infinite time of my relation to the child would be overcome in eternity. "Infinite time," Levinas writes,

is also the putting back into question of the truth it promises. The dream of a happy eternity, which subsists in man along with his happiness, is not a simple aberration. Truth requires both an infinite time and a time it will be able to seal, a completed time. The completion of time is not death, but messianic time, where the perpetual is converted into eternal. (TI 284–5)

Truth requires both infinite time (the relation to the child, pluralism, and continuity) and a time that would be able to be sealed and healed: a completed time, an achieved time. This is messianic time, where the temporal order is lifted up into the eternal. This is what Levinas calls "triumph."

Messianic triumph is the pure triumph; it is secured against the revenge of evil whose return the infinite time does not prohibit. Is this eternity a new structure of time, or an extreme vigilance of the messianic consciousness? The problem exceeds the bounds of this book. (TI 285)

Is this messianic eternity a new structure of time or an extreme vigilance, an extreme—to use a term that is central to Levinas elsewhere—insomnia of messianic consciousness? "This problem exceeds the bounds of this book." Never believe sentences that have that form, most of all when you write them yourself. But note that at the end of *Totality and Infinity* we find an accumulation of resonant and over-determined concepts: forgiveness, reconciliation, resurrection, the messianic, and eternity. It would appear that this armature of concepts is required in order to prohibit the return of evil. That's the ultimate problem. Even though we may be reconciled and resurrected through the son, there's no guarantee that evil won't return. Elemental Evil, of the kind that we saw in Levinas' discussion of Hitlerism and its drama of tragic fate, might still come back to haunt and destroy us. This is why we need the kind of theodicy that Levinas sketches in the lines we just read. It is only a messianic theodicy that precludes the possible return of Evil. Divine comedy.

Occupy Philosophy! Irigaray's Strategy

So much for Totality and Infinity, let's turn to Irigaray. Her text is written or addressed from the standpoint of the female reader, *la lectrice*. It's her reply to Levinas; she inverts the movement of the phenomenology of eros. It's a response to a call, to a severe provocation. I don't know how familiar you are with Irigaray, she's certainly not taught in philosophy departments, which is their loss in my view. In her earlier work, which for me is the most interesting, Irigaray had this strategy of what she called "mimesis," which is a great idea. What should a philosopher like Irigaray do when faced with a text like Plato's *Republic* or Levinas' *Totality and Infinity*? The strategy she adopted was a mimetic one: she mimicked and occupied the language of the text, subverting it through that occupation. As the allusion to the language of occupation suggests, this is a tactic that is at once philological, philosophical, and political: Occupy philosophy! What Irigaray does so brilliantly in "The Fecundity of the Caress," a text that appeared as the final chapter in *The Ethics of Sexual Difference* in 1984, is to take possession of Levinas' language. Every word she uses is a word Levinas employs, but she twists those words, subjecting them to torsion rather than distortion. Mimesis was an extremely productive strategy, one that should be used by philosophers more: it's repetition with a difference. If you want to engage in the displacement of the philosophical tradition, then repeat and occupy its language, engaging with it in a staged, indeed dramatized, dislocation. Irigaray writes from the standpoint of the female reader. In Irigaray, the *aimée*, the beloved, who in Levinas' text is silent, becomes the *amante*, the active female lover. Irigaray is Levinas sampled and played back by a female DJ. To some, "The Fecundity of the Caress" can appear to be disorienting and confusing, and so they dismiss it or think it is philosophically weak. I completely disagree and think that it's a very persuasive argument. Her main claim, I think, is that Levinas engages in an infantilization or animalization of the female subject. The female beloved is a kind of child or animal. As Levinas writes, in eros "[o]ne plays with the other as one plays with a young animal." Against this, Irigaray writes,

If she comes back to herself, in herself, to himself in her, she may feel that another parousia is necessary. Having to create, give birth to, engender, the mystery that she bears—prior to any conception of a child. No longer staying within the grasp of the one who draws upon the mystery, but taking charge—yes, she herself—of bringing it to light. Engendering lover prior to, as something more than, the son. And the daughter.⁵

She raises the question of the daughter, the absent and encrypted daughter, within Levinas' text. In the place of the son, Irigaray will defend the daughter; in the face of a masculinist sexual discourse that sees eros as profanation, Irigaray will speak of the sacredness and even divinity of love in terms of the mucus threshold. Irigaray's

⁵ Luce Irigaray, "The Fecundity of the Caress: A Reading of Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 'Phenomenology of Eros,'" trans. Carolyn Burke, in *Face to Face with Levinas*, ed. Richard Cohen (Albany: SUNY Press, 1986), p. 242.

analysis of the mucus threshold of female sexuality is both phenomenological and biological ("two lips that speak together," as she will say elsewhere). Eros, she writes, is "an entrance into another, more secret space. Where the beloved receives and offers the possibility of nuptials." It is a "return to the garden of innocence."⁶ For Levinas, eros is always described from a post-lapsarian point of view, from the standpoint after the Fall, from the facticity of original sin. Irigaray, like Marguerite Porete, is trying to describe eros without sin, as a return to the garden of innocence and pleasures, the Garden of Eden.

He believes that she is drawing him down into the abyss; she believes that he is cutting himself off from her to constitute his transcendence. Their paths cross but achieve neither an alliance nor a mutual fecundation. Except for the lover, whose double is—the son.⁷

Women exist in order to produce sons for fathers. Witness Good Prince Will of England, the Duchess of Cambridge, and little Prince George. We're so proud. Good work, Kate! The father perpetuates himself through the son, constituting his own transcendence through the conduit of the mother. And all that the mother means here is a material passage through which the continuation of male form is guaranteed. For Irigaray, the son is not the fulfilment of eros, of love, but simply man's return to himself through the other. As she writes, "The son closes the circle."⁸ This means that Levinas' work is not in the service of any genuine transcendence, but rather the continuation of the immanent circle of patriarchy. The son is the return to itself of the father through another, the son and not the daughter.

Shakespeare's Misogyny

What Irigaray is identifying is a powerful male fantasy. This is, incidentally, the central argument of Shakespeare's Sonnets. Many of the Sonnets are addressed to an unnamed young man, probably the Earl of Southampton, who was a great-looking guy with long hair and gay as a hat. Shakespeare asks, and forgive my vulgar, contemporary paraphrase, "what should a good-looking guy such as yourself do?" More faithfully, he asks (and note the language of spending, lending, loaning, investment, profit and loss, the entire mercantile language in which eros is described by Shakespeare here and elsewhere, notably in *The Merchant of Venice*),

Unthrifty loveliness, why dost thou spend

Upon thyself thy beauty's legacy?

Why selfishly spend your beauty on yourself? If your beauty ends with you, then that would be a terrible waste.

Thy unused beauty must be tombed with thee,

⁶ Irigaray, "The Fecundity of the Caress," p. 244.

⁷ Irigaray, "The Fecundity of the Caress," p. 244.

⁸ Irigaray, "The Fecundity of the Caress," p. 245.

Which used, lives th'executor to be.⁹

In poem after poem, Shakespeare goes on begging him not to "make worms thy heir" because his beauty is so lovely it must continue. The beautiful young man's beauty must be invested, hedged against a future where that beauty will receive a substantial increase in profit. This profit, this prophet indeed, is the son: "Unlooked on diest, unless thou get a son."¹⁰ Or as Shakespeare goes on to assert, "Make thee another self for love of me."¹¹ Therefore, marry. Sadly, for this purpose and the purpose of procreation, a woman is necessary. We should note that the fundamental orientation of eros in Shakespeare and in much else besides (we could trace this whole argument back to Plato) is profoundly homosocial. The beautiful man must perpetuate his beauty through the son and that requires (unfortunately) a woman, who at the end of the sequence of the Sonnets becomes the dark lady who is ridiculed in various ways with some famous misogyny.

My mistress' eyes are nothing like the sun;

Coral is far more red than her lips' red.¹²

Indeed, Shakespeare even complains about the bad breath "that from my mistress reeks." The son closes the circle of male beauty and male transcendence. And the woman is at best an evil necessary to procreation, and at worst a figure of disgust. Either way she has no voice. She does not speak. She reeks. Irigaray goes on,

Her fall into the abyss would refer to the loss of her voice. To not listening to her song. To forgetting her vocalism. The loved one would be mute, or reduced to speaking in the spaces between the consonants of the lover's discourse. The loved one relegated to his shadow, his double, that which he does not yet know or recognize in himself, presenting itself to him under the guise of the loved one. Disguising for him the space of the present. An engulfing of his authority in the present, which clings to memory and the song of the beloved. Whom he sends back down to the abyss so that he may rebound into the transcendent.¹³

The woman doesn't speak. She is an "ultramateriality" who receives the gift of form, of the concept, and conception in order to produce transcendence for the father. For Irigaray, Levinasian eros is "autistic transcendence,"¹⁴ which is a phrase I like without necessarily understanding what it means. The other term she uses, which is inflammatory but not unjustified in relation to the "Phenomenology of Eros," is "rape."

Not taking into account his own limits, the lover penetrates the flesh that he consummates and consumes without attention to the sacrificial gesture. He "takes communion" without rites or words. Is absorbed into nothing—unless it is his other? Without de-

⁹ Shakespeare, Sonnet 4.

¹⁰ Shakespeare, Sonnet 7.

¹¹ Shakespeare, Sonnet 10.

¹² Shakespeare, Sonnet 130.

¹³ Irigaray, "The Fecundity of the Caress," p. 249.

¹⁴ Irigaray, "The Fecundity of the Caress," p. 250.

tectable transition. Without a trace of this rape. If it were not for the exhaustion and suffering of the loved one. Reduced to infancy, left to herself or animal savagery.¹⁵

The animalized, infantilized beloved is raped. In French, "rape" is *viol*, where we see the root of the various meanings of "violence." Perhaps the point Irigaray makes here sounds stronger in English. But the idea is that profanation is violation and, in these terms, a kind of rape. Alliteratively and conceptually, *le viol* is linked to another very strong term in Levinas' French, *la volupté*, which is translated as "voluptuousness" and which is all over "The Phenomenology of Eros." Sadly, this translation says nothing. If I say "voluptuousness," what do you think of? Anna Nicole Smith? Marilyn Monroe? You probably think of a voluptuous woman. But *la volupté* is directly sexual pleasure, an intrinsically sexual pleasure. Sexual pleasure, Irigaray says, "is never conceived as an instance of power in act. It expresses itself as an exit, from itself, when tied to the instant, dispersing or rarefying our being—while managing an evasion."¹⁶ I think she's right about Levinas here. At the end of the text she will make the claim stronger: the feminine is the sacrifice that is made on the altar of male transcendence. Sexual pleasure is a profanation that serves the end of the production of the son. Ethical transcendence is male transcendence, philosophical transcendence too.

There is another more obviously polemical text on Levinas by Irigaray that we don't need to go into called "Questions to Emmanuel Levinas: On the Divinity of Love." However, I must mention that it is the text of a lecture given at the University of Essex in 1987, when Robert Bernasconi and Tina Chanter brought Irigaray over and asked her to talk about Levinas. She wrote a text by hand in a little cahier, an exercise book. I was her interpreter and she was, let's say, difficult. I sat in her hotel room in Wivenhoe Park Hotel while she read the text out to me and asked whether I understood. I nodded and then she would read the next paragraph. I didn't understand. The actual event was rather stressful, as I had to stand alongside her translating everything she said, and she said a lot. The text that was published is Margaret Whitford's translation of that talk. Basically, it reprises the argument of "The Fecundity of the Caress" but in a much more direct way without the mimetic strategy. All I would like to focus on here is the way in which the language of eros in "Questions to Emmanuel Levinas" is articulated through a series of allusions to the Song of Songs. I remember very clearly, sometime after Irigaray's talk at Essex, becoming fascinated with the Song of Songs and deciding that one day I wanted to write something about it. Sadly, that day never came, but let me at least try and speak about the Song of Songs by way of a conclusion to these Lectures. It might allow us to glimpse a way out of the patriarchy of Levinas's discussions of eros and fecundity, and find another way of conceiving an ethical relation to the other.

¹⁵ Irigaray, "The Fecundity of the Caress," p. 251.

¹⁶ Irigaray, "The Fecundity of the Caress," p. 252.

The Song of Songs, Finally

Irigaray insists that Levinas apprehends the feminine not in relation to herself but always from the standpoint of the male, which is a strategy dictated by male pleasure, male gods, and a culture of "men-amongst-themselves."¹⁷ Such a patriarchal culture is premised upon the absence of any female divinity and, in particular, upon the prohibition of any representation of female sexual organs. This is how Irigaray understands (and misunderstands) Levinas' insistence upon the feminine as that which shuns the light, as the invisible. The misunderstanding consists in the fact that Levinas gives an enormous privilege to the night and invisibility, arguing against the violence of light. Therefore, shunning the light is praise indeed. Nonetheless, Irigaray sees her task as restoring visibility to the feminine, particularly in relation to sexual enjoyment. This is where the Song of Songs comes in. What is at stake for Irigaray is the transition between matriarchal cultures that permitted or made central the representation of the feminine and patriarchal cultures that forbid it. She writes,

One of the places where this transition can be pinpointed, is located at the junction of Mesopotamian with Sumerian culture, a place where the songs celebrating sacred unions or marriages give birth to The Song of Songs, which tells of complexity of the nuptials between the two lovers [l'amante et l'amant], the two beloveds [l'aimée et l'aimé], who are born to different mothers and so do not belong to the same traditions, to the same genealogies or to the same gods.¹⁸

What Irigaray takes from the Song of Songs is the idea of an active female lover and an active male lover, not an active male lover who sings a marriage song and a passive female beloved who passively listens to the song. Remember that brides never get to speak in traditional weddings. Unfortunately, Irigaray is completely wrong about this Mesopotamian and Sumerian stuff. It's a version of what's called the Bachofen thesis, and its accompanying idea of *das Mutterrecht*, a primal, matriarchal Ur-religion. The idea is that there were strong matriarchal cultures in the Near East and Middle East that were displaced by patriarchy. The Song of Songs is thus interpreted as the residue of that prior matriarchal culture that somehow survives within the full-blown patriarchy of the Hebrew Bible. It's a great idea, but sadly, it's flawed. From most of the scholarship I've looked at, the Song of Songs is composed much later than that. It's probably Hellenistic, probably third century bc, and it certainly post-dates Alexander the Great's destructive wanderings in that part of the world. The Song of Songs is very possibly a marriage song that was originally in Aramaic, the language that became hegemonic in Palestine after the Greek ascendancy. The text we possess is in Hebrew, but scholars detect all sorts of Hellenistic sources. If you look at Sumerian marriage songs, they're much dirtier. Some people think that the Song of Songs is sexually explicit, and it is certainly sexy in my view, but it's really rather reticent about direct

¹⁷ Luce Irigaray, "Questions to Emmanuel Levinas: On the Divinity of Love," in *Re-Reading Levinas*, ed. Robert Bernasconi and Simon Critchley (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), p. 178.

¹⁸ Irigaray, "Questions to Emmanuel Levinas," p. 179.

sexual description. Instead it uses a wonderful language of agrarian simile. Her eyes are compared to doves, her breasts are like two fawns or clusters of dates, her navel is like a round basin, her belly is like a stack of wheat, her hair is like a flock of goats streaming down Mount Gilead. His head is as the finest gold, his abdomen is like a block of ivory, his lips are like roses, dropping with flowing myrrh, and so on. You get the whole gorgeous picture. By contrast, the Sumerian Goddess of Love, Inanna, says to her husband, Dumuzi, in the sacred marriage rite of Summa, "plough my vulva, my sweetheart."¹⁹ That's pretty direct. The Song of Songs is much more measured and restrained, which of course only inflames the heat of eros. The erotic calls for concealment. Think about Roland Barthes' remarks about the sexiness of the slit in clothing that reveals by concealing. Full nakedness is very often disappointing.

Irigaray returns to the Song of Songs at the end of "Questions to Emmanuel Levinas." She begins by making explicit a theme implicit in "Fecundity of the Caress": "In so far as I'm acquainted with him, Levinas has little taste for mysticism. What is the link between this lack of interest and his conception of sexual difference. In other words, is mysticism not linked to the flesh in a sexual dimension?"²⁰ And, more specifically, is it not linked to the flesh as sexed? I think this is right. It is not to say that mysticism is about sex, but rather that it is the transformation of sexual life, its refinement and distillation. Irigaray goes on to ask, "But outside of mysticism, who is God? What is God? What is the point of flesh without mysticism?"²¹ I think this is also right. Once we have flesh without mysticism, then we end up with an Andy Warhol movie or vintage Danish pornography, which is simply anatomical. Mysticism is the erotic transformation of flesh, where God is identified with the act of love and "is" within that act. Levinas' suspicions of mysticism turn first on his assumption that all forms of mysticism result in ontological union or fusion and thereby annul the separation and pluralism that he wants to maintain at the heart of the human-to-human relationship. But secondly, as I said yesterday, Levinas' opposition to mysticism also flows from the rationalistic tradition of Judaism with which he identifies by opposition to the kinds of Kabbalistic and Hasidic traditions that one can find in someone like Martin Buber. Levinas' opposition to Buber flows from deep suspicion of Jewish mysticism.

As Irigaray insists, this is why Levinas knows nothing of communion in pleasure. Distance is always maintained with the other, even in eros. There can be no loss of boundaries or entering into a fluid identity, what she calls "extase instante," instant or immediate ecstasy.²² For Irigaray, the reason for this forbidding of ecstasy lies with Judaism, which is the religion of the invisible God that brings about a disappearance of the flesh (and especially blood, particularly menstrual blood) and the reduction

¹⁹ S.N. Kramer, trans., "Sumerian Sacred Marriage Texts," in *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament*, ed. James B. Pritchard (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969), p. 643; cited in Chana Bloch and Ariel Bloch, trans., *The Song of Songs* (New York: Modern Library, 1995), p. 14.

²⁰ Irigaray, "Questions to Emmanuel Levinas," p. 186.

²¹ Irigaray, "Questions to Emmanuel Levinas," p.187.

²² Irigaray, "Questions to Emmanuel Levinas," p. 180.

of the erotic act to profanation rather than sacralization. This disappearance can be textually located in the Song of Songs, which still retains the traces of another erotics of the divinity of love and the active female lover, the amante. Irigaray concludes,

But the Song of Solomon bears the trace of the woman as lover (l'amante) for it says, and repeats: "do not awaken (my) love until she please." She, the lover, remains a subject in the act of love.²³

Now, there would be various ways of softening this polemic against Levinas. For example, the Song of Songs appears in a footnote to *Otherwise than Being* where Levinas is trying to describe the malady or sickness of being possessed by the Other. He quotes the famous verse, "I am sick with love" (OB 198). But Levinas immediately goes on in the main text to assert, a little irritably, that the "me voici," the "here I am" of ethical subjectivity "is not a gift for fine words or songs" (OB 142). Irigaray also completely misunderstands the huge importance given to the flesh, embodiment, and enjoyment in Levinas' work. So Levinas could be defended. And Irigaray's female metaphysics of communion based on a dubious set of anthropological and linguistic assumptions could be criticized. But I want to let the critique stand and use it in order to move into the Song of Songs itself.

More particularly, I'd like to imagine the Song of Songs as an ideal topos, even an eu-topos, for an erotics irreducible to either patriarchy or matriarchy. The song, in its long, languid, looping lines, allows us to imagine an erotic relation where both lovers are acknowledged as speakers, actors, and players. The Song of Songs permits the imagination of an ethics of sexual difference rooted in the divinity of the erotic act. There is a kind of ethics of sexual difference at work in the Song of Songs. An affirmation that eros can, in its highest moments, permit an escape beyond identity: a one that has at least become two. That's my thought or, rather, my hope. That's also my suggestion as to how we might answer the problem in Levinas.

Picking up on my methodological remarks at the beginning of these lectures, the Song of Songs is a drama, a nuptial drama, where both male and female lovers are recognized as subjects. The Song of Songs raises many more questions than it answers. It is also well worth reading in a number different translations. I have several here with me, beginning with the King James Bible and the Tanakh version. If this is a nuptial song, then does it describe sex before marriage? Very possibly, as this would explain why there is much secrecy, movement in the night, and the chasing of lovers. There are even beatings by the police, or at least the "watchmen of Jerusalem." But clearly there is sexual congress happening.

What is so fascinating is the switching of the narrative voice in the Song of Songs and the multiplication of voices. The first voice, the dominant voice, in the song is the voice of the girl, who is referred to as the Shulamite, which we assume to mean denizen of Jerusalem. How old is the girl? Most scholars say that she is young, 14 or 15. The boy? We don't know, possibly around the same age. There are the girl's brothers and

²³ Irigaray, "Questions to Emmanuel Levinas," p. 188.

these characters called The Daughters of Jerusalem, who form a kind of chorus in the polyphony of the song. As I said earlier, what is peculiar is that the house that the Shulamite lives in is described as the mother's, and the father is entirely absent from the song, as is God. There is also something strangely menacing and dreadful about the Song of Songs, with allusions to death that "feedeth among the lilies," two mentions of "terrible as an army with banners," and the temples "split open like a pomengranate." The whole mood of the verse is wrought with confusion, apprehension, and strange potentialities.²⁴

Against Scholem, For Hysterical Extravagance

People always ask how the Song of Songs ended up in the Bible. In a sense, this is a stupid question. The composition of the book that we call the Hebrew Bible was a complex process that took many centuries and was not necessarily guided by principles that we would think of as theological. The aim was in no way to produce a homogenous or orthodox work. On the contrary, there is some weird stuff in the Hebrew Bible. At the Council of Jamnia, in 90 ad, scholars argue that the rabbis "gave their sanction to writings that had already been accepted as authoritative."²⁵ (Sadly, the sources of textual authority in antiquity are very often hard to pin down—we do not know why the Song was authoritative.) The canon of texts to be included in the Hebrew Bible was closed around this time and we find Rabbi Akiva (ca. 40–ca. 137) writing,

No man in Israel ever disputed the status of the Song of Songs...for the whole world is not worth the day on which the Song of Songs was given to Israel; for all the writings are holy, but the Song of Songs is the holiest of the holy.²⁶

Some scholars have argued that the authority of the Song of Songs derived from its popularity. Perhaps it was a poem used or cited in marriage services. But given its authority and the fact of its inclusion in the Bible, the song has always presented huge problems of interpretation that can be read between the lines of the Rabbi Akiva's praise for the Song of Songs as the holiest of the holy. The song has been interpreted allegorically within Judaism not as a love song between a boy and a girl, but as expressing the love of Israel for God and God for Israel. Conceived as allegory, physical love becomes the mystical–political contract between God and his chosen people. Think of this what you will.

I don't want to get into the place of the Song of Songs in relation to Jewish mysticism, partly for reasons of a simple lack of competence but also because of a telling remark that Gershom Scholem makes early in *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*. He argues

²⁴ I owe this line of thought to a suggestion made by Rachele Rahme.

²⁵ *Yadayim Mishnah* 3:5, trans. in Sid Z. Leiman, *The Canonization of Hebrew Scripture: The Talmudic and Midrashic Evidence* (New Haven: Transactions of the Connecticut Academy of the Arts and Sciences, 1991), p. 121; cited in Bloch and Bloch, introduction to *The Song of Songs*, p. 28.

²⁶ Bloch and Bloch, introduction to *The Song of Songs*, p. 28.

that Jewish mysticism is a "masculine doctrine, made for men and by men."²⁷ As such, the long history of Jewish mysticism shows no feminine influence, and there have been no major female Jewish mystics, no Julian of Norwich, and no Marguerite Porete. Obviously, Simone Weil would be the modern example of a Jewish mystic, although she identified herself as Christian without ever converting. In addition to the feminine element, what is also missing from Jewish mysticism is the autobiographical dimension. The first autobiographies in many of the vernacular languages of Europe were written or dictated by female mystics like Angela of Foligno or Margary Kempe. Scholem concludes, bizarrely, that Jewish mysticism "also remained comparatively free of the dangers entailed by the tendency towards hysterical extravagance."²⁸ Let me be perfectly clear here: what compels me in relation to Christian mysticism, especially the female mystics, is precisely this hysterical extravagance, which I see as the highest praise, the holiest of the holy indeed.

Mysticism in the Kitchen

Of course, the Song of Songs also created a huge headache for Christian theologians. To give you a sense of some of the problems this text created, I'll cite an amusing passage. In a 1915 commentary on the Holy Bible by J. R. Dummelow, we find the following remark, which is, let's just say, written in the late British Imperial style. Imagine that I am speaking in a clipped, shrill, inhibited, slightly Basil Fawlty style:

At first blush we're surprised to find in the Bible a poem on human love. But we must remember that the mutual attraction of the sexes is of God's ordaining. So far from being intrinsically evil, it contains for both parties an immeasurable possibility of blessing. And the love which is here sung is ordered, regulated, legitimate. The imagery is too suggestive and the description of physical charms too minute, for our taste, but it was produced by an Oriental for Orientals.²⁹

When I read that passage out to an Iranian student of mine at The New School, Setareh Shohadei, she said "You know Simon, the problem with the Song of Songs is that it is Oriental." Indeed, for us, there is something absolutely exotic and strange about the Song of Songs. It leaves me breathless every time I read it.

Michel de Certeau—a very interesting thinker—who wrote on mysticism amongst other fascinating matters, like everyday life and angels, made the following remark: "Mysticism, especially, can only be dealt with from a distance, as a savage in the kitchen."³⁰ That's how I want to approach mysticism: with a little kitsch, kitchenesque savagery. Within Christianity, the Song of Songs is the mystical book of the Bible

²⁷ Gershom Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* (New York: Schocken, 1946), p. 37.

²⁸ Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, p. 37.

²⁹ J.R. Dummelow, *A Commentary on the Holy Bible* (London: Macmillan, 1915), p. 402.

³⁰ Michel de Certeau, *Heterologies: Discourse on the Other*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), p. 36.

par excellence. It is understood as the supreme expression of the love of God in the person of Christ by the soul or by the community, the Church. Within Christianity, the Church—the universal, Catholic Church—takes the place occupied by the particularity of Israel. And thus begins a dialectic of the universal and the particular with a long and bloody history. The way in which the Song of Songs is understood in the Christian tradition is that the two lovers are God as Christ on the one side and the Soul or the community as Church on the other. The song becomes a love ode of the union of the soul with Christ and Christ with the soul. Christian mysticism is a meditation on the meaning of love. Nothing more or less.

The origin of this Christian allegorical reading of the Song of Songs lies with Origen, the greatest exegete of the early Church. Origen sees the Song of Songs as an epithalamium, as a marriage song. It is a relationship between the bridegroom and the bride, where the bridegroom is the word of God—*λόγος* (logos)—and the bride is the soul. So, the masculine/feminine distinction in the interpretation of the Song of Songs becomes one where the male lover is God and the female beloved is the soul. In other words, the soul is feminized. Origen says that what's going on in the Song of Songs is a separation of the inner and the outer, the spirit from flesh, where passionate, carnal love becomes charity. Eric Anthamattan raised a question to me yesterday about the relation between *ἔρως* (erôs) and *ἀγάπη* (agapê), amor and caritas, between erotic love and Christian love or charity. Origen, in the most important early interpretation of the Song of Songs, identifies erôs and agapê. Erotic love becomes charity. It's a hugely important move. Everything is at stake. Origen writes,

But if any man who lives only after the flesh should approach it [the Song of Songs], to such a one the reading of this scripture will be the occasion of no small hazard and danger. For he, not knowing how to hear love's language in purity and with chaste ears, will twist the whole manner of his hearing of it away from the inner spiritual man and on to the outward and carnal; and he will be turned away from the spirit to the flesh and foster carnal desires in himself, and it will seem to be the divine scriptures that are thus urging and egging him on to fleshly lust.³¹

Of course, what is being recalled here is the distinction you find in Paul between living according to the *σάρκός* (sarkos) and living according to the *πνεῦμα* (pneuma). What the Song of Songs should induce is love of God in the soul, teaching us communion with God in the form of marriage. But that requires the identification of erôs and agapê. Otherwise, the person who lives according to the flesh will hear in the Song of Songs sheer fleshly lust. At this point scripture becomes pornography. If mysticism is a meditation on love, then it has to be what one of the greatest of the medieval female mystics, Marguerite Porete, would have called fine amor, refined love.

Let's have a little fun, shall we? How, then, is the Song of Songs picked up within Christianity? More particularly, how does Origen's allegorical interpretation inspire the

³¹ Origen, Commentary on the Song of Songs, in *The Essential Writings of Christian Mysticism*, ed. Bernard McGinn (New York: Modern Library, 2006), p. 8.

medieval mystics? Everything passes here through Bernard de Clairvaux, who wrote eighty-six sermons on the Song of Songs.³² By the end, he had only reached chapter three, verse four of the song. Bernard's sermons are beautiful, subtle, densely layered palimpsests of quotations and allusions. It's a kind of maximal medieval sampling technique. For Bernard, like Origen, the Song of Songs is the expression of the soul's journey on the way to a loving union with God. He will take a verse like "The King has brought me into his rooms" and then allegorize each detail of the room, which is indeed a bedroom or chamber, a place of erotic encounter. He finds scriptural authority for the Song's references to fragrance, ointment, myrrh, and aloes and then goes on to interpret the bedroom as the sanctuary of God, the holy of holies, into which only those capable of divine contemplation are able to gain admission.

Bernard is brilliant, but matters get even more fascinating when other, more heterodox, figures get hold of the Song of Songs. The affective force of Bernard's sermons on the Song of Songs and their concentration on the theme of love seems to authorize in its turn a whole tradition of interpretation that is at once intensely felt and deeply personal. It produces what Caroline Walker Bynum calls a "somatization" of religious experience, particularly but by no means exclusively on the bodies of women.³³ The extraordinary thing about the medieval female mystics is that because women were denied access to formal education, they received very little scriptural education and were not taught Latin, the official language of the Church. Instead of formal theology, a more informal relationship to Gospel or Scripture develops, which also takes place in the vernacular. The birth of mysticism is also the birth of a vernacular literature. Angela of Foligno dictated her "Book" to Brother Scribe in her Umbrian dialect. Hadewijch of Antwerp wrote some of the first texts in Flemish. The first book in English by an Englishwoman is Julian of Norwich's "Shewings."

All Mouth

I have five pieces of evidence with regard to the allegorical mystical interpretation of the Song of Songs, but we could look at a great deal more material. The first is by Madame Guyon, a seventeenth-century French mystic. Guyon's commentary on the Song of Songs was composed, as legend has it, in 12 hours. It is a meditation on the first words of the song, "Let him kiss me with the kiss of the mouth." Guyon writes,

We must remember that God is all mouth, as he is all word, and that the application of this divine mouth to the soul is the perfect enjoyment and consummation of the marriage by which the communication of God himself and of his Word is made to the soul.³⁴

³² Bernard of Clairvaux, *On the Song of Songs*, trans. Killian Walsh and Irene Edmonds, 4 vols., Cistercian Fathers Series 4, 7, 31, 40 (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 1971–80).

³³ Caroline Walker Bynum, *Fragmentation and Redemption* (New York: Zone Books, 1992).

³⁴ Madame Guyon, "Commentary on the Song of Songs," in *The Essential Writings of Christian*

God is pure and total orality. This is something that comes up again and again in mystical writings. Hence the huge importance of the Eucharist for many female mystics: the literal and figurative incorporation of the body of Christ. God is the kiss; and the kiss is the passage through which God flows into us in perfect enjoyment. In this kiss, in this flowing forth, this in-flowing, as Mechthild of Magdeburg will say, the soul is melted away like a little ice cube. In other words, and this is the centre of Porete's theology, the soul is annihilated in the kiss of God. Madame Guyon says that the soul is "annihilated, and freed from self that it can unreservedly flow into God."³⁵ Love is the passage to annihilation. Or, rather, love is annihilation, where God takes the place where the soul was.

Incidentally, this puts me in mind of a strange little note of Freud's from 1938, written very close to the end of his life. Freud writes, "Mysticism is the obscure self-perception of the realm outside the ego, of the id."³⁶ Of course, this means that mysticism has a relation to the unconscious and to unconscious desire, that is, it has a relation to the libido in its erotic and thanatic functions. The mystical relates to what is hidden from consciousness. I'm sure that Freud would not have approved of mysticism, particularly in its Jungian variety, but at least he sought to understand it. Given that the ego is the site of repression and resistance, locating mysticism in relation to the id is praise, although it might well be faint praise.

The achievement of annihilation is what Madame Guyon calls "indifference," a very important term in seventeenth-century mysticism. This was the heresy of what was called quietism in the seventeenth century, which was the "sin" of assuming such passivity towards God—no action was necessary, not even the sacraments of the Church. This is also what the Quakers got into trouble for. Religion wasn't about action in the world, going to Church, or any of that stuff; it was about the annihilation of the soul in relationship to God and the achievement of indifference or what Eckhart calls "releasement" or "detachment," which are both terms picked up by Heidegger. Ultimately it is a question of the enjoyment of God, the *jouissance* of God, through the mouth. The question of love, and you can find this in some very interesting writers like Anne Carson and Amy Hollywood, is that love is about the experience of annihilation. It's not a union or some kind of contract, or a mutual exchange of favours: I give you this, you give me that, and eventually we get a mortgage. You know the sort of thing. No. Love is annihilation. Anything short of annihilation is not love. As Madame Guyon says, "It is impossible to love too much."³⁷

Mysticism, p. 43.

³⁵ Guyon, "Commentary on the Song of Songs," p. 45.

³⁶ Sigmund Freud, "Findings, Ideas, Problems," in vol. 23 of *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, trans. and ed. James Strachey (London: Hogarth Press, [1939] 1964), p. 300.

³⁷ Madame Guyon, "Commentary on the Song of Songs," p. 44.

Decreation, Annihilation

Another way of putting this, with Simone Weil, is to say that love is the movement of decreation, the stripping away or negating of everything creaturely about us and everything that ties us to the self and world, and distances us from the other and God. To love is to negate. The *via negativa* is not to engage in a bit of conceptual cleverness, speaking in contradictions and paradoxes. It is a cutting away at oneself, which is not just conceptual but corporeal. It is what Porete sees as "hacking and hewing away at oneself to widen the place in which Love will want to be."³⁸ As Teresa of Avila said, "The pain was so great that it made me moan."³⁹ This is the meaning of poverty in mysticism, which is not just external poverty but an internal impoverishment; it's a pulling away, a ridding oneself of attachments, becoming so poor that one is nothing. This is what Eckhart means by detachment, and it also means ridding oneself of the idea of God. Eckhart famously writes, "This is why I pray God to rid me of God."⁴⁰ Mysticism is not a descending series of affirmations beginning from the authority of the postulate of God, in the standard theological manner. It is, rather, a series of what Eugene Thacker calls ascending negations, making our way up through a series of negations to an experience of nothingness. "O unknowable nothingness!" Angela of Foligno declared in her final words.

Here's a little theological speculation: is the annihilation of the soul also the annihilation of God? Once the soul is annihilated, then God takes the place of the soul and I (whatever meaning that pronoun still has once the soul is extinguished) become God. But if God is only God for the soul, i.e., in distinction from the soul, then once the soul has ceased to be, then what sense does the concept of God still have? Might this not be the deeper meaning of Eckhart's thought that when I am bereft of the will, detached, and annihilated, then I stand in my first cause, as it was when "I had no God, I was cause of myself."⁴¹ This is why Eckhart says, "I pray God to rid me of God, for my essential being is above God insofar as we comprehend God as the principle of all creatures." He also says, "If I myself were not, God would not be either: that God is God, of this I am a cause. If I were not, God would not be God."⁴² The implication is not that God and I are one in mystical union, but rather that with my annihilation God is also annihilated. Both God and I are not. Perhaps this is the meaning of the desert or the Godhead, both the external desert of Antony and the early Egyptian

³⁸ Marguerite Porete, *The Mirror of Simple Annihilated Souls*, in *The Essential Writings of Christian Mysticism*, p. 174.

³⁹ Teresa of Avila, *The Life of St. Teresa of Avila by Herself*, in *The Essential Writings of Christian Mysticism*, p. 359.

⁴⁰ Meister Eckhart, *Wandering Joy: Meister Eckhart's Mystical Philosophy*, trans. and commentary by Reiner Schürmann, ed. David Appelbaum (Great Barrington, MA: Lindisfarne Books, 2001), p. 112.

⁴¹ Eckhart, *Wandering Joy*.

⁴² Eckhart, *Wandering Joy*, p. 113.

monks and the inner desert of the soul. The desert is where there is neither God nor the soul, but general nihilation.

Mysticism is not a process of entering into the full presence of God, the *unio mystica*, but rather the experience of absence and nothingness, which is why so many of the most interesting mystics emphasize images of the desert and darkness, what Dionysius calls, in an extraordinary phrase, "the superessential darkness."⁴³ In my view, this darkness is a kissing cousin of Levinas' concept of the night of the *il y a*, the pure thereness of being, and the night of the erotic. But that's another story.

Our second piece of evidence is our local hero, Hadewijch of Antwerp. In "Vision 7" of her *Book of Visions*, she describes her union with Christ in relation to the *Song of Songs*:

Then he came to me himself and took me completely in his arms and pressed me to him. And all my limbs felt his limbs in the full satisfaction that my heart and my humanity desired. Then I was externally completely satisfied to the utmost satiation.

At that time I also had, for a short while, the strength to bear it. But all too soon I lost external sight of the shape of that beautiful man...⁴⁴

As Estelle Reiner says to the waiter, sitting in the diner across from Meg Ryan's character in *When Harry Met Sally* just after she's finished her fake orgasm, "I'll have what she's having." Christ is that beautiful man through whom annihilation is possible—God's annihilation too. In Hadewijch, you can see how the language of eros in the *Song of Songs* is taken up, distilled, and transformed.

The third character I want to line up is really wild, Richard Rolle, an English mystic from the fourteenth century. He was close to the anonymous author of *The Cloud of Unknowing*, and perhaps also close to Julian of Norwich, who is arguably the most theologically creative and most modest and compassionate of all the medieval mystics (I hope but will probably fail to write on Julian's theology of sin and love at some point). Rolle says there are three elements to the relationship to God: heat, song, and sweetness.⁴⁵ The way in which God affects us is through physical heat. The effect of song, sound, music, especially the *Song of Songs*, induces sweetness, which is the sweetness of love that is compared to jewels and gems like topaz. Such sweet song leads to rapture or *ἔκστασις*. This is the fire of love, the *incendium amoris*.

The fourth example of an interpretation of the *Song of Songs* is "The Spiritual Canticle" of John of the Cross, the sixteenth-century Spanish mystic whose song concerns the relation between the soul and its bridegroom, namely, God. John of the Cross speaks of spiritual matrimony as the achievement of detachment "from all things and from self when the bride is in solitude, spiritually detached, which takes place when all desires are quenched."⁴⁶ As with Madame Guyon, detachment is paradoxically reached

⁴³ Dionysius, *The Mystical Theology*, in *The Essential Writings of Christian Mysticism*, p. 286.

⁴⁴ Hadewijch of Antwerp, "Vision VII," in *The Essential Writings of Christian Mysticism*, p. 104.

⁴⁵ Richard Rolle, "The Fire of Love," in *The Essential Writings of Christian Mysticism*, pp. 341–6.

⁴⁶ John of the Cross, "The Spiritual Canticle," in *The Essential Writings of Christian Mysticism*, p. 464.

through the kiss that opens the Song of Songs, "There I, being alone, 'kiss you,' who are alone."⁴⁷ Alone to alone. Again, the central focus is the mouth, the kiss, orality. Like I said, God is all mouth. By flowing into the soul, sweeter than wine, God annihilates it.

The final example is Canadian, from 1654, Marie of the Incarnation. She was an Ursuline nun who sailed to Quebec in 1639, when it was a tiny outpost of a few hundred souls. It's a pity she didn't live a few centuries later. She could have joined The Arcade Fire, singing weird French backing vocals. Marie gives an intensely erotic interpretation of the Song of Songs, that kicks off from arguably the central Christian text for the entire mystical tradition, Saint Paul's line from Galatians, "It is not I who live but Jesus Christ who lives in me."⁴⁸ If Christ is God and God lives within me, then it is not I who live. It is myself as God. We can see how close this line of thinking steers to heresy. When Marie writes, "God alone was its only enjoyment," then such enjoyment is that of myself, myself as another within me. Although Levinas would refuse any identification, this sense of myself as another is very close to the structure of substitution as "the other within the same." This would be another way of thinking about annihilation. Mysticism is not just a question of the identity of the soul and God, as William James and many others tend to assume. It is rather the stranger idea of cultivating poverty in oneself, a decreative process of stripping away that permits the soul to become inhabited by the other. In this way, annihilation would be inhabitation by alterity: the tyranny of egoism gives way to ethical subjectivity.

The Enjoyment of God

I've given just five examples of interpretations, indeed transfigurations of the Song of Songs. There are many others, and I would urge you all to read and reread the song and enjoy its enjoyment. This brings me back to us: modern readers, contemporary readers, ironists imprisoned in a hipster hell, whoever and wherever the hell we are. For us, particularly when we feel the intense yearning of the Song of Songs, particularly the highly provocative chapter five, it is tempting, irresistibly tempting, to want to literalize the figurative and conclude that the Song of Songs is just about sex. This is a marriage poem. Okay, okay, okay, whatever that means. But this is just a poem about two people doing it. Both synagogue and church have repressive, mixed-up attitudes towards sex and this is why traditions of Jewish and Christian interpretation turn the song into some business about Israel and God or Christ and the soul. We laugh out loud and say, enough already. The song is about fucking. Why? Because everything is about fucking. You just dress it up in different ways, with different veils of hypocrisy. Such, I would argue, is our ideological prejudice, our deluded belief in our own sexual

⁴⁷ John of the Cross, "The Spiritual Cantic," p. 464.

⁴⁸ Marie of the Incarnation, "The Relation of 1654," in *The Essential Writings of Christian Mysticism*, p. 476.

emancipation. We want to say that Christianity has a deeply messed-up relation to the body, and therefore it has to transform the Song of Songs into something acceptable to religious morality. I won't labour the point. You get the picture.

I want to oppose that prejudice in the strongest possible terms and argue for a figurative, allegorical reading of the Song of Songs. What's going on in the song, in my view, is a transformation of the carnal, another thinking of the erotic, a sublimation, distillation or even purification of the banal discourse on fucking. What is at stake is some other possibility of desire, and some other possibility of desire's transfiguration that is bound up with another possibility of enjoyment, what more than one of the examples I looked at called "the enjoyment of God."

I have Jacques Lacan in mind here, in particular the way in which he stumbles upon Beguine mysticism in the course of Seminar XX as he attempts to get close to what takes place in the experience of feminine enjoyment or *jouissance* and its relation to love.⁴⁹ Lacan claims that to reduce mysticism to the "business of fucking" (*les affaires de foutre*) is to miss the point entirely. He then goes on—and he is thinking explicitly of Hadewijch and Teresa—to state that "I believe in the *jouissance* of woman insofar as it is an extra (*en plus*)."⁵⁰ Female mystics are on the path of an experience of the *en plus* that exceeds knowledge, the order of what Lacan elsewhere calls truth, by which he means the truth of the subject, where the subject is identified with the unconscious. This dimension of an excessive *jouissance* that articulates something that is more (*en plus*) of what Lacan sees as the essentially phallic function of knowledge is what he calls, with a nod to Heidegger, "ex-sistence." It is this dimension of ecstasy, following the line of a transgressive desire into its *ἄσκησις* (*askêsis*), that we can call love. To be clear, this is not something confined to women. Lacan adds, thinking of Kierkegaard, "there are men who are just as good as women," namely, those who "get the idea or sense that there must be a *jouissance* that is beyond. Those are the ones that we call mystics."⁵¹

I wonder if Lacan was also thinking of Bataille as one of those candidates for male mystics. You know, the guy whose wife he stole. If so, it would make a neat segue to my final move. The point I'm trying to make—and maybe not making as well as I would like to—is that what we see in these mystical readings of the Song of Songs is the possibility of another experience of enjoyment, an enjoyment that is more. If you reduce the Song of Songs and indeed mysticism to the bio-mechanics of intercourse, then you miss the whole thing and you miss what's interesting here and what's really at stake.

⁴⁹ Jacques Lacan, *On Feminine Sexuality: The Limits of Love and Knowledge*, trans. B. Fink (New York: Norton, 1998), pp. 74–7.

⁵⁰ Lacan, *On Feminine Sexuality*, p. 77.

⁵¹ Lacan, *On Feminine Sexuality*, p. 77.

Sovereign Love

I wish I had the cavalry coming over the hill at the end of these lectures; instead I have Bataille impaling himself delightfully on Calvary. In his discussion of mysticism and sensuality from his book *Eroticism*, Bataille says the following, which recalls Hadewijch's sense of God as a lightning flash or the ravishing far-near: "God—for me—means the lightning flash which exhausts the creature above the concern to protect or increase his wealth in the dimension of time."⁵² Whatever God means, Bataille also links God to an idea of poverty, an idea of enabling us to exit or at least think differently about the prison of utility, use-value, and wealth creation to which our lives are usually bound. Bataille cautions against two tendencies. On the one hand, he warns against the pathologizing tendency to reduce mystical experience to some psychological or psychiatric explanation. This is a thing we tend to do. We say, "Oh, that poor girl with the visions and the eating disorder who kept beating herself up clearly needed a combination of cognitive behavioural therapy, a regular supervised diet, and a soothing drug regime." We might think we know better, but do we? Really? On the other hand, Bataille goes on, "Neither must we spiritualize the domain of sexuality to exalt it to the level of ethereal experiences."⁵³ We mustn't reduce mysticism to the naturalistic or the psychological, but neither must we make it too ethereal and idealized.

So what is the significance of mystical experience for Bataille? Mysticism is about "the non-attachment to ordinary life, indifference to its needs."⁵⁴ It is a question of what Eckhart would call "detachment," release from the world of utility into an experience of poverty, passivity, inertia, where "the object of contemplation becomes equal to nothing."⁵⁵ For Bataille, God is, in a precise conceptual sense, nothing. This is why he was so keen on Angela of Foligno's exclamation, "O unknowable nothingness!" that he sees as a kind of fever that moves beyond divine limits.⁵⁶ Mysticism is another name for the cultivation of what Bataille elsewhere calls "inner experience" or the state of sovereignty. He writes, "Erotic experience, at least at first glance, is subordinated to the event; mystical experience sets man free from the event. In the sphere of mysticism we reach complete sovereignty."⁵⁷ Ultimately, Bataille subordinates the literal to the figurative, the sexual to the mystical, and seeks to attain what he calls a "theopathic state," where desire is withdrawn into an immobility, an experience of annihilation which is the double nothingness of the self and God. In the final paragraphs of *Eroticism*, Bataille writes, "Sensuality is to mysticism as a clumsy try is to a perfect achievement, and no doubt we ought to ignore what is after all a wrong turning on the spirit's road to

⁵² Georges Bataille, *Erotism, Death, and Sensuality* (San Francisco: City Lights, 1986), p. 236.

⁵³ Bataille, *Erotism, Death, and Sensuality*, p. 245.

⁵⁴ Bataille, *Erotism, Death, and Sensuality*, p. 246.

⁵⁵ Bataille, *Erotism, Death, and Sensuality*, p. 249.

⁵⁶ Georges Bataille, *Inner Experience*, trans. L.A. Boldt (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1988), p. 104.

⁵⁷ Bataille, *Erotism, Death, and Sensuality*, p. 249.

sovereignty.”⁵⁸ Sovereignty is what it’s all about for Bataille. Sovereignty would be a life that is a little less ordinary, one that is not reduced to the principle of utility or the service of goods, where I am defined in terms of a predictable and instrumental series of functionalist relationships: a life of regulation and routine. If the cost of sovereignty is the disorderliness and seeming randomness of love, then it is a price worth paying.

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We love and desire in different places. We love in an increasingly ethereal and sentimental way. We desire in an increasingly bio-mechanical and pornographic way. It would appear that love and desire are two halves of a dialectic that has fallen apart. And when they fall apart, we fall apart too. Our being becomes fractured and no surgery, orthopedic or ontological, appears to be able to put it right. Can we love and desire in the same place? I hope so. But I don’t know. Yet what is at stake in the Song of Songs and its mystical interpretation is precisely this question of the possible coincidence of love and desire. The Song offers a picture of eros that might be able to live up to the ethical relation to the other. It offers an escape from the tragic fatality of being that we have tracked persistently in Levinas’ work. In other words, Levinas’ problem is the right problem. The problem with Levinas lies in his answer to that problem. It raises the questions that we have tried to explore in this last lecture. It suggests to me that there is a need to leave the climate of Levinas’ philosophy. But I remain convinced that we cannot leave it for a philosophy that would be pre-Levinasian. What we need is a philosophy that would have the form of a drama. At this point, I can only imagine that drama as a series of ascending negations: neither tragedy nor comedy, neither epic nor lyric, neither sentimental nor cynical, something having the lineaments and contours of us, as we really are, in all the difficulty of being us, and how—until we pinch ourselves awake from our reverie—we might one day imagine ourselves to be.

Thank you for listening.

⁵⁸ Bataille, *Erotism, Death, and Sensuality*, p. 249.

Afterword

The problem with Levinas is that his work has been reduced to a series of slogans about "the ethics of alterity," "the Other" (capital O), and so on. To be clear, this is not simply the fault of Levinas' interpreters or of the way in which Levinas has become massively influential in an impressively wide array of academic and non-academic fields. Levinas has one big idea about ethics as a relation of infinite responsibility to the other where ethics is not a subsidiary field of philosophy, but first philosophy, metaphysics itself. Seen in this way, Levinas' work can be seen as offering a distinctive but recognizable position in moral thinking and moral philosophy that is, moreover, consistent with a broadly liberal world view. If Heidegger is the philosopher who makes a Faustian pact with totalitarianism, so the story goes, then Levinas provides a critique of Heidegger which provides a demanding but defensible and utterly decent moral position that can save us from totalitarianism.

My effort in this book has been to provide a less familiar—and perhaps more troubling—picture of Levinas' work. I hope this picture has the virtue of being truer to what Levinas actually thought and wrote throughout his long intellectual career. Although this book is admittedly idiosyncratic and a little cavalier in its tone, content, and overall approach, at its heart is a series of close readings of central texts by Levinas where I seek to present a problematic that I believe to constitute the core of Levinas' philosophical adventure. In this brief afterword, I'd like to review and restate my overall argument. The itinerary that I have followed is long and a little tortuous, so it might be helpful to provide some signposts.

I began with five framing questions. My first question concerned the method that we might follow in reading Levinas and my suggestion was that Levinas' work can be plausibly approached not as just philosophy, or indeed as moral philosophy, but as drama. At one level, this should be an obvious claim as the invention of the discourse called *philosophia* in Plato is premised upon the exclusion of the tragic poets in the *Republic*. Philosophy begins by opposing one form of drama—the theatrical, broadly understood—with the drama of Socratic dialogue. It is my broader contention that approaching philosophy as a dramatic genre might at least occasion a shift in our understanding of philosophy and deepen that understanding. More narrowly, in the opening pages of this book, I seek to track the appearances of the term "drama" in Levinas' work and view it in theatrical terms.

Happily, this brings us directly to Levinas' fundamental problem and to our second organizing question, which concerns his relation to Heidegger. Levinas' claim is that what appears to be the comedy of Heidegger's fundamental ontology—namely, to see

beneath the intellectualism and theoreticism of traditional philosophy and to conduct an existential analysis that reconnects us with life, the world, others, and history in a manner that is ultimately authentic—turns out to be a tragedy. The purported comedy of Heidegger's philosophy ends up being tragic, specifically, the tragedy of finitude. Namely, that Heidegger's philosophy, although conducted at the right existential level, simply leaves us with a conception of individual human authenticity rooted in the fatalism of being-towards-death. Levinas' problem, then, is very simple: how can we escape from the Heideggerian tragedy of finitude? The philosophical content of this question turns on Levinas' understanding of Heidegger's concept of facticity. The human being's fundamental relation to itself is not given through reflection or consciousness, but is rather the lived, engaged experience of being riveted to our facticity, to those unavoidable features of the self in its attachment to itself and the world, what Heidegger calls thrownness. It is in this specific sense that Levinas' entire problematic can be described in dramatic terms: if the Heideggerian comedy turns tragic and we are simply riveted to ourselves in our being-towards-death, then can there be another comedy, a comedy of infinitude that would allow us to escape the burden of simply being stuck with ourselves until we die. As I show in Lecture Four, this is the work of the child in Levinas, who provides a future that is not my future, a projection that is beyond my own fate, my own being-towards-death.

From the beginning of his work to the end, Levinas' problem is that of escape. This leads us to my third organizing question about the shape of Levinas' problem in his early work. I emphasize the importance of the essays on Hitlerism from 1934 and "On Escape" from 1935 because what I find in those papers is the Ur-form of Levinas' entire work laid out with great analytical and phenomenological power. Lecture Two is essentially a reading of those early essays, where I try to emphasize the distance between Levinas' thinking and liberalism and the awkward proximity that Levinas has to both Heideggerianism and Hitlerism. Levinas' question is that if being is something to which we are riveted in our facticity, then can we get out of being by another path? In other words, the response to the phenomenology of being in Levinas' early work is the claim for what he calls "the otherwise than being." This brings us to the fourth organizing question, namely, Levinas' answer to the problem of escape.

Levinas' way out of being is described in Lecture Three through a reading of his major 1974 book, *Otherwise than Being, Or Beyond Essence*. I focus in particular on Levinas' discussion of subjectivity as substitution. Indeed, the chapter called "Substitution" is called by Levinas the "centerpiece" of his work and I give a very detailed reading of those pages. But the point here is very simple: if Levinas is trying to find a way out of being in his early work, then his answer is given in the idea of otherwise than being, which is understood as a claim about subjectivity. Differently expressed, the response to the question about escape or evasion is worked out as a subjective relationship to that which cannot be evaded, namely, that the self is structured by a responsibility to the other understood as the other within the same. Levinas advances an admittedly strange claim about the self conceived as recurrence, which he understands as sheer

embodiment, a heart beating, a lung breathing: a pre-conscious, pre-reflective notion of the subject. Although the detail of the exposition in Lecture Three is important to review on these points, the escape from being is through an account of the subject that cannot escape responsibility, that is hostage to the other, even persecuted by the other.

Towards the end of Lecture Three, I advance a critical claim, namely, that Levinas' conception of the self as substitution makes a claim to identity, to what Levinas describes as the "in-itself" of the subject, as that which cannot be evaded. But, in my view, this claim is not sufficient in order to provide an answer to Levinas' fundamental problem. Substitution for the other is not escape; it is just a different description of imprisonment, of captivity, of being held hostage by the other. This already brings us to my fifth organizing question, as to whether Levinas' answer to his problem is the best answer. I raise a series of concerns about the confusion of descriptive and prescriptive terms in Levinas, his lack of an account of moral agency or moral motivation, the excessive masochism of his conception of ethical subjectivity, and the absence of any discourse of sublimation or indeed aesthetic transfiguration in his work.

In Lecture Four, I go on to suggest that another, and possibly more fruitful, path of escape is given in Levinas' *Totality and Infinity*, his masterwork from 1961. I have long been convinced that the final part of the latter book, "Beyond the Face," constitutes the most radical and far-reaching area of Levinas' thinking, and that the importance of the concepts discussed in those pages—especially eros, fecundity, pluralism, the infinity of time, and reconciliation—has never been fully understood and appreciated. It is also with *Totality and Infinity* that I try and return to what I call the sign under which I place my entire reading of Levinas: the question of sexual difference discussed at the beginning of Lecture One in connection with Derrida. Derrida makes a very provocative claim about Levinas in the final footnote of "Violence and Metaphysics," namely, that the great innovation of *Totality and Infinity* is that it would be impossible for that book to have been written by a woman. What Derrida means is that Levinas' philosophical discourse is marked by gender in a very clear way: it is male. This is a radical gesture in distinction from the standard philosophical operating procedure, by which I mean that philosophy usually sees itself as a discourse which is gender neutral and which functions through the alleged neutrality of concepts and arguments. It is this very neutrality that Levinas persistently attacks. The consequence is that his writing has a specific and gendered signature.

After laying out the internal structure of the final part of *Totality and Infinity*, I focus on the ambiguity of Levinas' discourse on eros. On the one hand, Levinas' radicality consists in the fact that eros is a privileged domain where the drama of sexual difference plays out and the fate of his entire philosophy is at stake. But, on the other hand, after having given this privileged space to eros, Levinas closes it down by reasserting patriarchy through the figure of the son. This is the function of what Levinas calls fecundity and the importance of this concept cannot be overestimated. The escape from the tragedy of finitude, from the facticity of egoity, is through the

child. The child is the incarnate promise of the continuation of existence beyond me and after me. Furthermore, it is fecundity that establishes a break with what Levinas sees as the monism of the philosophical tradition from Parmenides to Heidegger, where being is always conceived as one, as a unity. In fecundity, pluralism is established, whereby existing itself becomes not one but two and where identity becomes double. It is with this gesture, Levinas insists at the end of *Totality and Infinity*, that we leave the philosophy of Parmenidean Being and establish what he calls "the infinity of time." For Levinas, existence is not a Heideggerian one-act tragedy that ends with my being-towards-death. It is a drama with a multiplicity of acts, which both preceded my birth and which will continue after my death. And it is here that Levinas talks of reconciliation and even the dream of a happy eternity. In other words, against the tragedy of Heidegger's thinking, Levinas believes he is giving us a happy ending, a divine comedy, even a theodicy.

To tell the truth, I don't find this divine comedy terribly amusing. At this point in *Lecture Four*, I turn once again to my final organizing question. My claim is that Levinas gives two answers to the fundamental problem of escape: substitution in *Otherwise than Being*, and fecundity in *Totality and Infinity*. Each of these answers is deeply problematic, as I try to show. So, might there be another answer? It is at this point that I look to Luce Irigaray's subtle displacement of Levinas' phenomenology of eros. The results are quietly devastating: the problem with Levinas' view of eros is that it can only conceive of the relation between lovers as one between an active, male lover and a passive, female beloved. As such, Levinas repeats the standard metaphysical biology of sex differences that reaches back to Aristotle and completely misses the possibility that eros might be a relation between equally active but sexually differentiated subjects. Irigaray's question to Levinas, which is also my own, is, how might the erotic relation to the other be re-imagined and re-described? If Levinas' ethical relation to the other is ultimately predicated upon a patriarchal conception of eros, then might we be able to conceive of another account of the relation to the other, a relation at once ethical and erotic?

After working through the details of Irigaray's critique of Levinas, I pick up on a couple of key allusions that she makes to the *Song of Songs*, the extraordinary, short, and beautiful love poem that somehow ends up in the Hebrew Bible. This then leads me into an extended meditation on the *Song of Songs*, which is a text that I have wanted to think about for decades. What is so fascinating about this text is that it describes an erotic encounter between an active female lover, what Irigaray would call *une amante*, and her lover, the man with whom she is to be married (although I see no reason why this picture of eros has to remain within the horizon of heterosexuality). My hypothesis and hope is that the *Song of Songs* might give us a picture of an encounter with the other, at once erotic and ethical, which avoids the problem that Levinas falls into, namely, his patriarchy. I try to approach the *Song of Songs* as a relation between lovers that is irreducible to either the patriarchy implicit in Levinas or indeed the matriarchy for which Irigaray appears both nostalgic and hopeful. There is here

an affirmation of eros that can, in its highest moments, permit an escape beyond the tragedy of egoity, an alternative vision of ethical subjectivity, another way of answering Levinas' problem.

It is on the basis of this interpretation of the Song of Songs that I make my final move in the book, towards mysticism, particularly the writing of female, medieval Christian mystics. It is a fact that Christian mysticism largely arises as an interpretation of the Song of Songs, where the literal erotic relations between the Shulamite and her lover become allegorized as the relation between the soul and Christ. I follow through a number of examples of the ways in which the Song of Songs has been used by female Christian thinkers as a way of conceiving the nature of love, as an allegory of love. I deploy this allegory in order to explore whether the mystical interpretation of the Song of Songs might enable another way of thinking through the relation to the other than the one Levinas describes. Levinas had little patience with or interest in mysticism, but I decided—as a kind of experiment—to see where the Song of Songs might take us. I understand that the direction I take in the final pages of these lectures will not be to everyone's taste, in which case I ask for the gentle reader's patience while this fascinating avenue of thought is explored. Alternatively, the reader can simply ignore it.

What is of particular interest is the way in which Song of Songs enables the discourse of female medieval mysticism, where women—like Hadewijch of Antwerp or Julian of Norwich—begin to write for the first time in their vernacular European languages, access to Latin being denied to them by the Catholic Church. The Song of Songs is a text that functions as a fecund potentiality that allows us to imagine another way of relating to the other, a relation at once spiritual and intensely somatic, where religion is experienced phenomenologically at the level of the body and through the body.

In the final pages of the book I am trying to think through my five questions to Levinas and to see if we might be able to sketch another answer to Levinas' problem: namely, that the escape from the tragic fatality of being opens in the experience of love, at once mystical and somatic, where both are rooted in an experience of enjoyment, an enjoyment that is something more, something beyond the usual mechanical regulation of pleasures and mutual exchange of favours. What is being envisioned here is not a mysticism of substantial fusion or identity with the other, but a mysticism of decreation, absence, darkness, the desert, and nihilation. Ultimately, mysticism is another route—for me a privileged path—where the tyranny of egoity can give way to ethical subjectivity.

Finally, a word of explanation and an apology. As I said in the Preface, this book has an experimental character. I use the fiction of the lecture form in order to mobilize the content in a particular manner, namely, a dramatic manner: drama is both the method that I see at work in Levinas and the one that I both recommend in philosophy and hope to pursue in some subsequent writing. Philosophy should be closer to the thinking and modes of presentation of the tragic poets that Plato excluded from both the soul and the city in the Republic. It is my hope that the form and content of this book

mirror each other in an illuminating way. The conceit of the lecture form also allowed me to find a voice that is closer to the one that I try to maintain in my teaching, which is usually focused on the summary of large stretches of argumentation and close textual readings, but also given to asides, parentheses, and littered with bad jokes and occasional obscenities. I sometimes wish I could teach in another way, more synthetic and less buffonic, but sadly it seems beyond me.

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