

Plato and Levinas: *The Republic* and Postmodernity

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In Book II of Plato's *Republic*, Glaucon and Adeimantus, the sons of Ariston, issue Socrates a challenge. Show us, they tell him, "not only by the argument... but by what each in itself *does* to the man who has it," *that it is better to be just than to be unjust*.¹ An ancestor of Gyges, King of Lydia — a shepherd by occupation — they remind him, out on the field one day, came into possession of ring of power that gave him the uncanny ability to become invisible at will. Driven by his newfound power into a spiral of rape, murder, and treason, he installed his progeny as his country's rulers (King Croesus, fabled for his wealth, figured in this succession). From the story it would seem "no one is willingly just but only when compelled to be so."² In their hearts, however, the brothers know the opposite to be true — and they want corroboration from Socrates. Socrates, for his part, produces a game plan involving *mousike*, *gymnastike*, mathematics, and philosophy, for the education of rulers — distilled down to the story of the person who starts out helpless in a cave of unremitting deception, yet is gradually empowered to do justice to his fellows by building up in himself a *sure* and certain *knowledge* of the Good (symbolized by the Sun). This

¹*Republic of Plato*, 2nd ed., Allan Bloom trans. (New York: Basic Books, 1968), 360b. [Henceforth *Rep*]

²*Rep* 360c.

Good, Emmanuel Levinas — the postmodern philosopher³ — following Plato, asserts, is “not being but... [is] beyond being, exceeding it in dignity and power.”⁴ He parts ways with Plato, however, particularizing where this Good may be found — not, he argues, upon the face of the immutable sun, but in the face of the *other*.

Levinas expounds upon this point in, “Transcendence and Height,” by drawing analogies between ethical activity and Penelope’s mighty efforts, all throughout the many long years of her husband Odysseus’ absence — fighting in the Trojan War and then facing the perils of his voyage back to Ithaca, into the waiting arms of his Queen — to not falter in her eros, her conjugal loyalty and devotion, to him. Penelope’s story is quite a story because, with the years wearing on, and information from or about Odysseus, whether he might still be alive, or dead, not forthcoming, the issue comes up, and will simply not go away, whether Penelope, as Queen, should be required to remarry, until she can resist the idea no longer. From her suitors she buys additional time, announcing to them she is not averse to remarriage, but that she should be allowed to complete weaving a burial shroud for Laertes, Odysseus’ Father’s, eventual use. So she runs her loom by day in construction of this shroud, only to unravel her handiwork by night, in order to have to start over again next morning. She postpones in this way the usurpation by someone else of her missing husband’s rightful place both in her affections and upon Ithaca’s royal throne — until the day, following twenty long years of sorrow and misadventure, of Odysseus’ triumphant return into her waiting embrace.

The epic tale of Penelope’s loyalty to Odysseus illustrates for Levinas the singularity and “totality” of *eros* in the ethical relation between the “I” and the “other.” To be sure, he is aware of the limits to Penelope’s accomplishment. Her *eros* for Odysseus, and for Telemachus, their son, and for Laertes, her father-in-law, and for the citizens of Ithaca, whose

³Levinas is a thinker steeped in postmodern concerns. For him the history of Western philosophy and civilization is a history of tyranny and intolerance because it is reigned by sameness. Postmodernity is characterized by the dispersal of sameness. Well-ordered and rational states of affairs are displaced by plurality. Some have interpreted plurality to be the herald of relativism. Levinas believes in the contrary: the originality of his philosophy lies in its discovery that plurality is the condition of possibility of an ethics of infinite responsibility. More on this below.

⁴Rep 509 c.

Queen she is, raises her above her fellows. But as much as they have become a part of her, and she of them, they remain *other* to her. She cannot anticipate their every step, manage their every move, co-opt them in their very being. As much as, within the domestic space of the personal and the private, she can embroider upon their dispositions, knowing these are what they will carry out with them into the public, into the space of the political, out there they *still* would be expected to broker their own destinies, produce outcomes impossible for anyone, not even they themselves, to anticipate.⁵ According to Levinas, it is in that sense that, unlike other relations, her relationship to her fellows is

⁵Reference to Penelope and her role in *The Odyssey* might be taken by some to be anti-feminist. Simone de Beauvoir condemns Levinas for sexism. She cites a sentence in TO which states that “the absolutely contrary contrary... is the *feminine* (p. 85).” De Beauvoir accuses Levinas of assigning a secondary or derivative status to women. Since Levinas clearly states in his writings that the other, which he characterizes as feminine, is more important than the I, de Beauvoir’s criticism may not be so accurate. Levinas may still be taken to task though for putting the feminine on a pedestal of masculine making. In what follows it is not assumed that the other is necessarily feminine in any literal or figurative way. Characterizing the other as feminine is not an integral feature of Levinas’s ethics. But proving this requires another paper, so the issue will be set aside here. In any case, what some take to be the anti-feminist significance of Penelope is not related to de Beauvoir’s opinion of Levinas. The problem with the figure of Penelope, according to some, is that it assigns the woman to the home and relegates her to “merely” womanly duties. The point of the present exposition of the image of Penelope is that hers is a pattern of action that ought to be followed by both men and women because it is ethical. If some modern or postmodern feminists think that women ought to go out into the world to embark on an odyssey of their own as a matter of necessity, it should pointed out that if no one takes charge of the economic, political, and of course domestic affairs at home then such adventures could create tragic situations. It matters not whether a woman or a man takes up the requisite responsibility, what matters is for this ethical responsibility to be taken up by someone for the greater good.

For de Beauvoir’s criticism of Levinas see *The Second Sex*, trans. H.M. Parshley (New York: Vintage, 1989), p. xxii, n. 3. Since she is not engaged in a critical discussion of Levinas’s ethics, de Beauvoir only mentions Levinas in passing. She says: “I suppose that Levinas does not forget that the woman, too, is aware of her own consciousness, or ego. But it is striking that he deliberately takes a man’s point of view... When he writes the woman as mystery, she implies that she is a mystery for man. Thus his description which is intended to be objective, is an assertion of masculine privilege (Ibid.).” Since a perspectiveless point of view of an ego or of consciousness is impossible it seems that what de Beauvoir is really asking for is a woman’s point of view of the ethical responsibility that Levinas talks about. The image of Penelope presented here provides precisely that.

properly ethical:

neither a struggle, nor a fusion, nor a knowledge... [but] a relationship with alterity, with mystery — that is to say, with the future, with what (in a world where there is everything) is never there, with what cannot be there when everything is there — not with a being that is not there, but with the very dimension of alterity.⁶

By “alterity” would be meant “putting consciousness in question.”⁷ Upon weaving together a discourse about the Good, ethical practice would at some later point, in the manner of Penelope, rend it apart — not because some malevolent spell has tricked it into performing an exercise in futility, but because it operates on the basis of the insight that the Good is always greater than any effort to account for it.

At stake is a movement oriented in a way that is wholly otherwise than the grasp of consciousness and at every moment unravels like Penelope at night, everything that was so gloriously woven during the day. We are precisely going to follow the outline of this movement. Neither the notion of the greatest nor that of the most mysterious accounts for it, but rather the notions of height and infinity.⁸

Sense from Sensibility

In the first subsection of the Third Section of *Totality and Infinity*, entitled, “Exteriority and the Face,” Levinas tells us that, given its unique exteriority, the human face produces the “trauma” without which there could be no meaning, and no ethical command. For while the autonomous ego gets to know things in their exteriority through its enjoyment of them⁹ — its ingestion of food, its deployment of instruments, its ownership of things, its *sub-jection* to, imbeddedness in, par-

⁶Emmanuel Levinas, *Time and the Other and Other Essays*, Richard A. Cohen trans. (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1987), p. 88. (Hereafter, TO)

⁷Emmanuel Levinas, *Basic Philosophical Writings* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996) pp. 16-17. [Hereafter, BPW]

⁸Emmanuel Levinas, *Basic Philosophical Writings* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996) pp. 16-17. [Hereafter, BPW]

⁹TI pp. 110-115.

ticulars that it did not itself choose, but nevertheless must avow — it develops its “peculiar ‘knowledge’” of another’s face,”¹⁰ not through its enjoyment of it, but through something else not as simple to state. But “is not the face given to vision?” Besides, “how does the epiphany of a face determine a relationship different from that which characterizes all our sensible experience?”¹¹ The short answer is that, in contradistinction to mere sensible objects, when the face of the other encounters the I, it “speaks,” making it possible for there to be meaning at all. Once again, sense arises out of sensibility. Alphonso Lingis writes:

To sense something is to catch on the sense of something, its direction, orientation, or meaning. Sensibility is sense perception, apprehension of sense. In addition, to sense something is to be sensitive to something, to be concerned by it, affected by it. It is to be pleased — gratified, contented, exhilarated — or to be pained, afflicted, wounded, by something. A sentient subject does not innocently array object forms about itself; it is not only oriented in free space by their sense, it is subject to them, to their brutality and their sustentation.¹²

Sense, in other words, is related to the feelings that the particularities of the human condition stir up in the autonomous ego or I.

This is true especially of human encounters that occur corporeally, generating in the parties concerned feelings, say of gratification or hurt. When the other enters into the space of the I from a “dimension of height,” it calls into question its order of things, puts the I’s smugness on trial, its egoism, its fantasies concerning its putative freedoms. It entangles the I in an “infinite process of scrupulousness” that makes it take into account everything it had not before, simply because it had failed to coincide with its plans and designs.¹³

In contradistinction with the food upon which I am nourished, or

¹⁰Adriaan T. Peperzak, *To the Other: and Introduction to the Philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas* (West Lafayette: Purdue University Press, 1993), p. 161.

¹¹TI p. 187.

¹²“The Sensuality and the Sensitivity,” *Face to Face with Levinas*, Richard A. Cohen ed. (Albany, New York: SUNY, 1986), p. 219.

¹³BPW p. 12.

the tools that help me to attain to my objectives, or the things I appropriate as my own, the other cannot in any simple sense be ingested, appropriated, instrumentalized, absorbed. The other does not respond to mere need. Neither is it possible to grasp in knowledge. Its epiphany, ceaselessly, appears to be overshadowed by its concealment. As secret, interior, opaque, it can only be envisioned. Yet out of its non-transparency “the original language of the other’s defenseless eyes” emerges, with the prohibition of killing. To encounter the other, and behold her poverty written all over her face, is already to feel responsible. “To hear his destitution which cries out for justice is not to represent an image to oneself, but is to posit oneself as responsible, both as more and as less than the being that presents itself in the face.”¹⁴ What is more, the other comes across to the I in speech. The sensations triggered by words rend vision’s encompassing gaze. Levinas writes:

In sound and in the consciousness termed hearing, there is in fact a break with the self-complete world of vision and art. In its entirety, sound is a ringing, clanging scandal. Whereas, in vision, form is wedded to content in such a way as to appease it, in sound the perceptible quality overflows so that form can no longer contain its content. A real rent is produced in the world, through which the world that is *here* prolongs a dimension that cannot be converted into vision. It is in this way, by surpassing what is given, that sound is the symbol *par excellence*. If nonetheless it can appear as a phenomenon, as a *here*, it is because the transcendence it brings about operates only in verbal sound. The sounds and noises of nature are failed words. To really hear a sound, we need to hear a word. Pure sound is the word.¹⁵

Supplied here is not so much a visual picture as auditory markers of the rupture in the ego’s “totality” that the coming of the other occasions. The other not so much appears, as speaks — in a fashion, and concerning such things, unwelcome to the I. Through auditory signs,

¹⁴TI p. 215.

¹⁵Emmanuel Levinas, “The Transcendence of Words,” *The Levinas Reader*, Sean Hand, Ed. (Oxford: Basil Blackwell Ltd., 1989), pp. 147-48.

called "words," the other calls the I's reticence into question, pleads with the I, gets it to acknowledge there are debts to be settled with it. Lingis writes: "In facing me someone greets me, summons my attention, indicates something in the world opens to me too, answers my call, exposes himself or herself, contests me."¹⁶ In its needfulness, the other appeals to the I, engages its goodwill. "The being that expresses itself imposes itself, but does so precisely by appealing to me with its destitution and nudity — its hunger — without my being able to be deaf to that appeal. Thus in expression the being that imposes itself does not limit but promotes my freedom, by arousing my goodness."¹⁷ By a glance, in a word or gesture, in the face-to-face encounter, the other appeals to the other to do it good, to be responsible for it. In this consists the vocative in language. "Our speech is not only indicative; its acts do not just inform. Our speech is also vocative: with a glance, with a word, with a gesture, someone greets me, calls upon me, appeals to me, invokes me."¹⁸ The wonder of it is that within the vocative resides the imperative. "In the vocative effect and the imperative force of speech that is informative and formative, the power of the face is revealed, and the properties that are its own."¹⁹ This is the summons to the I and the other to the ethical, the summons for them to enter into relation. "Speech delineates an original relation."²⁰ In this relation, the other is the I's interlocutor. "The person with whom I am in relation I call being. But in calling him or her, I *call* to him or her. I am not only thinking that the other is, I am *speaking* to the other."²¹ As much as the I will try to comprehend it, own it, the way it would a simple being among beings, the other will not yield. "[Their] relation goes beyond comprehension."²² From the moment the I permits the voice of the other to break into its world, it is transported together with the other to a realm beyond the grasp of understanding where the I speaks to the other without imposing upon it the obligation to respond, even as it remains a readiness to be spoken to.

¹⁶"The Sensuality and the Sensitivity," p. 151.

¹⁷TI p. 200.

¹⁸"The Sensuality and the Sensitivity," p. 154.

¹⁹*Ibid.*

²⁰BPW p. 6.

²¹*Ibid.* (emphasis supplied)

²²*Ibid.* p. 5.

I cannot evade by silence the discourse which the epiphany that occurs as a face opens, as Thrasyarchus, irritated, tries to do, in the first book of the *Republic* (moreover without succeeding). 'To leave men without food is a fault that no circumstance attenuates; the distinction here between the voluntary and the involuntary does not apply here,' says Rabbi Yochanan. Before the hunger of men responsibility is measured only 'objectively'; it is irrecusable. The face opens the primordial discourse whose first word is obligation, which no 'interiority' permits avoiding. It is that discourse that obliges the entering into discourse, the commencement of discourse rationalism prays for, a 'force' that convinces even 'the people who do not wish to listen' (*Rep* 327b), and thus founds the true universality of reason.²³

The scandal it instigates within the formerly placid and orderly world of the I, makes it impossible for the I not to own up to its responsibility to be spoken to, to remain complacent, to hand something over, without the resultant bad conscience. "At no time can one say: I have done all my duty," writes Lingis, "except the hypocrite..."²⁴ Quiet the contrary, "[r]esponsibilities increase in the measure that they are assumed."²⁵ In the measure the I gives, it discovers the other's needs to be endless, but discovers also it can give more than it had thought possible. Its practice of giving draws it out of a desiccating focus on itself — on its concerns, limitations, thoughts. But in this consists the condition of possibility for the epiphany of the I's humanity. "Responsibility is what is incumbent on me exclusively, and what, *humanly*, I cannot refuse."²⁶ The I can show it is unique, singular, irreplaceable, but only if, before any of that, it has also shown it is responsible for the other. Alyosha's cries in Dostoyevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov*: "We are all responsible for all men before all, and I more than all the others."²⁷ It is as

²³TI p. 201.

²⁴Emmanuel Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity: Conversations with Philippe Nemo*, Richard A. Cohen trans. (Quezon City: Claretian Publications, 1997), p. 105. Hereafter, EI.

²⁵"The Sensuality and the Sensitivity," p. 157.

²⁶EI p. 101.

²⁷*Ibid.*

one who has faced and given to the other when this other has faced it, that the I establishes its identity.²⁸

What this means is that there is an inescapable ethical dimension to the human condition. The I may speak of existing sensibly only in allowing itself to be moved, affected, by the proximity of the other, outside the grasp of vision, through the instrumentality of language. "As long as the existence of man remains interiority it remains phenomenal. The language by which a being exists for another is his unique possibility to exist with an existence that is more than his interior existence."²⁹ Speech escapes the perspective of vision because the eye cannot listen. What is more, speech is always directed outward — to someone; it is fundamentally oriented towards exteriority. On Levinas' account, that speech should manifest itself in this way makes it the most important element in the face-to-face encounter, and the unique characteristic of the sensibility of persons. In contradistinction to other existents, similarly equipped with the senses, humans are able to connect to the subtleties of speech. This gives humans the ability to alter, embellish, annotate appearance; it gives a person motive to attend to his or her appearance just so its face-to-face with another is truly an encounter, not simply a brush with another sentient being.

Levinas understands language, not as a closed system of signs and symbols, but as speech.³⁰ Language is never mute; it is always spoken. As such, it is an activity that cannot be severed from persons. But neither is language a peculiar mode of access into the unknowable and unsynthesizable other. Humans remain ever distinct from their speech, underscoring the uniqueness and originality of the I's encounter with the other whose speech it needs really to be paying attention to. This is the I's motive for establishing its relation to alterity. The I's gaze always falls short of fully encompassing the other, and so it cannot totally contour or shape its relation to other according to what it intends. In that sense, the I's relation to the other transpires beyond intentionality. Levinas astutely observes that a human exists in the world relating

²⁸"The Sensuality and the Sensitivity," pp. 157-58.

²⁹TI p. 182.

³⁰"Speech is an incomparable manifestation: it does not accomplish movement from the sign to the signifier and the signified; it unlocks what every sign closes up at the very moment it opens the passage that leads to the signified, by making the signifier attend this manifestation of the signified (*Ibid.*)."

to effects it did not intend.³¹ He writes: "We are responsible beyond our intentions."³² Intentionality is insufficient as a founding principle because it fails to take into account that whole vast dimension of human existence that operates beyond the ego's design. There are limits to intentionality imposed upon it by its egocentricism. Language, on the other hand, not ever being private, bears an outward orientation. Insofar as the other appears by means of its speech, the I needs to pay careful attention to how it speaks and appears to the other, whom it faces. This, as we shall see, is the assymetrical burden upon the I in the face-to-face encounter.

Another reason why the I's responsibility for the other never wanes is proximity. Proximity differentiates the face-to-face from a mere juxtaposition of persons or objects. It gives a name to what transpires between persons beyond spatial juxtaposition. "What distinguishes thought aiming at an object from the tie with a person that the latter is articulated in the vocative—the one who is named is at the same time the one who is called."³³ Levinas contends that the other's proximity is as fundamental as the I's embodiment. As an embodied being, the I is always exposed to at least one other who issues an ethical plea and command. The I, then, is always present to another, and vice versa, through language. The I and the other are always in conversation even if one is always refusing to come to the other's aid. But the very understanding on the part of the I that aid is needed by the other, implicates the I in responsibility. The other whom the ego encounters is in need; the very understanding of this poverty already constitutes an imperative to come to her aid. "The comprehension of this destitution and

³¹In his essay, "Is Ontology Fundamental?," Levinas says: "The comedy begins with the simplest of our movements, carrying with them every 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 that I did not want to do.... When the awkwardness of the act turns against the goal pursued, we are at the height of tragedy. Laius, in order to out maneuver the predictions of disaster, will undertake precisely that which is necessary for them to be accomplished. To the extent that Oedipus succeeds, he works for his downfall, like the prey that flees the direct line of fire of the hunters across a field covered in snow, and thus will leave the very traces that will be its loss." (BPW p. 4)

³²*Ibid.*

³³BPW, p. 7.

this hunger establishes the very proximity of the other.”³⁴ One then cannot deny responsibility because one is capable of making sense of the neediness signified by the disfigured visage of the other. Again sensibility establishes the connection. Being exposed to the sight and sound of the other’s grimace or frown and wail or whimper means being affected by it. Embodiment entails affectivity; being faced with means being affected by the one whom one faces. Whether one responds by turning one’s back or by assuming the burden of the other’s poverty is a choice made possible by human freedom. But ethical responsibility precedes this choice because one has already understood the other’s destitution before the choice of responding to it comes up. Lingis observes that ethical responsibility is, in this sense, essentially linked to the heteronomy of human existence: “Responsibility is, then, not measured by authorship; it is not just the will or the project to answer for what has originated in one’s own existence. It takes over and answers for a situation one did not initiate; it is answering for...what came to pass before one was born.”³⁵

Proximity establishes this primordial responsibility at the same time it establishes human society. “Society must be a fraternal community to be commensurate with the straightforwardness, the primary proximity, in which the face presents itself to my welcome.”³⁶ Hence human fraternity is also made possible by sensibility — “*Responsibility is coextensive with our sensibility*.”³⁷ The only acceptable mode of relating to the other who is proximate to me is in terms of responsibility. Knowledge cannot establish a relationship with the other. “The tie with the other is knotted only as responsibility.”³⁸ Proximity with the other may only be affirmed by being responsible for her. Lingis succinctly says: “A face is not known; it is faced.”³⁹ Facing entails doing all one can to attend to the other’s poverty. To consent to face another is to be responsible to the one who is faced. Unless one takes on this irrevocable and inevitable responsibility that the other imposes, one has

³⁴TI p. 199.

³⁵“The Sensuality and the Sensitivity,” p. 226.

³⁶TI p. 214.

³⁷*Ibid.* (emphasis supplied.)

³⁸EI p. 97.

³⁹Alphonso Lingis, “Face to Face: A Phenomenological Meditation,” *International Philosophical Quarterly* 19 (1979), p. 151.

not really encountered the other face-to-face.

But Levinas is not speaking of a short-lived responsibility. He says, "I speak of responsibility as the essential, primary and fundamental structure of subjectivity."⁴⁰ The full meaning and significance of subjectivity for Levinas is sub-jection to another in responsibility. For him it is not that one is already a subject before being ethically responsible. One becomes a subject in the true sense of the word only upon becoming responsible for another. One is only human when one answers for someone other than oneself. The hyperbolic expression involved here surprises many readers of Levinas. Levinas thinks that if we are to understand the face which speaks as the bearer of meaning, then responsibility for the other naturally arises from the face-to-face encounter.⁴¹ There are many reasons why Levinas goes this far. If one were only responsible for what one did and for what one intended, then one is still moving within the bounds of an egoist "totality." If one's responsibility terminated at the point where, for one reason or another, one could not go on, the point of reference is still the I and not the other. Hence one has still not escaped from egoism. How can one *know* when responsibility for the other ends? Levinas' retorts that one cannot know.

Because Levinas uncovers a deeper sense of embodiment in enjoyment, he is also able to propose a higher possibility for the embodied spirit in infinite responsibility. As a corporeal existent, the human person operates on modes other than that of mind. Expression is one of the more prominent modes of human existence. "Expression renders present what is communicated and the person who is communicating; they are both in the expression."⁴² Language as expression then encompasses the embodiment of human existence that the intentionality of mind has missed. In place of the principle of intentionality and the inexorability of being thrown into existence Levinas places an emphasis on language. "*Meaning is the face of the other, and all recourse to words takes place already within the primordial face-to-face of language.*"⁴³ Levinas is only able to do this because he locates the origin of meaning in the other whom the I faces. Language acquires a central position in

⁴⁰EI p. 95.

⁴¹*Ibid.*

⁴²Emmanuel Levinas, *Collected Philosophical Papers*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1987), p. 21. (Hereafter CPP)

⁴³TI pp. 206-207 (Emphasis supplied)

ethics because it displaces the egocentrism of intentionality and utility while at the same time establishing a relation with alterity. It is language that accomplishes the difficult task before the I of relating with the other while keeping its otherness intact. As such language is never anonymous; it is always someone in particular who speaks.

Levinas emphasizes the fundamental ethical bearing of conversation. To be faced with another person in conversation is to be confronted with her non-totalizable alterity. The realization that one cannot relate with the other in a totalitarian manner grounds ethics. At the same time then that Levinas emphasizes the non-relative and non-negotiable alterity of the other, he establishes the distinctive feature of language as a speech act. Additionally, he maintains the priority of existents over existence.

Post-Rational Ethics

As we said, the epiphany of the face and the coming of the other's expression disrupt the placid and innocent attempts on the part of the I to appropriate the world of things for itself. What ensues, however, is more than the simple rupture of egoism or breach of "totality," but rather the advent of ethics. From the time the I admits to an understanding of the other's poverty and destitution, it becomes subject to the commanded of ethical responsibility. Lingis writes: "To recognize his voice is to recognize his rights over me, his right to make demands on me and to contest me, his right to demand that I answer for my existence."⁴⁴ To be in conversation with the other then is not only to be taught but also to be responsible. Even before freedom takes up this choice the I is already implicated in an involvement with the other in responsibility. All this is made possible by the I's exposure to exteriority through sensibility. "To have to answer to the other is to have to answer for what I did not initiate... It is this position that is constitutive of my being here and of my being vulnerable to being wounded by entities."⁴⁵

For Levinas, the sense of being human is infinite responsibility. To be sure, the idea of infinity is a disturbing concept. Notwithstanding its

⁴⁴"The Sensuality and the Sensitivity," p. 227.

⁴⁵*Ibid.* p. 229.

utility in the exact field of mathematics, it persists as a concept in being unclear and equivocal.⁴⁶ It assumes many faces. It is applied in fields as diverse as geometry, photography, calculus and cosmology. It has been depicted innumerable times in art. Eli Maor, who writes a cultural history of the infinite, has uncovered various expressions, spanning more than two millennia, of the problem of the idea of the infinitely small and the infinitely large. In Zeno's paradox we encounter one indicator of problems tied to the notion of infinity. Levinas locates the infinite in an altogether new location — the face of the other. On Levinas' account, the trace of the infinite in the face of the other disturbs, displaces, the rational speech of philosophy.

The infinite is a withdrawal like a farewell which is signified not by opening oneself to the gaze to inundate it with light, but in being extinguished in the incognito in the face that faces. For this, as we have said, there must be someone who is no longer agglutinated in being, who, at his own risk, responds to the enigma and grasps the allusion. Such is subjectivity, alone, unique, secret, which Kierkegaard caught sight of.⁴⁷

The idea of the infinite is an enigma to the finite because it cannot be contained in what is limited. "An enigma is beyond all cognition. Cognition rests on apparition, on phenomena, which the being of beings unfolds, putting all things together by light, ordering order."⁴⁸ Enigmatic infinity cannot be grasped by the mind; it can only be understood as an admission of the failure of understanding. The infinite is present in the finite only in absence. The greater wonder is not the apparent contradiction of this statement but the very capacity of the finite to conceive of the infinite. Moreover, the idea of the infinite has innumerable applications in human affairs. Levinas asserts: "To the idea of infinity only an extravagant response is possible. To understand more than one understands, to think more than one thinks, to think of what withdraws from thought, is to desire."⁴⁹ At this point the desire

⁴⁶Eli Maor, who wrote *To Infinity and Beyond: a Cultural History of the Infinite* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991), quotes the renowned mathematician David Hilbert: "The infinite! No other question has ever moved so profoundly the spirit of man; no other idea has fruitfully stimulated his intellect; yet no other concept stands in greater need of clarification than that of the infinite."

⁴⁷CPP p. 72.

⁴⁸*Ibid.* p. 71

⁴⁹*Ibid.* p. 72.

for an elsewhere and the desire for infinity converge with the desire for another.

Levinas establishes a *post-rational* — not irrational — ethics in introducing the idea of a disturbance, a breach, of “totality,” occasioned by infinity. “The disturbance that is not the surprise of the absurd is possible only as the entry into the given order of another order which does not accommodate itself with the first.”⁵⁰ This occurs specifically before the face of the other, insofar as upon it is ever so lightly etched the enigmatic trace of infinity. As the face that speaks, it calls upon the I both to listen and to speak. “The event proper to expression consists in bearing witness to oneself, and guaranteeing this witness. This attestation of oneself is possible only as a face, that is, as speech.”⁵¹ But in facing and speaking to the other, the I decides that, quite unlike the ancestor of Gyges, it will no longer remain silent, hidden, dissimulating.

What, about the face of the other, places its relation with the I beyond knowledge, possession, and power? Levinas explains it is the secrecy and interiority of the face, which is the trace of something beyond finitude, not a finite involuntary hiding, that enables it to resist human grasp. He writes: “The nakedness of the face that faces is an original trace, a primordial desolation.”⁵² Continuing, he says:

A trace can, to be sure, become a sign. But in a face before signifying a sign it is the very emptiness of an irrecoverable absence. The gaping open of emptiness is not only the sign of an absence.⁵³

What the notion of a trace appears to eliminate is the dichotomy between presence and absence. A trace signifies what has come to pass; it points to something that is no longer there. It indicates or signifies passage, and its direction. But that it should be anything at all, depends on whether or not we would want to take it up. “It enters in so subtle a way that unless we retain it, it has already withdrawn. It insinuates itself, withdraws before entering. It remains only for him who would like

⁵⁰*Ibid.* p. 67.

⁵¹TI p. 201.

⁵²*Ibid.* p. 65.

⁵³*Ibid.* pp. 65-66.

to take it up.”⁵⁴ Levinas supplies us with many examples of the tantalizing presence of absence, such as the excessive demands made by a diplomat to either be paid attention to or glossed over, the provocations of a lover to be accounted for either as sweet nothings or as exercises in seduction, the presence of the Holy in a burning bush away from which the prophet averts his eyes but which he attests to all the same through the production of scripture. All these are either taken up, or taken for granted, like the trace of infinity itself, in the face of the other.

From the standpoint of language, the enigma of the trace rises to greater visibility in the distinction that may be made between the *saying* and the *said*. Once *saying* has come to pass, what remains of it is the *said*, but only vestigially, faintly, on account of the quick passage of *saying*. *Saying* persists in the *said*, although in a manner that requires interpretation because, at best, what subsists in the *said* is traces at best. It can be said, therefore, that language contains “the possibility of an enigmatic equivocation for better and for worse that men abuse.”⁵⁵ Intentional and malicious equivocation is possible on account of interiority. What is more, it consists in a closed system of signs; all the time within it new sentences are composed, but consisting of old words. Speech, in that sense, endures. The same thing could be said of the face-to-face encounter, that it is both ephemeral and permanent. Each particular time the I is faced with the other, it seems like no other time, no matter how often repeated; but *that* the I should face the other appears certain. Here we see the inextricable connection between the face-to-face and language very clearly. This is exactly what Levinas wishes to emphasize, “Language as an exchange of ideas about the world, with the mental reservations it involves, across the vicissitudes of sincerity and deceit it delineates, presupposes the originality of the face without which ... it could not commence.”⁵⁶ The enigma of trace that is present in the face of the other extends from the visible phenomena to the auditory sensations produced by speech.⁵⁷

Now that we have seen the enigma of infinity in the speech and visage of the other we can begin to understand the rationale behind Levinas’ post-rational ethics. The “logic” behind language is the trace

⁵⁴*Ibid.* p. 66.

⁵⁵*Ibid.*

⁵⁶TI p. 202.

⁵⁷CPP p. 69.

of infinity in the face of the other because the face-to-face founds language, and the first signification materializes upon the epiphany of the other to the same. Language allows for the plurality of society because its outward projection is not the movement towards grasping but the demand for a response. Language leaves the alterity of the other intact while maintaining the integrity of the ego's interiority.

In thus grounding language, reason, and ethics in the "seasons" of the face of the other, Levinas reverses the fundamental movement of Western philosophy.

Asymmetrical Plurality

The gulf between the I and the other — the fact that the I and the other are each distinct in itself — paradoxically, is what makes proximity possible. Whereas the proximity of the Same to things inevitably leads to absorption, the radical alterity of the other, that can neither be absorbed nor thematized, much less exhausted, leads to encounter. This encounter of plural singularities is mediated by language. Indeed it is language's very nature to be shared by entities that are irreducibly distinct from one another. On account of their mutual distinctiveness, they can enter into conversation, speak of the meaningfulness of their play of words, and expect that their conversations always will get undone. "Speech proceeds from absolute difference."⁵⁸ "Language is a relation between separated terms."⁵⁹ Moreover, because the speaker remains distinct from whatever is spoken, his every speech act is marked by a practice of leave-taking. Through language, therefore, are conveyed the outcomes of radical alterity.

Language, in that sense, thwarts, among other things the totalizing intentions behind historical synthesis.⁶⁰ No differently than entities that speak, speech is non-synthesizable. The failure of comprehension also gives rise, however, to difficulties. Lingis notes, for instance, there is pain in sincerity in that it assumes the irremediable absence of the

⁵⁸TI p. 194.

⁵⁹*Ibid.* p. 195.

⁶⁰*Ibid.*

other.⁶¹ Radical alterity, similarly, occasions pain because of its command to always be slipping away. The non-correspondence between the speaker and what is spoken results in an excess on the part of the other that the I cannot encompass. Even so, it is important that this absolute difference be maintained. Only dissimilar existents would have anything to say to each other. If the I and the other belonged to the same whole, any exchange of words between them would add up to a repetition of what they already share. Whatever they say would amount to a reinforcement of their similarity.

This explains why Levinas is adamant about the fact that “anarchy essential to multiplicity.” Plurality may well invite chaos, “[b]ut a principle breaks through all this trembling and vertigo when the face presents itself, and demands justice.”⁶² The plurality he speaks of is no idiosyncratic proposal, but a matter of fact. We communicate with one another in a manner that testifies to this plurality. Asked whether he was denying the likeness between men Levinas, wrote the following reply:

I agree with you: all men are alike, but they are not the same. I did not at any moment want to deny the similarities between men. But the I qua I is absolutely unique, and when it is approached non-sociologically, it has nothing in common with the other. It is not a question of a difference that is due to the absence or presence of a common trait; it is a question of initial difference that is entirely self-referential.⁶³

Luk Bouckaert characterizes the outcome of Levinas’ analytics as “a

⁶¹“His or her face, which I thought comprehended, grasped, turns out to be the trace of an irremediable absence. It is this that is felt in the pain of sincerity. In the moment of sincerity I say to someone what I have been saying about him or her; I present to him or her my representation of him or her. And I rediscover each time the distance that recurs between the other about whom I speak, whom I comprehend, and the other to whom I speak, and who always arises further beyond, behind all that I say and think of him or her, to contest it, or to assent to it (“Face to Face...,” pp. 152-53).”

⁶²TI p. 294.

⁶³BPW p. 28.

plurality that does not add up,"⁶⁴ a non-converging and non-subsuming plurality making ethical tolerance possible. Levinas asserts that only the one who affirms the radical alterity of the other at the same time that she decisively recognizes her own autonomy is able to hear what the other has to say, and can be present to the epiphany of radical alterity. This is eminently true in relation to language. "The formal structure of language," he says, "announces the ethical inviolability of the other."⁶⁵ Language makes it possible for a plurality of persons to communicate disparate ideas to one another without becoming mired in intractable conflict. It ensures that dis-individuation need not take place for the I and the other to be able to communicate. Lingis adverts to the same thing when he says that conversation maintains difference.

Conversation is not a communion; it does not abolish that separation, rather it maintains the distance in which the common world can be exposed. The opening up of such an interval is the prerequisite for the possibility of speech. If, in the end, there is language at all, it is because there occurs and recurs the distance marked by the face of another.⁶⁶

Conversation, as Levinas understands it, occurs only upon the recognition by the I of the alterity of the face that beckons to it in speech. Otherwise what the other has to say gets swallowed up in "totality." Conversation draws from distance in order to establish relation.

Still, the ethical inviolability the ego discovers in the face of the other indicates the presence of an asymmetry within this plurality. The other counts more than the I when viewed in terms of the other's need. One may not procrastinate in face of the other's plea. Even were the other not in need, the I could still not maintain its equanimity, its discretion, its silence, in its presence. That the I must respond to the other promptly is especially compelling when the other is poor. Infinity enables the other to retain its exteriority even in relation to the I estab-

⁶⁴"Ontology and Ethics: Reflections on Levinas' Critique of Heidegger," *International Philosophical Quarterly* 10 (1970), pp. 402-419.

⁶⁵TI p. 195.

⁶⁶"Face to Face..." p. 152.

lished in conversation.⁶⁷

The idea of infinity, the overflowing of finite thought by its content, effectuates the relation of thought with what exceeds its capacity, with what at each moment it learns without suffering shock. This is the situation we call welcome of the face. The idea of infinity is produced in the *opposition* of conversation, in sociality.⁶⁸

Because the other bears carries within itself a trace of infinity it cannot be subsumed by the ego — implicates it in the dimension of distance. Moreover, the enigma of the trace of infinity in the other also draws the ego into conversation; it establishes proximity. A combination of nearness and distance constitutes the relation between the I and the other in language. In either case, however, the I counts less than the other; their society is asymmetrical. Lingis provides the following practical image of asymmetrical plurality:

To face someone is to expose oneself to the other's judgment. This is understood when a greeting is acknowledged; it is the understanding of the vocative and imperative force of a face always presupposed in the understanding of the indicative value of its expression. To agree to speak, to answer another's greeting, to enter into conversation, is to agree to be judged. It is already to admit the other's right to question me, to make demands on me, to require of me my presence and the presentation to him or her of my things. The one that faces already requires something of me, and first requires that I answer in my own name. I find myself, my existence in the first person singular, as an obligation.⁶⁹

To face the other is to allow her to impute guilt to the I. Quite the reverse of the practice of the ancestor of Gyges, it allows oneself and

⁶⁷TI p. 196.

⁶⁸TI p. 197.

⁶⁹"Face to Face..." p. 159.

one's actions to be seen. To go public is to become culpable. Once the I has been invoked by the other, it is unable to skirt the other simply by hiding from it in the privacy of its some personal space. Indeed, the other knocks on her door, pleading, demanding, to be hospitably received. Once it is made welcome, once it is allowed to approach in conversation, the I relentlessly is enjoined upon to respond; it is subjected to scrutiny, to questions and cross-questions. In short, simply because it knows the other to be in need, the I feels it is obliged.

Looking now at the distinct persons who comprise sociality, there is, first, the ego, in its ineffable singularity. "The ego is ineffable because it speaks; it responds and is responsible."⁷⁰ The singularity of the subject consists in its capacity for language. Since Levinas' primary understanding of language is the sincerity of the speech act, this means that the humanity of the subject hinges on her sincerity towards another to whom she speaks. Sincerity, however, cannot end in a word of welcome. One has to live out this capacity for hospitable speech. Again, this points towards an inexpressible dimension of the subject, and this would be action. The ineffable singularity of the ego consists in its capacity to speak and to act. This singular ego is not stripped of its dignity in its subjection to the other. "Speech is... a relationship between freedoms which neither limits nor negates, but affirms one another."⁷¹ The I speaks to, and serves, the other by maintaining its own dignity, but it is called to do that by the other itself. Lingis writes:

The greeting with which the other makes himself or herself present to me is not an invitation to see with him or her, to put myself in his or her place; it is a summons to be at my place, present at myself, answering *adsum*.⁷²

Because the other has spoken to me I need to respond, but I can only do so only if I keep "my place under the sun."

Then we have the non-encompassable alterity of the other, which is the focal point not only of *Totality and Infinity* but also of all of Levinas's ethics. The other comes to rupture the ego's "totality" as face.

⁷⁰CPP p. 36.

⁷¹*Ibid.* p. 43.

⁷²"Face to Face..." p. 153.

The face is present in its refusal to be contained. In this sense it cannot be comprehended, that is, encompassed. It is neither seen nor touched—for in visual or tactile sensation the identity of the I envelopes the alterity of the object.⁷³

The other breaches egoism to make sociality possible. Because the other approaches the I through expression it manages to break lose of the I's determination. The other comes without being the work of the I's freedom.⁷⁴ Through her disarming voice the I is prevailed upon to respond. "He or she does not break into my life with his or her force, but with his or her word, which I can resist without doing anything at all, by not answering, by keeping silence, by doing whatever I was doing."⁷⁵ But as Lingis points out, Levinas understands sociality to be an order of human relations that excludes egoism. As such it cannot exist without the breach of "totality." The epiphany of the other in the ego's "totality" then is the condition of possibility of sociality. The social in turn has the ineluctable dimension of language. The epiphany of the face of the other ends the silence of egoism through speech. Jean Greisch observes that in Levinas' philosophy,

the experience of the epiphany of the face ... is also the condition for the possibility of language, to such a point that it is from the perspective of this experience that the meaning of speech and expression be thought.⁷⁶

Finally, we have "the third party."⁷⁷ Sociality is not such without the third other; the I and the other are a couple by themselves. The I, the other, the third party, are the components of the nucleus of all human

⁷³TI p. 194.

⁷⁴CPP pp. 21-22.

⁷⁵"Face to Face..." p. 155.

⁷⁶Jean Greisch "The Face and Reading: Immediacy and Mediation," *Re-reading Levinas* ed., Robert Bernasconi and Simon Critchley (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), p. 68.

⁷⁷Levinas uses this term to refer to the other whom the I does not face. As such, 'the third party' represents all other human beings.

society. Were I and the other the only ones to exist, were it the case that the I cared only about the other, human relations would be exclusive. The presence of other human beings creates the public space. But not even the third party is anonymous. "The revelation of the third party, ineluctable in the face, is produced only through the face. Goodness does not radiate over the anonymity of collectivity presenting itself panoramically, to be absorbed into it."⁷⁸ It is language that establishes the public. What is spoken is always shared by at least three people because language cannot be private. A community of speakers is always presupposed by any kind of verbal communication. The exclusive and clandestine tendency of Eros then is held in check by language. The third party is always present when the I and the other are in conversation. If only because it is possible for her to overhear and understand what the I declares to the other.

Language as the presence of the face does not invite complicity with the preferred being, the self-sufficient "I-Thou" forgetful of the universe; in its frankness it refuses the clandestinity of love, where it loses its frankness and meaning and turns into laughter and cooing. The third party looks at me in the eyes of the other—language is justice. It is not that there first would be the face, and then the being it manifests or expresses would concern himself with justice; the epiphany of the face qua face opens humanity. The face in its nakedness as a face presents to me the destitution of the poor one and the stranger; but this poverty and exile which appeal to my powers as givens, remain the expression of the face. The poor one, the stranger, presents himself as an equal. His equality within this essential poverty consists in referring to the *third party*, thus present at the encounter, whom in the midst of his destitution the other already serves. He comes to *join* me. But he joins me to himself for service; he commands me as a Master.⁷⁹

It is the third party that cements sociality into the relation of the I

⁷⁸TI p. 305.

⁷⁹TI p. 213.

and the other. "If I am alone with the other, I owe him everything; but there is someone else."⁸⁰ The very existence of the third party brings about justice. It becomes necessary to moderate one's service to the other whom one faces because there is another apart from her who is in need. The other whom the I faces and the third party confront the ego simultaneously. The third party likewise commands service from on high. The subject is bound to the other and the others in responsibility. But one owes the others more, not because there are more of them, but because one is also responsible for the other's responsibility to the others. The I bears the weight of sociality. For Levinas the weight of responsibility that the subject bears is not only the origin of the ethical or the humanity of the human; it is philosophy itself.

For the author of *Totality and Infinity* the comparison of the incomparable — the other and the third party — is the work of philosophy because of justice. Surprisingly, Levinasian ethics has this end in mind. There is a non-negotiable respect for the personal individual, to be sure, but not at the expense of the rest that one might subsume in another form of universal anonymity. Levinas insists on maintaining the alterity of the many. It is necessary to ask: Who is my neighbor?

It is consequently necessary to weigh, to think, to judge, in comparing the incomparable. The interpersonal relation I establish with the other, I must also establish with other men; there is thus a necessity to moderate the privilege of the other; from whence comes justice.⁸¹

Levinas does not deny that this task is difficult, although he insists it is necessary. Without the valuation of the inviolable alterity of individuals, there can be no society. There will be a collective, to be sure, but one which is always in danger of being oppressed, manipulated or massacred because it is faceless. The social, especially one that is ordered by institutional justice, must always be held in check by the face-to-face.

If one understands these assertions one is also impressed by their incredible difficulty. Indeed, Levinas' ethics appears to be impossible to

⁸⁰EI p. 90.

⁸¹*Ibid.* p. 90.

live out. How is it possible to maintain the tension entailed by plural singularities that command exorbitant responsibility? Levinas insists that language is the medium that makes sociality possible.

As the manifestation of reason, language awakens in me and in the other what is common to us. But in its expressive intention it presupposes our alterity and our duality. It is enacted between things, between substances which do not enter into their remarks, but put them forth.⁸²

This is what most of his critics have missed. As a result they compare Levinas' philosophy to a meaningless platitude. Levinas, on the other hand, has always insisted that his task is not to construct an ethics that might allow us to build a just society, but to find the meaning of the ethical. Levinas does not prescribe an exorbitant, infinite responsibility that holds even the innocent to be guilty. He prescribes rather the fundamental ethical orientation of the human condition in speech.⁸³

Speech is not instituted in a homogenous or abstract medium, but in a world where it is necessary to aid and to give. It presupposes an I, an existence separated in its enjoyment, which does not welcome empty-handed the face and its voice coming from another shore. Multiplicity in being, which refuses totalization but takes form as fraternity and discourse, is situated in a "space" essentially asymmetrical.⁸⁴

Speech is not angelic. As something human it occurs in a world where an ego overcomes the horrifying anonymity of the elemental, enjoys looking after her needs, establishes a home and acquires possessions. Specifically speech is shared with an other who is needy in a very material sense. Only an ego that has experienced hunger and satiety can come this other's aid. As the other and I come face-to-face, they speak—through speech the world of objects is first shared. The space in which all this takes place Levinas calls language and face-to-face at

⁸²CPP p. 36.

⁸³In EI Levinas makes the following remark: "My task does not consist in constructing ethics; I only try to find its meaning. In fact I do not believe that all philosophy should be programmatic" (p. 90).

⁸⁴TI p. 216.

the same time. Language and the face are inextricably intertwined; it is only through them that the ethics that Levinas describes takes place.

Levinas sums up the relation between language and ethics through the image of Penelope unweaving what she has been gloriously weaving throughout the day to remain faithful to Odysseus, to her son and to her people. Penelope's ploy is analogous to Levinasian ethical discourse: an effort to speak of the unspeakable trace glimpsed in the face of another. Through sensibility one is touched, moved, and affected by the other. Especially through the sensation of being addressed with words, one's totalizing intention is breached. Through the auditory sensation of words, one is called to be responsible. In the end, Levinas deftly coaxes us to see an alternative mode of thought by overturning the heroism of Odysseus, which he takes to be totalizing. But the radical position that Levinas proposes is no younger than *The Odyssey*. He is not really proposing a novelty. In the sensibility of Penelope, Levinas finds that everything is in order as it is. The practice of fidelity and infinite responsibility was never truly alien to Western ethos. But it has endured a long history of repression and disparagement or indifference. Levinas' ethics reverses this movement. He raises our consciousness beyond the limits of intentionality to allow us to see beyond ourselves.

For Levinas the task of ethics continues to be to unsay, revise and re-say what has already been said. In the same way that Penelope untangled what she had gloriously woven during the day, one who engages in ethics must do the same. All that has been asserted, defended, criticized and denounced here are open to question. They have been put forth so that the task of saying ethics can begin.