

Chapter 7

THE ESCAPE FROM SOLITUDE: RESPONSIBILITY AS RESPONSE-ABILITY

1 Introduction

This chapter focuses on the transitions in Levinas' thought from his understanding of the solitude of the separate individual caught up in the evasions of knowledge and enjoyment, which is where we left the existent in the previous chapter, to the relation of the existent with exteriority in response to the approach of the Other — a fundamental "sociality" in which the transcendence of the Infinite is revealed.

In Levinas' view, the face to face relation of sociality, i.e., intersubjectivity, entails what we will designate as an ontological response-ability on the part of the Same, a kind of autonomic or obsessive responding to the approach of the Other, like exhaling without inhaling,¹ prior to any free commitment; a sensitive, pre-conscious response which gives rise to the meaning of authentic subjectivity as ethical responsibility.² Thus, in our view, the "ethical" of ethical responsibility, and, hence, its priority, must be understood as fundamental ethics, approximating what Heidegger reluctantly referred to as "ursprungliche Ethik" in his Letter on Humanism, and not prescriptive morality.³ We will find that, for better or worse, an ambiguous confusion arises in Levinas' work regarding this distinction.

Levinas' argument for the transcendence-in-immanence of sociality

will rest squarely on his establishment of the 'reality' of exteriority, the very otherness of the Other that is irreducible to a concept of otherness (despite its being represented in the terms 'otherness', 'exteriority', etc.), through the 'evidence' of phenomenological analyses of suffering and death, time, the visible and the invisible, and the face to face relation.

What we want to show in this chapter is that what Levinas means by the term 'responsibility' is not the same as that which would be determined by a measure of my freedom or non-freedom. Metaphysical response-ability has the 'structure' of an event which is prior to and the ground of the subject for whom freedom would be possible. We will focus on this priority later, although it must be taken into account to a certain extent already at this point since the priority of responsibility and responsibility itself are inseparable. In focusing on the dynamics of exteriority in Totality and Infinity, Levinas wishes to establish how it is that the approach of the Other instigates a fundamental responding in what appears to consciousness later as the identity of the Same, and that, in a fundamental sense, this responding is ethical. Later, we will see how Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence works to establish the priority of this responding over the identity that responds, a return to that moment of hypostasis where the existent is on the way to the identity of a being for whom freedom is first possible and not possible, but has not yet arrived.

1.1 An Overview of the Argument to Exteriority

Here are the basic steps of the analysis. Through suffering, Levinas argues in Time and the Other, the individual existent comes to know the futurity of death and its limitation of the possibilities for

being. When this suffering reaches a certain intensity, a "crispation" of the intransigence of the sovereign subject occurs, a softening of the narcissistic autonomy which makes possible the approach of the Other and the break-up of autonomy into pluralistic heteronomy.⁴ For Heidegger, the temporality of Dasein is situated precisely in the comprehension of finitude revealed in the ultimate nothingness of death toward which the whole of its being is inevitably thrust. But, for Levinas, temporality has a more fundamental foundation.

In Levinas' view, for the individual existent there is not yet time in the most fundamental sense. Levinas argues that beneath the futurity revealed by the reality of death, beneath the synchrony of clock-time, the very foundation of time is established by the diachrony of the face to face relation. In the relationship of facing, Levinas will locate the transcendence of exteriority as a disruption of the visible by the invisible. Still, the fact of death cannot be ignored since its actuality marks the termination of the face to face relation of sociality, ultimately consigning it to the representational synthesis of history, the objective view of the third party. Levinas will argue against this possibility of historical closure of the transcendence opened by the face to face relation in his rehashing of the Platonic argument that death is overcome in the erotic relationship, or, rather, in the fecundity that is the positive outcome of the erotic relationship: the child. This will be taken up in the following chapter.

The analysis of the existent's move from immanence to transcendence found in Levinas' early work, which begins negatively with reflections on suffering and death, is tempered by a more positive perspective of individuation found in Totality and Infinity. What accounts for this difference? The focus of Totality and Infinity is on

the dynamics of the Other understood as exteriority. Later, in Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence, the focus returns once again to a consideration of subjectivity, i.e., the dynamics of the Same understood as responsibility. Here the negative aspects of transcendence once again come to the fore. Levinas' depiction of transcendence is positive or negative depending on his perspective, whether he is looking at it from an analysis of the dynamics of the Same or the Other. In keeping with the neoplatonic influence on Levinas' thought, we note that there is a similar ambivalence in Plotinus' view of embodiment, at once an entombment or fall, but also the source of the experience of beauty (and, thus, of Beauty) which begins the transcending trek back to the homeland.

In Totality and Infinity it will be not so much the process of pain and suffering that brings about the individualistic subjectivity of the subject, as the more gentle and tender play of intimacy and the possibility of recollection within the feminine welcome of the home. The home and inhabitation, understood in the context of the gentleness and decency of the feminine, Levinas will argue, are at the base of separation as well as the first movement out of separation toward sociality and the Good: "inhabitation and the intimacy of the dwelling which make the separation of the human being possible thus imply a first revelation of the Other."⁵

Such are the general movements of the existent's escape from the suffering of separation in the transcendence of sociality. Let us now turn to a detailed investigation of Levinas' arguments for the establishment of the exteriority that would accomplish this.

2 Exteriority: From Solitude to Sociality

2.1 Suffering and Death

Although Levinas recognizes the ambivalence of separation, in the context of his attempt to establish the incomprehensible exteriority of the Other, he emphasizes the negative aspects, the burden and painfulness of solitude: "pain and sorrow are the phenomena to which the solitude of the existent is finally reduced."⁶ In the context of Time and the Other, the activity of the existent in its everyday life represents an attempt to escape this "profound unhappiness" of materiality and its consequent solitude. "Everyday life," Levinas argues, "is a preoccupation with salvation" from solitude.⁷ This preoccupation is reflected in the seriousness and sincerity of the individual's pursuit of knowledge and pleasure. Whereas Nietzsche derided the "spirit of seriousness" as a mark of the member of the herd, and Sartre saw in this the condemnation of "pour-soi" to be free, Levinas sees in everyday life a sincere, though frustrated, desire on the part of the existent to transcend the burden of materiality and individuality. As an evasion of authentic transcendence, however, the pursuit of knowledge and pleasure necessarily fails to overcome the misery of solitude. And nowhere does this failure to evade the burden of individuality become more evident, in Levinas' view, than in the pain of suffering and the reality of death.

In suffering, particularly in physical suffering, the inescapable oppressiveness of materiality is violently thrust back upon the existent. One is backed up against the material wall of one's being in suffering where there is "an absence of all refuge."⁸ Suffering does not signify a confrontation with nothingness for Levinas, as it does for Heidegger, but the very "impossibility of nothingness," like the

vigilance of insomnia.⁹ The pain of suffering is the acute awareness of one's materiality from which there is no exit. Furthermore, the inescapability of pain, the fact that it rivets us helplessly to our materiality in a solitude that is a universe of pain, includes in it the additional foreboding that this pain is not the worst that could happen. The pain of suffering, forcing a recognition of the susceptibility of materiality, includes an intimation of death. The painfulness of pain is that it is precisely a foreboding of an unknowable 'something', Levinas argues, a mysterious threat which cannot be brought into the light:

The unknown of death, which is not given straight off as nothingness but is correlative to an experience of the impossibility of nothingness, signifies not that death is a region from which no one has returned and consequently remains unknown as a matter of fact; the unknown of death signifies that the very relationship with death cannot take place in the light, that the subject is in relationship with what does not come from itself. ¹⁰We could say it is in relationship with mystery.

In pain we find ourselves gripped by the mysterious spectre of death which we cannot grasp. The spectre of death is the foreboding of an ultimate solitude which overrides any choice on my part.

For Levinas, contrary to Heidegger's analysis, death marks the complete effacement of the power and virility of the subject, the ultimate indignity of materiality. When death is, I am not; when I am, death is not. This wisdom from Epicurus, although in Levinas view it misses the paradoxicality of death because "it effaces our relationship with death," nevertheless indicates the relation with the futurity and mysteriousness of death.¹¹ Death never takes place in the now; it obliterates the now. The now, the present instant, as we have seen, is the point of departure of the existent, the position from which it exercises its mastery and freedom.¹² Levinas disagrees with Heidegger here because for Heidegger the assumption of one's death is at the same

time the assumption of "the uttermost possibility of experience." Levinas says: "Death in Heidegger is an event of freedom."¹³ But it seems that there is a bit of confusion in Levinas' analysis. He moves back and forth between the presentiment of death and its actuality.

Against Heidegger, Levinas argues that "my mastery, my virility, my heroism as a subject can be neither virility nor heroism in relation to death" because, although in the now I am the "master of grasping the possible," nevertheless "when death is here ... I am unable to grasp."¹⁴ For Heidegger, to accept one's mortality and finitude as being-toward-death is to make possible every action in the world, to make possible the fulfillment of one's authenticity. Clearly, the actuality of death brings possibility to an end. But Levinas does not make it apparent why the intimation of our mortality should also accomplish this radical inactivity. The point he wants to make is that death is ungraspable, that it always remains exterior to representation in the now. And thus he wants to conclude that "in the nearness of death" there is a "reversal of the subject's activity into passivity." The intimation of death in pain and suffering is not merely a matter of being backed up against our materiality, Levinas argues, but results in a complete breakdown of our virility into "the crying and sobbing toward which suffering is inverted."¹⁵ Let us look at this more closely since it is a key issue of Levinas' analysis and a central disagreement with Heidegger which harkens back to the whole problem of ontology and freedom which we looked at previously.

Our death is unknowable. Unknowableness, Levinas argues, is the very structure of the future. The future is not what I can represent to myself in the present as a possible, as Levinas claims Heidegger thought. The future is exactly what is beyond every reduction to a

representation in the present. The future always comes unannounced like an uninvited guest to a party, whether received with welcome at that point or not. The futurity of death is that the day and the hour of our death remains unknowable: "the future," Levinas says, "is absolutely surprising."¹⁶ Here the activity of light is reduced to the darkness of a complete passivity. This is not merely a passivity that would in its turn feed an activity, as in the relation of sensation to knowledge within a sense-data epistemology, but an extreme passivity where all activity and the possibility of activity is obliterated. For Levinas, the inability to know one's death in advance results in a complete shut-down of our active power of representation. But for Heidegger, it is exactly the heroic acceptance of this ultimate undoing that makes all doing possible. Freedom from the threat of death, the assuming of my death as a limit of the possible, opens up the whole world of the possible.¹⁷

To enter into the solitude of materiality as a limited and mortal being is to choose mastery and freedom; it is to practice death as Plato taught.¹⁸ Philosophy, in Plato's view, as well as for Heidegger and Nietzsche, is precisely this practice of death, an authentic acceptance of our mortality in a noble and courageous turning away from every inauthentic evasion in the everydayness of enjoyment and the idle chatter of the herd. The philosophical life, the truly authentic, ethical life, is both tragic and noble. But for Levinas, the response one has to death in the radical return to oneself of extreme suffering is "crying and sobbing," and a breakdown to a "state of irresponsibility."¹⁹ Thus it seems odd that Levinas turns to an analysis of Shakespeare's Macbeth where, in the face of inevitable doom, the tragic hero nevertheless plunges into battle. This is curious because it shows exactly that the

tragic hero does not break down and cry. Levinas' evidence here seems to support the Platonic/Nietzschean/Heideggerian thesis.

Levinas argues that the futurity of death disrupts the ipseity, the identity of the existent, since one's death can never be represented as an actuality. Furthermore, this mysterious unknowability places the subject in a position of extreme passivity. He cites Macbeth's initial unwillingness to fight MacDuff toward the end of the play as evidence of this passivity. But is this not merely a moment's hesitation from which the very heroism of the tragic hero is born? With courage but without hope Macbeth does throw himself into futile battle. Levinas is right to say that this is not an assumption of death in the sense of suicide or surrender of will, even though death is seen clearly to be inevitable. It is, in fact, a futile assumption, tragic in the sense of taking up a struggle one knows one cannot win, hoping against all hope for a last minute reprieve from the governor while knowing it will not come. It is precisely an active response against the passivity to which the inevitability of death would reduce the tragic hero. Levinas' preference for passivity comes to the fore here. Crying and sobbing is but one response to the extreme of pain that would loosen our hold on ourselves by nailing us to ourselves, but it is not the only one. Do we not yet have an admiration for the stalwart perseverance of the tragic hero? Has the errant posture of the erotic in our day — hence, in Levinas' terms, the posture of the feminine — so blinded us with its darkness that there is nothing left for us to do but cower in the corner sobbing and weeping? More fundamentally, we must ask about Levinas' attitude toward the solitude of separation, for this generates the whole thrust of his argument concerning responsibility.

2.2 The Evil of Solitude

Levinas begins his analysis of the escape from solitude to the sociality of the Other from the position that solitude is predominantly, though not exclusively, a negative aspect of determinate being. Solitude, defined by the materiality of the body, is understood as an oppression and a weight. But what is this problem that seems to be intrinsic to individuality? And how are we to account for the experiences of those who choose solitude? Is not the life of knowledge necessarily a life of solitude, even if carried on in community? It is not the community who confronts the text to be understood or the blank page at the beginning of a new work. All truly creative work is carried out in solitude. And what about the anchorites, monks, and hermits who had and have a craving for solitude, who can never get enough of it, and all those who strive for perfection in whatever form this might take? To excel at something, is this not to separate oneself, to choose solitude, to become one with oneself? Is not the "loneliness at the top" an inevitable aspect of all mastery? Beyond the admitted ambivalence, Levinas views solitude predominantly as a curse, an evil. It is not all negative, to be sure. To be one is to distinguish oneself from anonymity; distinction is necessary for transcendence; and all distinguishing of oneself thereby involves the separation of solitude. But, for Levinas, a commitment to this enchainment to one's self in a deferral of the genuine salvation of transcendence is an egoistic narcissism (already involving a negative judgement), a deferral of the 'genuine deferral' of being-for-the-Other. Is Levinas' position merely a matter of emphasizing one aspect of the human situation over the other? Can a priority of transcendence over immanence be demonstrated? This will be no simple discernment since the entire investigation of the

transcending exteriority of the Other in Totality and Infinity, and the responsible subjectivity of the Same in Otherwise than Being, is geared toward establishing this.

There is a constant tension in Levinas' philosophy between sociality and solitude, between being for-the-other (the very definition of responsibility) and being virile. Nietzsche's philosophy also focuses on this dialectic, but with an emphasis on the nobility of mastery. Thus Spoke Zarathustra can be understood as a kind of 'alternative' handbook for those who would choose the life of solitude, the philosophical life. But is solitude a blessing or a curse? In Levinas' view, solitude is certainly a deprivation, as if there were a state of sociality from which it is a fall. We want to escape our solitude, yet it is necessary for the achievement of the power and freedom of individuality which is the pre-requisite of sociality. The burden of solitude is like an unfortunate side-effect of the achievement of power: if you want power — consciousness, knowledge, freedom — you must be willing to accept the painful, lone-ly life of solitude. This is the curse and the blessing of materiality, the goodness and the evil of being.

From the very beginning, 'to be' is not, for Levinas, a pure good; it is a mixed blessing. The amount of solitude that one can take will determine the amount of mastery that one will be able to achieve. But how can a genuine desire for solitude be possible for Levinas? Levinas is looking for a way beyond death and the vulgarity of this world. He has flunked the 'love of life' test of Nietzsche's "Eternal Return" of the same, a determination based on one's willingness to live one's life over and over again ad infinitum exactly as it has been in every detail. Although Levinas subscribes to Nietzsche's understanding of what it means to be a "philosopher of the future," as he makes clear in his article

"Meaning and Sense" — at least when the German philosopher's words come from the mouth of Léon Blum — he does not seem to accept Nietzsche's connection between this understanding of philosophy and the love of life that goes with it. Looking to the beyond, Levinas says that "there is a vulgarity and a baseness in an action that is conceived only for the immediate, that is, in the last analysis, for our life."²⁰

In a more recent article, "Transcendence and Evil" (1978), which focuses on a text by Philippe Nemo that approaches the question of suffering and death through a phenomenological exegesis of the Biblical story of Job,²¹ Levinas distinguishes the "beyond" of his philosophy — in apparent contrast to that critiqued by Nietzsche — as one which "is conceived neither by negation nor by the anxiety the philosophers of existence speak of," i.e., neither as a denial of life nor as a "nostalgia" for absolute being.²² The horror of evil, ultimately, the tireless anxiety of death, is manifested physically and is not merely a state of mind or an emotion: "Sickness, evil in living, aging, corruptible flesh, perishing and rotting, would be the modalities of anxiety itself; through them and in them dying is as it were lived, and the truth of this death is unforgettable, unimpeachable, irremissible."²³ This evil of physical suffering awakens in the existent, who seems sought out by it, "an expectation of the Good, of God...."²⁴ But this expectation, Levinas says, in the context of "the Nietzschean warning against the spirit of resentment," would not be merely the anticipation of eternal pleasure, "a repayment for evil or vengeance:"

The soul which, awakened by evil, is found to be in a relationship with the beyond of the world does not amount to the make-up of a being-in-the-world, an empirical or transcendental consciousness equal to its objects, adequate to being, equal to the world in its desires promised to satisfaction. The soul beyond satisfaction and recompense expects an awaited that infinitely surpasses expectancy.²⁵

In the malignancy and carnal anxiety of concrete suffering, witnessed in the extreme in the horror of the Holocaust, there is revealed "a breakthrough of the Good which is not a simple inversion of Evil, but an elevation."²⁶ Levinas will also find this "elevation" revealed in the face to face relation and played out in the transcendence of fecundity. In the infinite and superlative aspect of this beyond, Levinas would free it from a mere sublimation of vengeance. But despite the "infinite" of Levinas' beyond, is there not yet a denial of life concealed here? In order to gain a clearer understanding of Levinas' beyond we must turn to his analysis of temporality in the context of the face to face relation, since the status of this "beyond" will be determined by his understanding of the infinite dimension of exteriority.

To summarize, for Levinas, death is an ultimate solitude. It marks the complete effacement of the power and virility of the subject. When death is, I am not; when I am, death is not. Death never takes place in the now. The now, the present, is the point of departure of the self. It is the point of mastery and solitude. Death is always yet to come. It is an ultimate unknown. It is what can never be brought into the light; a darkness of ignorance that cannot be reduced to the illumination of knowledge. Death is unknowable. Unknowability is the very structure of the future. What can be anticipated in the present, the not-yet, is not the future. The future is the ungraspable. It is what is always a surprise. It is in this sense, that death surprises us, that the time and the hour and the place of our death is unknown to us. That is the futurity of death.

Here the activity of light is reduced to an absolute passivity. Not merely a passivity that would feed an activity, like the passive dimension of knowledge, but an extreme passivity where all activity and

the possibility of activity is overcome. For Heidegger, the acceptance of this ultimate undoing is exactly what made all doing possible. To enter into solitude, that is to choose mastery, to practice death as Plato taught. Philosophy would be this very practice of death. It is only in the practice of death that the most complete fulfillment of the self is possible. The more solitude one can handle, the more mastery one can achieve, the more power. The ultimate solitude is death; to practice death, to have already died, would be to have achieved the ultimate power. To have no fear of death would make everything possible. Impossibility is the ground of possibility. But for Levinas, the impossibility of death marks the very end of the possible.

For Levinas, the inevitability of one's death is not the challenge of the noble hero but "the limit of the subject's virility," where one is "no longer able to be able."²⁷ Since the approach of death is unassumable, one's death remains wholly other. This is a disruption of my solitude which, according to Levinas, already shows a pluralistic dimension to existence. The approach of death shows that there are doors in the monads of Levinas' solitude. In the mystery of death, in its unknowability, Levinas wants to point to the fact that this unknowability shows that the other is not merely an alter ego in "an idyllic and harmonious relationship of communion, or a sympathy through which we put ourselves in the other's place; we recognize the other as resembling us, but exterior to us; the relationship with the other is a relationship with a Mystery."²⁸ The relationship with the other is a futural relationship, one that can never be wholly grasped in the present. Here we begin to see how the notion of time enters into the solitude of the existent: "It seems to me," Levinas says, "to be impossible to speak of time in a subject alone, or to speak of a purely personal duration."²⁹

The present does not break out toward the future in an ec-stasis of possibility as Heidegger thought. For Levinas, the future, temporality itself, will be constituted by the advent of the Other.

2.3 Temporality and the Face To Face

Although the relation of the existent with the otherness of death opens up a certain relationship with the future, death is not a futurity, not a form of exteriority, according to Levinas, that would free the existent from the solitude of hypostasis. Suffering and death bring an end to the power and the virility of the subject. If death "opens a way out of solitude," Levinas asks, "does it not simply come to crush this solitude, to crush subjectivity itself?"³⁰ The kind of alterity that Levinas is looking for is one where the otherness of the Other maintains a relationship with the existent without destroying the separateness of the existent. This is the basis of the whole problematic here. The importance of understanding the existent as radically separate, unto "atheism," is that separateness is the sine qua non of relationship.³¹ It is exactly in the fact that separateness is lost in the 'relations' of knowledge and enjoyment that precludes the possibility of genuine relationship.

Genuine relationship, inter-subjectivity, necessitates two separate terms. Yet relationship also calls for a connection that must be possible within or across the distance of separation without destroying the separation. Separation and transcendence must be maintained simultaneously. Ultimately, it will be the separateness of the existent, a withdrawal from the totality of being, which makes possible or is "creative of" or "produces" the relationship with infinity or God, to the extent that in this process, Levinas says, "man redeems

creation."³² How this can be possible is the question. For Sartre, such intersubjective transcendence was thought to be impossible. Being and Nothingness thus reduced love to romantic illusion on the one hand, and the politics of power on the other. But, as Levinas says in "Diachrony and Representation" (1985), a recent reflection which shows the question of temporality and transcendence to be at the heart of his philosophy, it is precisely love that names the transcendence in immanence of sociality with the Other.³³ This is why the futurity of death is insufficient for establishing genuine exteriority. In Levinas' analysis, it obliterates the present of the existent. But the futurity that will establish a genuine escape from solitude must be one which, while remaining future, is yet somehow present. Only in this way would the existent be able to maintain a relationship with the future without reducing the future to the present of sameness in representation — even as a possibility. The Other always comes as a surprise.

For Heidegger, of course, Dasein is preeminently a futural being; representing the future is the very definition of Dasein. The past and the present are always experienced in the context of the yet-to-be. In this sense, we never really live in the present. We are always caught up in an anxiety about what can become of what has been, of what is possible for us in the future given the limiting determination of what is no longer possible because of the past. Here the past and the present always refer to the future. This analysis is unacceptable for Levinas, however, because the determination of time as the possibility of the impossible is already to have situated time within the framework of knowledge and comprehension. For Levinas, the time of the solitary existent is the pure present. Thus, it is not death that will allow for a satisfactory escape from this pure present of solitude. The escape

will come in the existent's relation to the surprising incomprehensibility of the Other: "the situation of the face-to-face," Levinas says in Time and the Other, "would be the very accomplishment of time; the encroachment of the present on the future is not the feat of the subject alone, but of the intersubjective relationship."³⁴ But the time instituted in relation with the Other is understood by Levinas to be more fundamental than historical or clock time, even more fundamental than Husserl's immanent time.

In "Diachrony and Representation," Levinas focuses on the manner in which the approach of the Other establishes the temporality of intersubjectivity through an analysis of time utilizing the notions of "diachrony" and "synchrony," terms borrowed from linguistic analysis. In the act of representation the otherness of the Other is reduced to sameness, to the immanent present of the knowledge relation, as we have already seen. This is basically what Levinas means by synchrony: "In thought understood as vision, knowledge, and intentionality, intelligibility thus signifies the reduction of the other (Autre) to the Same, synchrony as being in its egological gathering." Levinas associates this with the outcome of Kant's "unity of transcendental apperception," the reduction of plurality to unity at the heart of the "I think."³⁵

But Levinas wants to argue that synchrony, concrete or objective time, is based on a more fundamental notion of time. Synchrony, is derivative of "Diachrony." Levinas understands diachronous time as precisely the break-up of synchrony, occurring in the approach of the Other. The face of the Other is that which cannot be reduced to an objectively temporal representation. This is precisely what Levinas means by "sociality." Sociality is the approach of the Other in such a

way that a dimension of the Other always breaks out of the attempt of consciousness to reduce that Other to the synthesis of an object of thought. This is also Levinas' definition of exteriority: i.e., the otherness of the Other. Exteriority is not a cognitive object. Its essence, perhaps one should say its essance, is precisely its non-objectivity. This is true of the face in general, as it is with all forms of exteriority which Levinas has uncovered, beginning with the i_y a.

The study of exteriority, which is the whole purpose of Totality and Infinity, is the search for those marginal levels of 'affective experience' which open up a dimension of relation to the otherness of the the Other, and thus to infinity, and thus to God, and which show how the Other cannot be reduced to an object without doing a certain violence to the Other. Inherent in this impossibility, Levinas concludes, there lies a command: Thou shalt not kill!³⁶ That is, thou shalt not reduce to an intentional object, synchronized in the immanent temporality of consciousness where it is possessed as mine, that otherness, alterity, or exteriority which can be thus reduced only in an act of arrogant violence which asserts that my right to be, the conatus essendi of Spinoza, takes precedence over that of the Other, a narcissistic egoism inherent in all totalitarianism. To the contrary, Levinas asserts, "the right of man is originally the right of the other man and does not coincide with the subtle calculus of totalitarianism."³⁷

Certainly, the imperative against intellectual and actual murder allows of disobedience. But the indigenous imperative remains, not derived from a conception of an absolutely rational consciousness, but from a "shimmer of infinity" ("ruissellement de l'infini") that "gleams forth" from the face of the Other as "la rationalité première."³⁸ Thus we

can see the importance of separation as a sine qua non of beholding the infinite dimension of human exteriority. It is precisely the accomplishment of separation that "opens upon the idea of Infinity."³⁹

2.4 The Visible and the Invisible

Certainly, in everyday intercourse with others, an objectification of the other is necessary. But the everyday face is not the face of the Other. The everyday, visible face is already derivative of an invisible face which, Levinas says, can be "neither seen nor touched," a face that is the presence of an absence, an indecently superlative face.⁴⁰ But in "everyday life," Levinas asserts, "the solitude and fundamental alterity of the other are already veiled by decency."⁴¹ Here the other is treated like an alter ego. This eradicates the otherness of the Other which makes the Other unique.⁴² If my secretary does not show up for work, I can always arrange to have another secretary temporarily take her place. In the very reduction of the otherness of the Other to the category "secretary," the uniqueness of the Other is lost. Although the face may remain ostensibly naked, it can be 'clothed' by various masks by which its uniqueness, its otherness, is ef-faced. Any perceived face is thus already a mask, as Nietzsche realized. The mask of the visual allows for a certain reciprocity between one individual and another, an interchangeability which functions at the level of the synchrony or sameness of consciousness. The other is here an intentional object.

But the kind of alterity Levinas wants to demonstrate is one where alterity appears as a "non-reciprocal relationship," a going out to the Other without a return to oneself. In the sheer nudity of the invisible face, unveiled, purely and indigently open and forthright, vulnerable, without masks and without power — that is where Levinas locates the true

alterity of the Other. But the alterity revealed in the face to face relation with the Other is not graspable. "The face with which the Other turns to me," Levinas says, "is not reabsorbed in a representation of the face." It is precisely this immateriality, invisibility, incommensurateness, incomprehensibility ... that structures the interpersonal as asymmetrical.⁴³ The metaphysical face is poor and indigent when measured by the capital of consciousness. The formula that Levinas often uses to express this radical incomprehensibility of the otherness of the Other, and which involves a certain ambiguity, perhaps fecund, between the ontic and the ontological, the visible and the invisible — a tension carried over into the notion of responsibility and which animates Levinas' work as a whole, as J.-F. Lyotard points out⁴⁴ — is that the Other is the weak, the poor, "the widow and the orphan," this latter being a formula found frequently in the Hebrew Bible.⁴⁵ The metaphysical face in which Levinas locates the transcendence of alterity is not that of the actual poor person, or the actual weak person, although Levinas does seem to shift surreptitiously into such ontic reference. It is crucial to Levinas' whole argument for transcendence in Totality and Infinity that it be the naked or invisible face of the Other, the face that is beneath every particular form of a face, and not necessarily the face of that beggar in the street or that lonely widow over there, which disrupts the synchronizing consciousness of the Same:

The face of the Other — under all the particular forms of expression where the Other, already in a character's skin, plays a role — is just as much pure expression, an extradition without defense or cover, precisely the extreme rectitude of a facing, which in this nudity is an exposure unto death: nudity, destitution, passivity, and pure vulnerability.⁴⁶ Such is the face as the very mortality of the other person.

The nudity and the vulnerability of the face in its sheer facing, its impoverishment, vulnerability, widowhood, is contrasted with the visible

face, whether of a rich or poor person, insofar as the visible face — regardless of the mask it wears — is the locus of the power and wealth of consciousness in its function of grasping and making present.

The distinction between the visible and the invisible, however, does not always seem to be maintained rigorously in Levinas' work. In the context of the responsibility at the heart of sociality, one feels as if one is called upon to act in some way differently than from the freedom of consciousness, but one is not exactly sure what to do about this. Levinas' philosophy seems to call for a change of behavior, but one wonders if — strictly within the bounds of his fundamental philosophy — it can even justify a change of heart. To what extent can the ursprungliche ethics of the metaphysical situation of pre-conscious contact with the invisible face of the Other be translated into practical philosophy? But let us continue our analysis of the face to face relation before attempting to answer this important question at the heart of our reflections.

Despite the vulnerability and indigency which characterizes the otherness of the Other, what we understand as the invisibility of the face — or perhaps because of it — the Other, in Levinas' view, also approaches the Same from a height, from an imperative position. In Totality and Infinity Levinas says that it is a soft imperative, a non-violent disruption, a gentle categorical: "the Other precisely reveals himself in his alterity not in a shock negating the I, but as the primordial phenomenon of gentleness."⁴⁷ Later, however, in Otherwise than Being, the revelation of alterity is understood as a trauma: "the exposure to another is disinterestedness, proximity, obsession by the neighbor, an obsession despite oneself, that is, a pain." And again: "as a passivity in the paining of the pain felt, sensibility is a

vulnerability, for pain comes to interrupt an enjoyment in its very isolation, and thus tears me from myself."⁴⁸ We suggested above that this difference in the depiction of contact with alterity is related to the fact that Totality and Infinity focuses on the dynamics of the Other as exteriority whereas Otherwise than Being focuses on the dynamics of the Same as responsibility. At any rate, the Other comes from a height, but not from a position of power or force, i.e., necessity. The imperative "curvature of the space," as Levinas calls it, in which relation with the face of the Other is played out is not, as with Kant and other Natural Law proponents, an abstract dictum that would command dutiful obedience of all subjects equally to its neutered universality.⁴⁹ In the relation of facing, we are not bound by the impersonal absoluteness of an a priori rational law that would command absolutely. The approach of the Other happens prior to the establishment of freedom and the rationality upon which it is based. It is precisely by means of the curvature of space between me and the other that response-ability is established as more fundamental than the relations of knowledge and pleasure. The imperative height of the Other is precisely located in the poverty of the Other's incommensurateness: "the Other does not only appear in his face," Levinas says, "as a phenomenon subject to the action and domination of a freedom; infinitely distant from the very relation he enters, he presents himself there from the first as an absolute." It is precisely by virtue of this height of incommensurateness, born of a poverty in contrast to the wealth of consciousness and knowledge, that the approach of the Other obligates me. It is the orientation between the Same and the Other that produces the ethical situation of responsibility and not any psychological disposition I might or might not have toward some particular other person. Here is the whole thesis of Totality and Infinity in a nutshell:

"The priority of this orientation over the terms that are placed in it, (and which cannot arise without this orientation)" Levinas says, "summarizes the theses of the present work."⁵⁰ In the closing pages of Totality and Infinity, Levinas summarizes the central importance of this "'curvature of intersubjective space'" — anticipating his future work — in his assertion that it "is, perhaps, the very presence of God."⁵¹

2.5 From Sociality to God

The height from which the Other approaches shows why Levinas does not mean by the notion of "face" the visualized, perceived, or known face of the other. The face of the Other, in Levinas' metaphysical sense, is not something we can see, which would already place it in the realm of consciousness and the politics of power. Thus, Levinas' establishment of the possibility of a pre-cognitive, sensible contact with invisible exteriority in the face to face relation, necessarily infinite, is the ground and foundation of what he means by the ethical and, as such, is the advent of God — infinitely beyond par excellence — in the world. Relationship with the invisible is relationship with an otherness irreducible to a concept of otherness. Invisible exteriority is thus already not merely a revelation of God understood conceptually as the Absolutely Other, i.e., as a being, but precisely as "other than the other." In "God and Philosophy" Levinas puts it this way:

Ethics is not a moment of being; it is otherwise and better than being. In this ethical reversal ... God is drawn out of objectivity, presence and being. He is never an object or an interlocutor. His absolute remoteness, his transcendence, turns into my responsibility — non-erotic par excellence — for the other. And this analysis implies that God is not simply the "first other," the "other par excellence," or the "absolutely other," but other than the other (autre qu'autrui), other otherwise, other with an alterity prior to the alterity of the other, prior to the ethical bond with another and different from every

neighbor, transcendent to the point of absence, to the point of a possible confusion with the stirring of the there is.⁵²

Perhaps we should speak of 'levels' of invisibility. Exteriority is invisibility in the sense that the Good, for Plato, is beyond being and nothingness. It is this aspect of the face which cannot be reduced to the visual, and which thus escapes every thematization. This is not merely a problem of the insufficiency of Abschattungen, the limitation of perspective, but a hearkening back to the ground of Erlebnisse in the Urimpression where that which is sensed always overflows the sensing of it in the dynamics of the instant. This returns us to a consideration of time. The temporality of the face, however, must be understood more radically than Husserl's notion of protention and retention,⁵³ more radically than what Bergson meant by "duration" or concrete time.⁵⁴ In the final analysis, Levinas is critical of the notion of concrete or lived time and time understood as duration because he finds that these are ultimately constituted within the framework of intentionality, although they do begin to indicate the more fundamental notion of time that Levinas finds revealed in the exteriority of the Other.

Levinas makes it clear again here, however, that he is not "denouncing the intentional structure of thought" in opposing the diachrony of the face to the synchrony of thought.⁵⁵ His argument is only meant to show that the temporality revealed in the face to face relation of sociality is more fundamental than the temporality that is a measurement of the movement between regular points.⁵⁶ This is a temporality which hearkens back to what Levinas calls an "immemorial" or "an-archic" past and which transcends itself toward a pure or infinite future, i.e., toward God.⁵⁷ It is, in fact, both from God and toward God. This is the whole thesis, not only of the infinity of responsibility but also of its priority.

To summarize, the subject that we know is a visible or intentional object constituted 'from' the invisible dimension of the Other to which we are related before we know it. Metaphysics, in Levinas' view, deals with invisible or non-objective 'objects'; invisibility would be the very definition of infinity. The totality of being or the absoluteness of consciousness reaches a limit point in the approach of the invisible dimension of the Other, an approach which is a withdrawal, the presence of an absence, a 'that' whose 'thatness' is precisely the fact that it will not become a this or a that. This is relation with the infinite exteriority of the Other, a sensitive responding to the command expressed in the invisible exteriority of the Other not to kill, even though every thematization involves a little death — a violence to the purity of the invisible object, an overpowering of diachrony by synchrony.

The primordial temporality revealed in the face to face relation with the Other who faces me, breaks through the solitude of the separate being — coming from a height — while yet not obliterating that solitude — coming from a poverty — by posing a challenge to the synthesizing process that is at the heart of separation and its freedom. The incomprehensibility of the face of the Other reveals itself as a desire that cannot be fulfilled, a desire which, unlike a need, cannot return to the existent in the immanence of satisfaction.⁵⁸ This is the very structure of responsibility. Having established that the exteriority of the Other necessarily poses a challenge to the sameness of representation, Levinas then wants to move to the argument that this response-ability is ethical. It is ethical insofar as it disrupts, critiques, or challenges the tendency toward absolutism, dogmatism, and totalitarianism which Levinas sees inherent in thought itself. The invisible, de facto, poses a challenge to the visible; by its very

invisibility marking the limit of the visible. The invisible is beyond every essence. Thus it is the very invisible exteriority of exteriority that bespeaks the "Thou shalt not kill." That human being is more fundamentally an ethical being than a knowing, representing being, follows from the establishment of this invisible dimension revealed in the face of the Other.

But is the invisible the proper domain of philosophy, where philosophy is understood in the context of light and illumination? As evidence for his argument and, ultimately, as an opening beyond it, i.e., as an escape from the historical limitations of sociality, Levinas offers a more tangible approach to the infinite dimension of the Other in his analysis of the "feminine," both in the context of the home and inhabitation, and in the context of the erotic relationship.

3 Conclusion

The escape from solitude, if, indeed, it is something from which escape is necessary, is situated in the extreme passivity of the subject as a separate being. The incarnate individuality of separation, understood as sensual materiality, involves not only mastery and action, but also passion and being acted upon. The sovereign subject is undone by the 'enslaved' subject in a dialectical movement not unlike that of Hegel's master/slave analysis, with its unexpected reversal. And yet this undoing is a response on the part of the Same. But here responsibility is understood as response-ability. It is a sensitivity prior to every thought and upon which thought arises. It is this by virtue of the very nature of the invisibility of the face of the Other.

But this is an invisibility which leaves traces of itself in passing, so that one can see 'it' through an oblique, phenomenological-poetic analysis.

The face to face relation is ethical since, by its very nature, the invisible poses a challenge, a limit situation, for the visible. The revelation of the invisible in the face to face relation is thus a revelation of the infinite. And since God is the infinitely Other or "other otherwise," it is a revelation of God. Such is the ontological force of the invisible. Philosophy here becomes Theology.⁵⁹

Responsibility is thus understood as a responding to this infinite dimension, this absolute unknowability of the Other, this presence of an absence. And this responding to the Other, prior to any thought or any choice on my part, is ethical to the extent that, by the very nature of the situation, representational thought confronts its limit. The realization of this limit defines the ethical. The ethical dimension of invisibility is that it inherently involves a skeptical critique of the totalitarian pretensions inherent in thought.

But is not the extreme passivity that Levinas locates in the paradoxical instant of beginning as well as that of response-ability, fundamentally equivocal and ambiguous, like the feminine, an active passivity that is a passive activity? In pointing to the prior contract of the hypostasis and the reversal of bodily 'intentionality' as the seeds of a contestation to the prerogative of representation, is Levinas not already involved in a wholesale begging of the question at the base of his analysis? Is there not a problem of evidence here? Are Levinas' analyses anything more than poetry passing in the guise of philosophy? Is not philosophy properly situated in the light of day, whereas Levinas would have us see what cannot be seen? Is the 'freedom of beginning' at

the basis of responsibility merely the initial stirring of a utopian philosophy that would be a call for peace and justice in a world where all the evidence is to the contrary? Has Levinas actually proven anything or is this merely an impassioned plea to hammer the weapons of war into the ploughshares of peace? Is Levinas doing anything more than bringing out the other side of the Nietzschean/Heideggerian position?

For Nietzsche, as for Heidegger and Sartre, the escape from solitude is a fall into the everydayness of the herd and its inauthenticity. For Levinas, solitude is something we want to escape from. Is this not already the position of the slave? What distinguishes the noble from the slave is exactly the difference in their relation to solitude. Is this not also the difference between what Christianity would call the average person and the saint? The net result of this preference for passivity is that there follows, despite Levinas' disavowals, a diminution of the responsibility I have toward myself, a responsibility grounded in a rational ethic based on the natural law of reason. The law of reason need not be interpreted as a blitzkrieg.

By contesting Levinas' weighting of the negative aspects of separation and solitude, however, we have tried to offset the tendency to interpret the ethical situation as a greater power than the epistemological or ontological situation. The ethical situation Levinas is describing is prior to the distinctions and judgements of power. Power is a category of the political, and hence of morality. In a sense, the ethical situation has no force. In fact, it never actually takes place. Its essance is deferral. Its power lies in its lack of power. This is the way of the feminine. The understanding of responsibility at this level must be distinguished from the responsibility implied in the rational use of freedom. The responsibility established by the face to

face relation is a response-ability. That is all Levinas really needs to establish, since it would follow from the 'structure' of invisibility that this response-ability is, in a fundamental sense, ethical.

There is always a danger of allowing the perception of this peculiar pre-thematic situation to slip into categories and representations and then to turn these representations into moral prescriptions. But this would not follow from what Levinas has established here. The ethical would stand over and against the moral, to the degree that the moral is a category of the same, a representation; whereas the very ethicality, if one may so speak, of the ethical is precisely the fact that it cannot become a representation. Levinas himself must struggle against the desire to be edifying. Or does he not follow this Hegelian dictum?⁶⁰

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1. OB, p. 14 / p. 17; what a diver emerging rapidly from the depths must do in order to avoid the "bends."
 2. OB, p. 116 / p. 148.
 3. Martin Heidegger, "Letter on Humanism" in Martin Heidegger: Basic Writings, ed. David Krell (New York: Harper and Row, 1977), p. 235.
 4. TO, p. 76 / p. 64; CPP, p. 59.
 5. TI, p. 151 / p. 124.
 6. TO, p. 68 / p. 53.
 7. TO, p. 58 / p. 39.
 8. TO, p. 69 / p. 55.
 9. TO, p. 69 / p. 56.
 10. TO, pp. 69-70 / p. 56.
 11. TO, p. 71 / p. 59.
 12. TO, p. 72 / p. 59.
 13. TO, p. 70 / p. 57.
 14. TO, p. 72 / p. 59.
 15. TO, p. 72 / p. 60.
 16. TO, p. 76 / p. 64.
 17. TO, p. 70, n. 43 / p. 57, n. 5; Levinas says: "Death in Heidegger is not ... 'the impossibility of possibility,' but 'the possibility of impossibility.'" See also, CPP, p. 51.
 18. "... true philosophers make dying their profession" Plato, Phaedo in The Collected Dialogues of Plato, ed. E. Hamilton and H. Cairns, Bollingen Series LXXI (Princeton: Princeton U. Press, 1982), 67e, p. 50.
 19. TO, p. 72 / p. 60.
 20. Levinas, "Meaning and Sense," in CPP, p. 93.
 21. Philippe Nemo, Job et l'excès du Mal (Paris: Grasset, 1978).
 22. Emmanuel Levinas, "Transcendence and Evil" in CPP, pp. 178-179.
 23. Ibid., p. 179.
 24. Ibid., p. 181; p. 183.

25. Ibid. pp. 183-184.
26. Ibid., p. 185.
27. TO, p. 74 / p. 62.
28. TO, p. 75 / p. 63.
29. TO, p. 77 / p. 64.
30. TO, p. 70 / p. 65.
31. TI, p. 77 / p. 49; pp. 88-89 / p. 61.
32. TI, p. 104 / p. 77.
33. Levinas, "Diachrony and Representation," in TO, p. 108.
34. TO, p. 79 / p. 69.
35. "Diachrony," in TO, p. 99.
36. TI, p. 199 / p. 173; cf. CPP, p. 55.
37. Guy Petitdemange et Jacques Rolland, Autrement que savoir, including a dialogue with E. Levinas (Paris: Osiris, 1988), p. 61 (my translation).
38. TI, pp. 207-208 / pp. 182-183.
39. TI, p. 105 / p. 78.
40. TI, p. 194 / p. 168; see also, 1979 Preface to TO, p. 32.
41. TO, p. 82 / p. 74.
42. TO, p. 83 / p. 75.
43. TI, p. 215 / p. 190.
44. Autrement que savoir, p. 87.
45. Richard Cohen, in TO, p. 83, n. 64 / p. 75.
46. "Diachrony," in TO, p. 107.
47. TI, p. 150 / p. 124.
48. OB, p. 55 / pp. 70-71; see also, "Humanism and An-archy," in CPP, p. 133: "The other ... imputes ... responsibility ... as a traumatism...."
49. TI, pp. 215-216 / pp. 190 / 191; also, p. 291 / p. 267.
50. TI, p. 215 / p. 190.

51. TI, p. 291 / p. 267.
52. Levinas, "God and Philosophy" in CPP, pp. 165-166.
53. "Diachrony," in TO, p. 102.
54. Emmanuel Levinas, "The Old and the New," in TO, p. 129.
55. "Diachrony," in TO, p. 105.
56. "Old and New" in TO, pp. 129-30.
57. "Diachrony," in TO, pp. 111-116.
58. Emmanuel Levinas, Transcendance et intelligibilité, (Genève: Labor et Fides, 1984), pp. 14-15.
59. Transcendance et intelligibilité, p. 25.
60. Ibid., p. 16.