

## Chapter 9

### SUBJECTIVITY AS RESPONSIBILITY: A PASSIVITY MORE PASSIVE THAN ANY PAST

#### 1 Introduction

##### 1.1 Levinas and the Tradition

As we have seen throughout the previous chapters, Levinas is critical of philosophies that define the subject by recourse to freedom, knowledge, or self-consciousness. His primary reason for this critique is that it leads to the insurmountable problem of accounting for intersubjectivity otherwise than through the politics of power, domination, and self-interest. This is undoubtedly the fulcrum of his critique of the whole history of Western philosophy and what leads him to assert, in particular, that it was the civilization of transcendental idealism which led to the horror of the Holocaust.<sup>1</sup>

Whereas it is true, as Kant pointed out in his second Critique, that freedom is the necessary postulate for the possibility of conscious moral behavior, it is this same primacy of freedom, in Levinas' view, that mitigates against genuine transcendence toward the Other. This is not only a problem for understanding interpersonal human relations, but for understanding the relation of the human to the divine as well. This becomes manifestly clear, for example, in Sartre's atheistic ontology where subjectivity is defined as radical freedom and intersubjectivity is thus reduced to mutual manipulation and a struggle for domination between

beings that are basically 'for-themselves'. Relation with a transcendent God is consequently out of the question. From the perspective of the problem of intersubjectivity, Sartre's ontology of being and nothingness can be understood as the existential culmination of the tradition of transcendental idealism. In a recently published book, Continental Philosophy Since 1750, Robert Solomon makes just such a claim.<sup>2</sup>

Solomon views the tradition of transcendental idealism as a sustained preoccupation with the self: "the rise and fall of the self" proclaims the subtitle of his text. One cannot help but hear connotations of the fate of an empire. Focusing on the interaction of Enlightenment rationalism and romantic intuitionism, joined by their humanistic concern for the individual, Solomon characterizes the 'Self'-preoccupation of the idealistic tradition as an egocentric "transcendental pretence" that began with Rousseau's solitary walks in the woods, was elaborated systematically by Kant, reached an apotheosis with Hegel, was reinterpreted phenomenologically by Husserl, Heidegger, and the French existentialists, and which is currently under attack by the relativistic back-lash of 'post-modern' thinkers such as Lévi-Strauss, Foucault, and Derrida. "Fully developed," Solomon says, "the transcendental pretence has two central components: first, the remarkable inner richness and expanse of the self, ultimately encompassing everything; and secondly, the consequent right to project from the subjective structures of one's own mind, and ascertain the nature of humanity as such," resulting in a "cosmic self-righteousness."<sup>3</sup>

The tone of Solomon's text suggests that he thinks this focus on the self involves an arrogant, male-dominated egocentrism which we are better off being done with. Except for a "Supplement" outlining the post-modern attack on the transcendental pretence, Solomon gives the last

word in his text to Simone de Beauvoir who, he says, "starts to move beyond Sartre ... in her keen awareness of the importance of caring for others and respecting their freedom."<sup>4</sup> But, from the perspective of Levinas' analysis, it is clear that even in this call for equal respect and concern among free individuals de Beauvoir is still operating within Sartre's ontology and is thus inevitably promoting the transcendental pretence, albeit a feminized version.

Levinas is not even mentioned in Solomon's book. This is an unfortunate oversight because Levinas' theory of subjectivity involves a unique and thoroughgoing critique of the transcendental pretence Solomon has identified. Levinas should be situated with one foot in and the other beyond Solomon's "Supplement." His critique of the Absolute Self or the Transcendental Ego of idealism is post-modern in the sense that it involves a deflection of the egocentricity of universalizing the self; but it is radically different from the relativistic orientation of other post-modern thinkers in that Levinas' de-positioning of the transcendental pretence is accomplished through an ethical orientation to the Other by which subjectivity is defined. Levinas thus goes beyond the mere call for tolerance of and equality with the Other as this is found in the concept of intersubjectivity of thinkers such as Buber, Marcel, and de Beauvoir. Their work represents a healthy move toward deflating the arrogance of the transcendental pretence but, in Levinas' view, does not go far enough.

It is not merely a matter of one freedom respecting another freedom. For Levinas, this is a secondary, political matter derivative of a more fundamental ethical situation where I am called to be responsible for every other freedom with no claim that any other should be responsible for me. The fact that Levinas' critique of the

transcendental pretence is completely overlooked by Solomon shows how inadequately the thoroughgoing radicality of Levinas' thought is currently understood, as Professor Levinas himself pointed out to the author in a recent conversation.<sup>5</sup>

## 1.2 Overview of the Argument

Levinas argues that the subjectivity of the subject is defined by an inexhaustible and non-thematizable responsibility for the Other, for all Others, prior to any consciousness of my responsibility consequent upon the establishment of my freedom. In Otherwise than Being the phenomenological analyses brought forward to support this claim constellate around the notions of "proximity" and "substitution," notions developed from a radical interpretation of "sensibility" understood as a non-thematizable "vulnerability" indigenous to embodiment or incarnation — "a passivity more passive still than any passivity," to use one of Levinas' favorite formulas for expressing his radical understanding of subjectivity.<sup>6</sup>

Levinas arrives at his highly original interpretation of sensation from a phenomenological analysis of the interaction binding together language, time, and being — an interaction to which we were introduced in our analysis of his description of the hypostasis in Existence and Existents. The linguistic turn to this argument first arises in Totality and Infinity where response to the Other is understood as "expression" and "signification," the giving of myself to the Other without calculation. This leads to the important distinction worked out in Otherwise than Being between "the said" ("le dit") and "the saying" ("le dire") or the "already said" ("déjà dit").<sup>7</sup> The response of uncalculating and unpremeditated expression is here understood as a substitution for

the Other, a "being held hostage" by the Other, an "expiation" for the Other which accounts for the priority of responsibility. In sum, then, the primary concern of the present chapter is to show how Levinas justifies his argument for describing the priority of responsibility as the foundation of subjectivity from his analysis of language, being, time, and sensation expressed as proximity and substitution.

Furthermore, we will show that there are two, not necessarily distinct, outcomes of Levinas' understanding of subjectivity as a priori responsibility. The first involves a practical concern for the establishment of peace and justice in the world. In Levinas' view, how one understands subjectivity will make a difference as to how one approaches this task: "It is then not without importance to know if the egalitarian and just State in which man is to be fulfilled ... proceeds from a war of all against all, or from the irreducible responsibility of the one for all...."<sup>8</sup> The second outcome is more theologically oriented: a concern for establishing the essential relationship between the human and the divine, as we have already seen indicated in our analysis of exteriority in the two previous chapters and which is attested to by Levinas' most recent works, De Dieu qui vient à l'idée and Transcendance et intelligibilité. In De Dieu qui vient à l'idée Levinas says that to ask "if God can be expressed in a rational discourse which would be neither ontology nor faith is implicitly to doubt the formal opposition ... between the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, invoked in faith without philosophy, and the god of the philosophers. It is to doubt that this opposition constitutes an alternative."<sup>9</sup> To understand subjectivity as a radically passive response to the Infinite revealed in the otherness of the Other, a responsibility prior to consciousness or the possibility of free commitment, is to understand human being as being in the grip of

the Good which, as Levinas frequently points out, Plato locates beyond Being, i.e., to understand human being fundamentally as being-called-by-God. Responsibility is thus a response-ability to an imperative call manifested as the thought of the Infinite in us — a notion Levinas adopts from Descartes' Third Meditation, although he is by no means a 'Cartesian'. The thought of the Infinite in us, as Levinas understands this, is a thought which thinks more than it thinks and which thus could not have been generated out of our finitude.<sup>10</sup> "It is then an idea signifying with a signifyingness prior to presence," Levinas says, "prior to every origin in consciousness and thus an-archic, accessible in its trace."<sup>11</sup>

Finally, in the concluding section of this chapter we will bring together all of the diverse elements of Levinas' theory of the priority of responsibility as the subjectivity of the subject in the notion of the genuine Work.

But how successful is Levinas' argument? In general, the theory of the priority of responsibility establishes the one-for-the-Other as an an-archic 'foundation', a movement prior to being by which a subject becomes a subject, comes to be. It is a pre-thematic call from God which opens humanity. But then there seems to be a secondary sense of responsibility that creeps into Levinas' work, one which comes after the establishment of freedom but is yet somehow ambiguously connected to the prior sense of responsibility. For example, in the same passage where Levinas says that responsibility is "a passivity more passive still than any passivity ... which is possible only in the form of giving the very bread I eat," he also says that "for this one has to first enjoy one's bread." The reason for this is not so that one would "have the merit of giving it, but in order to give it with one's heart...."<sup>12</sup> A few

paragraphs later, however, he says that "it is not a gift of the heart...."<sup>13</sup> The ego of enjoyment is not yet the self, the 'me' of responsibility but what is disrupted by the approach of the Other. It is precisely the ego of enjoyment that exercises the freedom of spontaneity. But Levinas wants to argue that ethical responsibility is prior to freedom, that it founds freedom, and yet it would seem that the ego of enjoyment precedes responsibility insofar as it is disrupted by it. How are we to understand this equivocation? Is it productive or does it render Levinas' theory meaningless poetry? Should Levinas be held to the principle of non-contradiction when it is precisely this that his work attacks? Is it not clear, despite the equivocation, what Levinas is doing, what his message is? And is this not the point of his whole work, that there is yet a 'clarity' beyond clarity, an ethical 'clarity' that is exactly the skeptical and illogical dissembling that thwarts the attempt of all logic to reduce it to a meaning that satisfies?

Yet how is it possible that the "non-thematizable provocation" of responsibility, situated prior to consciousness, freedom, and knowledge as a radical, affective passivity, nevertheless apparently has the power to impose a moral obligation that is conscious and thematizable.<sup>14</sup> What is the cash value, as William James would say, of Levinas' understanding of the priority of responsibility as the subjectivity of the subject? Does not the absolute passivity of responsibility preclude the possibility of meaningful action? Is Levinas' theory of responsibility merely another monstration of the eternal return of skepticism, a utopianism masquerading as fundamental ethics, a passionate call for recognition of the 'good woman' of affectivity as the silent and a priori foundation of the 'great man' of thought? If Levinas' analysis of

responsibility involves a chircuro ambivalence which, when looked at from one direction, appears as an incommensurable surplus of metaphysical desire, a passivity more passive than any past, but, when looked at from another direction, becomes an edifying sermon on hammering the weapons of war into the ploughshares of peace, on giving away all that is mine and following in the way of the Lord, can it be accepted as philosophy? Or is there a message in Levinas' theory of responsibility itself about what is the proper task of philosophy? These questions will guide the present analysis.

We will begin our approach to the accessible trace of the inaccessible thought of the Infinite in us through an investigation of Levinas' distinction between saying and the said which is the linguistic backbone of his argument for the priority of responsibility understood as the subjectivity of the subject.

## 2 Saying and the Said

As was indicated above, one way to understand the thrust of Levinas' entire philosophical effort is as a sustained and ever-deepening investigation into the nature and meaning of subjectivity. His philosophical work presents a radical and unprecedented redefining of what it means to be human, forged from a thinking-through of the history of Western philosophy under the influence and inspiration of the Biblical tradition of Judaism. The apex of this long reflection is summed up by the title of this chapter: subjectivity as responsibility.

It is impossible, however, as Levinas fully realizes, even to pose the question of the nature of subjectivity without presupposing within

this question an understanding of essence and the ontological distinction between Being and beings in which essence is manifested, i.e., an understanding of exactly that which, in his approach to the meaning of subjectivity, Levinas is intent upon questioning beyond.<sup>15</sup> Thus, even in the very first sentence of our own reflections in the present section of this chapter — in stating the saying of Levinas' said in our own said — we immediately find ourselves faced with the tripartite problem of language, time, and being which, as we have tried to show from the beginning of our study, is a concern of central importance to Levinas' understanding of the priority of responsibility, and thus to subjectivity understood as responsibility. Prior to the understanding of human being as freedom, consciousness, or the power to know — indeed, prior to the understanding of human being as be-ing, reduced to the presence of a comprehensible term, i.e., a said — to be human, Levinas argues, is to be for-the-Other.

In Otherwise than Being, recapitulating, but deepening, his earlier work, Levinas begins his argument for the priority of responsibility with an analysis of the relation joining language, being, and time to the understanding of subjectivity. This analysis is approached through the distinction between the saying and the said. This distinction refers back to the amphibological progression from the 'verbality' of the verb to the nominalization of the noun that we first came across in our study of the hypostasis. Hypostasis, it will be remembered, is a term used by Levinas to indicate the amphibology or coming-to-be of the subject (but before it gets there), a process which Levinas compared to the 'verbality' of lived life becoming nominalized as experience.

The distinction between saying and the said focuses on how being

is temporalized in language. According to Levinas' analysis, it is possible to find in this linguistic instantiation which constitutes experience properly so-called, an 'origin' or a past, on the "hither side" of the said, that is not recuperable by consciousness or re-presentable in language and yet which is 'experienceable' pre-thematically and is revealed through language as a kind of "resounding" as opposed to a "designation" — i.e., a saying which opens out into an "immemorial past" on the one hand and indicates a "pure future" on the other and which is 'located' at the living heart of subjectivity.

Although this immemorial or unthematisable past can never be fully realized in language, it can be approached in the ambiguity of the non-representational 'intentionality' of "sensitivity" which Levinas describes in Otherwise than Being as a "proximity," a being inspired by the Other, an identity-in-difference, a "substitution" that is "the irreducible paradox of intelligibility" or of the rationality which would define subjectivity.<sup>16</sup> We will look at this progression in more detail below. Let us say here, however, that, basically, what Levinas is arguing is that subjectivity is grounded in a pre-conscious affectivity of intersubjectivity, where intersubjectivity is not understood as the interaction of two already existent beings but as the non-thematisable response of responsibility on the part of the Same to the invisible infinity revealed in the alterity of the Other prior to the thematization of this alterity. In his analysis of language, being, and time, Levinas is arguing that sense is not exhausted by the meaning represented, i.e., made present in the said of language. This epistemological critique thus necessarily involves a critique of the nature of the knower as well.

The production of meaning in or as language is a function of the

ontological distinction by virtue of which the meaningful is instantiated as a said. This coming-to-presence has a temporal structure: the present of the presence of being's essence brought to light in the said is inscribed within a horizontal comprehension of the past and the future. Subjectivity, understood as thinking being, is thus defined within the parameters of this "amphibology" of the temporalization of being. Now what Levinas wants to argue is that this basically Husserlian/Heideggerian conception of what is meaningful does not exhaust all the possibilities of meaning and is definitely insufficient for understanding the deepest meaning of subjectivity. Subjectivity is more than a thinking being constituted in the context of the finitude which guides the manifestation of essence defining thought. "Does the fact of showing oneself," Levinas asks, "exhaust the sense of what does indeed show itself, but, being non-theoretical, does not function, does not signify as a monstration?"<sup>17</sup> Levinas' answer is that the manifestation of essence in the said of language does not exhaust itself in what is manifested. His argument for this critique is generated from an analysis of sensibility.

In the ambiguity of sensibility, the unity in distinction of sensing and the sensed prior to thematization in the said, Levinas locates an "already said," a pre-thematic "saying" from which the said is constituted but which is never fully recuperable by the said, a language of signification prior to the signs which represent this: "It is through the already said that words, elements of a historically constituted vocabulary, will come to function as signs and acquire a usage, and bring about the proliferation of all the possibilities of vocabulary."<sup>18</sup> But all the possibilities of vocabulary do not exhaust the meaning of the human. "If a man were only a saying correlative with the logos,

subjectivity could as well be understood as a function or as an argument of being. But the signification of saying goes beyond the said."<sup>19</sup> In the said of language, being, an entity, is separated from its essence: this is understood as that, the basic structure of all thought and the production of meaning that Levinas calls "the amphibology in which being and entities can be understood," the light of knowledge made possible by the temporalization of time.<sup>20</sup> But, Levinas says, "the entity that appears identical in the light of time is its essence in the already said," not as a comprehensible synthesis, but as an identity in difference, a surplus of meaning that goes beyond the thought that would think it.<sup>21</sup> Levinas' understanding of subjectivity is generated out of this understanding of the signifyingness of saying prior to its temporalization in language as a said. But how can a signification prior to the said be said? Here it will be helpful to spend a few moments reflecting on Levinas' own language since it is itself an exceptional illustration of what it is saying — at once, the expression and an example of the priority of responsibility.

### 3 The Ethical Dimension of Levinas' Language

#### 3.1 The Betrayal of Saying

An impossible simultaneousness of meaning, the non-assemblable but also inseparable one-for-the-other, is an excluded middle signifying as an equivocation or an enigma. And yet can not this very beyond become a notion, while undoing itself? Language would exceed the limits of what is thought, by suggesting, letting be understood without ever making understandable, an implication of meaning distinct from that which comes to signs from the simultaneity of systems or the logical definition of concepts. This possibility is laid bare in the poetic said, and the interpretation it calls for ad infinitum. It is shown in the prophetic said,

scorning its conditions in a sort of levitation. It is by the approach, the-one-for-the-other of saying, related by the said, that the said remains an insurmountable equivocation, where meaning refuses simultaneity, does not enter into being, does not compose a whole.<sup>22</sup>

Levinas's language is anarchical. It undoes itself at every turn because it seeks to express that which refuses to be expressed absolutely. It is given over to a saying which can only be said in the unsaid of the attempt to say it because it desires not to speak about the ethical but to speak ethically. The betrayal of an-archical saying is necessary for the production of the said. The violence done lovingly to the originary word must be undertaken if there is to be philosophy, if there is to be justice and peace in the world, as we will see. Yet one must always be on guard, as Husserl warned, against slipping back into the "natural attitude." But does Levinas share this concern with Husserl?

This linguistic problem that Heidegger understood as keeping the ontological from being contaminated by the ontic — but which for Levinas would be a matter of keeping the "poetic said" from being contaminated by the ontological — is encountered throughout the exposition of the ethical relation of the same and the other in Totality and Infinity, but becomes a primary problematic of Otherwise Than Being. In the context of the co-relation of the said and the saying Levinas formulates the problem as follows:

We have been seeking the otherwise than being from the beginning, and as soon as it is conveyed before us it is betrayed in the said that dominates the saying which states it. A methodological problem arises here, whether the pre-original element of saying (the anarchical, the non-original, as we designate it) can be led to betray itself by showing itself in a theme (if an an-archeology is possible), and whether this betrayal can be reduced; whether one can at the same time know and free the known of the marks which thematization leaves on it by subordinating it to ontology.<sup>23</sup>

The betrayal of language is necessary if being is to be shown, if peace

and justice are to be accomplished for the Other in the world. The methodological possibility of this productive betrayal is worked out most thoroughly in the notions of sensibility, proximity, substitution, and responsibility, in Otherwise Than Being, but these developments are rooted in the formulation of the ethical relationship as it is worked out in Totality and Infinity. Let us return to this for a moment.

For Levinas, the ethical is not a system of moral prescriptions but a way of being-for-the-other, a sensible proximity with the other in the face-to-face relation which already defines what it means to be human and which, in the responsibility 'constituted' by this proximity, is always prior to prescriptions concerning it. Thus the epiphany of the face, as we showed in the two previous chapters, is the origin of the ethical.<sup>24</sup> As Max Scheler also argued, to be truly human is to be one-for-the-other. But it is not, as Scheler thought, that the human already exists and is consequently in need of the guidance of the ethical as something added to it which would then ensure its genuine humanity, as if, prior to the ethical, the human could be conceived as a neutral entity distinct from the imperative of the social relation. Rather, Levinas says, "the epiphany of the face qua face opens humanity."<sup>25</sup> Thus Levinas is led to assert that ethical responsibility is prior to the distinction between Being and beings; metaphysics precedes ontology. And if, in order to appear, the metaphysical must be inscribed within the ontological, i.e., if saying can only become known within the said, within the space of the structure established by the ontological difference, it is thus inscribed only as a "non-indifference" to the other, a dis-interestedness (a disruption of the interest or self-concern inherent in essence) which keeps the ethical inscription from becoming hypostasized as merely the noematic correlate of an intentional noesis —

a reduction, for Levinas, tantamount to the violence of Cain.<sup>26</sup> Here is the source of the frustrating equivocation in Levinas' work. Let us look at it more closely since it is not only a problem for Levinas but for one who would write a commentary on Levinas' commentary as well.

### 3.2 Anarchical Metaphysics

In a note to one of his own commentaries on Levinas' philosophy, Derrida points out that one must be cautious in speaking about Levinas' work "because Levinas' writing, which would merit an entire separate study itself, and in which stylistic gestures ... can less than ever be distinguished from intention, forbids the prosaic disembodiment into conceptual frameworks that is the first violence of all commentary."<sup>27</sup> The ethical metaphysics developed by Levinas, and the radical notion of subjectivity contained in this, is inextricably connected to an understanding of discourse, language, speech, signification, and expression.

As we saw above, in any utterance, according to Levinas, what is said cannot be understood apart from the saying which says it. Saying involves a pre-thematic and pre-conscious being-with-the-Other, a "signification" which is not yet syntactical speech but which gives rise to a specific intention that results in a statement, a said, and with which the saying, in part, becomes correlative. Saying only occurs in relation with an other, as that relation. To speak is always to speak to someone. Even if I am only speaking to myself, a third person is necessarily projected in the horizon of the dialogue. The saying of responsibility is a resounding silence between two, whereas the said always involves a third party, i.e., society. As we will see below, this is what leads Levinas to associate the said with the pursuit of justice

in the world.

Although every said involves a betrayal of the saying from which it condenses, yet it is necessary that the said bring this betrayal within the structure of responsibility, not by foregoing the said in favor of quietude (in truth, a worse violence, as Heidegger realized) but by taking on this violence first and foremost within oneself, within the sayer. As Levinas puts it, "the face opens the primordial discourse whose first word is obligation."<sup>28</sup> It is from this prior obligation that the said and the work of justice arises.

Saying, the very possibility of language, obligates because saying is first and foremost an ethical relation; it is not only a being-with the Other but a being-for-the-Other as well, an immediate expression or response of myself to the Other without calculation, a 'language' prior to language. Levinas understands this as the "welcome" made possible by the individuating impact of the home; expression is a donation of myself to the Other. It is a response to the proximity of the Other in need: "it is not a gift of the heart, but of the bread from one's mouth ... the openness, not only of one's pocketbook, but of the doors of one's home, a 'sharing of your bread with the famished,' a 'welcoming of the wretched into your house' (Isaiah 58)."<sup>29</sup> This proximity or approach of the Other necessarily puts my identity into question the way saying puts the said into question. If the face-to-face relation is manifested as speaking or expression, it is necessary that this speaking not congeal into a dogmatic thematizing of the Other. It is not that the face-to-face requires a new form of speaking. As a trace it is already a new form of speaking which is necessarily undone by the imposition of the noesis/noema structure of representational language and must constantly be resurrected or unsaid through critique:

A face as a trace, trace of itself, trace expelled in a trace, does not signify an indeterminate phenomenon; its ambiguity is not an indetermination of a noema, but an invitation to the fine risk of approach qua approach, to the exposure of one to the other, to the exposure of this exposedness, the expression of exposure, saying. In the approach of a face the flesh becomes word, the caress a saying. The thematization of the face undoes the face and undoes the approach.<sup>30</sup>

The being of being-for-the-other, which establishes the ethical relationship as responsibility, is a communication of oneself in the sense of expressing or giving oneself with "total gratuity," a speaking which undoes every representational structure through a renunciation of the need for absolute certitude — to the extreme point that one would not know whether one had accomplished this renunciation or not.<sup>31</sup>

Indeed, to think that one had accomplished this radical undoing of representational intentionality — already a representation — would be a sure sign that one had not achieved it. In this sense responsibility is not something that we do; it is a response-ability that makes responsibility possible, but the initiative comes from elsewhere, from the otherwise than being, from God through the incommensurableness of the exteriority of the Other. The command to be responsible for the Other, Levinas says, comes "from I know not where," "like a thief," which "has meaning only negatively, by its non-sense," a command which is "prior to any movement of the will," an "anarchy" which "escapes any principle" where I might know what I am doing.<sup>32</sup> Responsibility, as "vulnerability" and openness, as "sensitivity" and the capacity to be wounded, as suffering and persecution, i.e., as "a passivity more passive than any passivity," is something which happens to me through an "election," an "assignation" coming from the height of the Other in the curvature of space which opens unto the Infinite, an imperative which commands me to obey, like an obsession or an inspiration, before I could ever know what I am doing: an "obedience to the order to go, without understanding the

order, this obedience prior to all representation, this allegiance before any oath, this responsibility prior to commitment, is precisely the other in the same, inspiration and prophecy, the passing itself of the Infinite."<sup>33</sup> This is the meta-physical an-archy that is revealed in the ambiguity and equivocation of Levinas' exorbitant language.

Levinas agrees with Kant that reason cannot represent essences, or, rather, that reason can only represent essences but not the thing-in-itself. But Levinas also wants to go beyond Kant by stretching the said as far as possible to make that which is "beyond essence" appear by crossing out the said as soon as it is said so that the saying is allowed to resound apophantically beyond the designation. Levinas' language is suggestive, at once empirical but also ultra-empirical. He uses the idea of "maternity," for example, to express the passivity, vulnerability, and 'burden' of sensibility that is outside of one's control, and thus, like an obsession, surpasses, overflows, or deconstructs any representation by which one would attempt to reduce the ultra-empirical aspect suggested by the empirical concept to merely that concept. Levinas pushes language to say what in fact cannot be said in a said except in a said which immediately unsays itself. It is in this sense that Levinas' language itself is an anarchy, a sensible poiesis operating prior to cognitive sense, obsessively, like the non-origin of subjectivity. His language is an embodiment of what it announces. It is a trace which signifies in the break-up of signification and which thus illustrates the priority of responsibility in its own praxis.<sup>34</sup> Like the koan or the parable, and like responsibility as well, Levinas' language keeps on giving after every meaning one would give to it.

But this will not do for a dissertation. Therefore, in order to arrive at a clearer understanding of how it is possible for meaning to be

revealed as the surplus of saying over the said, let us return to our discussion of Levinas' understanding of the interrelation among language, being, time, and sensation which supports his crucial distinction between the saying and the said and generates his argument for the priority of responsibility.

#### 4 The Priority of Responsibility

##### 4.1 Language, Being and Time

Contrary to Heidegger, Levinas argues that already in the fundamental question of ontology, 'What is being?', there is a presumption, not only of the whatness or essence of that which is being asked about but also of the "who" who is doing the asking. All questions which ask after the 'what' of something, even the ontological question itself, already function within the distinction between Being and beings, the distinction within which all thought necessarily arises. Levinas says: "The question — even "what is being?" — then questions with respect to being, with respect to what is precisely in question."<sup>35</sup> Even the question 'Who is questioning?', by virtue of its very structure, is a question asked within the parameters of thought and being.<sup>36</sup> It asks after the 'what?' of the 'who?'. Thus, for Levinas, such questioning already involves a certain interest in being, an essential interest asking about that which becomes present to itself in the question. In the question 'What is being?' the unity of being becomes separated from itself so that it can question itself in order to achieve a conscious knowledge of itself, a 'this as that', the structure of all thought. But what 'is' is distinguished on the one hand from what is not yet, and on

the other hand from what has been. The three moments of temporality are at the heart of conscious knowledge which, as the presencing of the present in the context of anticipation and reminiscence, is an identity in difference; the past and future are the horizons of the same present. But the light in which the identity of the identical becomes present, the light that supports the light of knowledge, cannot itself become thematized in the identity of the present. Levinas puts it this way:

Temporality, in the divergence of the identical from itself, is essence and original light.... The time of the essence unites the three moments of knowing. Is the light of essence which makes things seen itself seen? It can to be sure become a theme; essence can show itself, be spoken of and described. But then light presents itself in light, which latter is not thematized, but resounds for the "eye that listens," with a resonance unique in its kind, a resonance of silence.<sup>37</sup>

It is through this analysis of the relation between temporality and the coming-to-presence of being as conscious knowledge, a coming-to-presence which always falls short of the absolute presence-to-self it seeks, that Levinas locates the first glimmering of the otherwise than being, the beyond-essence. And it is in this breaking-up of the pretensions of consciousness, rather than in consciousness itself, that Levinas will locate the deepest meaning of subjectivity.

Basically, what Levinas wants to argue is that the subject cannot be understood adequately from within ontology because ontology distinguishes the essence of being from itself in the moments of temporalization and then collapses these in the presence of an identity. But the identity of the present is always circumscribed by the very light which supports the light of intelligibility so that the process of distinguishing and identifying never catches up with itself, always comes late upon the scene, like Hegel's Owl of Minerva. Thus Levinas asks, "Is the subject comprehensible out of ontology?"<sup>38</sup> For Levinas the answer is

a resounding "No." The understanding of subjectivity as self-consciousness, a consciousness of self represented to itself, cannot, in Levinas' view, get at the deepest meaning of subjectivity. It is not as a knowing being, in Aristotle's sense of the rational animal, that subjectivity can be most adequately understood. Here rationality is determined by the identity of a logos which, from the perspective of temporality is "the verb stated in a predicative proposition." In predication or re-presentation, however, the amphibological character, "the temporalization of the lived," is lost: "To be thenceforth designates instead of resounding."<sup>39</sup> And the designation from which all resounding would be shut out is understood as the rational comprehending of the real. But, Levinas says, "to recognize with philosophy — or to recognize philosophically — that the real is rational and that the rational is alone real, and not to be able to smother or cover over the cry of those who, the morrow after this recognition, mean to transform the world, is already to move in a domain of meaning which the inclusion cannot comprehend and among reasons that 'reason' does not know, and which have not begun in philosophy." Thus, in Levinas' view, the subject cannot be adequately described according to representational cognition, freedom, or any other intentional noema: "the subject ... has to be described on the basis of the passivity of time."<sup>40</sup> To identify the propositional logos with rationality and intelligibility is to be dumb to the fact that "there is meaning testified to in interjections and outcries, before being disclosed in propositions...."<sup>41</sup> In order to get at this deeper understanding of reasonableness which guides his conception of the subject, Levinas turns to an analysis of sensuous lived experience and its relation to language.

#### 4.2 Sensibility and Proximity

There is an ambiguity in sensuous lived experience in that in the midst of the 'flow' of experience from the future to the past there is nevertheless the constancy of the present in which and as which sensible reality is experienced. This is what Husserl understood as the unity of protention and retention in the present instant, Kant's unity of apperception, a present which is both there and not there. Sensuous lived experience is a paradoxical unity in difference. But whereas, according to Levinas, Husserl thought that this process of temporality was a process wholly defined by consciousness, i.e., wholly recuperable or re-presentable in consciousness, Levinas finds in this ambiguity an opening out into an immemorial past and a pure future which cannot be brought to consciousness but which can be 'experienced' in a non-representational, 'affective' way, where affect is not understood as an emotion or feeling — which already would be a representation — but as pre-thematic proximity and substitution, a being-inspired by the Other, a being in the place of the Other while yet retaining one's separateness. We will look at these notions more closely below. But what is important here is to see how these conceptions are generated from Levinas' understanding of how sensibility is an openness to the Other before there is any concept of openness.

"In Husserl," Levinas reiterates in Otherwise than Being, "the time structure of sensibility is a time of what can be recuperated."<sup>42</sup> This is what led Levinas to accuse Husserl of holding to a primacy of consciousness in his search for pure knowledge. "The thesis that the non-intentionality of the primal retention is not a loss of consciousness, that nothing can be produced in a clandestine way, that nothing can break the thread of consciousness, excludes from time the

irreducible diachrony whose meaning the present study (Otherwise than Being) aims to bring to light, behind the exhibiting of being."<sup>43</sup> We have already stated in our investigation of Levinas' relation to Husserl earlier in our study that we believe Husserl ameliorates to some degree his position in his later work. In the Crisis, e.g., Husserl makes it clear that the recuperation of the temporalization of being in language is an open-ended process and however much it may aim at pure consciousness this is not thought to be actually achievable. Levinas perhaps sells Husserl, Heidegger, and Hegel a bit short in this regard, and a more sympathetic reading would place Levinas closer to their thought.<sup>44</sup> But what is important for our purposes is to see how Levinas utilizes his interpretation of Husserl to work out his own position.

To reduce the essential ambiguity of sensing and the sensed, the fact that, as Levinas says, "sensorial qualities are not only the sensed: as affective states, they are the sensing" as well, to consciousness, is to have already placed consciousness within the limiting parameters of the said. But before being is a what it is a way; before the verb "to be" becomes nominalized or gerundized into be-ing, in the process that Levinas calls the amphibology of being, it is a manner of being in the world, a style, a process of being, an actual living of life. Before time becomes instantiated as past, present, and future, it is already the process of aging, a growing old in the wrinkling of flesh and the soreness of joints, a need to shave in the morning. Before language becomes thematized or nominalized in the said it is "the verbalness of the verb that resounds" in a saying or already said which becomes correlative with the said but which never is fully absorbed into it and, thus, in Levinas' view, opens out into a pre-reflective, pre-thematic 'experience' which can never be brought fully into the language of the

said but which can be glimpsed obliquely.<sup>45</sup> Thus, what Levinas wants to do in order to understand subjectivity as responsibility, is to "go back to what is prior to this correlation" of the saying in the said.

According to Levinas, the phenomenological reduction is precisely the move back from the correlation of the saying in the said to the resonance of the saying that will not be fully absorbed into the said. Saying, the surplus of lived experience over the consciousness which represents this to itself, must be allowed to continually disrupt the said which would reduce this to an absolute correlation. This is precisely what leads to the ambiguity in Levinas' writing, as was pointed out above. On the one hand, Levinas says, the philosopher must necessarily reduce the saying to a said, a "good violence" insofar as it is a reduction to the "responsibility for another" which "is precisely a saying prior to anything said."<sup>46</sup> On the other hand, this reduction of saying to the said must not be allowed to congeal into the absoluteness of an identity. Thus, Levinas adds, "a philosopher's effort, and his unnatural position, consists, while showing the hither side, in immediately reducing the eon which triumphs in the said and in the monstrations, and, despite the reduction, retaining an echo of the reduced said in the form of ambiguity, of diachronic expression." This leads to "an endless critique, or skepticism," what might be thought of as a built-in 'deconstruction' (Derrida) or an on-going 'archaeology' (Foucault), "which, in a spiralling movement, makes possible the boldness of philosophy, destroying the conjunction into which its saying and its said continually enter," a 'good' destruction in which "the spirit hears the echo of the otherwise."<sup>47</sup>

To summarize, Levinas' argument for the priority of responsibility begins with a critique of the assertion that the meaningful is limited to

the coming to presence of being in propositional language. His basis for this is derived from an analysis of temporality not exhausted by the three moments thematizing time. To move beyond this strictly cognitive understanding of time he appeals to an interpretation of sensibility and, in particular, to the ambiguity of the lived experience of sensing and the sensed: "a thermal, gustative or olfactory sensation is not primarily a cognition of pain, a savor, or an odor." It is true that it can become a cognition "by losing its own sense, becoming an experience of..., a consciousness of.... But then it is already a saying correlative with and contemporary with a said."<sup>48</sup> Before sensation becomes thematized in a representation it is a way of being in the world; it is lived bodily before it is experienced representationally. Although Husserl's pioneering work regarding the phenomenology of sensation set the stage for this understanding of a non-recuperable or immemorial temporality, Husserl was never able to realize the full implications of his work, according to Levinas, because he was still under the influence of a desire for pure knowledge reminiscent of the very scientific empiricism of which he was critical. Thus all affectivity and axiological considerations were thought to be subject to the doxic thesis of theoretical consciousness — the basis of Levinas' charge of the primacy of theory in Husserl's phenomenology: "Despite the great contribution of Husserl's philosophy to the discovery, through the notion of non-theoretical intentionality, of significations other than those of appearing, and of the subjectivity as a source of significations, defined by this upsurge and connection of meanings, a fundamental analogy is constantly affirmed by Husserl between the cognitive consciousness of..., on the one hand, and axiological or practical intentions, on the other." Thus, sensation, for Husserl, is thought to participate in the meaningful

"only inasmuch as it is animated by intentionality, or constituted ... according to the schema of theoretical consciousness of...."<sup>49</sup>

#### 4.3 Animation, Psyche, and Proximity

Wanting to support his theory of constitution, sensation is understood by Husserl as an organizing receptivity. But Levinas argues that before sensation is an animation in the sense of an organizing receptivity, it is first a vulnerability to the Other, a passivity in the sense of a capability of being wounded, a capability of enjoyment, and "an exposure to wounding in enjoyment."<sup>50</sup> This defines the "psyche," not as a synthesizing activity of apperception in the Kantian sense, but as "a peculiar dephasing, a loosening up or unclamping of identity."<sup>51</sup> This animation by the Other is what Levinas means by proximity. Proximity is not spatial contiguity. It is a process of approach to/of the Other guided by no concept of proximity which could be represented in "the consciousness a being would have of another being that it would judge to be near inasmuch as the other would be under one's eyes or within one's reach, and inasmuch as it would be possible for one to take hold of that being, hold on to it or converse with it, in the reciprocity of handshakes, caresses, struggle, collaboration, commerce, conversation." Proximity is a vulnerability to the Other prior to this consciousness where "consciousness, which is consciousness of a possible, power, freedom, would then have already lost proximity properly so called...."<sup>52</sup> Thus, Levinas says, "animation can be understood as an exposure to the other, the passivity of the for-the-other in vulnerability, which refers to maternity, which sensibility signifies."<sup>53</sup> Sensibility, as vulnerability prior to receptivity, signifies maternity in that maternity is "bearing par excellence," bearing "even responsibility for the

persecuting of the persecutor."<sup>54</sup> The psyche, as animation, is a giving over of oneself prior to the intentionality of giving. Animation, as sensibility, is non-cognitive signification in the form of being one-for-the-other in proximity and vulnerability; a passivity more passive than any knowledge of representation; it is vulnerability and exposure to outrage, pain and suffering for the Other prior to any thought about all of this.<sup>55</sup> Thus understood, sensation is the very locus of Levinas' an-archical metaphysics and the origin of his interpretation of subjectivity as responsibility.

#### 4.4 Consciousness, Passivity, and Recurrence

Consciousness then, in the context of Levinas' analysis of temporality and sensibility, is, so to speak, a play of representation where being is won and lost. Consciousness is the result of the process of representing or re-presenting being in a thought which purports to be equal to itself, a self-knowledge in the Hegelian sense of self-consciousness, a knowing of oneself that equals who one is, despite the fact that this thought in reality is never able to catch up with itself, is, rather, a "recurrence."<sup>56</sup> Nevertheless, the supposed identity of consciousness is employed as the measure of freedom. Understood as identity, consciousness cannot be passive, and in not being passive consciousness is defined as freedom, i.e., knowledge in the sense of that which is clear and distinct and thus as that which is reliable as a determination for freedom, but a reliability which, as the result of the domination of its object inherent in representational knowledge, is, in Levinas' view, actually a false security since this throws self-consciousness back upon itself as its own origin — Sartre's sense of being "condemned" to be free. Consciousness is the freedom of

domination, a freedom which defines itself by its spontaneity, its not being dominated in turn. Thus, for consciousness, responsibility is measured by how free one is, where responsibility does not extend beyond consciousness; it is limited to one's freedom, i.e., one's very consciousness of the extent and power of one's consciousness — self-consciousness. But the fact that the "oneself" that would be an identity is actually a recurrence guided by the temporalization of time, thus indicates a passivity in consciousness: "the oneself has not issued from its own initiative," Levinas concludes, "as it claims in the plays and figures of consciousness on the way to the unity of an Idea."<sup>57</sup> And there could be no passivity in consciousness unless there were something other than consciousness to which consciousness could be passive.

The philosophy of consciousness, and of freedom as defined from the equality with itself of conscious knowledge, fails to recognize the origin of consciousness in that which is other, absolutely other than itself. In failing to recognize the otherness of the Other it remains trapped, as Sartre puts it, in-itself/for-itself. Consciousness and freedom cannot account for exteriority. Consequently, for Levinas, consciousness must be affected by 'something' "before forming an image of what is coming to it, affected in spite of itself" prior to itself.<sup>58</sup> This being affected prior to the event of the consciousness of being affected is like a persecution in that it assaults us prior to or against our will, obsession in that it takes hold of me before there is a 'me' to resist, a substitution in that I am inspired by the Other before I know it. "It is as though persecution by another were at the bottom of solidarity with another."<sup>59</sup> Here there is an identity in duality that cannot be overcome by the Hegelian dialectic which would reduce subjectivity to substance.<sup>60</sup> The "oneself," the identity of a subject is

never fully exposed in a theme, in a being or entity as essence; for the essence of essence is time, recurrence. The recurrence of the "oneself" in subjectivity is not presence, Levinas says, but an "exile," an "explosion or fission."<sup>61</sup> The "oneself" of consciousness does not constitute itself but is hypostasized as responsibility.<sup>62</sup> Responsibility is thus understood as an accusation of the self by the Other, an "election" before commitment would be possible, an assignation where "the subject is accused in its skin" like a "sound that would be audible only in its echo."<sup>63</sup>

#### 4.5 Obsession and Substitution

Being obsessed by the Other strips the self-centered, enjoying ego of its pride, its self-containment, its illusory equality with itself in the satisfaction-seeking play of consciousness, its freedom understood as spontaneity. The ego of enjoyment is an ego which admits of a responsibility that is merely the guarantee of its freedom, a limited responsibility which, in the egoism of its self-reference, and its concern for stability, cancels or effaces itself as genuine responsibility that is a giving of oneself to the Other, being-for-the-Other. Obsession is to be under accusation by the Other, to be challenged by the Other to bring about justice in the relationship between all persons, which would be peace. The process that would lead to peace begins when the "ipseity" of the self-conscious ego of enjoyment is shocked into the realization that in its spontaneity and its dependence upon the objects which provide that enjoyment, its actions injure, take the bread from another's mouth, reduce the Other to an object of consciousness, an object of use, and in this objective reduction prevents itself from the metanoia that is subjectivity,

obedience to the call to responsibility and justice and fulfillment of itself as a subject. Obsession is an openness to the Other, an openness which is a vulnerability, an exposure of one's defenses, an exposure of the jugular to the challenging teeth of the Other.

From the point of view of the Other, obsession is a call to responsibility and justice. The Other is both the personal, sensible other and the Infinite Other, God, who is revealed through the faces of personal others as an historical, personal God who suffers along with historically suffering humanity. God is revealed, not as a vertical, transcendent Being making pronouncements from on high, but horizontally, as a God who comes to me in the flesh and the blood of the Other. This perspective reflects the influence on Levinas' thought of Judaism, a perspective which would be understood somewhat differently within Christianity, although it seems to us that Levinas' fundamental ethics is not incompatible with Christian teaching. In a dialogue among theologians, for example, which took place after the presentation of "Transcendance et intelligibilité," Levinas admits that he says "the face of the Other as the Christian probably says the face of Christ..."<sup>64</sup> It would be valuable to follow out the implications of this interfacing between Judaism and Christianity in the context of Levinas' philosophy, but this goes beyond the scope of the present study.

From the point of view of the subject — the only real point of view possible in the one-way relationship with the Other, obsession is an election and assignation prior to the possibility of choice. It shows the subject to be pure passivity, an interiority defined by the exteriority of the Other. This passivity is a radical passivity, a passivity that is more passive than any concept of passivity could reveal. Ultimately, this passivity is the dependence inherent in being a

creature, a created being.

For Levinas, there is no choice regarding responsibility insofar as the assignation or election is compulsory, except perhaps that of suicide, which is forbidden. But even in suicide there is an oblique affirmation of life's essential goodness, as we have already seen. To refuse suicide is to ipso facto shoulder the burden of responsibility. The first and only real 'choice' of subjectivity is the 'choice' between suicide and obedience. The 'choice' of obedience to the call of the Other, the exposure of oneself to being wounded by the Other, vulnerability, is a being cast out of one's identity, one's self-knowing. Obedience is not the result of a conscious choice based on a rational deduction from self-evident principles, but a fission, a diffusion, an obsession in which one no longer has the felt-security of knowing what one is doing. Because one gives oneself, or is given, immediately to the Other in obedience to the challenge of the Other, responsibility can be understood as a substitution for the Other, a giving of my life in the service of the Other without the prior overcoming of the risk of this obedience in the false security of a representational knowledge guaranteeing the safety of my act.

The "fine risk" of subjectivity is incommensurable with the philosophy of consciousness: in the former one simply responds to the proximity of the Other, being hurt by the need of the Other, before one knows what one is doing and despite oneself; in the latter, one seeks to bring about a synchronization or identity of thought and being by reducing subjectivity to substance and grasping the essence of this substance in a representation equal to itself. But even in this, consciousness is thwarted by "recurrence," the slipping-away of the subject from every concept that would represent it, the physical exposure

of the body in respiration, exposure to what is exterior to it, other; the need to take up the representational play of consciousness and the themes by which it establishes itself over and over again, a recurrence which insistently frustrates the teleological expectations of consciousness as the maintenance of an identity between who one is and who one thinks one is.

Authentic subjectivity, subjectivity in contrast with the separate ego of consciousness and the freedom of spontaneity, emerges from the break-up or dispersion of identity in obsession and substitution, a dispersion at the heart of what is gathered in thought:

This recurrence would be the ultimate secret of the incarnation of the subject; prior to all reflection, prior to every positing, an indebtedness before any loan, not assumed, anarchical, subjectivity of a bottomless passivity, made out of assignation, like the echo of a sound that would precede the resonance of this sound. The active source of this passivity is not thematizable. It is the passivity of a trauma, but one that prevents its own representation, a deafening trauma, cutting the thread of consciousness which would have welcomed it in its present, the passivity of being persecuted. This passivity deserves the epithet of complete or absolute only if the persecuted one is liable to answer for the persecutor. The face of the neighbor in its persecuting hatred can by this very malice obsess as something pitiful. This equivocation or enigma only the persecuted one who does not evade it, but is without any references, any recourse or help ... is able to endure. To undergo from the Other is an absolute patience only if by this from-the-other is already for-the-other. This transfer, other than interested, 'other-wise than essence', is subjectivity itself.<sup>65</sup>

Responsibility is thus understood by Levinas to be "prior to freedom."

The self is a subject, a "sub-jectum" insofar as it is subject to everything, responsible for all before all.<sup>66</sup> Responsibility is a "having-the-other-in-one's-skin," before one even has a sense of self, a sense or signification which is itself grounded in obsession and substitution.<sup>67</sup> "The ego is not just a being endowed with certain qualities called moral," Levinas says, "which it would bear as a substance bears attributes, or which it would take on as accidents in its

becoming."<sup>68</sup> Subjectivity is not to be an object in a world of objects, but the revelation of the trace of infinity in the face of the Other whom I approach in substitution; it is "a being divesting itself ... turning itself inside out" in an inversion, "... neither nothingness nor a product of a transcendental imagination." The subject is "the fact of 'otherwise than being'."<sup>69</sup> Substitution is not an act of an already conscious being, not the right thing to do on the part of an ego already constituted as an actor. Substitution is prior to the act/actor distinction, prior to all distinctions. It is first a way of being that is not a potential for achieving some end, but a way of being "in obsession, a responsibility that rests on no free commitment."<sup>70</sup> Subjectivity, always outside or otherwise than any conceptual representation of subjectivity, "is not an act; it is a passivity inconvertible into an act, the hither side of the act-passivity alternative, the exception that cannot be fitted into the grammatical categories of noun or verb, save in the said that thematizes them."<sup>71</sup>

The movement from the "strict bookkeeping" responsibility of the spontaneous ego of consciousness to the infinite or exorbitant responsibility in the pure freedom of election — a freedom which frees one from the presumptions and illusions of finite freedom, "from ennui, that is, from enchainment to itself, where the ego suffocates in itself due to the tautological way of identity, and ceaselessly seeks after the distraction of games and sleep in a movement that never wears out ... an anarchic liberation" which describes "the suffering and vulnerability of the sensible as the other in me," this "substitution for another is the trope of a sense that does not belong to the empirical order of psychological events...."<sup>72</sup> Responsibility is a one-way street. It is in this and not the freedom and identity of self-consciousness that the

uniqueness of the subject, of 'me', is located.

To require that the other substitute himself for me would be, Levinas says, "to preach human sacrifice!" In order to require that the other substitute himself for me I must already have a concept of me and the other. But "there is no ipseity common to me and the others; 'me' is the exclusion from the possibility of comparison."<sup>73</sup> It is not the ego of finite freedom that is chosen but the 'me', the self, the subject whose election to being held hostage, the subjection of the subject, is precisely what defines the subject in responsibility. Responsibility does not begin with the establishment of a stable ego capable of calculating the extent of its responsibility according to the range of its freedom. Rather, the notion that subjectivity is persecution and passivity, obsession and substitution "reverses the position where the presence of the ego to itself appears as the beginning or as the conclusion of philosophy."<sup>74</sup>

#### 4.6 Freedom and the Good

The first word of the mind is thus an unconditional and pre-thematic "Yes" that is not an immature assent to do whatever I please, but rather an "exposure to critique ... more ancient than any naive spontaneity." Representational thought, conceptual thought, always arrives too late, is always a latecomer on the scene that has already taken place, which is why Hegel said that philosophy paints its "grey on grey." Job stands accused and persecuted prior to any reason or justification for this accusation. But this unwarranted persecution is not merely a limitation of personal freedom, reducible to privation; it is "to be responsible over and beyond one's freedom." Responsibility as persecution in openness is "better than" any concepts arising from the

starting point of finite freedom because responsibility arises in the anarchical passivity of a created being in relationship to the absolute otherness of the Good:

To be responsible over and beyond one's freedom is certainly not to remain a pure result of the world. To support the universe is a crushing charge but a divine discomfort. It is better than the merits and faults and sanctions proportionate to the freedom of one's choices. If ethical terms arise in our discourse, before the terms freedom and non-freedom, it is because before the bipolarity of good and evil presented to choice, the subject finds himself<sup>5</sup> committed to the Good in the very passivity of supporting.

Responsibility takes place in a time that cannot be represented in temporal thematization since it is an absolutely unrepresentable past. Thus, the distinction between freedom and non-freedom, which is a distinction of consciousness, a knowing in which the condition for the possibility of the distinction is already lost, cannot serve as the fulcrum upon which any understanding of the human subject would turn. Being passive, that is, created, the human subject is called to the constitution of itself through an election issuing from the Creator, an election which is persecution and wounding in the approach of the Other. In the radical passivity of the subject as creature, there arises an openness of oneself to the Other in response to an unwarranted assignation. Openness, in the form of absolute responsibility for the Other, a responsibility whose command to obedience and call to justice is imposed on me from outside and is thus always more ancient than any theme that would attempt to present it, is a fundamental susceptibility to the Good which is beyond being and being's essence. Levinas puts it this way:

The distinction between free and non-free would not be the ultimate distinction between humanity and inhumanity, nor the ultimate mark of sense and nonsense.... Has not the Good chosen the subject with an election recognizable in the responsibility of being a hostage, to which the subject is destined, which he cannot evade without denying himself, and by virtue of which he is unique? A philosopher can give to this election

only the signification circumscribed by responsibility for the Other. This antecedence of responsibility to freedom would signify the goodness of the Good: the necessity that the Good choose me first before I can be in a position to choose, that is, welcome its choice. That is my pre-originary susceptiveness. It is passivity prior to all receptivity, it is transcendent. It is an antecedence prior to all representable antecedence: immemorial. The Good is before all being.<sup>76</sup>

The Good is absolutely exterior to me. In the challenge of the face to face relation with the Other in which the secure originality, the security in the uniqueness of my freedom, is disrupted and thrown into question, the election of the Good is communicated to me, the election to responsibility. "The Good," Levinas says, "assigns the subject according to a susception that cannot be assumed, to approach the Other, the neighbor."<sup>77</sup>

Responsibility is the "desire for the non-desirable ... outside of concupiscence." In responsibility, the uniqueness of the subject as subject is understood as irreplaceable. The burden of all others is upon me and it is this burden which makes me be me; this burden -- vulnerability, maternity, proximity, obsession, persecution, substitution -- is an election, an assignation, a call that breaks-up my finite freedom in favor of the infinite freedom of responsibility, a call which sets me apart from all others: "the uniqueness of the responsible ego is possible only in being obsessed by another, in the trauma suffered prior to any auto-identification, in an unrepresentable before."<sup>78</sup> Finite freedom, the freedom of spontaneity, thus cannot be a beginning for the establishment of the self; it is precisely in the breaking-up of this finite freedom through the disturbing approach of the Other that "there can be disengaged an element of pure freedom."<sup>79</sup> This infinite freedom is revealed in witness and prophecy as the glory of God.

#### 4.7 Witness, Prophecy, and Glory

In Levinas' understanding, witness and prophecy are the peculiar ways of speaking the manner in which the Infinite infinitely surpasses the finite, how the Infinite is signified without entering into a theme, without becoming the noesis of a noema, the cause of an effect, or the present representation of a remembered past or anticipated future. Rather, witness, in Levinas' view, is a saying that signifies a "plot" which "connects to what detaches itself absolutely, to the Absolute." Levinas calls this "detachment of the Infinite from the thought that seeks to thematize it and the language that tries to hold it in a said ... illeity," a plot Levinas admits he is tempted to call "religious" although it "does not rest on any positive theology." Witness and prophecy are signified in responsibility as the "Here I am!" of obedience to the call of the Infinite revealed in the approach of the Other, not as a choice made freely on my part, but as the dispossession of the very possibility of choice.<sup>80</sup> It is the Infinite that orders or commands me from the height of the invisible otherness of the Other to be responsible. But I do not know this responsibility in advance and then do it as an act of compassion or atonement. Rather, I first come to understand the order as an order in my response to it — not unlike the way freedom is demonstrated in practical action for Kant whereas it cannot be demonstrated theoretically. "I find the order in my response itself," Levinas says, "which, as a sign given to the neighbor, as a 'here I am', brings me out of invisibility, out of the shadow in which my responsibility could have been evaded."<sup>81</sup>

The response to the command to be responsible, to instigate an order of justice and peace, is a response which takes place before one knows what one is doing, because the order issues from a dimension of height which always escapes thematization the way the Infinite surpasses

every attempt to state what the Infinite is. This surpassing quality of the command to justice which is enacted before it is known, this 'infinite' of the Infinite, as Levinas calls it, is the glory of the Infinite, the glorification of the glory of God:

Glory is but the other face of the passivity of the subject. Substituting itself for the other, a responsibility ordered to the first one on the scene, a responsibility for the neighbor inspired by the other, I, the same, am torn up from my beginning in myself, my equality with myself. The glory of the Infinite is glorified in this responsibility. It leaves no refuge in its secrecy that would protect <sup>82</sup> it against being obsessed by the other, and cover over its evasion.

Responsibility, the subjectivity of the subject, is the obedient response to an order to be responsible before one knows what this order is, before one hears it.<sup>83</sup>

What makes ethics primary, what ultimately constitutes the priority of responsibility, and what makes language, as pre-thematic signification, irreducible to an instrumental means among other instrumental means or to an act among other acts, is the glory of the Infinite that is glorified in the one-for-the-Other of responsibility, signification which is the very passing of the Infinite. Thus, Levinas says,

before putting itself at the service of life as an exchange of information through a linguistic system, saying is witness; it is saying without the said, a sign given to the other. Sign of what? Of complicity? Of a complicity for nothing, a fraternity, a proximity that is possible only as an openness of self, an imprudent exposure to the other, a passivity without reserve to the point of substitution."<sup>84</sup>

#### 4.8 Society: Peace and Justice

Justice, the entry of the third person upon the scene of the relationship between the Same and the Other, is, in Levinas' view, founded upon this relationship, i.e., founded upon responsibility. It is only as responsible beings that we enter into society, that society is

possible as the conscious order of peace and justice. Before there is the possibility of society and justice for all, relationship beyond the for-the-Other, there must first be this for-the-Other. Justice is analogous to responsibility: what responsibility is in the context of the dyad, justice is in the context of the third, the Other or neighbor of the Other. Whereas the relation of responsibility is pre-conscious and non-thematizable, the advent of the third is precisely the origin of consciousness: "consciousness," Levinas says, "is born as the presence of the third party." The coming on the scene of the third party in the demand for justice brings about an extension of responsibility as an "adventure that bears all the discourse of science and philosophy" and demands that responsibility become "a concern for justice, for the thematizing, the kerygmatic discourse bearing on the said, from the bottom of the saying without the said, saying as contact...." Such an extension of the assignation of responsibility as justice for all other beings is thus the very "spirit in society."<sup>85</sup>

In his understanding of responsibility for the Other as the basis of society, Levinas thus places himself in sharp contrast to the social contract theory of Hobbes because, for Levinas, even if the social contract were to issue in peace and justice, this would be paid for at the price of sacrificing the dignity and essential goodness of the individual to the extent that the social contract is required because the original human situation is conceived as a war of all against all. What Levinas is arguing is that there is a more fundamental 'contract' in the affection of sensibility prior to every concept, a contract that is pure contact, proximity, substitution, responsibility. For Levinas, the 'noble savage' is the falsely accused who turns the other cheek, who returns love for hatred, atonement for persecution. It is in the context

of the need for establishing peace and justice in the world that responsibility becomes a work to be done. But the work of responsibility is not an easy task.

### 5 Responsible Work as the Practice of Death

Responsibility, in Levinas' view, issues in the production of a kind of Work which must be rejected in one's lifetime, a Work oriented to a future beyond the worker, to a future that is the infinite possibility for forgiveness, for beginning anew. Work, in the realm of language, becomes genuine only in the transcendence of a giving marked by the real or figurative death of the author. In his article, "La Trace de L'Autre," Levinas puts it this way: "the Work conceived radically is a movement of the Same towards the Other which never returns to the Same" — a preference for the stark errantry of Abraham over the romantic return of Ulysses.<sup>86</sup> For Levinas, there is a necessary inequality in the relation between the Same and the Other, as we have seen, an inequality which is the very possibility of there being Ethics. For Levinas, the face of the Other reveals a trace of God. The Other comes to me from a height, a "curvature of space," because the approach of the Other, in the incommensurableness of this approach, reveals itself to be a trace which, resounding to Infinity, reveals the trace or passing of the Infinite Other, God.

The ethical challenge posed by this intrinsic inequality of the face-to-face relation with the Other, in Levinas' view, takes the form of a call to generous and even complete self-sacrifice in the non-suicide of responsibility. Thus, human being is not fundamentally

being-toward-death as Heidegger thought, but

being-toward-a-time-after-our-death. This ethical formula is concretely illustrated in Levinas' understanding of the nature of the Work:

A Work thought all the way through requires a radical generosity of the Same, which in a work goes toward the Other. It consequently requires an ingratitude of the Other; gratitude would be the return of the movement to its origin.... One-way action is possible only in patience, which, pushed to the limit, means for the agent to renounce being the contemporary of its outcome, to act without entering into the promised land....To be for a time that would be without me, to be for a time after my time, for a future beyond the celebrated "being-for-death," to-be-for-after-my-death...(this) is not an ordinary thought which extrapolates its own duration, but is the passage to the time of the Other.

Levinas names this totally gratuitous giving of one's self in the Work, without expectation of return, by the Greek term "Liturgy," a term used initially without religious significance, although Levinas adds that "a certain idea of God should turn up as a trace at the end of our analysis."<sup>87</sup> Liturgy, the celebration of the liturgy in our daily work, for Levinas, is a living of the practice of death as Socrates argued. This is the ethical sacrifice par excellence!<sup>88</sup>

So conceived, the transcendence of the work as "an eschatology without hope," must be prepared for in advance by taking-on the death by which the work is liberated for-the-other, without self-destructive nihilism. The 'taking-on' of this detachment as a practice of dying toward what is beyond oneself, by renouncing "being the contemporary of the triumph of one's work," is precisely what makes the genuine work possible, but without guaranteeing its success. The pre-donation of my work is what allows my work to be done. Thus, only when my work is no longer for me but wholly for the Other can it genuinely be "mine." Is this not the meaning of the dedication of the written work, inscribed even before the front matter of the text begins?

The radical passivity of responsibility, as the practice of death

in the Socratic sense, is thus actually fulfilled in the genuine work. Here is the meaning of Levinas' formula that responsibility is "vulnerability, exposure to outrage, to wounding, passivity more passive than all patience, passivity of the accusative form, trauma of accusation suffered by a hostage to the point of persecution...a defecting or defeat of the ego's identity."<sup>89</sup>

But who would have the strength to take up the thankless task that is ordered by Levinas' ethical phenomenology? Who could accomplish such living in the open? Who could eschew the support and the security of the herd and the polis? Who could turn the other cheek, love the one who persecutes? For Levinas, it is only the one who has given up the need for security, who has taken on the practice of death as a daily task of releasement and dis-possession, who is radically given over to the work whose life and truth will come into being only for future generations. This radical work must be rejected, must be cast out of the polis, will not be understood for a hundred years. It is the work that is wholly gift, wholly an act of responsibility toward the other. In short, it is the work of love.

When Levinas says that "a breakdown of essence is needed," a "weakness," a "relaxation of virility without cowardice," we understand that without this orientation, this liturgy, it is impossible to live where "the substitution of the hostage discovers the trace."<sup>90</sup> To accomplish this is in truth to die to one's self-interest, as in Kant, and thus to fulfill in one's self the greatest achievement of love: the laying down of one's life for the other, without suicide, the giving up of all self-satisfaction for the greater honor and glory of God revealed in the infinite otherness of the one who approaches.

## 6 Conclusion

In its purity, Levinas' philosophy is for everyone and no one. It is unabashedly utopian, but in the true etymological sense of this abused Greek term: like Plato's Republic it is "no place" and it is not intended to be any place. Socrates would have been humorously astonished by Plotinus' nostalgic plans to build a Platonopolis. The call to the kind of responsibility which Levinas describes demands the ultimate dispossession of the unity and the identity of the self and of the presupposition that such a unity and identity is possible or, at least, an acceptance of this, an openness to it which can be consciously worked at. It is the pluralistic relinquishment and welcoming of all positions and non-positions. That a utopia, by definition, cannot be, that it is inherently self-contradictory, is exactly the point, is precisely Levinas' ambiguous answer to the questioning which has guided us in this chapter. To hear what Levinas is saying in his said requires "an exposure to the other without this exposure being assumed, an exposure without holding back...", the relinquishment of the egoistic hold on the world which conceptualization would obtain.<sup>91</sup>

One will find nowhere to lay one's head in Levinas' thought, no security in the grasp of a final solution which will make a deep and refreshing sleep possible. Levinas is all wakefulness and insomnia. No one can avoid the call of the Other. Even the escape of eternal sleep that suicide promises is, according to Levinas, "a self-defeating defection," and inadvertently an affirmation of the love of life.<sup>92</sup> It is possible to close oneself off to the call of the Other but it is not

possible that there be no call, no approach. For, being closed-off, according to Levinas' thought, is possible only within the context of already being open to the Other.

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1. Poirié, p. 84.
  2. Robert C. Solomon, Continental Philosophy since 1750: The Rise and Fall of the Self, A History of Western Philosophy: 7 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), p. 173.
  3. Solomon, pp. 1-2; p. 41.
  4. Solomon, p. 193.
  5. Interview with Emmanuel Levinas, Paris, France, 26 March 1989.
  6. OB, p. 72 / p. 91.
  7. OB, p. 37 / p. 47.
  8. OB, p. 159 / p. 203.
  9. "God and Philosophy," CPP, p. 155 / DDQV, pp. 96-97.
  10. "Transcendance et intelligibilité," pp. 23-24.
  11. "God and Philosophy," CPP, p. 161 / DDQV, p. 107.
  12. OB, p. 72 / p. 91.
  13. OB, p. 74 / p. 94.
  14. OB, p. 12 / p. 14.
  15. In Otherwise than Being the term 'essence' (= 'essance') refers to the 'being' of the ontological distinction and not to quiddity. See Levinas' introductory note at OB, p. xl / p. ix.
  16. OB, p. 70 / p. 88.
  17. OB, p. 67 / p. 84.
  18. OB, p. 37 / p. 47.
  19. Ibid.
  20. OB, p. 42 / p. 54.
  21. OB, p. 37 / p. 48.
  22. OB, pp. 169-70 / pp. 215-16.
  23. OB, p. 7 / p. 8.
  24. TI, p. 199 / p. 173.
  25. TI, p. 213 / p. 188.

26. OB, p. 97 / p. 123.
27. Derrida, "Violence and metaphysics," p. 84, n.7.
28. TI, p. 201 / p. 175.
29. OB, p. 74 / p. 94.
30. OB, p. 94 / pp. 119-20, emphasis added.
31. OB, p. 96 / p. 123.
32. OB, p. 150 / p. 191; p. 148 / p. 189; p. 137 / p. 174; p. 110 / p. 140; p. 101 / p. 128.
33. OB, p. 150 / p. 192.
34. OB, p. 100 / p. 126.
35. OB, p. 23 / p. 29.
36. OB, p. 27 / p. 34.
37. OB, p. 30 / p. 38.
38. OB, p. 31 / p. 39.
39. OB, p. 42 / p. 55.
40. OB, p. 53 / p. 68.
41. DDQV, in CPP, p. 172 / p. 126.
42. OB, p. 34 / p. 43.
43. Ibid.
44. See my article, "When Love of Knowing Becomes Actual Knowing: Heidegger and Gadamer on Hegel's Die Sache Selbst," The Owl of Minerva, 17, 1 (Spr 1986): 153-164.
45. OB, p. 39 / p. 50.
46. OB, p. 43 / p. 56
47. OB, pp. 43-44 / pp. 56-57.
48. OB, p. 65 / pp. 81-82.
49. OB, p. 65 / p. 82.
50. OB, p. 64 / p. 81.
51. OB, p. 68 / p. 86.
52. OB, p. 83 / p. 104.

53. OB, p. 71 / p. 89.
54. OB, p. 75 / p. 95.
55. OB, p. 72 / p. 91.
56. OB, p. 105 / p. 133.
57. Ibid.
58. OB, p. 102 / p. 130.
59. Ibid.
60. OB, p. 103 / p. 131.
61. OB, p. 104 / p. 132.
62. OB, p. 105 / p. 133.
63. OB, p. 106 / p. 134.
64. "Transcendance et intelligibilité," p. 57.
65. OB, p. 111 / p. 141.
66. OB, p. 116 / p. 147.
67. OB, p. 115 / p. 146.
68. OB, p. 117 / p. 149.
69. Ibid.
70. OB, p. 116 / p. 148.
71. OB, p. 117 / p. 149.
72. OB, p. 124 / p. 159.
73. OB, p. 127 / p. 163.
74. Ibid.
75. OB, p. 122 / p. 157
76. Ibid.
77. OB, pp. 122-23 / p. 157.
78. OB, 123 / p. 158.
79. Ibid.
80. OB, p. 147 / p. 186.
81. OB, p. 150 / p. 191.

82. OB, p. 144 / p. 184.
83. OB, p. 150 / p. 192.
84. OB, pp. 150-51 / p. 192.
85. OB, p. 160 / p. 204.
86. Emmanuel Levinas, "La Trace De L'Autre," p. 191; cf. "La Signification et le sens," Revue de Metaphysique et de Morale, 2 (1964): 139 ff.
87. Levinas, "La Trace," pp. 191-92.
88. For a poetic rendition of this principle see Charles Bukowski's poem "love and courage" in Dangling in the Tournefortia, (Santa Barbara, Calif.: Black Sparrow Press, 1981), pp. 51-52.
89. OB, p. 15 / p. 18.
90. OB, p. 185 / p. 233.
91. OB, p. 15 / p. 18.
92. TI, p. 149 / p. 123.